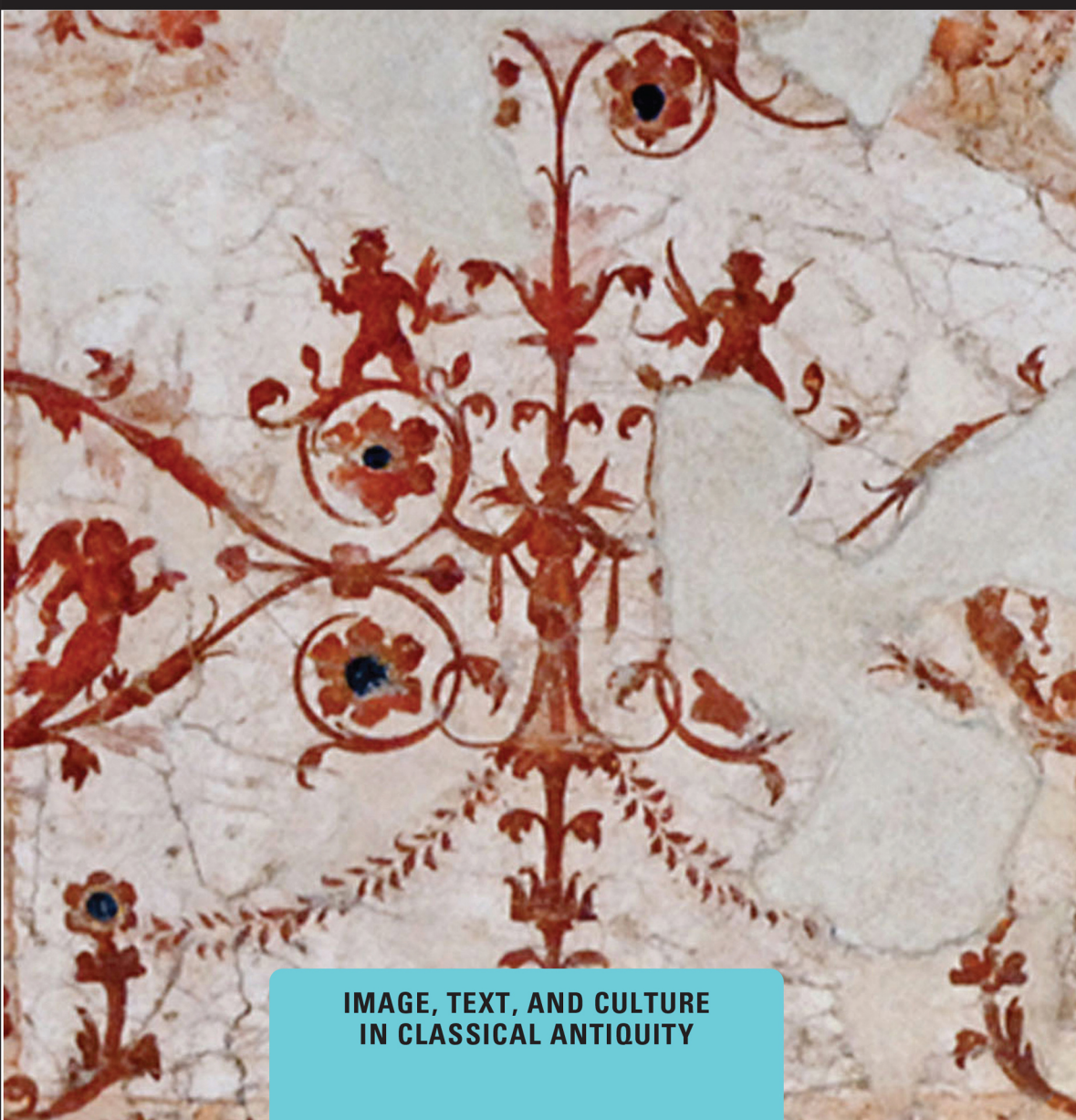
Scott Weiss

The Neronian Grotesque



IMAGE, TEXT, AND CULTURE
IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

The Neronian Grotesque

During the reign of Nero, Roman culture produced some of its most spectacular works of art and literature, and some of its strangest. This study explores these effects across textual and visual media in an integrated way.

Weiss' analysis allows for appreciation of the shared strategies of composition, overlaps between literary and visual rhetoric, the role of context in shaping the reception of a work, and the authority of the reader/viewer to generate meaning. The volume offers an account of Roman visual-literary interactions in the mid-first century CE that considers these dynamics as informing broad cultural phenomena. The results reveal features pervasive in a literary and artistic culture invested in exploring the edges of expression.

The Neronian Grotesque is a fascinating study on the literary and artistic production in the Neronian period, and has wider implications for anyone working in the field of Roman cultural history and visual studies more broadly.

Scott Weiss is a senior advancement writer at Washington University in St. Louis, where he previously held a postdoctoral teaching fellowship in the Department of Art History and Archaeology. He has taught at Knox College, St. Louis Community College and Stanford University, where he received his PhD. His research interests include Latin literature, Roman art and ancient slavery.

Image, Text, and Culture in Classical Antiquity
Series editor: Michael Squire
University of Cambridge, UK

Since the Renaissance—and arguably much earlier—the visual and verbal remains of the Greco-Roman world have been a constant source of inspiration and enlightenment. This series offers an interdisciplinary forum for research into those ancient literary and artistic cultures, exploring classical materials both on their own terms and in light of their subsequent receptions. Attuned to the ways in which different cultural forms mediate different aspects of the classical past, the series explores both the fundamental problems and opportunities of reconstructing Greco-Roman antiquity from its surviving archaeological and textual traces.

A defining interest of the series lies in the intersection between ancient visual and verbal media. In what ways do images and texts construct different records of the classical past, and how did ancient artists and writers themselves theorize the relations between what can be seen and what can be said? Drawing on recent comparative literary and visual cultural studies, series-volumes explore how interdisciplinary approaches can illuminate different aspects of ancient cultural and intellectual history. At the same time, they demonstrate how classical materials can nuance more modern theories of visual and verbal mediation in turn.

The series will publish monographs and edited volumes on all periods of Greco-Roman history, from Archaic Greece through to Late Antiquity. We are particularly interested in projects that are structured according to theme, medial difference or methodological problem rather than chronological timeframe. Above all, volumes aim to probe, interrogate and provoke: by crossing traditional disciplinary and subdisciplinary boundaries within and beyond the field of classics, while also drawing on approaches developed outside its historicist parameters, Image, Text and Culture in Classical Antiquity engages a broad readership from a range of different academic perspectives.

Ecphrastic Shields in Graeco-Roman Literature
The World's Forge
Karel Thein

The Imagination of the Mind in Classical Antiquity
Forms of Thought
Edited by Emily Clifford and Xavier Buxton

The Neronian Grotesque
Scott Weiss

For more information about this series, please visit: www.routledge.com/Image-Text-and-Culture-in-Classical-Antiquity/book-series/ITCCA

The Neronian Grotesque

Scott Weiss

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

Designed cover image: Detail of decoration from the Domus Transitoria in Rome. Heritage Image Partnership Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo

First published 2024
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-367-47819-3 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-55354-2 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-03857-3 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003038573

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Contents

Figures

Acknowledgements

This book benefited greatly from the support of many individuals and institutions, and it is my pleasure to acknowledge their contributions to my work. The project began as a dissertation at Stanford University, where I had the tremendous privilege of working with a committee dedicated to sharing their expertise and helping me develop my own scholarly voice. My first thanks must go to Grant Parker, my steadfast advisor, who supported unorthodox approaches to the study of the ancient world and always encouraged me to think big. Jennifer Trimble provided critical feedback that always motivated me to charge forward; her improvements to my work are innumerable. Alessandro Barchiesi inspired my thinking with exciting ideas that frequently reoriented my research in unexpected ways. Christopher Krebs witnessed the earliest origins of the dissertation and supplied the project with much-needed skepticism without ever doubting its potential. Michael Squire models the scholarship I aspire to conduct on relationships between ancient texts and images; I am grateful for his generosity in joining my committee and the enthusiasm and seriousness with which he engaged with my work.

It is thanks to Michael, more than anyone else, that I am able to publish this project in its present form; his support as my editor made this book possible. I am honored to be included in the series *Image, Text, and Culture in Classical Antiquity*, which offers a distinctive opportunity to interrogate the intersection between ancient visual and verbal media.

Faculty and staff, at Stanford and elsewhere, assisted me in numerous ways during the initial phases of research and writing. For reading various drafts and providing guidance on my research, I am grateful to Giovanna Ceserani, Andrea Cucchiarelli, Amir Eshel, Roland Greene, Nicholas Jenkins, Jay Reed and Susan Stephens. Valerie Kiszka, Lydia Hailu and Claudia Ortega aided in all sorts of logistical ways.

My research in Italy was made possible by funding from the Lemmermann Foundation as well as numerous awards from Stanford University: an Edwin J. Doyle Memorial Fellowship from the Department of Classics, a Graduate Student Grant from the Europe Center, and a Graduate Research Opportunity Award from the School of Humanities and Sciences. I owe special thanks to Stefania Peterlini of the British School in Rome for her wizardry in obtaining permits to access

archaeological sites. After returning from Rome, I spent a year of research and writing with funding from a Mellon Foundation Dissertation Fellowship.

My fellow graduate students have been a sustaining source of intellectual exchange and friendship. My years in graduate school were greatly enriched by the camaraderie I enjoyed with Stanford colleagues Ted Kelting, Kilian Mallon, Stephen Sansom, Alyson Melzer, Brittney Szempruch, Hannah LeBlanc, Israel McMullin, Simeon Ehrlich, Lizzy Ten-Hove, Dillon Gisch, Grace Erny, David Pickel, Brandon Bark, Peter Shi, Ian Tewksbury, Vladimir Zuckerman, Jacqueline Arthur-Montagne, Nolan Epstein, Jon Weiland, Brian Bigio, Gabrielle Thiboutot, Ava Shirazi, Sienna Kang, David Driscoll, Alan Sheppard, Carolyn MacDonald, Mark Pyzyk, Matthew Loar and Dan-el Padilla Peralta, as well as the Hertziana crew of Morgan Ng, Tiffany Racco, Johannes Gebhardt and Ray Carlson.

In the time since graduating from Stanford, I have been fortunate to work alongside wonderful colleagues. For their collegiality and support of my work, I am grateful to Judith Thorn, Hilary Lehmann, Mitchell Parks, Danielle Fatkin and Greg Gilbert at Knox College; to Trevin Jones at St. Louis Community College; and to Liz Childs, Nicola Aravecchia, Nate Jones and Cathy Keane at Washington University in St. Louis.

Routledge has been amazingly supportive throughout the publication process and patient through many delays as a result of the pandemic. For all of their assistance, I thank Amy Davis-Poynter, Marcia Adams and Lizzi Risch. Finally, I want to extend my gratitude to the anonymous readers that Routledge assembled to review my work—three for the initial proposal and two for the full manuscript; their feedback helped me refine the book in many ways, and I am grateful to them for their time and effort.

Part of Chapter 4 appears in different form in "Bodily Metaphors and Failed Resolution in Persius's First Satire," *Arethusa* 55.1 (2022), 67–94. I thank the journal for permission to reprint that material here.

My family has always embraced me with unfailing love and support. My life would not be what it is without Adam, Beth, Alex and Brooks Weiss and Stephen, Rachel and Paul Kobasa. My parents, Joel and Susan Weiss, are the bedrock of who I am, and I am forever grateful for all they have given me. My greatest thanks go to Clare Kobasa, my most vital interlocutor, who animated the ideas in this book and gave me the courage to see it to completion.

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group
http://taylorandfrancis.com

Introduction

Semen has no business coming out of an eyeball. And yet, readers of the ancient Roman satirist Persius confront just that. Like so many oddities of literature written under the emperor Nero, the image resists interpretation and has prompted some readers to abandon it as merely grotesque, but that label deserves attention for its potential to open new avenues of inquiry. The concept of the grotesque, which permeates texts and visual art of the period, owes its origins to Nero. In the late fifteenth century, antiquarians uncovered the subterranean ruins of his Domus Aurea, and in these "grottoes" they marveled at wall paintings they named *grottesche*.[1] These frescoes excited the imaginations of artists such as Pinturicchio and Raphael, who emulated the ancient forms to create a new artistic style. In the following centuries, this style became broadly associated with the strange and fantastic as it developed into what we now call the grotesque. On a fundamental level, the grotesque disrupts normative ways of comprehending the world. It challenges preconceived notions about the stability of natural forms and provides alternative strategies for representing reality.

During the reign of Nero, Roman culture produced some of its most spectacular works of art and literature, and some of its strangest. Scholars have long noted that much of this material pushes at traditional limits of aesthetics and poetics, but no study has ever attempted to account for these effects across textual and visual media. This lacuna should surprise students of Neronian literature, steeped as it is in visuality and largely understood since a boom of scholarship in the 1990s through the paradigm of spectacle.[2] This book employs theories of the grotesque in order to explain some of the most challenging effects of Neronian literature and to contextualize these dynamics within the contemporary visual culture that gave birth to this polyvalent concept. The results reveal features pervasive in a literary and artistic culture invested in exploring the edges of expression.

Periodization and the Question of *Zeitgeist*

How appropriate is it to classify the reign of Nero as a coherent and distinct era with identifiable cultural features? An observer of collected volumes published over the past three decades could understandably arrive at the impression that the issue is settled.[3] Doubt lingers, however, for even the editors of those companions

DOI: 10.4324/9781003038573-1

and others who attempt to survey "Neronian" literature.[4] More often than not, traditional periodization reduces complex diachronic phenomena into units of time that are conceptually digestible, if not simplistic. Even the Augustan age—perhaps the most canonical period of Roman history—deserves to be problematized and reimagined.[5] Alternative models for understanding imperial Roman culture can look beyond the reigning dates of individual emperors or dynastic families in order to capture dynamics that do not fall neatly within such rigid timeframes.[6] Any scholarship on Neronian culture must recognize that the years 54 and 68 do not represent magical boundaries that hermetically seal off the activities of what came before and after. This study of the Neronian grotesque is no exception. But how specifically Neronian are the dynamics this book identifies?

As a visual form, the ornamental designs that came to be known as grotesques were not a Neronian invention. Drawing on various Hellenistic motifs, the grotesque ornaments of Roman art began in the early Augustan period.[7] Their popularity, however, grew over the following generations and became a defining feature of the Neronian phase of Fourth Style wall painting.[8] Of course, the grotesque as an aesthetic category extends beyond the narrow morphological definition of ornamental forms characterized by an amalgamation of human, animal and vegetal elements. In its preoccupations with the interplay between reality and artificiality, however, Neronian painting exemplifies many aspects of the polyvalent concept of the grotesque, as it is most broadly understood.[9] These features of Roman art also have significant precursors. The frescos from the Villa Farnesina, for example, represent Augustan painting's ability to deploy ornamentation and hybridity to challenge visual ontologies.[10] As with the emergence of the quintessential grotesque ornament, these more abstract features of Neronian visual culture are not without precedent, but they appear with greater frequency and intensity in the mid-first century CE.

A similar story can be told about Neronian literature, which scholars frequently characterize as bizarre, baroque and (of course) grotesque.[11] Whereas many Neronian texts display a penchant for strangeness and literary effects that some readers throughout the centuries have considered extravagant, these qualities did not emerge out of nowhere. As with Roman wall painting, important precursors anticipated many of Neronian literature's most striking characteristics. One author stands out in particular: Ovid. From rhetorically charged verse to obsessions with the body and its permutations, Ovidian poetics frequently typifies the grotesque in many ways that resemble the case studies in this book. In some respects, then, the literary phenomena of the Neronian grotesque can appear as the Neronian reception of Ovid.[12] Such a view, however, puts too much weight on intertextual relationships between individual authors. Seen another way, Ovid was a bellwether of literary trends that accelerated through the Julio-Claudian period and became increasingly prominent by the mid-first century. Of course, these trends did not cease with Neronian authors, and we can detect further development of these themes in Flavian literature.[13]

In addition to the fact that some of the most idiosyncratic features of Neronian art and literature were also present in Roman culture before and after the period,

we must reckon with the dating of various works generally thought to be Neronian but sometimes called into question. Authors such as Calpurnius Siculus or even Petronius face their skeptics.[14] Seneca, perhaps the literary figure most central to the Neronian age, likely wrote many or most of his tragedies under Claudius. Similarly, although secure evidence can precisely date many Fourth Style wall paintings, others are more vaguely located within the third quarter of the first century, arguably as likely to be Vespasianic as they are to be Neronian. These ambiguities point in the same direction as more firmly datable evidence that pre- or postdate the reign of Nero. The Neronian grotesque describes phenomena that extend across the early imperial period, with greatest clustering of the most illustrative examples coinciding with the mid-first century. We should think of a long Neronian age in a model similar to the treatment of centuries by historians of the early modern period.[15] For example, this book's analysis of the *Aetna*, likely written in the 60s or 70s, is meant to encourage a more capacious understanding of what counts as Neronian.

Such a flexible definition of the Neronian period appeals to a more nuanced view of history than the rigid boundaries of an imperial reign, but the degradation of chronological precision also risks losing heuristic utility, as "Neronian" becomes a squishy byword for the late-Julio-Claudian/early-Flavian years. Abandoning the limitations of Nero's reign also raises the question of the emperor's involvement in the aesthetics of his time. How responsible was Nero for Neronian art and literature? With regards to the emperor's personal direction of artistic and literary choices, this book takes the position that Neronian culture operated above and beyond Nero the man. The scenario of a wider milieu in which the emperor was just one of many factors appears much more plausible than an imperial puppet master dictating tastes and fashions.

Two elements, however, forbid a complete removal of Nero from the focus of this book. First, some of the most prominent examples of Neronian art and literature were commissioned by and for the emperor. The Domus Aurea, of course, leads the discussion of the Neronian grotesque. Chapter 3 explores how imagery from the palatial complex relates to pastoral poetry of Calpurnius Siculus that celebrates the emperor. These case studies sit alongside others with little or no direct connection to Nero. The coexistence of this evidence indicates that imperial projects were neither entirely responsible for nor completely irrelevant to the broader aesthetic phenomena that I term the Neronian grotesque. The second reason for retaining Nero, on some level, in the big picture of the Neronian age is more complex. From the moment of his ouster up to the present day, a mythology around Nero has transformed the man into a larger-than-life figure who embodies many qualities essential to the dynamics that are central to this book.[16] The absurdities, theatricalities and falsities belonging to this mythology make disentangling "Nero" from "Neronian" an impossible task. For that reason, the expansive vision of a Neronian age outlined previously will always include the shadow of the emperor as an icon of its essence.

If we accept this notion of a Neronian age, we must further ask whether it offers a coherent picture of a cultural moment. This question of *Zeitgeist* lies at the core of this book. In particular, the book asks not only if certain styles and themes can

be found across Neronian art or literature but also if those works of different media share common concerns and aesthetics. By probing the relationships between visual and literary production, the book offers new insights into important developments in Roman culture in the mid-first century.

Texts and Images

The relationship between images and texts is complex and has been an object of interest since antiquity. Recent years have produced an exciting body of scholarship committed to examining with theoretical sophistication how ancient Greek and Roman art and literature relate to each other.[17] These studies do not prioritize words over things or vice versa, nor do they assume simplistic models of directionality, with one medium commanding influence over another, as can traditional conceptions of illustration or ekphrasis. Instead, they seek to elucidate shared strategies of composition, overlaps between literary and visual rhetoric, the role of context in shaping the reception of a work, and the authority of the reader/viewer to generate meaning. This book draws on the methods developed by these recent studies and seeks to contribute to the growing understanding of ancient image–text interactions. In its alignment with these recent trends in scholarship, the book situates itself within the *Image, Text, and Culture in Classical Antiquity* series, which aims to illuminate the cultural history of the ancient Mediterranean through interdisciplinary studies of verbal-visual intersections.

The most ambitious effort to coordinate Neronian literature with its contemporary visual culture is Jean-Michel Croisille's *Poésie et art figuré de Néron aux Flaviens: recherches sur l'iconographie et la correspondance des arts à l'époque imperiale*.[18] In his massive study (2 vols., 726 pp., 167 plates), Croisille compiles what amounts to an assemblage of correspondences in iconography. His preoccupation with figural representations limits his study to an attempt to prove direct exchanges between wall paintings and poetic treatments of the same subjects, and the resulting product is, in the words of one reviewer, "an opportunity sadly squandered."[19] In addition to its *a priori* assumptions that individual works of art drew inspiration from specific literary passages, the overall project implies that image-text analysis can only recover the similarities and differences between compared representations of mythological scenes, to say nothing of more complex aesthetic dynamics. In light of the work of Elsner, Platt, Squire and others, the results seem especially reductive and unsatisfying. Hence the need remains for a sustained analysis of Neronian text–image relationships.

This book intervenes by offering a new way to study those relationships. Rather than endeavoring to prove one-to-one iconographic correspondences of mythological representation, the book attempts to draw parallels between the aesthetics and style of literary and visual media, and thus demonstrate shared strategies with which these works engaged their recipients. To be clear, iconography does not wholly recede from the picture, but it also does not occupy the center to the exclusion of other interests. For example, in Chapter 2, after analyzing a painting of Medea in a Pompeian house, I refer to Seneca's *Medea* for the sake of contextualizing certain

compositional decisions, but my focus quickly shifts to another of Seneca's plays, the *Thyestes*, in order to arrive at a core interest of my book—modes of representation. Each chapter brings together Neronian texts and images in order to show their commonalities not so much in what they show but in how they show it. These dynamics of display emerge through analysis of resonant imagery, compositional designs and contextual forces that color the register and tone of the works. My argument at times appeals to the "fuzzier echoes" of interactivity between visual and literary culture, but as these reverberations accumulate the book will demonstrate that Neronian art and literature could achieve similar effects and took related steps in pursuit of a common goal to expand the parameters of representation.[20]

The concept of the grotesque affords a powerful hermeneutic framework for making these connections. Because of its origins in the Renaissance rediscovery of the Domus Aurea, its earliest articulations responded to Fourth Style wall painting. In its subsequent development, current understandings of the concept often neglect the features that defined it in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but I seek to recover those aspects of the grotesque as a valuable heuristic for considering Neronian culture. At the same time, during that long theoretical development, the grotesque acquired connotations that capture many phenomena recurring throughout Neronian literature, from the estranged worldview of Seneca and Lucan to the carnivalesque absurdity of Petronius and Persius. By embracing its polyvalent nature, developed over the course of a protean intellectual history, the grotesque may therefore bridge two spheres of Neronian cultural production, the literary and the visual.

Chapter Outline

The book's chapters are divided into three parts devoted to the main themes that guide my analysis: fantasy and reality, hybridity, and ornament. The chapters pursue their themes through a series of case studies, for which I have selected examples that well illustrate broad and pervasive phenomena within Neronian art and literature. Over the course of the book, parallels between the case studies show that these three main themes belong to the same overarching concern surrounding new potentials for representation.

Part I explores the interplay between fantasy and reality. Confusion between these two realms constitutes a fundamental feature of the grotesque as it as been articulated in a variety of contexts. We can witness this characteristic in the earliest appearance of the word *grottesche*, an anonymous poem recounting a descent into the grottoes of the Domus Aurea. Chapter 1 lays the groundwork by establishing the grotesque as a conduit between these different modes. It differs from the other five chapters in that it does not exclusively treat Roman material from the mid-first century, but rather it explores properties of the grotesque as it has been articulated in a variety of cultural contexts and the relationship of this transhistorical concept to a historically contingent moment in Roman antiquity, when its features are especially prevalent in art and literature. By approaching the longue durée of the grotesque, the opening chapter intends to address methodological questions

of anachronism and temporalities. Chapter 2 continues the theme of fantasy and reality by mapping it across three Neronian case studies, with a special attention to how these texts and images harness physical spaces to create metaphorical spaces in which different modes of representation may coexist. Throughout these case studies, this chapter illuminates a fundamental feature of the grotesque, which by collapsing the distance between fantasy and reality provokes those who encounter it to reconsider the nature of the world they inhabit.

Part II addresses hybridity, another core element of the grotesque. The images in the Domus Aurea provoked such an intense response because of their daring combinations of human, animal and vegetal forms, and the concept of the grotesque developed as Renaissance artists tried their own hands at inventing imaginative combinations of disparate parts. Modern theorists have also emphasized hybridity as a fundamental aspect of the grotesque's ability to shock and intrigue by assembling familiar and identifiable features into strange and unfamiliar appearances. Chapters 3 and 4 will survey Neronian hybrids that exemplify these divergent qualities, with the former treating those that inspire awe or fear and the latter analyzing those that are playful or satirical. Chapter 3 concerns hybrids that present themselves in the context of overwhelming power. The fear that these hybrids inspire speaks to a disturbing side of the grotesque, which can expose the instability of assumed categories that often inform our most basic understandings of natural forms. Chapter 4 charts hybrids of a very different variety, those that are more playful or satiric in form. These humorous or satirical hybrids channel a playful side of the grotesque, which mocks a sense of decorum demanding forms maintain discrete domains rather than blend to create something new.

Part III takes the concept of ornament as its guiding principle because it featured so prominently in the original conception of the grotesque that directly responded to Neronian material. The ornamental designs of Fourth Style wall painting formed the basis for the theories of Pirro Ligorio and Gian Paolo Lomazzo to describe the grotesque as a communicative system that pivoted between order and disorder and could express anything imaginable. As the grotesque gravitated to other genres, such as caricature, and took on more abstract meanings, popular understandings of the concept have neglected its origins in ornament, but the ideas associated with that conception have much to offer my project's analysis of Neronian texts and images. Chapter 5 investigates how ornament, traditionally understood as investing order into an aesthetic system, can contribute a sense of disorder to the compositions to which it belongs. By both framing and disorienting the composition, ornamental features exemplify the disruptive qualities of the grotesque. Chapter 6 continues the study of ornament through the lens of excess, which for the Neronian grotesque proves to be a central theme and the discourse through which ornament operates. The case studies in this final chapter show that in the context of the grotesque, ornament may disrupt and disorient an aesthetic system it ostensibly buttresses.

A conclusion summarizes the various themes that guide these chapters to show how they converge to illuminate broader phenomena that pervaded Neronian cultural production. The grotesque afforded Neronian artists and authors new avenues for perceiving the world and representing it. Over the course of this book, a diverse

set of cultural artifacts emerge as participants in this collective mode of display. By showing the interconnections between these works, this study helps explain the Neronian predilection for fanciful and sometimes repulsive imagery as a desire to challenge expectations and to expand parameters of representation. The idea of representational expansion unifies the various case studies, as the previous chapter summaries indicated. In this way, the themes that structure the study—conflations of fantasy and reality, hybridity and ornament—collaborate to reveal even broader themes that pervade Neronian cultural production. We may understand them to be multiple facets of the same phenomenon. Only by looking at these themes together in a single study, however, can we see clearly the breadth, variety and interconnectivity of Neronian aesthetic experimentation. The hybrids explored in Chapters 3 and 4 rely on integrated modes of display that Chapters 1 and 2 established to be a fundamental process by which the grotesque operates. By considering how Neronian texts and images deployed ornament, Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrate that the literary and visual culture of the period valued excessive effects, and this revelation explains why the case studies from the previous chapters contain so many instances of art and literature attempting to show what might seem outside the bounds of representation.

Notes

1 On the rediscovery of the Domus Aurea, Dacos 1969 remains fundamental.
2 Important examples of this generation of Neronian scholarship include Bartsch 1994; Panayotakis 1995; Leigh 1997.
3 For a representative sampling, see Elsner and Masters 1994; Castagna and Vogt-Spira 2002; Buckley and Dinter 2013; Bartsch, Freudenburg, and Littlewood 2017.
4 Dinter 2013: 1 acknowledges the "artificial nature" of periodization. Maes 2013: 309–12 problematizes the practice of establishing parameters for Neronian literature, and his appendices point to the wide variety of authors who could be included, but often are not, within the canonical account of the epoch. His work shows that there is a certain degree of arbitrariness to how we conceive of a cultural moment, even after the temporal boundaries have been established.
5 Morrell, Osgood, and Welch 2019.
6 König and Whitton 2018: 4 make a compelling argument for considering together literature written during the time of Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian without the need to appeal to a "Nerjadrianic" age.
7 Walter-Karydi 1990: 138–47.
8 Ling 1991: 83–84 observes a decline of this type of ornamentation, both in prevalence and in quality, during the Flavian period.
9 Lorenz 2013: 378 makes a compelling argument that Neronian painting exhibited "an interest in the processes with which reality and artificiality can be generated and upheld, including an exploration of the wide areas of overlap between them."
10 Platt 2009; Barham 2021.
11 Just to name a few: Segal 1984; Sell 1984; Johnson 1987; Most 1992; Bartsch 1997; Castagna and Vogt-Spira 2002; Maes 2013; Bartsch 2015; Branham 2019.
12 Ovidian intertexts can play an important role in the study of the Neronian grotesque and are explored elsewhere in this book (e.g., the reception of Ovid's depiction of chaos; cf. Tarrant 2002).
13 Stover 2012 and Rebeggiani 2018: 153–96 on the reception of Lucan in Flavian epic attest to the importance of Neronian literature in the subsequent generation.

14 I accept both Calpurnius and Petronius as Neronian authors. The debate around the date of Calpurnius is longstanding, and I treat the issue in Chapter 3. Petronius has traditionally been on firmer Neronian ground (see Schmeling 2011: xiii–xvii for a summary of the evidence and bibliography), but recent arguments for dating the *Satyrica* to the second century are difficult to ignore. Roth 2016 points out a striking parallel between the text and Pliny the Younger and argues that it is more likely that the *Satyrica* alluded to Pliny than vice versa. Kronenberg 2017, however, while acknowledging Roth, offers further support for a Neronian date by suggesting that Statius' *Silvae* 2.4 makes a connection between Petronius and Nero, with the assumption that Pliny drew inspiration from the *Satyrica* (cf. Solin 2003).
15 See, for example, Wallerstein 1974 on the long sixteenth century and O'Gorman 1997 on the long eighteenth century.
16 The essays assembled by Elsner and Masters 1994 laid the groundwork for studying Neronian culture through of tropes surrounding Nero. Maes 2013 crafts a helpful distinction between Nero and NERO as the man and myth intersect in modern understandings of Neronian literature. More recently, Malik 2020 has excavated the foundations of the Nero as Antichrist paradigm, another layer of mythmaking through which modern understandings of the mid-first century CE inevitably form.
17 For examples, see Elsner 2007; Squire 2009; Platt 2011; Pandey 2018; Valladares 2021; Reitz-Joose 2022.
18 Croisille 1982.
19 Ling 1983: 296.
20 Regarding interactivity, König and Whitton 2018: 21 prefer "interactions" as opposed to intertextuality, since "interactivity" is better equipped to "give voice to the fuzzier echoes and dialogues between the lines of our texts, and to invoke the sociohistorical communication and exchange that went along with literary production."

Part I

Fantasy and Reality

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group
http://taylorandfrancis.com

1 In the Grotto

For those explorers who first lowered themselves beneath the earth, it must have been dark. Torches would have lit the space, but not completely. Flickers from the flames would offer glimpses of the murals, images appearing in the subterranean night. This atmosphere of darkness defined the experience of visiting the Domus Aurea in the late fifteenth century, and the mysteries of the grotto profoundly informed understandings of its imagery and subsequent ideas about art and aesthetics that developed from that initial moment of reception. Connections between the grotto, *grottesche* and the grotesque are impossible to disentangle.[1] In this way, the grotto was not just the site of early modern encounters with ancient Roman paintings; it became a metaphor for the process by which an aesthetic experience can disrupt the world as it had previously been understood and reconfigure it into new possibilities.

The conceptual relationship between the grotto and the grotesque lies in the overlap of spaces that each occupies. The former holds a physical space underground, a place both dangerous and exciting where artists and antiquarians could venture to pursue untold discoveries and ignite their imaginations. The latter describes a metaphorical space, a realm of potentiality that affords those who confront it a new way of understanding the world. When we try to conceive of what the grotesque is and how it works, the grotto offers a fertile symbol to visualize. The experience of entering both the physical space of the grotto and the metaphorical space of the grotesque is at once disorienting and productive. Explorers of the Domus Aurea, feeling their way around in the dark, had to adjust their frame of reference when they came face-to-face with images unlike any they had seen before, but they emerged from the grotto with new ideas about how forms can exist and interact with each other. Similarly, as an aesthetic phenomenon, the grotesque demands a rethinking of fundamental principles regarding the nature of the world and the possibilities for its representation. The intellectual history of the grotesque as a concept, traced briefly in the following pages, reveals this underlying continuity with the grotto from which it sprung.

The rediscovery of the Domus Aurea introduced a radically new vocabulary of ornamental designs into the artistic imagination of the Italian Renaissance.[2] Pinturicchio's decorations for the Della Rovere Chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo represent the earliest known imitations of these ornaments, and provide a *terminus ante quem* for the rediscovery of the Domus Aurea at no later than 1479.[3] Within

DOI: 10.4324/9781003038573-3

a generation, the popularity of *grottesche* had proliferated, and they featured notably in ambitious commissions such as Luca Signorelli's decorations (1499–1504) in the Cappella Nuova of the cathedral in Orvieto. These designs bear little to no resemblance towards any ancient model found in the Domus Aurea and show that *grottesche* had become an idiom for invention rather than a set of established templates.[4] The prominence of *grottesche* and quality of their execution perhaps reached a highpoint in the Vatican Logge (1516–19) at the hands of Giovanni da Udine under the supervision of Raphael.[5] A graffito in the Domus Aurea signed by Giovanni bears testimony to the inspiration he drew from his exploration of the grotto.[6]

The earliest account of one such descent beneath the earth belongs to an anonymous poem, the *Antiquarie prospetiche romane composte per prospectivo melanese depictore* (c. 1500).[7] Written in terza rima and dedicated to Leonardo da Vinci, the poem recounts a tour of the ancient sculptures and monuments visible in Rome and includes a vivid episode in which the protagonist describes his encounter with the grotto (125–29):

> Hor son spelonche ruinate grotte
> di stuccho di rilievo altri colore
> di man di cinabuba apelle giotte
> Dogni stagion son piene dipintori
> piu lastate par chel verno infresche
> secondo el nome dato da lavori
> Andian per terra con nostre ventresche
> con pane con presutto poma e vino
> per esser piu bizarri alle grottesche
> El nostro guidarel mastro pinzino
> che ben ci fa abottare el viso elochio
> parendo inver ciaschun spaz camino
> Et facci traveder botte ranochi
> civette e barbaianni e nottoline
> rompendoci la schiena cho ginochi.
>
> Now they are skeletal ruins with fragments of stucco reliefs and paintings by the hand of Cimabue, Apelles, Giotto. Though painters crowd the grottoes in every season summer seems favored over winter according to the name given to their works. We crawl down into them on our bellies with bread and ham, apples and wine, to behave more peculiar than the grotesques. Our guide is Mastro Pinzino who makes us rub our faces and eyes in the dirt indeed, each of us looks like a chimney sweep. He brings us to see toads, frogs, owls, barn owls and bats while we break our backs on our knees.
>
> [tr. Fienga]

A close reading of these verses reveals a great deal about the nature of the grotesque in its earliest form. The speaker of the poem sets the scene in the cavernous

ruins of the grotto (*spelonche ruinate grotte*), a space for exploration, discovery, invention and imagination. The grotto is both a physical place and a conceptual idea located within the ruins. As a material vestige of ancient Rome, it represents a conduit between antiquity and modernity. Its fragmentary state precludes its visitors' ability to gain full access to the past but offers a tantalizing glimpse at a remote world. In the grotto, past and present collide on a path of artistic communication. The poet elides the early Renaissance painters Giotto and Cimabue with the ancient master Apelles, who finds himself inserted between his two modern colleagues (*cinabuba apelle giotte*).[8] The rhyming of *grotte*/*giotte* further connects ancient ruin with modern art. None of these painters actually applied his brush to the walls of the Domus Aurea, but to the poet's mind the frescoes recall the genius of both recent and distant pasts. The effect collapses two eras into a single point in time and space, at which sit the grotto and its imagery.

The *Antiquarie* paints a vivid portrait of a descent into the ruins of the Domus Aurea. We read of crowds rushing down to explore the grottoes at every season (*Dogni stagion son piene dipintori*), but nature functions differently beneath the earth as summer is "fresher" than winter (*piu lastate par chel verno infresche*). The grotto is thus a place of contradictions, and already we can observe the inversions and transgressions that have become familiar to our present conception of the grotesque. The poet puns on the quality of the "fresh" air with the name given to the surrounding works (*secondo el nome dato da lavori*): fresco. His word games again align the mood of the grotto with the art it contains. The details of his movement through the tunnels of the Domus Aurea further evince a quality of strangeness that lurks in the grotto. Crawling on their bellies (*Andian per terra con nostre ventresche*), our poet and his companions behave "more bizarrely than the grotesques" themselves (*per esser piu bizarri alle grottesche*). More than any other line from the passage, this salient phrase unlocks the poetics of the grotesque. Rather than a static collection of images for passive observation, the grotesque is a dynamic display that engages its viewers and demands participation. In the grotto, reality and fantasy interact, and we lose any distinction between the animals that inhabit the grotto, the creatures that animate their walls and the explorers who blur into the scenery that surrounds them. The toads, frogs, owls, barn owls and bats could just as easily exist on the frescoes as in the fresh air of the grotto. The final image of the explorers "breaking their backs on their knees" (*rompendoci la schiena cho ginochi*) renders their contorted bodies into grotesque creations that rival the fantasies within the Domus Aurea.[9]

The *Antiquarie* presents a poetic vision of the grotesque when it was first realizing articulation, but as the sixteenth century progressed several art theorists offered interpretations of the grotesque.[10] These discussions often occurred in the context of Counter-Reformation debates over the propriety of images in religious art, and *grottesche* met open hostility from those such as Gabriele Paleotti, who censured the hybrid creations as violations of divine will.[11] The grotesque also found its champions in those who saw it as an exciting new idiom for artistic invention and expression. In articulating the value and meaning of *grottesche*, these *trattatisti* arrived at more abstract understandings of the ancient images that have much to