

Topic Page: [Nero, Emperor of Rome, 37-68](#)

Summary Article: **Nero (Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus)**

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Nero (37–68 CE) was the fifth Roman emperor and the last representative of Rome's first imperial dynasty, the Julio-Claudians. His reputation for villainy and ruthless depravity is arguably unmatched by that of any other ancient Roman.

Nero was born Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus on December 15, 37, in the imperial villa at Antium (Anzio). His father, Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, belonged to an old and distinguished family, although he personally does not seem to have lived up to his forebears; Seneca the Elder comments on his laziness (*Sen. Controv.* 9.4.18), while Suetonius describes him as despicable in every respect (*Suet. Nero* 5.1). Lucius' mother, Agrippina the Younger, played the key role in his formative years. She was the great-granddaughter of Augustus, daughter of the highly ambitious Agrippina the Elder and of the immensely popular Germanicus. At the time of Lucius' birth, his mother enjoyed considerable privilege and prestige, since his uncle, her brother Caligula, reigned as emperor. By 39 CE, things had turned sour. Agrippina and her sister Livilla were suspected of conspiracy and exiled. The infant Lucius was placed in the care of a paternal aunt, Domitia. The assassination of Caligula in February 41 and the subsequent accession of Claudius led to the recall of Agrippina and the reunion of mother and child. She was now determined to devote her energies to the promotion of her son's prospects. It was no doubt she who was responsible for stories that circulated about his being miraculously protected by snakes during his childhood (*Suet. Nero* 6.3; *Tac. Ann.* 11.11).

Following the scandalous fall of Messalina, Agrippina married the emperor Claudius, in 49. In the following year, he adopted her son, who now became Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus. In 53, her plans moved closer to fulfillment when Claudius approved the marriage of Nero to his daughter, Octavia. At the same time, Agrippina worked to replace the supporters of Claudius' natural son, Britannicus, with her own appointees. Most significantly, she engineered the appointment of her adherent Burrus as commander of the Praetorian Guard. She also secured the return to Rome of the philosopher Seneca the Younger, reputedly her lover. He was to be her son's tutor, and a number of contemporary essays written by Seneca for the guidance of his pupil have survived. In October 54, Claudius died, supposedly poisoned by a mushroom supplied by Agrippina. She suppressed news of the death until Nero's succession was assured. He was taken to the praetorian camp and proclaimed as emperor, and the Senate cooperated by conferring the appropriate imperial powers on him.

The initial phase of Nero's reign was highly promising. He possessed considerable personal charm and was highly deferential toward the senators, going out of his way to emphasize that he would honor their ancient privileges. Writers of the fourth century attribute to the emperor Trajan the claim that, for a *quinquennium* (five-year period), Nero was superior to all other emperors; it was probably to his initial period that they referred (*Aur. Vict. Caes.* 5.2–4; *Epit. de Caes.* 5.2–5). In his first speech to the Senate, the young Nero promised to model himself on Augustus, noting that he had not been brought up during civil wars and did not come to his position with resentment or a desire for revenge. He promised to keep his private affairs and state affairs separate, he would not countenance bribery or influence peddling, and, perhaps most encouragingly, he would cut down on the practice of trying cases secretly *in camera* (*Suet. Nero* 10; *Tac. Ann.* 13.4). Tacitus observes that Nero was as good as his word,

and several beneficial measures followed. There were debates about the jurisdictional boundaries of praetors and tribunes, there were prosecutions of corrupt officials, and there was much effort given to the reorganization of taxes; these things happening largely as joint efforts of princeps and Senate, leading Tacitus to observe that some fundamentals of the old republic had survived (Tac. *Ann.* 13.28).



Bust of the emperor Nero from the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy. © Photo Scala, Florence. Courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali.

Nero seems to have allowed himself to be guided by Agrippina at the outset, and she occupied a central position in the earliest part of the reign, even to the extent of appearing with her son on his precious metal coinage. But control seems to have shifted very soon to Burrus and Seneca, who sought to separate Nero from his mother, and it is interesting to note that in his first emollient speech Nero had made an explicit point of distancing himself from some of the practices of the Claudian period, and that the speech was written for him by Seneca. It was no doubt through their influence that Agrippina's role was gradually diminished, and she eventually became alienated from her son. By the end of 55, she seems to have withdrawn from any active role in political events.

For all its enlightenment, the first *quinquennium* was not free of dark political shadows. In 55, Claudius' natural son Britannicus died, and Nero was suspected of poisoning him, although his guilt cannot be determined. Also, Faustus Cornelius Sulla was exiled in 58 (Tac. *Ann.* 13.47). He had close connections to the imperial family and was the husband of Antonia, Claudius' daughter, and might thus have been seen as a threat to Nero. Seriously egregious behavior on Nero's part did not, however, become evident before 59. It was in that year that the issue of Agrippina re-emerged. Why this occurred at this particular time is not fully understood. Tacitus claims unconvincingly that she reasserted herself because of her opposition to an affair that Nero was conducting with Poppaea Sabina, the wife of the future short-lived emperor, Otho (Tac. *Ann.* 14.1). Whatever the reason, Nero decided that his mother was to be eliminated, even though she had not apparently played any role in affairs of state since 55. He supposedly arranged the construction of an ingenious collapsing boat, which failed to work properly and from which she was able to swim safely to shore. She was subsequently finished off by assassins sent by her son.

From this point on, Nero behaved more and more despotically. He seemingly found the guidance of

Seneca and Burrus no less irksome than he had found his mother's interference, and he increasingly went his own way. The most striking manifestation of this was a growing obsession with public performance. Ironically, his interest in poetry had been fostered by Seneca, who had discouraged him from reading oratory, and Nero had turned to verses, which he was able to compose with considerable facility (Suet. *Nero* 52). He now began to express his artistic interests more publicly. He founded the *Juvenalia* (59) to celebrate the first trimming of his beard, games that involved theatrical performances. The *Neronia* or Quinquennial Games were founded in 61, games in the Greek fashion that combined chariot races, gymnastics, and music (Suet. *Nero* 12.3). He personally performed in public, beginning in Naples in 64.

Generally speaking, the empire outside Rome seems to have been administered competently. The rebellion of Boudica in Britain in the early 60s was brought to a successful end, and in 63 peace was concluded with Parthia. But in Rome itself the reign increasingly bore the marks of tyranny. Rubellius Plautus, great-grandson of Tiberius through Rubellius' mother Julia, daughter of Tiberius' son, Drusus, had lived a quiet and undistinguished life, but he attracted the same dynastic suspicion that had hobbled Faustus Cornelius Sulla, and he was obliged to go into exile in 60 (Tac. *Ann.* 14.22). Events took an especially serious turn for the worse in 62. In that year, the hated and feared treason trials, which had been suspended at the outset of the reign, were reintroduced, after a number of scurrilous verses attacking Nero came to light. Burrus' death in that same year probably aggravated the situation. Tigellinus was appointed to replace Burrus as commander of the guard; he was the chief influence on Nero henceforth, and it was a malign influence. Rubellius Plautus and Cornelius Sulla were murdered in exile; the Senate showed no willingness to condemn their deaths. Also, in the same year, Nero divorced the popular Octavia, and was free to marry Poppaea Sabina ([Sen.] *Octavia*; Suet. *Nero* 35; Tac. *Ann.* 14.59–64; Cass. Dio 62.13). A bogus affair between Octavia and a freedman was concocted to provide grounds. Her execution represented an important breach between Nero and the traditional nobility, and the consequent bitterness is reflected in the tragedy inspired by her death, the *Octavia*, once assigned to Seneca but more likely Flavian. Poppaea was pregnant at the time of her marriage, and in January 63 bore a daughter, Claudia Augusta, who died four months later and was declared a goddess.

In July 64, Rome suffered a major disaster when much of the city was destroyed in a devastating fire that began in the area of the Campus Martius and spread between the Palatine and Esquiline. Overcrowded streets and timber construction meant that fire was a constant concern in Rome, but this disaster was unprecedented in its scale. The blaze continued for several days; only four of the city's fourteen districts escaped unscathed, and three were totally gutted. Nero's conduct seems have been beyond reproach. He was in his birthplace, Antium, when the flames started. He returned to the capital immediately and took energetic measures to check their spread, demolishing buildings and setting controlled fires. This last strategy seems to have been misunderstood, and created suspicion that he had deliberately committed arson (Tac. *Ann.* 15.38). He organized schemes to feed the newly homeless, and to provide a water supply, and later to remove massive amounts of debris. He arranged a program to provide compensation for those whose houses had been destroyed. He also tried to turn the devastation to some good account by adopting a new and wider layout of the streets, and he required that construction of new buildings adhere to a much more stringent code of fire prevention. The *pièce de résistance* of the new Rome was to be his own residence, the "Golden House" (*Domus Aurea*), a splendid structure, situated next to a lake and embraced by quiet groves. This was on such a grand scale that it fed suspicions that he had personally ordered the fire. The notion of arson was fostered by rumors that he had watched the conflagration from a tower while dressed up as a

performer, and had read out his great epic on the fall of Troy (Suet. *Nero* 38; Tac. *Ann.* 15.39; Cass. Dio 62.16–18).

It is almost certain that the fire had broken out by accident, but as the rumors of his involvement persisted, Nero shifted the blame to the Christians, useful targets because of their general unpopularity. They were subjected to particularly cruel torments, used as human torches or wrapped up in animal skins and mauled by savage animals. The retribution was so cruel that in the event it roused sympathy for them (Suet. *Nero* 16; Tac. *Ann.* 15.44). It is little wonder that Nero was depicted as the anti-Christ by such later Christian writers as Tertullian and Lactantius.

In 65, a major conspiracy evolved under the leadership of Gaius Calpurnius Piso (Suet. *Nero* 36; Tac. *Ann.* 15.48–74; Cass. Dio 62.24). The plot, to assassinate Nero at the games, was betrayed, and ruthless punishments followed, not only of the conspirators but also of those who had only the slightest connection to them. Notable among the victims were the poet Lucan and Nero's former tutor, Seneca, who found himself implicated after the event and committed suicide. Later in the same year, Poppaea died, reputedly kicked to death by Nero while pregnant, but in reality perhaps from a miscarriage (Suet. *Nero* 35.3; Tac. *Ann.* 16.6; Cass. Dio 62.27). She was granted a public funeral and divine honors.

Political tensions grew worse and opposition increased. Prominent among Nero's opponents were the Stoics, and in 66 one of their number, Thrasea Paetus, perhaps the most respected senator of his day, was obliged to take his own life because of his ill-concealed contempt for the regime (Tac. *Ann.* 16.33–5). Nero did gain some advantage when he established peace with Parthia and marked the event with a grand spectacle. Tiridates, the Parthian king of Armenia, was invited to Rome in 66 and entertained with games on an extravagant scale (Suet. *Nero* 13; Tac. *Ann.* 16.23–4; Cass. Dio 63.4–6). Nero felt secure enough to be able to leave Italy and to embark on a tour of the eastern provinces, leaving his freedman Helios to look after affairs in Italy. He took part in artistic festivals and managed to win every prize. While this success rate should be viewed with suspicion, he was not lacking in literary ability, and Martial (8.70), for one, thought highly of his skill as a poet. In Corinth, he made it known that the Greeks would be exempt from taxation. This exemption did not long survive, but it did win him popularity, at least in that region of the empire. But clearly all was not well. While in the east he removed from office and put to death three imperial legates, the distinguished Gnaeus Domitius Corbulo (see CORBULO, Gnaeus Domitius), who had given excellent service in Germany and Armenia, and the brothers Scribonius Proculus and Scribonius Rufus, legates of Upper and Lower Germany, respectively.

The fatal threat to Nero was to come from the western provinces. Helios anticipated the looming crisis, urging Nero to return to Italy, which he did in late 67. In March 68, the governor of Gallia Lugdunensis, Vindex, called upon the governors of other provinces to rebel in support of Servius Sulpicius Galba, serving then in Spain. Vindex was, in fact, defeated and killed, two months later, but Nero proved incapable of responding effectively to the crisis, alternating between panic and inertia. The unrest spread to Africa, where Lucius Clodius Macer revolted. At the instigation of one of the prefects, the imperial guard switched their support to Galba, and the Senate declared Nero a public enemy. He was obliged to escape to his private villa, where he took his own life with the help of faithful slaves. Among his final words was a phrase famous in Antiquity, as it is now, *qualis artifex pereo* ("what an artist dies in me!"; Suet. *Nero* 49; Cass. Dio 63.29.2).

Nero's shortcomings as ruler can hardly be doubted, but all the same his reputation suffered considerably in the years immediately following his death. He received hostile treatment under the

Flavian emperors who, after some months of turbulence, succeeded him. Pliny the Elder called him "the fiery destruction of the human race" (*HN* 7.45) and "poison ... for the world" (*HN* 22.92). The sources in this initial period must have played a major role in shaping the image of Nero that emerges in later writers. On his death, various pretenders emerged in the east insisting that they were Nero and were welcomed in some quarters, evidence that he was not universally unpopular (Tac. *Hist.* 2.8; Suet. *Nero* 57; Cass. Dio 64.9.3, 66.19.3b).

SEE ALSO:

Persecution of Christians; Philhellenism; Rome, city of: 4. Julio-Claudian.

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