

The later emperor Nero was born L. Domitius Ahenobarbus on December 15, 37 CE in Antium. His father Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus died already in 40 CE. His mother Agrippina the Younger, a granddaughter of Augustus, was sent to exile by Emperor Gaius Caligula, her brother. After the emperor's death she returned and married his successor, her uncle Claudius. Nero was adopted by him in 50 CE, married his daughter Octavia in 53 CE, and was developed as potential successor. After Claudius's death (probably poisoned by Agrippina) Nero was proclaimed emperor by the Pretorian guard on October 13, 54 CE. Shortly thereafter, the Senate decreed him the *tribunicia potestas* and the *imperium proconsulare*. His official name was now Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus.

Nero had his predecessor and adoptive father consecrated as *divus Claudius* and legitimized himself on coins as *divi filius* (e.g., H. Mattingly [ed.], *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*: I, 200, No. 1, 4, 7). In contemporary poetry his reign is celebrated as the return of the Golden Age (Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis* 4.1; Calpurnius Siculus, *Eclogae* 1, 4, 7; Carmen Einsidlense 2). Since Nero had achieved this without preceding civil wars, he even surpassed the example of Augustus (Seneca, *Clem.* 1.9.1). However the idea of a happy *quinquennium Neronis*, during which the stoic philosopher Seneca as Nero's advisor ruled the Roman Empire, is a modern construct based on a misunderstanding of late sources (Aurelius Victor, *Liber de Caesaribus* 5.2–4). Its use as an explanation for supposedly positive remarks about Rome in the NT (Rom 13:1–7) is implausible.

There is numismatic evidence for a friendly attitude towards the Senate and for Agrippina's prominent position during Nero's first years of government. Nero's interest in the arts is also well documented: he donated the penteterial Neronia and performed himself as singer, poet, dancer, and charioteer. After the classic poetry of Augustus's reign, Neronian literature was a second heyday of epic, bucolic, satire, tragedy, novel, letter writing, and philosophical treatises.

In the NT Nero is the *Kaisar* resp. *Sebastos* to whom Paul appeals, when he is brought before the courts (Acts 25:8, 10–12, 21, 25; 26:32; 27:24; 28:19; cf. 2 Tim 4:16). Within the biblical text he is not mentioned by name (but in the *textus receptus* of 2 Tim 4:22 with the subscript). He is not judged either positively or negatively.

In 55 CE Nero had Britannicus, Claudius's son, murdered. He also alienated himself from his mother and ordered her death in 59 CE. In 64 CE the Great Fire of Rome occurred. Facing subsequent unrest, Nero had "Christians" executed as guilty of arson (Tacitus, *Hist.* 15.44.2–5; cf. Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2). Possibly the deaths of Peter and Paul are connected with these measures against Christ-believers in Rome (John 13:36; 21:18–19; 2 Pet 1:14; Acts

Nero

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I. Greco-Roman Antiquity and New Testament

The reports of ancient historians about Nero (Tacitus, *Ann.* 13–16; Dio 61–63; Suetonius, *Nero*) were all written after his death and concordantly depict him as the low point and inglorious end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Already most of their (lost) sources, Cluvius Rufus, Fabius Rusticus, and Plinius maior, seem to have been biased against Nero (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 20.154). In contrast coins and inscriptions, as well as literary works created during his reign provide valuable insight into Nero's self-representation and contemporary reception and help to correct this one-sided picture.

20:25, 38; 2 Tim 4:6; 1 Clem. 5; Tertullian, *Praesc.* 36.3; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.25.5–8; Lactantius, *Mort.* 2.6). The construction of the huge palace complex *domus aurea* after the fire lowered Nero's popularity and contributed to the tensions with the senatorial elite. The Pisonian conspiracy of 65 CE was revealed and suppressed. Numerous executions and forced suicides followed, including Seneca's.

In 66 CE Nero set off on a journey through Greece. He was celebrated there as a singer and charioteer. The declaration of freedom for Achaia – in reality almost without consequences – brought him enthusiastic approval (Inscriptiones Graecae VII 2713; cf. also the rather positive statements Plutarch, *Sera* 567F–568A; Pausanias, *Descr.* 7.17.3).

The Judean war broke out in 66 CE, partly because Nero had chosen incompetent governors for this province. Nero does not seem to have taken the uprising very seriously. He delegated its suppression to Vespasian. In 68 CE Iulius Vindex, governor of Gallia Lugdunensis, rebelled against Nero. Although the revolt was without success, the Praetorian guard changed sides and chose Vindex's supporter Galba, governor of Hispania Tarraconensis, as emperor. On June 8, 68 the Senate declared Nero a *hostis publicus*. He escaped from Rome and on the following day committed suicide on the estate of his freedman Phaon.

The Senate decreed a *damnatio memoriae*. However, Nero was by no means unpopular among the entire population at that time. Already Otho and Vitellius tried to take up positive sentiments in the Roman populace towards Nero (Suetonius, *Otho* 7.1; *Vit.* 11.2). Pretenders, so called false Neros, gathered supporters (Suetonius, *Nero* 57; Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.8). The legend of *Nero redivivus* found its way into Jewish and Christian apocalypticism: In Sib. Or. 4.119–124; 5.25–34 Nero returns from the East and takes revenge on Rome, executing the divine judgment for the destruction of Jerusalem. In Rev 13:1–18; 17:1–18 the antichrist is pictured as Nero. In ancient Christianity, Nero became known as the first persecutor (Tertullian, *Apol.* 5.3) and functioned as a paradigm of the end tyrant or antichrist.

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