

Reimagining Nero in Early Modern Rome

Nero's position as Rome's most notorious emperor has been cemented in the modern popular imagination through films and novels, perhaps most notably various versions of Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis*, as well as commercial advertisements and even political cartoons and satires. In various media, Nero emerges as a grotesque caricature of a thoroughly decadent and sybaritic ruler who deliberately set fire to Rome so that he could histrionically declaim his own epic poem on the fall of Troy against the spectacular backdrop of the city devoured by flames. Modern perceptions of Nero are embedded within a hostile historical tradition that began almost immediately after his suicide on 9 June 68. Authors like Pliny the Elder, Tacitus and Suetonius all enshrine an overwhelmingly negative evaluation of Nero's personality and policies. In the ancient literary tradition, Nero became the quintessential "bad" emperor whose ranks also included Caligula, Domitian, Commodus and Elagabalus. Indeed, Nero is the first of the "bad" emperor's whose memory was officially condemned by the Senate when they declared him a *hostis*, a proscribed enemy of the Roman state. As a result, Nero's portraits were removed from public display, defaced and recycled in vast numbers, his name was erased in inscriptions, and certain coins were recalled and countermarked. The highly adverse assessment of the emperor is further compounded by early Christian authors who consistently position him as the anti-Christ and position him as the first persecutor of Christians (Lefebvre 2017; Pascal 1923). Nero's memory, however, was not universally disparaged. In the immediate aftermath of his death, his supporters brought his portraits into the Roman Forum and decorated them with flowers, and his elaborate funeral and burial in the tomb of his paternal ancestors, the Domitii Ahenobarbi cost 200,000 *sestertii*. In the late fourth and early fifth centuries, his portraits appear on the contorniate medallions that were distributed on the first of the year in the Circus Maximus and, in

fact, after Trajan, Nero is the second most popular emperor whose images appeared on the contorniates (Alföldi and Alföldi 1976).

By the early modern period, the negotiation of Nero's memory had become complicated by his various portrayals in the ancient historiographical and literary traditions, early Christian authors, medieval legends, and growing antiquarian and philological investigations of Rome's ancient past. In Renaissance Rome, Nero's visual image was accurately revived through a painstaking study of his numismatic likenesses. Between 1433 and 1445, Antonio Filarete carefully based his representations of Nero on the bronze central doors of St. Peter's that depict the martyrdoms of Sts. Peter and Paul, on the emperor's last two portrait types. Giovan Francesco De Rossi also employs accurate renditions of Nero based on coins for the stucco decorations of Bramante's Tempietto at S. Pietro in Montorio during restorations and modifications carried out in 1628 (Villa 2018:14).

Similarly, Renaissance and Baroque sculptors correctly replicate iconographical details of Nero's ancient portraits in marble and porphyry likenesses created in the 16th and 17th centuries. An anonymous 17th century sculptor has ingeniously reconstructed a baroque image of Nero as a voluptuary emperor around an ancient fragment of a portrait of Nero recarved in antiquity into a likeness of Domitian, the artist somehow intuiting the fragment's original association with Nero. As wealthy aristocratic patrons amassed major collections of ancient sculpture, early modern artists created new depictions of Nero. A beautifully rendered 16th century example in the Uffizi acquired by the Medici originally formed part of the Cesi and Ludovisi collections in Rome and also may reflect the flattering physical depictions of Nero in Seneca's *de Clementia* and *Apocolocyntosis*, or Calpurnius Siculus rather than the more decadent depiction in the Capitoline. Perhaps the most remarkable and surprising early modern re-evaluation of Nero's image and

legacy is Gerolamo Cardano's *Neronis Encomium* first published in Basel in 1562, although probably originally written in 1546 (Di Branco 2008). In the *Encomium* Cardano, best known as a mathematician, presents a portrait of Nero as the ideal Roman emperor who is the most notable role model for Renaissance rulers. Written in Latin, the *Encomium* is a surgically precise refutation of Suetonius and Tacitus's historical invective against Nero. Ultimately, early modern evocations of Nero all contribute to the rich and varied stratigraphy, not all of it pejorative, that comprises the emperor's ongoing historical memory.

Bibliography

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