D. persuasively and convincingly shapes a flexible and dynamic diagnostic for her readers to break from the 'conversion' model and to allow the value of Roman power within a complex, competing system. Local consent to Roman power, in the many forms it might take, may not necessarily indicate loyalty or 'Romanness' in any explicit form, but should rather be seen as placing the political currency of Roman symbols and articulations of power within the broader scope of complex Mediterranean identities.

University of Birmingham HANNAH CORNWELL
h.e.cornwell@bham.ac.uk
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JOHN F. DRINKWATER, *NERO: EMPEROR AND COURT*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. xviii + 449, illus., maps, plans. ISBN 9781108472647. £32.99.

There has been no shortage of books on Nero. 'Nero has attracted significant attention', as John Drinkwater notes with typical understatement in his impressive, convincing, but occasionally frustrating evaluation of Nero's reign (10). At over 400 pages, with great attention to detail, this book challenges M. Griffin, *Nero. The End of a Dynasty* (1984) as the obvious English starting point for Neronian events and politics. For a comprehensive analysis of the Pisonian conspiracy (197–219 with table 2), a good overview of what we know of the Golden House (248–63), or a detailed description of Neronian finances, imperial avenues of income and fiscal management (326–68), this is now the book to consult first. Yet D. aims to do more than that. He wants to show how Nero was neither mad nor bad, nor a divine autocrat. D. argues forcefully that there was a 'wider team behind a single *princeps*' (59) and that this 'Establishment' successfully ran the Empire. Nero had no clear idea about what role to play. He first acted the *princeps*, but although he was capable, he 'grew bored with the details of administration' (129). Nero therefore increasingly detached himself from responsibilities, taking up 'acting the sportsman and artist' (293). This was fine as long as the Establishment could solve problems without him, but when in 68 Nero needed to 'play' the general, he refused to do so (407), and was dropped by the Establishment. Nero was 'never in charge of the Empire' (416). Others were, and did a good job, explaining why so much went well in Neronian times.

This reconstruction may be correct, and D. suggests sensible scenarios for how matters played out. He does so through 'considered inconsistency': sources are accepted or rejected 'on the grounds of plausibility' (13). This often works well, certainly in the first chapters (Part I: Background, 7–168). D. sets out problems in Neronian historiography, argues convincingly that Nero never placed the status of senators in doubt (26), and describes in detail the people who would surround Nero throughout his reign: his mother (32–55) and then 'the Establishment Team' (56–80). In the course of his argument, D. debunks some persistent myths. His Neronian court, against V. Rudich's court in *Political Dissidence under Nero* (1993), was a place 'where people were not afraid to air at least some of their opinions' (116), and Neronian times were 'the opposite of an age of suffocating repression' (128). At a military level good commanders were appointed, who were given a relatively free reign, even if 'grasp of the wider political and military situation appears to have been weak' (152).

In other parts of the book, 'considered inconsistency' works less well, especially in the chapters brought together as Part II: Assessment. Surely D. is right that Nero was not the murderous monster of our literary sources, and his chapters analysing prominent deaths in Nero's reign are very good on the detail (169–232). But responsibility for the death of Agrippina is too easily shifted away from Nero on the grounds of plausibility (183–7). Where, in other cases, killing is undeniable, it was 'due to political necessity and managed by the Establishment' (232). Why, moreover, does D. accept Suetonius' claim (*Ner.* 56) that Nero urinated on the image of Dea Syria (266 and 287), other than that it fits his argument against eastern influences on the emperor? And how is Nero's declaration 'that he was at last beginning to be housed like a human being' (Suet., *Ner.* 31.2) 'conclusive proof' that there was no divine connotation to the Golden House and hence no Neronian interest in 'divine status' (272)? Simply wrong is the claim that the reliefs from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias are 'official statuary' (39). As to Nero's presumed madness, D. chooses

to discuss and dismiss it through 'the gamble of psychoanalysis' (277). Reconstructions are plausible, as always. It may be true that Nero's fall was partly due to some sort of burn-out, with Nero 'disinclined to save himself', whatever the Establishment tried (294). The last part (End, 372–415) discusses Nero's relation to Greece and his fall. Again, much is sensible and convincing, for instance how the emperor's much-discussed 'triumph' may have been a 'celebration of the successes of peace' (382–4).

None of D.'s reconstructions go against the evidence and many of the scenarios he proposes will become the new points of departure. Occasionally, however, it feels that evidence is deemed plausible if it fits the pattern that D. has established. This is not helped by continuous and frustrating cross-referencing, often to later parts of the book (e.g. 156 n. 31 refers to 293, which for evidence refers to 304 n. 274; but examples are legion). This heightens the sense that D. is arguing a case as much as analysing his sources. As D. recognises, almost all reconstructions of Neronian politics reflect the times in which they are written. Notwithstanding his monumental attempt to weigh the evidence fairly, D. does not entirely avoid that trap. His Nero seems to function in a much more recent setting: his *liberti* are compared to Samuel Pepys (65), the *concilium* is a 'privy council' (67), and Nero might even be kept in check by 'a loyal opposition' (154) and supported by a 'freedman-based fiscal machine' (350). The Pavilion in the Golden House was a sensible new centre of power, and 'much smaller overall than Buckingham Palace' (257). This is a very British Nero.

Radboud University OLIVIER HEKSTER
o.hekster@let.ru.nl
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SHADI BARTSCH, KIRK FREUDENBURG and CEDRIC LITTLEWOOD (EDS), *THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO THE AGE OF NERO*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. xviii + 402; illus., maps, plans. ISBN 9781107052208. £74.99.

It could be a perilous thing to be a companion to Nero, as Lucan, Vestinus and many others found out. Now students and non-specialists venturing into Neronian culture and its legacy can do so in very good company. This collection of essays strikes the right balance between explaining the achievements of the age and exploring nuances. One comes away from the majority of the chapters with a solid grip on the fundamental issues, some food for thought and reliable directions for where to turn next. An introduction sets the agenda and introduces the contents of the chapters. Twenty-one chapters follow (around thirteen pages each), grouped in six sections; the quality is maintained at a very high level throughout.

Part I treats Nero's socio-political world. Matthew Leigh (ch. 1) contextualizes his predilection for public performance, setting it against the interests of our sources for Nero's behaviour, Roman social norms, as well as Hellenistic and Roman imperial contexts of spectacular display. Josiah Osgood (ch. 2) outlines the political and social function of the early imperial senate and shows how Nero's aestheticism may be read as an aspect of his relationship with that body. Carlos F. Noreña (ch. 3) examines the nature of government under Nero; he stresses the constellation of individual and institutional negotiations adding up to our notion of imperial governance; and he rightly marginalises the emperor's own role in providing 'good' or 'bad' governance. Anthony A. Barrett (ch. 4) writes on the women who influenced Nero from birth to death; he clarifies that violent ends tended more typically to meet those with whom Nero had formed close personal relations than those who represented a political threat.

Part II surveys Neronian literature. Cedric Littlewood (ch. 5) considers the aesthetics of Neronian literature as a whole (Lucan, late Seneca, Persius, Petronius and Calpurnius Siculus) in relation to Augustan classicism. Gareth Williams (ch. 6) sets Lucan in his contexts and stresses the fractured voice and open-endedness of his epic. Kirk Freudenburg (ch. 7) gives a reading of Petronius focusing upon acting and roles. Daniel Hooley (ch. 8) introduces Persius through the themes of father-figures and silence. Both Freudenburg and Hooley look for unnamed Nero-figures in their texts.

Part III is devoted to 'Neronian Seneca'. Chiara Torre (ch. 9) warns against reading the tragedies as unproblematic mirrors of Neronian Rome; she stresses a 'reconfigured Augustanism' (i.e. an early