

E. BUCKLEY and M. T. DINTER (EDS), *A COMPANION TO THE NERONIAN AGE* (Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. Pp. xvi + 486, illus. ISBN 9781444332728. £120.00.

Few rulers have managed to define an era the way Nero did. If the label ‘Neronian’ is due partly to accidents of transmission, it is equally due to the emperor himself, who shaped and embodied the culture of his age via his various roles: aspiring performer; lavish builder; amateur poet; sponsor of exploration; and general philhellene. Yet to what extent does the ‘Neronian Age’ imply a unified cultural period? And how has Nero’s prominent personality affected the overall scholarly reception of his principate? These two questions are recurrent themes in Buckley and Dinter’s *Companion to the Neronian Age*, which aims not just to (re)evaluate the emperor, but to situate the developments of his era within the wider context of early imperial Rome. It is a major strength of this volume that contributors do not assess Nero in isolation, but treat the society and culture of his age as a bridging moment between Augustan classicism and the *paideia* of the Second Sophistic.

This *Companion* comprises twenty-five chapters, which the editors have grouped into four sections: ‘Nero’; ‘The Empire’; ‘Literature, Art, and Architecture’; and ‘Reception’. The Introduction by Dinter summarizes key themes before discussing the Neronian literary aesthetic as exemplified by Seneca, Lucan, and Petronius. The volume concludes with a brief Epilogue by Griffin, who analyzes some of the reasons for Nero’s recent rehabilitation among classical scholars.

Chapters on literature constitute by far the strongest and largest part of this book. The Neronian authors represented range from canonical – Seneca (Whitton; Mannering; Buckley; Doody); Lucan (Hardie); Petronius (Murgatroyd); and Persius (Nichols) – to more peripheral figures like Columella (Reizt) and the much contested Calpurnius Siculus (Henderson); there is even a fascinating study of Greek literature

under Nero (Hansen). All of these essays offer entertaining and thorough overviews of their material, and all discuss the works' main themes in a manner appropriate to Companion volumes. Two chapters, however, stand out from the rest: Murgatroyd's, which examines in sensitive detail the complex narrative layers of Petronius' *Satyricon*; and Whitton's, which outlines exciting new solutions to the persistent scholarly problems of Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*.

If the volume's treatment of literary material is thorough, it is also a little excessive, and leads to unfortunate overlaps: Seneca's *NQ* is not so important that it deserves attention from three separate essays (Bryan; Mannering; Doody). A more significant disadvantage is that the volume's literary focus skews our vision of the Neronian age. Buckley and Dinter allot only one chapter to Nero's military activity (Braund); to religion (Šterbenc Erker); and to imperial administration (Lavan). Art and architecture fare slightly better (Beste and von Hesberg; Bergmann; Lonrenz; Squire), but even four chapters on this topic can only begin to capture the innovation and influence of Neronian painting and building styles. Squire's piece on *grotesche* is particularly good at explaining the unique effects generated by Neronian wall painting. It also reveals, incidentally, that the *nachleben* of Neronian art was just as significant and pervasive as that of Neronian literature.

More successful is Buckley and Dinter's effort to contextualize Nero. The volume's first section analyzes the emperor against the backdrop of typical princely upbringing (Fantham); biographical and historical tradition (Hurley); and Roman attitudes to Greek culture (Mratschek). Again, all of the essays are clear, detailed, and relevant, although Fantham perhaps overstates the peculiarity of Nero's education: most elite Romans would have received as much vocal training as they did military. The second section of this volume widens focus even further, addressing the general

state of the empire under Nero, the political structures he inherited and the customs he was expected to follow. Mordine's chapter is undoubtedly the highlight here: it describes how the imperial household became an increasingly political entity throughout the Julio-Claudian era. It also complements Hurley's work in the previous section, which argues that historical writing became more biographical in response to a governmental arrangement that concentrated power in the hands of one man. A useful (if unintended) outcome of both essays is that they collapse the assumed difference between ruler and society, bringing readers back to the volume's central question: what is 'Neronian' about the Neronian Age?

Finally, the *Companion* concludes with a brief glance at reception, which covers later representations of Nero himself, as well as his era's considerable cultural influence. Literature dominates once more, with Lucan (Maes) and Seneca (Braund) occupying two of the four chapters. Such work on reception is inherently difficult because it requires scholars to focus on multiple historical periods and/or cultural traditions. A potential pitfall is that critics lose sight of the original material, as Maes does in a chapter that contains more Dutch history than Lucan per se. Braund and Squire achieve a better balance, while Maier gives a fascinating account of Nero's bizarre afterlife in Jewish and Christian literature.

Despite its drawbacks, the *Companion to the Neronian Age* is an admirable volume overall. It has hardly any typological errors and the only peculiarity in its layout is the four colour plates inserted into Bergmann's chapter but referring to other essays (by Beste and von Hesberg; Lorenz; and Squire). Buckley and Dinter must be commended for producing a *Companion* as stimulating as it is wide-ranging.

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