

## Nero the Hero

Everyone knows the standard stories of Nero: he murdered his mother, fiddled while Rome burned, built his huge palace, The Golden House, on the ashes of Rome, drained the treasury and committed suicide (with some prompting) at age 30.

Everyone has also heard the stories of Elvis Presley's post-mortem existence, ranging from the 1968 sightings in a supermarket, through the New York Times 1988 story "Some Place for the King to Call Home," to the most recent Sun tabloid article. Is there also evidence that Nero did not die, that he is still living somewhere protected by the CIA?

Suetonius (Nero, 57) predicted that Nero would return (to Jerusalem) and win back the Roman Empire and said that "Everyone wants him to come back. " For years people were still laying flowers on Nero's grave. Edicts circulated in his name. over a period of 20 years, 3 men turned up claiming to be Nero and causing disturbances. The first false Nero (69 AD) found followers awhile but was captured and executed by a Roman governor who was passing by. A second (79) appeared in Asia and eventually found refuge in Parthia (fans of Nero). The third (88) was supported by the Parthians to the best of their ability and handed over with the greatest reluctance.

Among the predictions of the Sibylline Oracles (which ranged in date from 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC to 7<sup>th</sup> AD) were some that referred to Nero: Nero would return and destroy Rome (#4) or a matricide would return from Parthia or reappear under Marcus Aurelius (#5,8). After 170 AD there were no further predictions of Nero's return. Nero appears in Christian writing in the book of Revelations (90 AD) as the prototype of "the Beast" (anti-god, anti-Christ, the man who returns). The number of the beast (666) can be worked, through numerology, to read Nero's name. and St Augustine in The City of God says that some suggest that Nero will raise p again and be the anti-Christ or never died and was still vigorously alive (ca. 420) and in hiding until he should return to his kingdom.

Martin Charlesworth in 1950 wrote that belief in the return of a historical person shows a desire for that person to return. Three conditions normally are needed: he must have (1) been regarded with affection and hope by many, (2) died –especially young- with his work incomplete (3) in a sudden and mysterious death. This most often happens in marginal places and classes and not normally longer than a century after the person's death. Such characters include King Arthur, Olaf Trygvison, Frederick Barbarossa (I and II), Czar Alexander I, Anastasia, JFK, Elvis and Bruce Lee. Baldwin the 9<sup>th</sup>, Count of Flanders, who led the 4<sup>th</sup> Crusade – against Constantinople and became Baldwin the 1<sup>st</sup> there, was captured by the Bulgars and died in prison, but 20 years later he supposedly reappeared in Flanders.

Stith-Thompson lists in his Motif Index 2 closely related types: a570, culture hero/divinity expected to return at time of need. There are clearly wide-spread common themes. Note that "Nero" in Sabine language means "strong man, hero".

Tacitus (Hist 1.4) says that, at the news of Nero's death, the senate and equites and "al respectable people" were delighted but that the sordid plebs (i.e., about 95% of the population) were saddened. So, Nero must have been popular with a significant number of the people. (Of course, whatever was said in Nero's own lifetime has to be examined for possible flattery of the ruler.)

After his death (for those who accepted his death), there was official damnatio memoriae and the literary tradition is rabid against him. The "Senecan" Octavia, probably written within a month after

his death, shows him as a monster, a theme picked up by many later writers, including Juvenal. However, Nero (like Alexander the Great) became an object of approval after his death among some. Josephus claimed that earlier historians (for and against Nero) often lied. Martial (50 years after Nero's death) said that Nero's learned songs were still sung by many (as Vitellius had done). Nero's immediate successor, Galba, was anti-Nero, but Otho considered setting up again Nero's statues and people in the streets often hailed him as Nero Otho. Vitellius offered sacrifice to Nero's departed spirit.

The Talmud, a compilation between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries CE of oral law with exegesis, contains the story (from the Babylonian Talmud) of a 66-70 Jewish revolt during which one Nero Caesar, supposedly a lieutenant of the emperor, was prophesied as about to destroy Jerusalem by the will of God. This Nero, however, ran away, converted to Judaism, married and became the ancestor of the later rabbi Meier.

Plutarch, a younger contemporary of Nero, in an essay on God's Slowness to Punish sees the soul of Nero in Hades being remade to return as a viper. But then a voice emerged from the air and said to make him into a gentler creature, a frog, as he had a favor coming because he had freed Greece. (Greeks admired Nero for removing taxes from the Greeks and trying to cut a canal across the Isthmus of Corinth).

Elegabalus, Roman emperor 218-22, imitated, in Nero's circus, the games Nero had held there.

What did Nero look like? His iconography has been confused by some wrong attributions. A head in the Capitoline Museum supposed to be Nero is actually Domitian with some restorations. A black basalt head from the Baroque period is supposedly based on a now lost original. Five different coin types show how he wanted to be seen. Two of these show a young Nero, before his accession. After he came to the throne in 54, his first type was a young Julio-Claudian generic type, with a broad face and curls on the brow parted in the middle. As Nero saw himself more as an artist (from age 21 or so on) he had himself portrayed with a more compact head, a fuller face and curls on the brow not parted, the hair showing a stepped arrangement. The final coin type, the official portrait, shows a crown of hair, carefully laid distinctive layers on the brow and deep on the back of the neck (consciously similar to the style worn by charioteers – to recall not only real circus drivers but also the driver of the chariot of the sun), all on a fatter face.

Unofficial representations include (1) a graffito from Nero's Golden House, a sketch with a full beard, (2) a drawing from the Palatine showing him in breastplate and laurel wreath (3) the bust of an aristocrat from the Vatican museum, wrongly labeled as Otho, imitating Nero's hair style in the last coin type, (4) a tombstone/grave altar from about 64-69 of Lucius Calpurnius Daphnis, shown with a purse in one hand and a fish in the other; he and the two other figures all have Nero's hair style, (5) a man with child, in which the man's hair style also imitates Nero's.

Would Nero's damnatio memoriae mean all his statues had been destroyed? No, busts of Nero were reworked for later emperors – a batch for Vespasian and Domitian. Cassiodorus cites Nero as the originator of throwing down then handkerchief/napkin to start chariot races and a 5<sup>th</sup> century gem shows Nero (conveniently labelled) as doing just that.

A cameo originally thought to show Caracalla is now seen as Nero's. Nero sits on an eagle and wears the gorgon aegis, his feet in sandals and his right arm holding a small figure of Nike (holding out a victory crown); a cornucopia is behind his head. Nero is clearly being cast as Jupiter, an apotheosis scene, Nero the Hero being taken up to the gods as Divus Nero.

What went wrong with Nero? He alienated the aristocracy and the Christians (e.g., in blaming them for the fire and executing many) – who wrote 99 percent of the history -- and they saw him as a

monster. What did Nero actually do and what did he mean to do? Normally he was rather passive in military and political matters. His greatest self-emphasis was as a creative artist, supposedly exclaiming as he died, *Qualis artifex pereo!* (What an artist is dying in me!) If we consider Nero's audience, we ask what he did to make the public like him. Theater, amphitheater and circus were important in Roman life as public propaganda. Roman life in Nero's day was profoundly theatrical. These norms were not the norms of the elite, but they were (or may have been those of the public at large).

So, a possible counter-picture to that seen at the beginning of the talk is Nero as a Graeco-Roman universalist, restoring Greece, as one who curbed fanatical cults and initiated building programs, as a populist and artist who pleased the people with propaganda parades through the streets (including the triumphal parade over his mother in 59!), the Golden Boy. True, he did bankrupt the state with his lavish expenditures, but for a positive reflection of Nero through the eyes of his supporters, see Leon Feuchtwangler's 1936 historical novel The False Nero.