

All the *excerpta* derive from the collections *De virtutibus ac vitiis* and *De insidiis* by Constantinus Porphyrogenitus (Xth century). Owing to the fact that Nicolaus draws on Augustus' own autobiography and other good contemporary sources, after a period of scepticism in the last century the reliability of this *Vita* has been revalued.

Professor Scardigli, well-known particularly for her first-class monograph on *Die Römerbiographien Plutarchs* (München 1979) and her contributions to *ANRW* on the Late Empire, has provided an excellent Italian translation of the *excerpta* (following the numeration of Jacoby, 90 F 125–130, i–xxxii = 1–139), a brief introduction and a comprehensive historical commentary.

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

D. Asheri

Miriam T. Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty*. Batsford, London 1984, pp. 320
17.95 £

The author of *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics* (reviewed by J. Geiger in *SCI* 3 [1976/7]) is certainly in an advantageous position in relating the story of Nero's reign. Mrs. Griffin's long acquaintance with the personalities, events, ideologies and conflicts of the period is apparent everywhere in this wise, mature and balanced account of Nero's predicament and ultimate failure. Yet even Mrs. Griffin feels the need to resort to what seems by now to have become a standard feature of the genre, namely the *apologia* for writing an imperial biography. "This study", she declares in the preface, "is intended to be a hybrid, biographical in its concentration on the Emperor's personality and problems, historical in its analysis of his fall in terms of the interaction of that personality with the political system" (p. 8). Hence she banishes from her account any matter that might benefit more from a discussion ranging over several reigns; conversely, Nero's reign is treated as an *exemplum* of the viability of the principate as a political system. Following her contention that "for the historian, the most important event of Nero's reign was its collapse", she wishes, she says, to explore "how far the political system itself contributed to Nero's failure".

Before considering her solution to these questions, to which both parts of the book are devoted — for her answers are adumbrated already in the description of "Nero's Principate" (pp. 37–182) and fully developed in the "Post-Mortem on the Fall of Nero" (pp. 185–234) — a few words on the nature of the book are called for. It is a hybrid in yet another respect: it is intended for both the scholar and the general reader. In this respect it is entirely successful (for example, the discussion of Tacitean methods and purposes on pp. 83–7 can benefit both potential audiences). Mrs. Griffin's method is ever one of rigorous analysis; the evidence is made to yield solid results; anecdotes

come into their own or they are excluded; many of the atrocities and acts of licentiousness in Dio's and Suetonius' narratives are not so much as mentioned in a discussion which aims at and attains sobriety, lucidity and plausibility.

Chapter 2 (pp. 18–33) offers a brief delineation of the salient features of the Augustan Principate. Next come Nero's antecedents and the succession to the principate up to his own day. Nero's own accession — a virtual coup d'état, and portrayed as such by Tacitus — receives short shrift, although it was a remarkable illustration of the nature of the principate as it was, rightly, viewed by Mommsen (cited on p. 190).

Part 1 opens with the tradition about the Quinquennium Neronis (Mrs. Griffin has no doubt that it comes at the beginning of the reign) and Nero's presumed share in the creation of the Golden Age. Nero's determination to make his mark in the arts is enlisted to counter allegations of total political passivity in the early years. To whomever one gives the credit, the excellence of the first period lies in the realization of the promises of the accession speech in the senate (Tacitus, *Ann.* XIII,4). True, "a reform in style, rather than in content" (p. 79), nevertheless, not something to be scoffed at in a political system whose stability, efficiency and success depended to a large extent on "the consent and co-operation of the senatorial order" (p. 60; cf. pp. 89; 114; 118). The price demanded for loyalty and goodwill was threefold; "respect for constitutional forms, deference to the Senate as a body, and opportunity for the ambitious members of the upper orders" (p. 60). Yet the ideology of the *princeps civilis* was rivalled by that of Seneca's monarchical tract, *De Clementia*, namely "the virtue of the Princeps as the only restraint on his use of power" (p. 95) in a system devoid of any effective built-in safeguards against tyranny (see Wirszubski, *Libertas as a Political Idea in the Late Republic and Early Principate*, pp. 124f. and Mrs. Griffin's own masterly treatment of the tract in her *Seneca*, ch. 4).

Whether through lack of tact or through lack of virtue, Nero fell short of both the ideals set before him. The turning point — a favourite theme of imperial biography — whether it came in 59 after Agrippina's murder, or in 62 after Burrus' death (the latter is favoured by Tacitus, but conflicts with Dio and the Quinquennium tradition) signals the gradual revocation of the promise of the accession speech and the adoption of a new image. The creation of this owed not a little to Nero's aesthetic tastes and philhellenism. "The Descent into Tyranny" (ch. 7) meant, amongst other manifestations, a severe deterioration in Nero's relationship with the upper orders and the denial of their own reward to merit and social position. Feeling unappreciated and later on insecure, senatorial army commanders would soon show signs of disaffection and finally resort to open revolt (pp. 112–8).

In the following section, "The Tyranny of Art", Mrs. Griffin tries to isolate and define Nero's personal mark on the visual arts. Evidence is sought in striking artistic innovations in coinage and city architecture, presumably initiated and inspired by the Emperor himself. Utilizing recent numismatic studies and closely examining both literary and topographical evidence for the plans behind the building of the *domus aurea* and the rebuilding of Rome after the great fire of 64, Mrs. Griffin concludes that

“Nero was an enthusiast who threw himself into grand projects and put at their service the latest Roman technology and the most advanced artistic ideas” (p. 142). But even at this stage one cannot but sense the manic obsessiveness and loss of touch with reality which reveal to us the artistic Emperor displaying water-organs and explaining their operation while control over the Empire was slipping from his grasp (Suetonius, *Nero* 41; Dio, 63,26,4–5). His jealousy of excellence and success in the arts put an end to the literary renaissance of his reign which, it is suggested, owed much to the Emperor’s patronage and encouragement and even inspiration (ch. 9).

The Pisonian conspiracy was a shameful fiasco demonstrating the moral erosion of the senatorial aristocracy. Its detection was followed by the persecution of the so-called “Stoic opposition”. The author reasserts once again the political character of that opposition which adopted Stoicism as its garb, but was in fact fighting for the last vestiges of the *libertas senatoria*.

Mrs. Griffin plays down the severity and inevitability of the events which led to Nero’s suicide; she believes that it could have been averted had Nero not lost heart, alarmed “nuntiis magis at rumoribus quam armis” (Tac. *Hist.* I,89). Hence she searches for the underlying causes for his fall, those inherent in the very structure of the Augustan Principate. To these causes she devotes the second part of the book.

One by one the problems of succession, of finance, the temptation of philhellenism and the military image of the princeps are discussed. The lack of an established principle of succession meant that the principate came to an end with the death of each reigning princeps. At the same time the ruling house had the habit of intermarrying with the aristocracy. It is suggested that in combination these two features provided the cause of instability, uncertainty and, under an insecure princeps whose dynastic claims could be called into question, of the aristocratic blood baths under Nero: the systematic elimination of all rivals and claimants.

Despite its inherent deficiencies, in the last analysis the financial system cannot be blamed for the extravagance of a young princeps who compensated for his lack of military glory and prestige with a display of magnificence and munificence far exceeding what was expected of imperial *liberalitas*. Likewise, his philhellenism fulfilled a similar function: re-educated to accept “the Greek view of the performing arts”, the Romans would join in the admiration and adulation shown to the performing Emperor by Greek audiences. The hellenistic world substituted for the *civilis princeps* or *clemens rex* the concept of an absolute monarch resplendent in wealth and regal pomp, surrounded by adulation and flattery, which Nero must have found congenial indeed. Yet he stopped short of divine monarchy.

Finally Nero’s failure to live up to the traditional Roman expectations of the *imperator*, namely resounding victories and prowess in battles, led to a distortion and a travesty of these very values: supplications were voted for poetic recitations (Suet. (*Nero* 10) and triumphs celebrated victories in Greek games — worst of all, the suppression of a conspiracy was made to look the equivalent of victory on the battlefield.

“The principate stands condemned, for it required men of exceptional and varied talents at its head” (p. 8). So Mrs. Griffin. However, it withstood almost 19 months of civil war following Nero’s suicide. Nero fell foul of the senatorial order and came to a bad end, like others before him. But the evolution of the principate, its entrenchment and institutionalization went on apace. In contradistinction to what happened after Caligula’s assassination (Josephus, *AJ* XIX, 158–189), after Nero’s suicide the restoration of the Republic was no longer contemplated. The Flavian Principate must be seen as a continuation of that of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. No taking stock ensued, no substantial changes were introduced.

The modern historian who attacks the system rather than the folly or vice of the individual emperor must demonstrate that the whole fabric of the Empire was coming undone because of its inability to accommodate a Nero. The connection between the Jewish Revolt — the only serious uprising of the time — and Nero’s downfall was purely incidental (to a large extent it had already been contained at the moment of Nero’s death). All in all it seems hard to disprove the claim that “*Laudatorum principum usus ex aequo quamvis procul agentibus; saevi proximis ingruunt*” (Tac. *Hist.* IV, 74, 2); or in the words of the modern historian: “Crime, vice and folly at Rome coexisted with a stable order and prosperity abroad” (Syme, *Tacitus* I, 441). An elementary truth, but one worth repeating.

One by one the problems of succession, of finance, the temptation of philhellenism that Nero’s suicide followed upon the crushing defeat inflicted on Vindex at Vesontio by the governor of Upper Germany, Verginius Rufus. Although Verginius refused both before and after the victory to assume the purple (Plutarch, *Galba* 6, 2), Cassius Dio suggests that his desertion was one of the two causes which led to Nero’s suicide (the other being the proclamation of Galba, Dio, 63, 27, 1). The link is still missing.

Basing herself on Tacitus, Suetonius and Dio, Mrs. Griffin is bound, despite herself, to follow in their footsteps, and to some degree, to accept their bias. These writers do not supply sufficient proof of the shortcomings of the system. In the necessary absence of evidence of a completely different nature, the bias of ancient historiography is bound to leave its impress on our interpretation of individual reigns. Historians who choose a broader canvas and attempt to study the imperial system as a whole are less confined. They have *all* the remains of the ancient world as their primary source, and they are necessary, for as Fergus Millar suggested: “the very nature of the Empire itself means that it can only be understood by starting from the provinces and looking inward” (*JRS* 56 [1966], 166).

All this is not to underrate the wealth of knowledge, the acuteness of the analysis, the cautious handling of the evidence and the rare insights which are the hallmarks of this study.