

Value and limitations of suetoni



The value of Suetonius' account of Nero as a source for accurate historical information is surrounded in doubt and speculation. His purpose, sources and contemporaries must be considered in order to assess the extent to which Suetonius biography of Nero is reliable as a historical reference. However, despite Suetonius being a biographer branded as a scandalmonger, his account of Nero provides different historical interpretations, which his contemporaries in the history of Nero often omit and therefore offers a unique perspective on his life and reign.

Firstly, Suetonius' intentions with regard to the audience of his biography of Nero must be assessed as a core factor in regard to its value as a historical reference. For the author himself acknowledges that his work was not intended as a historical record, for Holland agrees, stating he was " a biographer and antiquarian rather than a historian.[1]" Furthermore, the arrangement of the biographies; thematically instead of chronologically is clear evidence of Suetonius' desire to deviate away from writing a history and therefore clearly support's Holland's statement. Thus, Suetonius' choice of material concerning Nero's life strikes the reader as unnecessary, if compared to the significant events which are neglected. Suetonius appears to focus on events which are of interest to him rather than looking to present a wide basis of factual detail. Evidence of this is demonstrated in how Suetonius prioritises detail to recording events, for example the coverage of Nero's reign is disproportionately substantial in comparison to Tiberius, who reigned for a longer period of time[2]. In addition, there is no mention of the unrest within the Empire, such as the Boudiccan revolt in 60 AD. In place of this, Suetonius directs the biography to focus on the scandals within Nero's

reign. This is present in verse 29, when the libertus Doryphorus marries Nero and he imitates the sounds of a woman when performing the marital duties, “ with this man he played the role of bride.[3]” However, on the other hand it can be argued, the biography is immensely valuable in gaining an insight into Nero’s character as well as providing a psychological approach to understanding Nero. As Suetonius is the only author of Nero to provide a description of his personal appearance, “... a good height but his body was blotchy and ill-smelling...[4]” This is in stark contrast to Tacitus, who considered personal detail on the subject was “ beneath the dignity of a serious historian to record.[5]”

The next factor in assessing the value of Suetonius’ reliability as a historian is his use of sources for his information. His account incorporates an extensive and broad range of evidence; from the use of word of mouth, senatorial decrees, previous accounts of Nero and indirect speech from the emperor himself, “ Nero provided information of the dream, revealing...[6]” Using this evidence it could be concluded that Suetonius’ can qualify as a historical source as he rarely introduces any bias. Combined with this, the availability of sources which Suetonius had as private secretary to the Emperor Hadrian encourages him to be perceived as a reliable historian. It was during this time that he began writing *The Twelve Caesars*, although there are limitations to this argument as he lost access to the archives as he was dismissed by Hadrian. Grant states that he was dismissed whilst completing the biography of Augustus, and that therefore his account on Nero is not as reliable[7]. However, this appears to be a too rigid approach by Grant to Suetonius’ sources of information as he did not wholly base his

findings upon imperial archives. There is evidence of this in how he draws information from Tacitus, in verse 36, when referring to the Pisonian conspiracy in Rome, which Tacitus previously had given a lengthy account of in his *Annals* 15, subsequently it is not possible to completely agree with Grant's narrow conclusion. On the one hand, the lack of Suetonius' own opinions as well as desire to make a judgment on the Emperors shines favorably upon the historical reliability of Suetonius' writings. On the other, if using Grant's judgment, as he lost access to the Imperial archives before writing the account of Nero's life, his account is not entirely reliable.

For Suetonius also documents rumour and popular belief as his sources, these elements of gossip include descriptions of Nero's sexual appetite and mythology of ancestors. In verse 28, he openly states this use, " People claim that at one time...[8]" and later in verse 54, " some people say...[9]" However, it must be argued that despite being only speculative and therefore not definitive evidence, the author highlights ancient attitudes towards the ruler. These accounts provide a contemporary voice for the unheard majority of the populace, whereas other historians rely on accounts from the wealthy literate minority.

Finally, the value of Suetonius' information on Nero is best judged by comparing how his contemporaries deal with the same subject matter. Steiner states that Suetonius' biography is only elevated to its important position as a result of the lack of basic historical narratives of Nero's reign[10]. Although the two major sources of Tacitus and Cassius Dio remain, the existence of others which no longer remain are attested by Tacitus and

Josephus. In the Antiquities of the Jews 20. 8, Josephus states that many historians had lied about Nero;

“...some of which have departed from the truth of facts out of favour, as having received benefits from him; while others, out of hatred to him, and the great ill-will which they bare him, have so impudently raved against him with their lies...[11]”

Suetonius’ description of the reign of the Emperor Nero is mostly negative. For he states, by verse 19 of his biography of Nero, “ These deeds, some of them meriting no reproach, others even deserving some praise, I have gathered together to separate them from the shameful deeds and crimes with which I shall henceforth be concerned[12]”. Suetonius’ argument declares differing possibilities; the author is being objective in his analysis of Nero’s life, but has finished depicting the positive aspects by the end of section 19, or Suetonius is trying to heighten a sense of drama to his biography by strongly contrasting the different aspects of Nero’s life.

Furthermore, the contrastive depictions of similar scenes suggest that the contemporaries of Suetonius applied the same sources to their accounts. Shotter highlights in Appendix IV of Nero that the works by Suetonius, Cassius Dio and Tacitus have many similarities, which highlight their common source material on Nero[13]. In Tacitus’ Annals, he mentions Doryphorus was poisoned as he disapproved of Nero’s marriage to Poppaea, but he explains no further. With Suetonius in verse 29, Doryphorus is mentioned in passing as the marital plaything of Nero. The tone of the description, “ to such a degree virtually every part ... had been employed in

lusts”, indicates that it appears to be added only to empathise Nero’s depravity and sadistic practices for the reader’s delight rather than to plainly inform and record a history of Nero’s activities. The references of Doryphoros in both extracts suggests that the authors gained their knowledge of him from the same source, however the differing explanations of Doryphorus’ role during Nero’s reign means that both accounts’ validity are disputable.

It must be considered the historical importance of Suetonius’ work is best evaluated by directly comparing events which both he and his contemporaries record. The differing views of Suetonius, Cassius Dio and Tacitus towards as to who was responsible for the fire of AD 64 prove this. Suetonius directly blames Nero, “ he set fire to the city, so openly indeed... [14]“, and goes on to describe his joy in watching Rome burn. In contrast, Cassius Dio, writing at the end of the 1st century AD, is certain, in his account, that Nero ordered the fire to recreate the burning of Troy as he envied Priam’s downfall. He states in Roman History 62. 16 that “ Nero set his heart on accomplishing ... his desire, to make an end of the city and realm during his life ... He secretly sent out men ... to set fire.” However, he writes a century after the fire occurred, suggesting that later historians firmly believed Nero was the cause. Finally, Tacitus, writing closer to the time, states the doubts of Nero’s role in the Great Fire. His bitterness in speaking about the Christians suggests bias, in Annals 15. 44 he states that they were “ a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace”, in contrast to how he speaks fondly of Nero’s actions helping to rebuild the city using his own money. Whereas Cassius Dio makes no mention of any other suggested culprits such as the Christians, leading the

reader to think that Christianity had become more widely accepted by this time.

In conclusion, Suetonius' account provides a source of debate, as an alternative viewpoint of Nero's life, for it provides a character-based perspective in contrast to other historians' works of the time. In doing so, it has value as a historical source but as a purely biographical work, this limits Suetonius' reliability. Thus, Suetonius' account of Nero is useful as a historical reference to the extent that they must not be trusted to provide an accurate narrative of fact but represent popular opinion at the time and as a character reference for Nero whilst providing an enjoyable narration for the reader.