

BY CHARLES A. RAY JR.

NERO

Ruler of Rome

NERO WAS BORN in December A.D. 37 as Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus. His father's family could trace an unbroken line of nobility back for over 200 years. His grandfather on his mother's side was the popular Roman general Germanicus, who was a descendant of the great Emperor Augustus. Nobility, however, does not guarantee civility. Michael Grant began his biography of Nero by saying, "Nero was born of murderous parents, and brought up in a

Some of Rome's Circus Maximus was burned in the fire of 64. However, Nero evidently had it rebuilt, for it was in use when he returned from Greece in 68. Upon his return, Nero passed through the Circus Maximus in triumphal procession.

LESSON REFERENCE

ETB: Romans 13:1-14

Right: Bronze statuette likely made in Gaul showing Nero in imperial dress.



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murderous atmosphere. And he too was murderous. But only when frightened, though unfortunately he got frightened easily.”¹

ASCENT TO POWER

Nero’s uncle Gaius Caligula became emperor the year Nero was born. Two years later, Nero’s mother, Agrippina, was accused of plotting to kill Caligula, who was her brother, and was banished from Rome. Nero was placed in the care of his father’s sister. Nero’s fortunes turned the following year (A.D. 41) when Caligula was murdered by his own palace guards. Caligula’s uncle Claudius was selected as the next emperor, and he allowed his niece, Agrippina, to return from exile.

Upon her return to Rome, Agrippina immediately remarried, this time to a wealthy orator, who died suddenly three years later. In A.D. 48, Claudius’s wife was forced to commit suicide for her alleged involvement in a plot to assassinate Claudius, and by the following year Agrippina was the new wife of the emperor.

Claudius had one son, Britannicus, by his former wife, but Agrippina set out to undermine his claim to the throne. In her first year of marriage to Claudius, she arranged the engagement of Nero to Claudius’s daughter Octavia, and the following year she convinced Claudius to adopt her son. At this time Nero’s name was changed to Nero Claudius Drusus Germanicus.

That same year Agrippina secured the Roman senator, orator, and philosopher Seneca as Nero’s personal tutor. Seneca had been exiled to the island of Corsica in A.D. 41 under the influence of Claudius’s first wife, and Agrippina was instrumental in securing his return to Rome. Nero’s career accelerated rapidly, soon eclipsing the younger Britannicus. Nero’s name appeared first on official



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inscriptions; his image, not that of Britannicus, appeared on coins; and he was allowed to march in parades at the head of the emperor’s palace guard, the praetorian guard.² Nero was given special consideration in pleading cases before the Roman senate, in one case arguing in Latin on behalf of a Roman colony and in another case arguing in Greek on

behalf of two Greek cities.³

In February 54, Britannicus turned 13, the age at which Claudius had allowed Nero to become a legal adult. Claudius gave some indication of giving a similar status to Britannicus, a situation that would have threatened Nero’s claim to the throne. Claudius made a new will, but he died in October 54 without having taken any

Born in Antium (now Anzio, Italy) to Agrippina the Younger and Cnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus on December 15

Claudius marries his niece, Agrippina the Younger

Adopted by Claudius as his own son

A.D. 37

49

50

Needing a scapegoat,
NERO BLAMED THE FIRE ON
the Christians in the city and began
AN INTENSE TIME OF PERSECUTION.
Paul and Peter were probably martyred
IN THE AFTERMATH OF THIS EVENT.

steps to strengthen Britannicus's position. With the aide of Burrus, the commander of the praetorian guard, Agrippina had Nero declared emperor and Claudius's revised will suppressed. Burrus owed his appointment as commander to the political maneuvering of Agrippina, and rumors circulated that she was responsible for Claudius's death, probably through poisoning.

GOLDEN YEARS

Agrippina had assumed significantly more political clout under Claudius than was customary for the wife of an emperor. Nero was not yet 17 when he ascended to the throne, and for at least the first year of his reign, Agrippina exercised even more power. Her portrait appeared on coins with Nero's, hers occupying the more prominent place. Rumors circulated in the first century that Agrippina controlled Nero in part through an incestuous relationship with him.⁴

Soon, however, the relationship between Nero and his mother deteriorated. She threatened to champion Britannicus over Nero, and early in



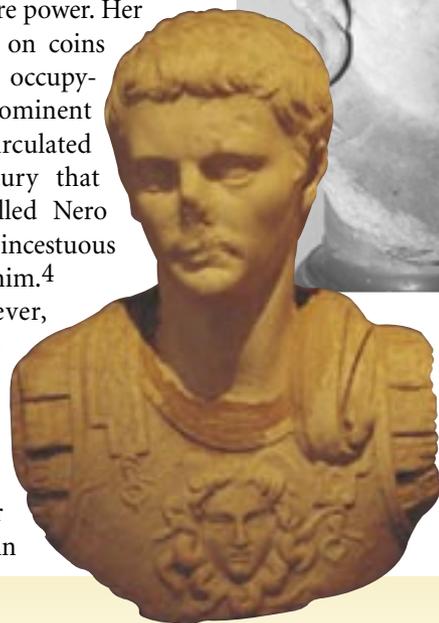
Far left: Statue of a young Nero.

Left: Roman bronze showing Germanicus, commander of Roman legions, especially on the Rhine. Germanicus was Nero's grandfather.



Above: Agrippina, wife of Claudius and mother of Nero.

Left: Marble bust of the emperor Claudius, who adopted Nero in A.D. 50.



A.D. 55 Nero enlisted help in having Britannicus poisoned. He then forced Agrippina to move out of the palace to another residence across town. Working together, Burrus and Seneca used Nero's poor relationship with his mother to channel his energies, at least partially, to the task of governing the empire. The result was a period early in Nero's reign of almost five years during which Rome experienced stability.

Nero appears to have been influenced by Seneca's concepts of generosity and leniency. On one occasion he attempted to eliminate all forms of indirect taxation from the empire. The move proved to be economically impractical but increased Nero's popularity among the people. Nero was reported to have taken his judicial duties very seriously, studying written briefs overnight before making decisions. He appears to have worked hard at removing some of the abuses common among previous emperors.

Like Seneca, Nero was opposed in principle to the death penalty. This desire for clemency was put to the test when a city official was killed by one of his slaves. According to Roman law, all four hundred of the man's slaves were to be executed in retaliation. The extreme fear by the nobility of the large slave population in Rome forced Nero, perhaps against his will, to enforce the law.

Paul wrote his letter to the church at Rome sometime during this period of Nero's reign. While some scholars attempt to date the letter during the reign of Claudius, as early as 51-52, most scholars date the letter in the mid-50s, probably between 55-57.⁵

YEARS OF GROWING TYRANNY

Nero had shown an early interest in the performing arts and athletic competition. Most Roman nobility

Marries Octavia,
 Claudius's daughter

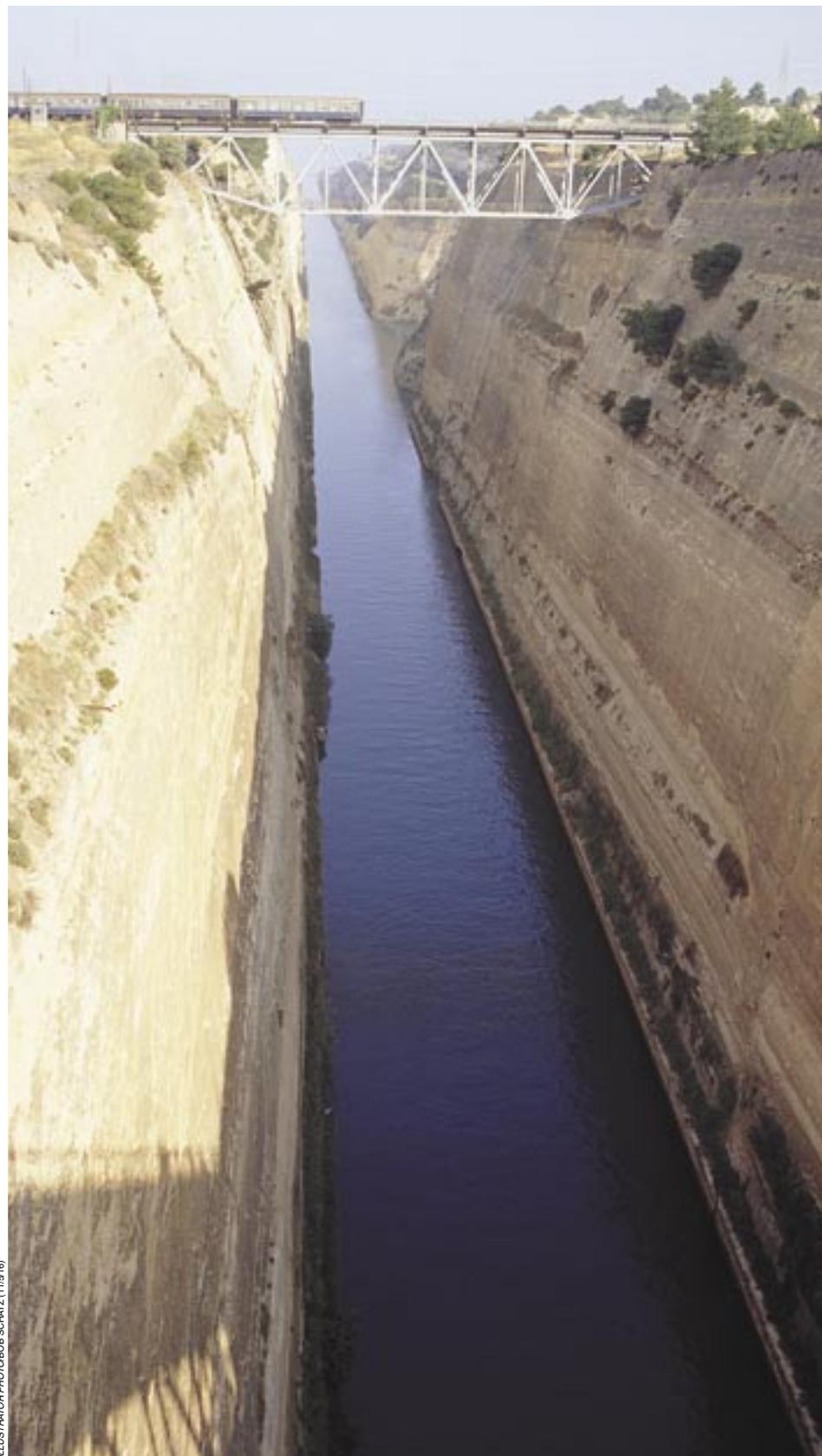
Becomes emperor
 at age 17

believed strongly in the superiority of the Roman practical arts of war and government. While the pursuit of the arts for relaxation and diversion was encouraged, serious pursuit of the arts was left for slaves and other foreigners.

Nero did not share this opinion and had worked privately to excel in music, oratory, and art. His mother had always discouraged these pursuits, and Burrus and Seneca were able to limit Nero's performances to private audiences. A series of events beginning in A.D. 59 changed things.

Nero became less tolerant of his mother's attempts to control him and finally resolved to have her murdered. Following a bungled attempt to have her drowned in a collapsible boat, Nero had her killed on charges of plotting to assassinate him. In contrast to Agrippina's domineering control, the counsel of Burrus and Seneca must have seemed mild. Without that contrast, the two men had less success controlling Nero's wilder side.

In the following years Nero became more determined to fulfill his interests, which included singing, acting, chariot racing, and pursuing sexual exploits. When Burrus died in 62, probably from something like a throat tumor, Nero replaced him with Tigellinus, who encouraged Nero's licentious self-absorption. Without the aid of Burrus, Seneca asked Nero if he could retire from government. Although Nero refused his request, Seneca became less and less involved in governmental affairs. That same year Nero divorced his wife, Octavia, and married Poppaea, who was the wife of a friend and pregnant with Nero's child. Two years later Nero began to make public appearances on the stage and in athletic events, much to the dismay of the Roman Senate and other nobility.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTOBOS SCHATZ (11/9/16)

Divorces Octavia (banishes her and later kills her)
Marries his mistress, Poppaea

62

63

The Great Fire of Rome
First imperial persecution of Christians

64

Nero also was active in remodeling and enlarging his own palace. Eventually his rather large palace became the entrance hall into an immensely larger palace known as the Golden House. Depending on which estimate one accepts, the Golden House and surrounding gardens covered between 125 and 370 acres.⁶ The notorious fire of July 64 caused destruction, which made possible this massive construction project.

The origin of the fire is unknowable, though several aspects of the

situation led to finger pointing in Nero's direction. Reports circulated that during the fire gangs of men were seen throwing torches into buildings and threatening anyone who tried to extinguish the flames. After burning for six days, the fire appeared to be stamped out only to reignite on the property of Tigellinus, the new commander of the emperor's palace guard.

Nero's own attitude toward the fire seemed suspect as well. Inspired by the sight of the city burning, he sang in its entirety his original composition, *Fall of Troy*, while he played his lyre. The ancient sources differ as to where the performance took place, either on the roof of his palace or in his private theater.⁷ The public outrage was intense and was not abated by the emperor's acts of benevolence. Needing a scapegoat, Nero blamed

the fire on the Christians in the city and began an intense time of persecution. Paul and Peter were probably martyred in the aftermath of this event.

The following year a conspiracy against the emperor erupted. Nero brutally suppressed it. According to one source, the crackdown resulted in 19 executions and 13 banishments. As discontent continued to grow in Rome, Nero went to Greece, where he spent a year competing in various athletic games and other events. To no one's surprise, Nero won every event he entered, even the 10-horse chariot race in which he fell from his chariot and was unable to complete the race.

Nero finally returned to Rome in January 68 to at least three separate uprisings. His feeble attempts at restoring order failed miserably. When the Senate voted to condemn Nero to death by flogging, his palace guard deserted him. On 9 June 68 Nero committed suicide. His famous statement, "What an artist dies with me," was uttered as he gave directions on how to decorate his tomb.⁸ This quote encapsulates Nero's decline from an emperor with a passion for the arts to a passionate performer who happened to be emperor. **B**

Far left: Corinthian canal. Nero brought 6,000 Galilean slaves to work on it, but the project stopped at his death. The canal was completed in the 20th century.

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LIFEWAY PHOTO/ FRICK SIMMS



Above: Nero's Golden House on Palatine Hill in Rome as viewed from the hippodrome.

Insets left and above: Roman cymbals and flutes. Nero fancied himself a musician.

1. Michael Grant, *Nero* (New York: Dorset Press, 1970), 13.
2. *Ibid.*, 26.
3. Miriam T. Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 32.
4. Grant, 32.
5. James D. G. Dunn, "Romans, Letter to the" in *The IVP Dictionary of the New Testament*, Daniel G. Reid, ed. (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 1.2, 976.
6. Grant, 140.
7. *Ibid.*, 126.
8. Griffin, 182.

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Work begins on Nero's Golden House

Outbreak of rebellion in Judea, the first Jewish revolt against Rome

Begins work on canal from Corinth to Cenchreae
Appoints Vespasian to head campaign against Jews

Commits suicide (June 9)

65

66

67

68