Nero

the man behind the myth

bp is pleased to welcome you to the iconic British Museum for what will be a spectacular exhibition.

Nero: the man behind the myth vividly explores the reign of the leader long-considered one of Rome's most egotistical, extravagant and evil.

Nero the ruler is well-known. But accounts of his time as ruler have always been open to interpretation. Is his legacy misrepresented? Or, was he every bit the wretched, ruthless ruler that history has judged him to be?

As a visitor to this exhibition you have a unique opportunity to make up your own mind and we are pleased that visitors can once again enjoy a world-class offering from this great institution. We wish you a great experience, aided by the remarkable items on display and the journey expertly curated by the British Museum.

Nero:
the man behind the myth

Nero is one of the most infamous Roman emperors.

Does he deserve his reputation for cruelty and excess?

Nero – portrait or caricature?

Famous for centuries, this is still the most-illustrated portrait of Nero. However, only a small part of the face with the forehead and eyes is ancient, and even this was re-carved into the likeness of a different emperor after Nero's death. The rest of the sculpture is a restoration from the 1660s, based on hostile accounts by ancient writers. It skilfully translates these texts into a compelling but misleading image of Nero as a voluptuous and cruel tyrant. Portraits from Nero's lifetime looked very different.

Marble, AD 59–98 (with later restorations)
Roma, Musei Capitolini

Image caption:
Right: Spanish artist Salva Ruano's modern interpretation of the bust exudes a striking, life-like realism. However, it only adapts a distorted image for the modern era.
© Salva Ruano Martín, cesaresderoma.com

Behind: From Baroque opera to modern cinema, Nero's legacy has fired the popular magination and perpetuated influential stereotypes. Here, Peter Ustinov plays Nero 'fiddling while Rome burns' in Quo Vadis, 1951.

A young ruler

Nero was the fifth Roman emperor. He came to power aged sixteen and reigned for almost fourteen years, from AD 54 to 68. Nero had to steer a vast empire through a period of great change. Faced with conflicting demands and expectations, he adopted policies that appealed to the people, but alienated many members of the elite. Ultimately, his reign came to a premature and tragic close, but this outcome was not predetermined.

Nero's memory was contested. In the end, the judgements of elite authors like Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio prevailed. In light of new research, now is the time to re-evaluate their stories.

Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus becomes Nero

Nero was born as Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus on 15 December AD 37 into an elite clan closely related to the imperial family. He lost his father aged three. In AD 49, the reigning emperor Claudius married Nero's widowed mother, Agrippina. He formally adopted Nero the following year. Statues like this were probably created to mark the occasion. They are Nero's earliest portraits. He became the official crown prince a year later, and ruler of the Roman empire in October AD 54, two months before his 17th birthday.

Marble, AD 50–54
Paris, Musée du Louvre, Department of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Antiquities

Nero became emperor aged 16. He reigned for nearly 14 years. After his death, Roman historians wrote about Nero. They said he was a bad emperor. As you explore this exhibition, look out for labels like this one, designed especially for young learners. They invite you to think about different aspects of Nero's reign and decide whether you feel he was a good or an unsuccessful emperor.

Map caption:

The Roman empire in the time of Nero

Nero inherited a vast empire which had grown significantly over the previous centuries to encompass the entire Mediterranean basin. To the east ruled the Parthians, Rome's greatest rivals.

From republic to empire

Nero was the final ruler of Rome's first dynasty, the Julio-Claudians, which comprised members of two interrelated families, the Iulii and the Claudii.

Some eighty years earlier, Nero's ancestor Augustus had emerged victorious from decades of civil war. He established a new form of government, the principate ('the rule of the first man' among equals). While presented as a restoration of the pre-war republic, in reality the principate was a monarchy. Over the next few decades, this led to constant tensions between the emperors and the senate. As the traditional assembly of the Roman aristocracy, the senate was still essential for the formal running of government and the passing of laws.

Image caption:
A Roman senator with images of his ancestors – an expression of privilege and a distinguished family line. Senators without such lineage were dismissed as 'new men' by other aristocrats.
© Leemage / Corbis Historical via Getty Images

Social mobility

This tombstone shows people handing documents to officials. It was dedicated by Quintus Fulvius Eunus to his sons Faustus and Priscus. Both men worked as clerks for senatorial magistrates. While the officials changed annually, clerks provided expertise and continuity. Many went on to hold respected positions.

Marble, Rome, Italy, AD 25–50
Roma, Museo Nazionale Romano

The imperial family

Augustus exceeded all senators in authority, wealth and power. This allowed him to pass on his rule to members of his family. A close association with Augustus, whether through descent, marriage or adoption, became crucial for succession.

Nero was Augustus' great-great grandson. As the principate came under strain during the reigns of Augustus' three successors, Nero offered a politically useful link back to its founder.

Augustus (63 BC – AD 14)

Augustus was adopted into the Julian family by his great-uncle, Julius Caesar (100–44 BC).

His long reign after decades of civil war ushered in a period of peace and prosperity.

The *plebs* (commoners) were Augustus' strongest supporters.

Marble, possibly Italy, before AD 14
British Museum

Livia (58 BC – AD 29)

Livia married Augustus in 38 BC. They became a symbol of the ideal, traditional couple.

Livia was presented as a role model for Roman wives.

As Augustus' informal adviser, she exercised great influence.

Marble, possibly Italy, 25–1 BC
Bequeathed by Sir William Temple
British Museum

Nero belonged to a powerful and wealthy family. He became emperor because he was related to Rome's first emperor, Augustus.

Do you think being the ruler should be based on your family, your money or your abilities?

Tiberius (42 BC – AD 37)
Tiberius was Livia's son, born from a previous marriage.

After the premature deaths of his chosen heirs, Augustus adopted Tiberius, a capable general and experienced statesman.

As *princeps* (emperor) Tiberius' relationship with the senate was strained.

Marble, Nemi, Italy, AD 19–23
Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen (IN 709)

Imperial victories

The scenes on this scabbard celebrate Julio-Claudian military successes in Germany and stress harmony and order. Germanicus hands the enthroned Tiberius a figure of victory. In reality, the troops had mutinied at Tiberius' accession, preferring Germanicus as *princeps*.

Tin, iron, gold and bronze, Mainz, Germany, about AD 14–16
Donated by Felix Slade
British Museum

Germanicus (15 BC – AD 19)

Germanicus, a grandson of Augustus' sister, was a young and popular general.

Augustus obliged Tiberius to adopt Germanicus although Tiberius already had a son of his own.

This caused tensions.

Germanicus died in Syria, allegedly from poisoning

Marble, Roselle, Italy, AD 1–50
Grosseto – Museo Archeologico e d'Arte
della Maremma

Imperial women

Augustus had no son. The line of succession therefore ran through the women of the Julio-Claudian family, who achieved unprecedented public prominence. Many members of the senatorial elite resented their influence, portraying them negatively in their writings.

Agrippina in particular played a significant role as the great-granddaughter, great-niece, sister, wife and mother of successive emperors.

Caligula (AD 12–37)

Caligula was Germanicus' only surviving son.

After he became emperor, his relationship with the senate broke down.

Assassinated in AD 41, he was later maligned as a mad tyrant.

This portrait retains rich traces of its original painted finish.

Marble, AD 37–41
Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen (IN 2687)

1–2. Caligula and his sisters

Caligula's sisters Agrippina, Drusilla and Livilla were given unprecedented honours. Here they are represented as Securitas (Stability), Concordia (Harmony) and Fortuna (Fortune) (1). Drusilla was deified after she died, but Agrippina and Livilla were banished for alleged conspiracy.

The bust of Caligula survived the deliberate destruction of his images following his death (2).

1) Copper alloy, minted in Rome, AD 37–8, British Museum; 2) bronze, Colchester, England, AD 37–41, Colchester Museums

**3. Agrippina the Younger
(AD 15/16–59)**
Agrippina was 13 when her great-uncle Tiberius arranged her marriage to Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus.

Their son, the future emperor Nero, was born in AD 37.

Following Agrippina's exile and Gnaeus' death, Nero was raised by his maternal aunt.

Chalcedony, AD 37–9
British Museum

Claudius (10 BC – AD 54)

Claudius was Germanicus' younger brother.

He unexpectedly became emperor following Caligula's assassination.

He married four times, his last wives were Messalina and Agrippina.

Claudius gave considerable power to imperial freedmen, causing great resentment among senators.

Marble, Gabii (near Rome), Italy, about AD 50
Paris, Musée du Louvre, Department of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Antiquities

1–2. Claudius' first family

This coin (1) and phalera (2), a military medallion, show Claudius' children. Antonia was Claudius' daughter from a previous marriage. Claudia Octavia and Britannicus' mother was Messalina.

Born one month into Claudius' reign, Britannicus was celebrated as his future heir.

1) Silver, minted in Caesarea Mazaca (Turkey), AD 43–8; 2) glass, Colchester, England, AD 41–54, bequeathed by Felix Slade
British Museum

3. Rivalry at court

Messalina became concerned with Nero's rising stardom. According to rumour she sent men to kill him, but they were scared away by snakes in his chambers. Nero dismissed the story, but later wore a gold bracelet encasing a snakeskin that had been found in his bedroom.

Gold, Pompeii, Italy, AD 1–79
Donated by Mrs Marion Whiteford Acworth JP
British Museum

4. Nero as crown prince

After Messalina's death, Claudius married his
great-niece Agrippina in AD 49. A year later
he adopted her son Nero. In AD 51, Nero was
formally declared an adult and was granted
the title of *princeps iuventutis* ('leader of the youth'),
introducing him as crown prince in place
of Britannicus.

Silver, minted in Rome, AD 51–4
Donated by Count John Francis William de Salis;
bequeathed by Frederick William Hasluck
British Museum

5–7. Nero as heir designate

Nero's portrait began to be given prominence over Claudius' natural children on imperial coins. No-one in Rome could doubt that Nero would be emperor. Images of Nero and Britannicus together continued only on coins minted in the provinces (5–6). Nero's position was further cemented through marriage to Claudius' daughter, Claudia Octavia (7).

Copper alloy, 5–6) minted in Pergamon (Turkey), about AD 50–54; 7) minted in Knossos (Crete), AD 54–68, bequeathed by Colonel James Saumarez Cameron
British Museum

Valeria Messalina (AD 17/20–48)
Messalina was Claudius' third wife and mother
of Britannicus.

Her influence over Claudius made her unpopular.

Ancient writers portrayed her as licentious
and scheming.

Suspecting Messalina of plotting against him,
Claudius forced her to commit suicide in AD 48.

Marble, Rome, Italy, about AD 45 (the child's
head is modern)
Paris, Musée du Louvre, Department of Greek,
Etruscan, and Roman Antiquities

Power and succession

Nero was well-prepared for his accession to the throne. The transition following Claudius' death was seamless. Although later sources claim that it was orchestrated by Agrippina – even that she had poisoned Claudius – the emperor had designated Nero as his heir long before. Nero had allies among the senate and the support of the Praetorian Guard, an elite military unit stationed in Rome.

In contrast to his elderly predecessor, Nero was an energetic young prince. Senators thought he would put an end to previous abuses and show them respect as Augustus had done. The people had great expectations for Nero's reign, which promised the arrival of a new golden age.

Wall quote:
Aurea secura cum pace renascitur aetas...
iuvenemque beata sequuntur saecula...

A golden age is reborn with carefree peace…
and blissful centuries follow the youthful prince…

– Calpurnius Siculus, Eclogue 1

The power behind the throne
At the beginning of Nero's reign different court factions competed for power. Agrippina acted almost as his co-ruler. Some resented her influence, which was considered inappropriate for a woman. Seneca, a leading thinker and Nero's former tutor, became his chief adviser. Together with Burrus, the commander of the Praetorian Guard, he attempted to guide the emperor and weaken Agrippina's hold over him. Nero's love for a freedwoman, Claudia Acte, heightened tensions between mother and son. In AD 55, Britannicus died suddenly and Nero removed Agrippina from the palace.

The new *princeps*
When Nero became emperor in October AD 54, a new version of his portrait was created to serve a rising demand for his images. It was an updated form of the earlier type, showing him as a youthful and vigorous ruler. The simple hairstyle remained unchanged and differed markedly from those of his predecessors. A new era had begun.

Marble, Olbia, Italy, about AD 54–9 (bust restored)
MiC – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Cagliari

Agrippina crowns her son Nero
This relief from Aphrodisias, a prosperous city in Asia Minor (western Turkey), demonstrates how Nero's accession was perceived in the provinces. A second panel showed Agrippina with Claudius, stressing her role in ensuring continuity between the reigns. Other scenes celebrated Claudius' and Nero's military exploits. This imagery was probably influenced by contemporary monuments in Rome that are now lost.

Nero and Agrippina
This coin series illustrates the shifting power dynamic between Nero and his mother during his early reign. The silver denarius, issued before Claudius' death, gives prominence to Agrippina and relegates Nero to the reverse (1). Minted after Nero's accession, the second coin presents mother and son facing each other. Only Agrippina's names and titles appear on the front, stressing her continued pre-eminence (2). The third coin, an aureus of AD 55, shows Nero, his name and titles in the foreground with Agrippina behind. It demonstrates her waning influence and Nero's rising independence (3). Subsequently, Agrippina disappeared from his coinage altogether (4).

Silver and gold, minted in Rome
1) AD 50–54, donated by George IV, King of the United Kingdom; 2) AD 54, donated by

Edward Wigan; 3–4) AD 55–6, bequeathed by
Clayton Mordaunt Cracherode
British Museum

The rise and fall of Agrippina
The coins of Nero and Agrippina shown above tell
the story of their changing relationship. Agrippina's
influence over her son eventually receded.

Duration: 1 minute.
This is silent.

Soldiers of the Praetorian Guard

Augustus established the Praetorians as his personal guard. They were an elite unit and the most powerful military force in Italy, where no regular troops were stationed. Praetorians enjoyed considerable privileges and their support was crucial for the emperor. They helped Claudius take power, and after his death swore allegiance to Nero. Both rewarded them handsomely.

This relief depicts six Praetorians in parade armour. It comes from a triumphal arch in Rome that commemorated Claudius' conquest of Britain in AD 43.

Marble, Rome, Italy, AD 51–2
Paris, Musée du Louvre, Department of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Antiquities

As a young emperor, Nero was helped by his mother, clever advisers and his personal guards, the Praetorian Guard.

If you were planning to become emperor, who would you want on your side?

Seneca, Nero's tutor and minister
Lucius Annaeus Seneca (about 4 BC – AD 65) was born in Spain and educated in Rome. He was a Stoic, adhering to a philosophical school that valued virtue and reason over all else. Seneca's writings were widely read and admired. In AD 49, Agrippina's intervention saw him recalled to Rome from exile and hired as Nero's tutor. He became the emperor's main adviser but was forced to commit suicide towards the end of his reign.

Marble, Rome, Italy, AD 200–25 (cast)
Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Manuscript of Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*
Late in AD 54, Seneca composed the *Apocolocyntosis* ('*Pumpkinification*'), a satirical work mocking Claudius' deification. Here, in the earliest surviving manuscript, Seneca harshly criticises Claudius' shortcomings, while he presents Nero as a divinely appointed new ruler.

Seneca's shocking irreverence is evident in Claudius' supposed last words: '*vae me, puto concacavi me*' ('Oh dear, I think I shat myself'). On the same page, Nero is enthusiastically praised, as Apollo prophesises a long and joyous reign for him.

Parchment, Germany, (possibly Fulda monastery), AD 800–900
Stiftsbibliothek St.Gallen

Image caption:
Detail of the ninth-century manuscript copy of Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*. Claudius' alleged last words are highlighted.
© St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek

A youth full of promise

Nero stressed his connection with Augustus, both as his ancestor and role model. In his accession speech he publicly promised to respect the authority of the senate and to rule according to the principles of generosity and clemency. In return, the senators expressed their confidence in Nero by agreeing to deify Claudius, although his rule had been unpopular among them. Claudius' funeral was enacted with great ceremony, but it was more about acknowledging Nero than commemorating Claudius.

The Praetorian Guard and the senate

Following Caligula's assassination, the senate debated whether to elect a senior senator as the new ruler. Claudius pre-empted them, enlisting the support of the Praetorians in return for money. Claudius acknowledged the Guard on coins (1). Nero was also hailed emperor by the Praetorians, but he deliberately chose to show deference to the senate. He issued coins showing the *corona civica* (a 'civic crown' in the form of an oak wreath), which could only be awarded by senatorial decree (2).

Gold, minted in Rome, 1) AD 41–2, bequeathed by Sir Hans Sloane; 2) AD 55–6, bequeathed by Clayton Mordaunt Cracherode
British Museum

Image caption:
Aureus showing the Praetorian camp. A military standard and a personification of *Fides* (Loyalty) are seen within.
© The Trustees of the British Museum

Nero *capite velato* (with covered head)

This skilfully carved portrait belonged to a statue of Nero performing a sacrifice (as is clear from the hem of the toga that is ritually pulled over his head). It expressed an important element of the emperor's civilian role. In March AD 55, Nero officially became *pontifex maximus* (chief priest). Such statues complemented images of the emperor in military garb.

Marble, Rome, Italy, AD 54–9
Roma, Museo Nazionale Romano

War and diplomacy

Nero inherited an empire rife with problems. Uprisings in newly conquered territories and existing tensions with rival powers caused him major concern. In the east, a long-running conflict with the Parthians over the buffer state of Armenia kept Nero occupied. To the west, the province of Britain erupted in a violent rebellion led by Boudica, Queen of the Iceni tribe.

Nero reacted with a mixture of military force and diplomacy, selecting experienced senators to act as generals on his behalf. His public image was carefully crafted to present him as a strong and able military leader and a successful protector of the empire.

To the right:

An officer and writer

Rome's frontiers along the Rhine and Danube rivers were under constant pressure from neighbouring tribes. The famous author Pliny the Elder served as an officer in Germania (Germany) during the reigns of Claudius and Nero. While stationed there he wrote on military topics, followed later by his famous *Natural History*. These horse trappings are marked 'Pliny prefect of cavalry'. They may have belonged to Pliny, or a soldier under his command.

Silvered bronze, Xanten, Germany, about AD 50
Donated by Joseph Mayer
British Museum

Image caption:
Roundel showing Nero (or possibly Claudius) in the centre, with Pliny's name above. It was found at a Roman military fortress in Germany where Pliny was stationed.
© The Trustees of the British Museum

Defending the empire

Even though Nero had to abandon plans to go on campaign himself, it was important that his subjects recognised him as a strong military leader. Coins commemorated spectacular military displays in Rome and provided ample opportunity to promote the emperor's martial prowess to people across the empire. Nero's coins were the first to show a ruler in military garb since Augustus. Here, the emperor addresses his troops as commander-in-chief (1). Wearing full armour and on horseback, Nero leads a parade of the imperial guard (2). The senate dedicated a monumental arch in Nero's honour for his early successes against the Parthians (3).

Copper alloy,
1–2) minted in Rome, AD 64; 3) minted in Lugdunum (Lyon, France), AD 65
British Museum

Image caption:
Nero's arch in Rome was shown on coins that circulated across the empire. They reminded

people of his success over the Parthians.

To the left:

Britain

Britain was partially conquered by Claudius in AD 43, eleven years before Nero became emperor. Some local elites prospered from Roman contact. Other people were brutally exploited, sparking fierce resistance. In AD 60 or 61 Queen Boudica of the Iceni tribe led a rebellion, laying waste to important Roman settlements including the provincial capital Camulodunum (Colchester), as well as Verulamium (St. Albans) and Londinium (London). The uprising was suppressed soon after. Nero followed war with reform, sending a special official to improve the local administration and rebuild the province.

Map caption:

Map of Britain at the time of Boudica's rebellion showing tribal territories, Roman forts (▲) and cities affected (●).

Encounters

Following the conquest of Britain, Roman and local tastes influenced one another. This led to the emergence of a new distinctive artistic identity that is particularly evident on decorated military objects. This helmet combines a Roman shape with Celtic style decoration. Its owner was perhaps a local warrior fighting for Rome, or a Roman soldier who commissioned armour decorated in a local style.

Copper alloy, England, AD 50–100
Donated by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks
British Museum

Romano-British jewellery

Named for their distinctive shape, these colourful 'dragonesque' brooches first appeared in Britain after the Roman conquest (1). They fuse an existing local taste for s-shaped brooches with Roman enamelling techniques. The hinged collar represents a new and distinct local dress tradition that emerged in a world that was changing under

41

Roman rule (2). Found exclusively at the edges of the province, such jewellery may have been used to express identities in opposition to Rome.

1) Copper alloy and enamel, Faversham, Kent, AD 75–175, bequeathed by William Gibbs; 2) brass and enamel, Portland, Dorset, AD 50–150
British Museum

1–2. Mining for minerals

Rome exploited Britain's rich mineral resources, expropriating mining sites and organising labour, forced or voluntary. Lead was a useful by-product of silver mining. These ingots were probably produced in the Mendips, before being transported to the nearby port at Clausenum (Bitterne) and exported across the empire. One names Nero (1); the other the Second Legion Augusta (2). Mining came under Roman military control but was also outsourced to private contractors.

Lead, 1) Stockbridge, Hampshire, AD 60;
2) Blagdon, Somerset, date uncertain,

donated by James Williams
British Museum

3–4. Controlling resources

Under Nero, mining extended to new sites in Wales, where these ingots were found. This recent discovery bears the first known reference to Marcus Trebellius Maximus, sent by Nero to govern Britain in AD 63 (3). Trebellius Maximus helped to bring stability following Boudica's revolt. This in turn allowed private exploitation of mines in Flintshire, as suggested by the example naming the lessee Gaius Nipius Ascanius (4).

Lead, 3) Rossett, Wales, AD 63 –9, on loan from Wrexham County Borough Museum and Archive; 4) Carmel, Wales, AD 60–70, Ar fenthyg gan / Lent by Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales

Map caption:
Major lead mines in Neronian Britain (◆) and related ports (⚓)

Spoils of war?

The Roman governor Gaius Suetonius Paulinus was campaigning in Wales when local discontent finally erupted into rebellion. Boudica attacked Camulodunum (Colchester), defeating the Ninth Legion when it attempted to rescue the town. This decorated cavalry helmet was possibly war booty ritually deposited in a marsh by a Briton. Alternatively, it may represent a votive offering made by a Roman soldier adopting practices similar to those of the native population.

Copper alloy and tin, Witcham Gravel, Cambridgeshire, AD 1–100
British Museum

A rebellion led by Queen Boudica threatened Roman rule in Britain. Nero ordered the Roman army to defeat the rebels.

What would you have done?

Fight, talk or leave?

Human tragedy

Colchester was a Roman settlement for veteran soldiers. This hoard was found beneath the floor of a house there, probably buried for safekeeping during Boudica's attack by fleeing Romans. The building was destroyed by fire and the hoard was never retrieved. Its owners were probably killed. The hoard comprises Roman republican and imperial coins as well as earrings, bracelets, armlets, finger rings and an amulet box. The jewellery was probably made in Italy. Two of the armlets are military decorations, awarded to a retired soldier.

Copper alloy, emerald, ivory, glass, gold, pearl and silver, Colchester, England, AD 60–61
Colchester Museums

Image caption:
Gravestone of Marcus Favonius Facilis, a centurion of the Twentieth Legion. Facilis was buried at Colchester. His tombstone may have been toppled during Boudica's revolt.
© Colchester Museums

A bloody battle

The joint forces of the Iceni, Trinovantes and other British tribes numbered in the tens of thousands. Colchester was unprepared and poorly defended when they attacked. Many Romans were killed and the settlement was burned to the ground. Human remains found in the Boudican destruction layer at Colchester bear witness to the violence of the onslaught. These fragments from a human jaw and lower leg display savage cut marks.

Human bone, High Street, Colchester, England,
AD 60–61
Colchester Archaeological Trust

Gaius Iulius Alpinus Classicianus

Nero appointed a man from the provinces, Gaius Iulius Alpinus Classicianus, as his treasury official for Britain. His task was to correct the financial abuses that had contributed to the rebellion. Classicianus died in Londinium (London) in AD 65. This image shows the monumental tomb built for him by his wife, Iulia Pacata. You can

see a partial reconstruction of the tomb upstairs in Room 49: Roman Britain.

Life in Londinium

These wooden writing tablets are an amazing discovery. One of the earliest hand-written documents from Britain, the financial record can be dated to AD 57 due to the mention of two consuls, one of whom was Nero (1). Written after Boudica destroyed London, the others name the prefect Classicus, probably a relative of Classicianus (2), and the First Cohort of Vangiones (3). This and other units from Germany reinforced Britain in AD 61, one of the measures Nero took to restore order. He also ensured that this important trade centre was quickly rebuilt. Soon after, London became the provincial capital.

Wood, Walbrook, London, 1) 8 January AD 57; 2) AD 65–80; 3) AD 67
Bloomberg collection

Image caption:
Dated 8 January AD 57, the tablet (1) names two

freedmen, Gratus and Tibullus, acknowledging a debt of 105 *denarii*. It shows London as a thriving commercial settlement.
© Bloomberg collection/ MOLA, illustrator: Roger Tomlin

Calleva Atrebatum

After destroying three important Roman towns, Boudica was finally defeated by Gaius Suetonius Paulinus in AD 61. Nero replaced him as governor with the more conciliatory Petronius Turpilianus. Nero garnered support among the allied territories bordering the province by financing building projects. This tile from Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester, Hampshire) is stamped with the emperor's name. Ongoing excavations at Silchester evidence extensive Roman investment, including a bath house.

Ceramic, Silchester, Hampshire, AD 54–68
Donated by Lieutenant Colonel J B P Karslake
British Museum

Image caption:
The tile from Silchester, with a stamp bearing Nero's name.
© The Trustees of the British Museum

Central cases:
Nero in armour
Almost none of Nero's full-length statues survive. This small bronze gives a rare sense of a complete sculpture. It shows the emperor seated and in full military garb, with a decorated breastplate and cloak. It probably formed part of a larger, multi-figured scene. Nero's pose, with his right arm extended, implies that he was receiving emissaries or prisoners of war. Parallels suggest that the figure was originally attached to a bronze monument.

Bronze, Oderzo, Italy, AD 54–9
Veneto Regional Museum Directorate,
Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Venezia

Gang chains

This chain held enslaved people, prisoners or criminals. It is extremely heavy. The wearers were forced tightly – and painfully – together. The chain was found in a lake on Mona (Anglesey, Wales), a stronghold of the druids. For centuries, people left metal offerings in the lake and other watery contexts.Violence and slavery were a brutal reality in Britain. Rome's presence, and its exploitation of the provinces' rich natural resources, exacerbated the situation.

Iron, Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey, Wales,
100 BC – AD 78
Ar fenthyg gan / Lent by Amgueddfa Cymru –
National Museum Wales

Decapitation?

Statues of Nero were erected throughout the empire. This bronze head (long-mistaken for Claudius) dates to the years after Nero's accession. It may have been made locally, or imported from Gaul (France). The eyes were originally inlaid with enamel or coloured glass. The complete statue

probably stood in Colchester before being hacked down and taken as booty during Boudica's attack. Found in a river, it was perhaps deposited as an offering on the boundary between Iceni and Trinovantes tribal land.

Art Fund_

Copper alloy, River Alde at Rendham, Suffolk, AD 54–61
Purchased with support from Art Fund
British Museum

Image caption:
Official portrait of Nero from his early reign. Images like this provided the model for the bronze head displayed here.
© MiC – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Cagliari, photo by Francesco Piras

Left of the arch:
Parthia

The Parthian empire – a rich and mighty power in greater Iran – was Rome's only true rival. Rome and Parthia were locked in a longstanding

struggle for control of Armenia, a strategically important buffer state between their territories.

After the Parthian king installed his brother Tiridates on the Armenian throne, Nero took military action. When initial successes were followed by setbacks, he agreed a diplomatic solution. Nero conceded that a Parthian prince could rule Armenia, on condition that he be crowned by the emperor in Rome.

Map caption:
The Parthian empire and Armenian territory, about AD 58.

1–2. Parthian horsemen

The Parthians established a vast empire that endured for almost 500 years. Rome recognised Parthia as its equal in wealth, urban culture and military strength. Its might came particularly from its superior cavalry. Mounted on light horses and carrying bows, these legendary fighters feigned panicked retreat at full gallop, only to turn their

bodies back to shoot at the pursuing enemy. The archer depicted here wears characteristic Parthian dress and carries a composite bow (1). Cataphracts, heavily armed and mounted warriors in full mail armour, were equally formidable (2). These skilled fighters were much feared and difficult to defeat.

1) Ceramic, Syria, AD 1–300; 2) Limestone, Iraq, 300 BC – AD 200
British Museum

3–5. Vologases, great king of Parthia

Vologases was the Parthian King of Kings from AD 51 to 78. Here he wears a diadem, symbol of royalty (3). Another scene shows him receiving the diadem from the Greek goddess Tyche (4). The seated archer proclaims the Parthians' unique skill in battle (5). Acting against a previous settlement between Rome and Parthia, Vologases installed his younger brother as king of Armenia. Nero sent his general Corbulo to restore Roman authority.

Silver, 3) minted in Seleucia ad Tigrim (Iraq), AD 52–3; 4) minted in Seleucia ad Tigrim (Iraq),

AD 51–2; 5) minted in Ecbatana (Iran), AD 51–79, donated by Sir Evelyn Grant Duff
British Museum

Image caption:
Reverse of a drachm of Vologases, depicting the Parthian king as an archer.
© The Trustees of the British Museum

Right of the arch:
The arch of Nero
This fragment supported one of the columns of Nero's Parthian arch in Rome. The arch was built by senatorial decree to celebrate the expulsion of the Parthians from Armenia. It was richly decorated with reliefs and crowned by a statue of Nero in a triumphal chariot. The monument aligned Nero's victories with Augustus' earlier successes over the Parthian empire. However, subsequent setbacks ultimately forced Nero to seek a diplomatic compromise with the Parthian king.

Marble, Rome, Italy, after AD 58
Roma, Musei Capitolini, Centrale Montemartini

Spectacle and splendour

Nero implemented far-reaching administrative measures, including tax and currency reforms, in addition to major building projects. He created new venues for the enjoyment of the people and improved the food supply system of Rome, in line with public expectations of a good emperor. Nero also built a new imperial palace.

Organising spectacles and providing entertainment for the people was an important element of imperial rule. Nero outdid his predecessors in terms of investment and involvement in public performances. He became the first emperor to appear on stage – an act that at the time divided public opinion and determined later perceptions of Nero as a deluded artist.

To the right:
Class tensions
This statue romanticises slavery. The young boy's job was to light the way at night with his lantern. He has fallen asleep, dutifully waiting for his master. The reality was starkly different. In AD 61, a distinguished senator was murdered by one of his household staff. Despite protests by the people, Nero backed the senate's decision to uphold an existing law. It stipulated that all enslaved members of the owner's household should be executed – a ruthless collective punishment intended as a deterrent.

Marble, Rome, Italy, AD 1–100
Roma, Museo Nazionale Romano

To the left:
Great projects
Nero changed Rome's cityscape on a scale not seen since Augustus. He had a lifelong interest in major engineering works and innovative architectural projects. In the *Campus Martius* he constructed a splendid amphitheatre and great public thermae which became the model for later imperial bath

buildings. He also built a central food market, the _Macellum Magnum_. While the amphitheatre did not survive Nero's reign, the market, and especially the baths, were praised long after his death.

Map caption:
Map showing Rome at the time of Nero, with his main construction projects.

1. _Macellum Magnum_ (The Grand Market)

Nero advertised his construction or improvement of public facilities on coins that set a new standard in the beauty and precision of their imagery. In AD 59, Nero dedicated the _Macellum Magnum_, a magnificent food market that supplied everything from staple foods to luxury goods, brought to Rome from all over the empire. The market is celebrated on this coin.

Copper alloy, minted in Rome, AD 63
British Museum

Image caption:
Scene from an altar showing Daphnus, a banker

57

and fish auctioneer working in the, *Macellum Magnum*. His was a profitable occupation, since seafood was considered a luxury.
© Photo SCALA, Florence

2. The harbour at Ostia

Ostia was Rome's sea port, from which goods from overseas were shipped up the river Tiber into the city. Claudius constructed major new facilities, which Nero improved. Using a novel bird's eye perspective, this coin shows the new harbour, Portus. A porticoed pier (left) and breakwaters (right) encircle the basin, which bustles with ships. A statue surmounts a lighthouse. Below is a personification of the river.

Copper alloy, minted in Rome, AD 64
British Museum

Providing for the people

Nero used coins to stress his concern for the people 56 of Rome and his efforts to ensure their wellbeing.

Here, the emperor distributes money to the citizens (1). Ceres, the goddess of agriculture, is seated next to a personification of the Annona, the public provision of grain to the city of Rome (2). Citizens handling these coins would feel safe in the knowledge that the emperor cared about their needs.

Copper alloy, 1) minted in Rome, AD 64, donated by Bank of England; 2) minted in Lugdunum (Lyon, France), AD 65
British Museum

Image caption:
Sestertius showing Annona (left) and Ceres (right). Between them is a container for measuring wheat and the stern of a grain ship from the port at Ostia.
© The Trustees of the British Museum

Image caption:
Nero reduced the weight and metal content of silver and gold coins. Some criticised this devaluation, but his measure harmonised imperial and provincial

coinage, facilitating currency exchange and eliminating associated fees across the empire. Later emperors maintained Nero's new standard.

Central plinth with red backdrop:
The performing prince
Managing the conflicting expectations and demands of the people and the elite was a major challenge throughout Nero's reign. Theatres and circuses were popular entertainment venues, but also highly politicised spaces where the audience could express its opinion and appeal directly to the emperor.

From boyhood, Nero was passionate about chariot racing and trained as a musician. He was the first emperor to perform publicly. This enhanced Nero's popularity with the people and possibly served a political purpose by mobilising them for his cause. His actions provoked great resentment among parts of the senatorial elite.

Map caption:
Map of Rome showing its main entertainment

structures. Rome had many theatres and circuses to accommodate its sizeable population.

Gladiatorial armour

Thrilling and full of lethal drama, gladiatorial games were popular across the Roman empire. The Julio-Claudian rulers funded and organised games to gain mass support. Nero even had his own gladiatorial school, the *ludus Neronianus*. A famous gladiator of the day, Spiculus, later became the loyal commander of his bodyguards. Gladiators specialised in different fighting techniques using specific weapons and armour. They were paired-off to fight on this basis. Displayed here are the weapons of a *hoplomachus* (left) and *thraex* (right), the gladiators also depicted in the clay sculpture. Figurines of gladiators were mass-produced as mementos.

(*thraex* helmet and greaves) bronze, Pompeii, Italy, AD 50–79. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Department of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Antiquities

(*hoplomachus* helmet) bronze, Pompeii, Italy, AD 1–100, bequeathed by Miss H R Levy
(shield) bronze, Pompeii, Italy, AD 1–100
(figurine) terracotta, Turkey, AD 1–200
British Museum

Wall to the left:

Riot in the amphitheatre

In AD 59, a violent riot erupted during a gladiatorial contest in Pompeii's amphitheatre between opposing supporters from Pompeii and nearby Nuceria. The wall painting in the image to the left shows an aerial view of the amphitheatre and its surroundings. People are fighting in the arena and in the stands, as well as in the streets outside. Nero handed the investigation to the senate, which issued Pompeii with a 10-year ban on holding gladiatorial games. It was later reduced thanks to Nero's influence, which added to his popularity in the local area.

© Raffaello Bencini / Bridgeman Images

Central plinth with green backdrop:
At the races
A variety of spectacles took place in the circus, but chariot races were the most popular. They influenced the decoration of everyday items. These oil lamps show a racing *quadriga* (four-horse chariot) (1), a victorious racehorse (2) and a triumphant charioteer (3).

Charioteers were of low status, but they could acquire considerable wealth and fame. Consequently, they were the target of aristocratic disapproval, a sign of the mounting tensions between elite and popular culture that characterised Nero's reign.

Terracotta, 1) Pozzuoli, Italy, AD 40–70, bequeathed by Sir William Temple; 2) Italy, AD 30–70, donated by John Henderson; 3) Pozzuoli, Italy, AD 51–100, bequeathed by Sir William Temple
British Museum

Chrysocolla (malachite)

Chariot racing in Rome was managed by teams called *factiones*. They were named after their team colours – red, white, blue and green. Each faction had numerous charioteers and hundreds of supporting staff. Nero raced chariots himself. He was a supporter of the popular Greens. He mixed expensive ground *chrysocolla* with the sand in the arena when racing, turning it green in their honour.

Precision engineering

This unique model of a *biga* (two-horse chariot) shows remarkable detail. The left wheel is different from the right, to allow charioteers faster turns – races were mostly decided at the turning-posts. As children, Nero and his friends reportedly played with wooden chariots. Heavy and expensive, this seems an extravagant toy. Perhaps it was a prized scale model for a wealthy supporter or stable owner.

Bronze, Rome, Italy, AD 1–100
British Museum

The *Circus Maximus*

These mass-produced architectural panels show popular spectacles in Rome's *Circus Maximus*. A quadriga approaches the turning posts (1). A rider on horseback has already made the turn. He is a *hortator*, whose job it was to precede the chariot, signalling to its driver. *Venationes* (animal hunts) were also common. Here hunters fight fierce lions (2). In Nero's time, the Circus held 150,000 spectators and housed a temple to Sol. When racing in the arena, Nero brought to mind the Sun god, who travelled across the sky in his chariot.

Terracotta, AD 40–70; 1) Italy, British Museum; 2) Campania, Italy, Roma, Museo Nazionale Romano

Image caption:
Accidents on the race-track were common and dangerous. Here, the chariot is upturned, the charioteer flung to the ground and the horses left reeling.
© KHM-Museumsverband

Central plinth with blue backdrop:
Nero's new portrait
This new portrait type marked Nero's five-year anniversary as emperor in AD 59. His wavy locks are combed towards his forehead and styled into a bold fringe. Aged 21, Nero celebrated the first shaving of his beard with private games (*Iuvenalia*), taking to the stage in front of members of the upper classes.

In AD 60, Nero established quinquennial games called *Neronia*. Five years later, at the second *Neronia*, the emperor performed publicly in Rome for the first time.

Marble, Rome, Italy, AD 59–64
Roma, Parco archeologico del Colosseo

Theatre masks
These architectural decorations represent the theatrical masks worn by Roman actors performing tragic scenes. Nero's biographer, Suetonius, wrote that the emperor performed the roles of Orestes and Oedipus, mythical figures

who committed matricide and incest respectively. Both parts offered the opportunity to recite strong monologues and provided insight into the human psyche. However, Suetonius may have edited this list deliberately in order to link Nero to alleged crimes against his mother Agrippina.

Marble, Pompeii, Italy, AD 1–79, MiC – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli; marble, AD 1–100, British Museum

Nero loved performing in public. He acted, played music and took part in chariot races. This made him popular with the crowds.

If you were emperor, how would you entertain your people?

A tragic actor
This intricate statuette represents an actor in the middle of a tragic performance. His pose and gestures are strongly expressive. Behind the mask, with its elaborate hairstyle and deep frown,

the eyes and mouth are visible. The tunic is carefully rendered and he wears raised platform shoes called *cothurni*. Nero focused on performing demanding tragic roles, and wore similar outfits during his performances.

Ivory, Rome, Italy, AD 1–200
Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris

Scene from a tragedy

This wall painting shows two tragic actors performing on stage. It is difficult to identify the drama being enacted with certainty. Men played male and female roles. The female character on the right holds an infant amidst an animated exchange with the man on the left. Their masks, clothing and gestures closely resemble the ivory statuette displayed to the right.

Plaster and paint, House of the Dioscuri, Pompeii, Italy, AD 62–79
MiC – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

Wall to the left:

Apollo *citharoedus* (playing the lyre)

Lyre-players were celebrities who often attracted mass followings. Nero trained hard to become accomplished at playing the *cithara* (lyre) and singing. Here he celebrates the god Apollo, who was connected with music and chariot racing. However, Apollo was also a warlike god – the hands that plucked the strings could also shoot the arrow. Suetonius believed that the figure on this coin was not Apollo, but Nero playing the lyre.

Copper alloy, minted in Rome, AD 62
British Museum

Actor dressed as a king

Like the actor shown here, performers could become famous. However, they remained *infames*, people of low status with limited legal rights. Nero and others broke with a custom that banned the elite from participating publicly in gladiatorial games and scenic performances. Upper class traditionalists vilified him for appearing on stage

and influencing young noblemen to follow, as this violated their notions of elite decorum.

Plaster and paint, Palaestra (Herculaneum),
Italy, AD 62–79
MiC – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

Clapping and chanting of the *Augustiani*
Romans understood the political importance of the crowd's reaction during spectacles. Nero created a group of supporters, the *Augustiani*. Controversially comprising knights and commoners alike, these young men accompanied Nero's performances with choreographed rhythmic clapping and chants, steering the reactions of the audience.

Duration: 1 minute, 30 seconds.
The crowd shouts: 'Beautiful Caesar! Apollo! Augustus! Winner! By your name we swear. No one will defeat you!'

Nero and Orestes

In Greek mythology, the tragic hero Orestes killed his mother Clytemnestra to avenge his father Agamemnon. Thereafter, he was hunted by vengeful spirits. Orestes had faced a heartrending dilemma, forced to choose between conflicting moral obligations. Such intense psychological dramas were popular topics in contemporary Roman tragedy and may have drawn Nero to play Orestes on stage. This wall painting shows Orestes, his companion Pylades and sister Iphigenia with the King of Tauris, on a quest to lift Orestes' curse.

Plaster and paint, House of the Citharist, Pompeii, Italy, AD 62–79
MiC – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

The world of theatre

This beautifully coloured, three-dimensional panel decorated the reception room of a Pompeian house. It recreates an elaborate Roman theatre stage, the edge of which is visible in the

foreground. The human figures (actors or the mythical figures they represent) are arranged among the intricate architecture of a royal palace. The popularity of theatre performances made such decorations particularly fashionable in wealthy households.

Stucco and paint, House of Meleager,
Pompeii, Italy, AD 62–79
MiC – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

Passion and discord

Nero's mother Agrippina and first wife Claudia Octavia were crucial for his rise to power. After his accession, his relationships with them changed. Weary of Agrippina's influence and suspecting her of plotting against him, Nero ordered her death in AD 59. He then divorced and exiled Claudia Octavia, who was executed in AD 62. Their fate echoed those of imperial women before them. Roman princesses were often accused of involvement in conspiracies, and were either exiled or killed. Nero's actions still tarnished his reputation, despite senatorial resentment of Agrippina.

Nero later married Poppaea Sabina, who gave him a daughter, but both died prematurely. He was survived by his third wife, Statilia Messalina.

A Julio-Claudian princess?

Likenesses of imperial women who were exiled or killed are often hard to identify because their statues were removed or destroyed. This portrait may represent a Julio-Claudian woman, perhaps Livia, Julia (Tiberius' granddaughter), or Claudia Octavia. Claudia Octavia married Nero aged 13 or 14. The sources praise her as dutiful and virtuous, suffering from Nero's bad behaviour. Divorced and banished, she was executed in AD 62 on alleged adultery charges. She was admired by the people and her removal caused some unrest in Rome among her loyal supporters.

Marble, Stabiae, Italy, 27 BC – AD 68
MiC – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

Agrippina's demise

This imposing statue of Agrippina was carved from dark-green stone to imitate the metallic sheen of bronze. Agrippina's power during the reigns of Claudius and Nero alienated many senators and other traditionalists. They slandered

prominent women like her with wild tales of sexual promiscuity. Agrippina and Nero were even accused of incest. Nero justified Agrippina's death in a letter to the senate, claiming that she had planned to assassinate him. Officially, his salvation was celebrated, but Nero's detractors accused him of matricide.

Basanite, Rome, Italy, AD 49–59
Roma, Musei Capitolini, Centrale Montemartini

From stage play to history
Tacitus and Cassius Dio described Agrippina's last moments in a breathtaking action scene. Their words and the plot line were taken from a fictional stage play, the *Octavia*, composed shortly after Nero's death. Even the anti-Neronian *Octavia* simply adapted a suicide scene from an earlier tragedy, Seneca's *Oedipus*. Such examples reveal the techniques and concerns of elite writers, who privileged strong convictions and a dramatic narrative over historical accuracy.

Wall quote:

Agrippina: "Strike here, strike here, for this bore Nero."
– Cassius Dio, Roman History

Agrippina: "Here, here is where your sword must stab: it gave birth to such a monster."
– Anonymous, Octavia

Jocasta: "Target this, my hand, this, the fertile womb that bore me sons and husband."
– Seneca, Oedipus

A young princess

This statue was found during underwater excavations in a submerged Roman villa at Baiae, Italy. It recalls sculptures of very young girls from classical Greece. The butterfly in her right hand represents the soul, suggesting that the statue had funerary connotations. The excavators originally identified her as Nero's first wife, Claudia Octavia. However, the hairstyle directly copies Nero's own. Perhaps this was an idealised portrait of Claudia

Augusta, his daughter by his second wife
Poppaea Sabina, who died aged only
three months.

Marble, Baiae, Italy, AD 63–8
Museo Archeologico dei Campi Flegrei nel
Castello di Baia - Parco Archeologico dei Campi
Flegrei – MiC

Image caption:
Portrait of Nero, showing the similarity of his
hairstyle, particularly the fringe, to that of the
statue displayed here.
© Upon permission of MiC – Parco archeologico
del Colosseo

1. Poppaea Sabina

This skilfully carved portrait head with an elaborate
hairstyle may depict Poppaea Sabina, Nero's
second wife. The likeness is similar to her coin
portraits. Nero and Poppaea married in AD 62.
She gave birth to a daughter the following year.
Another beautiful woman with influence at court,
Poppaea was later unjustly vilified as devious and
sexually promiscuous.

Marble, Rome, Italy, AD 50–68
Roma, Museo Nazionale Romano

Nero's mother and wives were powerful. Ancient writers said that Nero had them killed. Nero said his mother and first wife betrayed him.

Who would you believe?

2. Imperial gifts to Venus
Surviving graffiti highlight Nero's popularity in Pompeii, probably related to Poppaea's connection with the area. The emperor visited the city in AD 64, an event celebrated with verses scratched into the kitchen walls at the home of Iulius Polybius. This short poem honours Nero and Poppaea for the lavish offerings of jewels and gold they made to the temple of Venus in Pompeii.

Plaster, House of Gaius Iulius Polybius, Pompeii, Italy, AD 62–5
Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico di Pompei

'Munera Poppea misit Veneri sanctissimae berullum helenumque unio mixtus erat, Caesar ut ad Venerem venet sanctissima ut tui te vexere pedes caelestes Auguste millia milliorum ponderis auri fuit'

'Poppaea sent as gifts to most holy Venus a beryl, an ear-drop pearl and a large single pearl. When Caesar came to most holy Venus and when your heavenly feet brought you there, Augustus, there was a countless weight of gold'

3–4. *Augusta*

Poppaea gave birth to a daughter, Claudia Augusta, in AD 63, and was granted the honorific title *Augusta*. Claudia Augusta died shortly after. Nero and his empress are probably depicted together on this gold coin (3). When Poppaea passed away in AD 65, probably due to a miscarriage, hostile gossip blamed Nero, depicting him as a stereotypical mad tyrant. Poppaea and Claudia Augusta were both deified. This coin shows a statue of Claudia Augusta in a small temple (4). A corresponding image of

Poppaea appears on the other side.

3) Gold, minted in Rome, AD 64–5,
donated by Edward Wigan
4) copper alloy, unknown mint, about AD 65
British Museum

5. Apotheosis of Poppaea

Nero deeply mourned Poppaea's death. He honoured her with a lavish funeral during which, according to Pliny, a year's supply of frankincense was consumed. This papyrus celebrates her apotheosis (deification) and presents Nero and Poppaea as an ideal example of married love. It is unclear whether it copies a poem from Nero's time, or is a later composition.

Papyrus, Oxyrhynchus, Egypt, AD 200–300
Lent by The Egypt Exploration Society

6. Statilia Messalina

Following Poppaea's death, Nero quickly remarried. Despite being in mourning, he needed an heir. Statilia Messalina, Nero's third wife,

outlived him. Little is known about her. This portrait displays extraordinary craftsmanship, particularly in the rendering of the hairstyle, which reflects the luxury and refinement of the period. It may show Statilia Messalina, however the identification is not certain.

Marble, Rome, Italy, AD 50–70
Roma, Musei Capitolini

On the wall:
Celebrity couple
Nero and Poppaea were very popular in Pompeii. Graffiti record their supporters, the *NeroPoppaenses*. Nero's name is attested in the city more often than that of any other emperor.

© Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum

Fire

One of the defining events of Nero's reign was the great fire of Rome in AD 64. It raged for nine days, devastating the city. Nero led the relief effort and supervised reconstruction. Despite fires being common in Rome, he was later accused of starting the blaze. To reconcile the gods, Nero blamed a new sect of Jewish origin. Its members later became known as Christians.

This supposed act of arson and the persecutions cemented Nero's posthumous reputation, creating the enduring image of a tyrant who 'fiddled while Rome burned.' However, the emperor was not in Rome when the fire started. The claims that he instigated it appear baseless or purposefully distorted by his political enemies.

The fire of Rome

Rome burned for nine days. The historians Tacitus, Cassius Dio and Suetonius paint a vivid image of the chaos and destruction caused by the flames, allowing us to partially reconstruct the events. The fire consumed private dwellings and public buildings alike, scorching the city.

Duration: about 2 minutes.
There are sounds of crackling flames, collapsing buildings and people shouting.

The force of the flames

The great fire of Rome began in a stall near the *Circus Maximus* on 19 July AD 64. The blaze spread quickly. Three of Rome's 14 districts were completely devastated. Seven more were reduced to ruins. This window grating was recently found near the Circus. It is testament to the enormous force of the fire – the heat was so intense that it warped the iron.

Iron, Rome, Italy, AD 64
Roma, Museo Nazionale Romano

Some ancient writers said that Nero stayed in his palace singing during the great fire of Rome. Others said he offered shelter and food to the people.

If you were the emperor, what would you do during a disaster?

The earth tremors
Fires and natural disasters were common in the ancient world. In AD 62, Pompeii was devastated by a severe earthquake. Homes were destroyed, public buildings gave way and the water supply was disrupted. This relief records the event. The stone carver cleverly rendered the buildings askew, appearing as though on the verge of collapse. It took years for the city to recover.

Marble, House Lucius Caecilius Iucundus, Pompeii, Italy, AD 62–79
Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico di Pompei

The new Apollo

Nero's reign reached its climax in the years following the fire. Rome's restoration began with the construction of new, improved housing for the people and Nero's greatest building project to date – the *Domus Aurea* ('Golden House').

This new imperial residence, with its innovative architecture and luxurious decoration, was designed to provide an appropriate frame for the emperor's public role. It also lavishly accommodated his private needs.

The high point of Nero's reign, referred to as the 'Golden Day', occurred in AD 66. Following a diplomatic treaty with Parthia, the Parthian prince Tiridates arrived in Rome. Nero crowned him king of Armenia in a spectacular public ceremony.

To the left:

Nero's palaces

When Nero's first residence was destroyed by the fire of AD 64, he built a grander palace, the *Domus Aurea*. He probably intended it as a political stage for important public events, entertaining the imperial court, the senators and perhaps also the masses. This ambitious project, unfinished at Nero's death in AD 68, was harshly criticised by his political enemies. They described it as the palace of a king or tyrant because it encompassed former public and private lands destroyed by the fire.

Image caption:
The buildings of the imperial palace within Rome's cityscape. The Esquiline wing of the *Domus Aurea* is on the right.
© Upon permission of MiC – Parco archeologico del Colosseo

The first palace

Only a few traces of Nero's first palace survive. Nero improved and extended the existing

imperial residence on the Palatine Hill, including a monumental podium. He also connected the Palatine to his properties on the nearby Esquiline Hill through a new set of buildings, the *Domus Transitoria* (House of Passage). This ornate column capital comes from Nero's Palatine residence.

Marble, Rome, Italy, AD 54–68
Roma, Parco archeologico del Colosseo

Exotic marbles

Precious materials from across the empire adorned the floors and walls of the main halls inside Nero's palaces. Yellow marble came from North Africa, red and green porphyry from Egypt and Greece respectively, and white and black marbles were brought from Turkey. They were assembled to create stunning decorative patterns in contrasting colours. This impressive panel comes from the Palatine Hill.

Marble, Rome, Italy, AD 54–68
Roma, Parco archeologico del Colosseo

Map caption:
The marbles in the palace came from quarries across the Roman world and were obtained at great expense. Some were reserved for exclusive use by the emperor.

Splendid interiors

Nero's first palace contained a suite of lavishly decorated dining rooms arranged around a central fountain court. They were destroyed in the fire, but their remains offer a glimpse of the opulence of thebuildings' interior design. Frescoes with mythological scenes adorned the ceilings.
Inset glass gems reflected the light like a starlit night sky. The walls and floors were clad in costly marbles, including ornate and intricate geometric and figurative inlays for narrative friezes.

Polychrome marbles, Rome, Italy, AD 54–64
Roma, Parco archeologico del Colosseo

The second palace

Nero's new residence encompassed buildings on the Palatine and Esquiline Hills, connected by porticoes and colonnaded squares. The Esquiline residence comprised a suite centred on an octagonal room, flanked by two symmetrical wings whose rooms probably accommodated huge banquets. These frescoes come from the 'Hall of Achilles', so-called for the mythological scene painted on its ceiling. Painted candelabra, plants, swans and sphinxes created elaborate frames for such scenes.

Plaster and paint, Rome, Italy, AD 64–8
British Museum

Image cption:
The 'Hall of Achilles.' The ceiling was decorated with mythological scenes surrounded by ornamental designs. The fragments displayed here belonged to the apse and the decorative border of the vault.
© Backyard Productions / Alamy Stock Photo, 2018

Cinnabar and gold

This fragment depicts two sphinxes among acanthus plants. The two figures in relief are probably Leda and the god Zeus in the form of a swan. The details were carefully rendered using expensive cinnabar and gold. Pliny mentions these pigments and their prices. He also names Famulus, the painter commissioned by Nero to work on the *Domus Aurea.*

Plaster and paint, Rome, Italy, AD 64–8
British Museum

Precious wall decorations

Decorative elements including strips of gilded bronze inlaid with gems were applied to the walls of some luxurious buildings. These pieces come from the *Horti Lamiani*, a set of gardens surrounding the imperial property on the Esquiline Hill. They show the kind of opulent and intricate decoration that characterised the *Domus Aurea* in addition to its frescoes and marble revetments.

Bronze and gemstones, Rome, Italy,
date uncertain
Roma, Musei Capitolini

Form and function
The functions of different rooms within the palace determined how they were decorated. The main hallshad floors and walls clad in marble, with paintedceilings. In less important rooms, marble was partlysubstituted with stucco and paint. Service rooms were simply painted.

These fresco fragments, depicting sea-monsters andother mythological creatures, come from the mainservice corridor. There is no trace of the precious pigments used in more important, public rooms.

Plaster and paint, Rome, Italy, AD 64–8
British Museum

Image caption:
The *Domus Aurea's* main service corridor had a vaulted ceiling and was 70 metres long.
© Max Rossi / REUTERS / Alamy Stock Photo, 2017

Eumolpus, the steward

Nero's palace was served by specialist staff, most of whom were slaves or freedmen, numbering in the thousands. This altar was set up by a high-ranking servant, Eumolpus, and his daughter Claudia Pallas. Eumolpus proudly mentions his job title. He was in charge of the Golden House's furnishings (*a supellectile domus aureae*).

The altar was dedicated to Sol (Sun) and Luna (Moon). Significantly, the depiction of Sol closely resembles contemporary portraits of Nero.

Marble, Rome, Italy, after AD 64
Florence, National Archaeological Museum – Direzione Regionale Musei della Toscana

To the right:

Luxury and social status

Under Nero, the Roman aristocracy gathered great wealth. Their luxurious standard of living began to spread to newly rich freedmen and provincials, leading to increased competition. Banquets and lavishly decorated homes were used to express status. Nero's palace, while exceptional in size, did not outdo his contemporaries in terms of furnishings. Nero also introduced new forms of entertainment and occasions where people of different classes could mingle. Appreciated by the masses, such inclusiveness antagonised some members of the senatorial elite.

A rare vessel

This fluorspar vessel (*vasa murrina*) is one of only two examples that survive from antiquity. Such vessels were exceptionally rare in the Roman world, making them highly valued and much sought after. Their beauty lay in their varied colours, but they were also thought to improve the flavour of wine. According to Pliny, Nero paid one million sesterces for a single cup.

Art Fund_

'The Barber cup'
Fluorspar, Cilicia, Turkey, AD 50–100
Purchased with support from British Museum
Friends, Art Fund, the Caryatid Fund and
Mr Frank A Ladd

Imports from the far east
This coin was found in India, where it was cut
to test the quality of the metal. It highlights the
far-reaching commercial network of the Roman
empire under Nero. Spices, textiles and other
exotic materials were imported from India to Rome,
to satisfy elite tastes. Silk came from China. Pliny
complained about the massive outflow of Roman
gold to pay for such luxuries.

Gold, minted in Rome, AD 61–2
Donated by HH Raja Martanda Tondaiman,
Raja of Pudukkottai
British Museum

Image caption:
In India, coins were checked by cutting through theirthickest section. Perhaps this also implied a symbolic rejection of foreign authority, but it was not specific to Nero.
© The Trustees of the British Museum

Dining in luxury

Ancient sources describe extravagant hosts surprising their guests during dinner parties, showering them with flowers and fragrances falling from the ceiling with the aid of moving panels. The fresco depicts a similar entertainment, showing dried fruit, flowers and pastries tumbling from a hanging drape. According to Suetonius, the *Domus Aurea* had a banqueting room with a revolving ceiling that turned throughout the day and night.

Plaster and paint, House of Marcus Fabius Rufus, Pompeii, Italy, AD 50–79
MiC – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

Silver tableware

Roman authors often condemned excessive opulence, comparing it with the simple customs of their ancestors. However, refined dining was widespread among the wealthy. Elite criticism was aimed more at the excesses of the newly-rich. The writer Petronius penned a mocking tale about a freedman, Trimalchio, and his pretentious dinner party. This complete silver dining set, weighing almost nine pounds, includes prized heirlooms and newer pieces. It may have belonged to freedmen entrepreneurs.

Silver, Moregine (Pompeii), Italy, 50 BC – AD 79
Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico
di Pompei

Nero built a grand palace in Rome. Wealthy Romans criticised it. They said Nero was extravagant, even though they were too.

Do you think new buildings made Rome look important, or were they a waste of money?

Elite architecture

Rich, aristocratic mansions built outside the city walls were places for leisure, enjoyment and contemplation. They were a world away from urban dwellings connected with the business of everyday life. These villas developed distinct architectural features, reminiscent of Greek palaces, and were often built by lakes or the sea, as shown in these landscape scenes. Nero's *Domus Aurea* drew inspiration from such villas, many of which were around the Bay of Naples. However, it was built on a grander scale than anything seen before, and situated In the centre of Rome rather than in the countryside. This broke with convention.

Plaster and paint, Pompeii, Italy, 1) AD 1–37;
2) 40–45; 3–4) AD 45–79
MiC – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

From right to left:
Diplomacy and foreign policy
Nero planned to expand the empire. He extended Roman control over the Black Sea and considered invading Ethiopia. He then prepared a campaign in the Caucasus. Nero's settlement with the Parthians over Armenia was part of his eastern policy. Shortly after Tiridates' coronation as king of Armenia in AD 66, Nero embarked on a tour of Greece. He may have intended to follow this with a major military campaign in the east. However, a Jewish revolt in Judaea and rebellions in Gaul (France) and Spain forced the emperor to abandon his plans.

Map caption:
Approximate route of Tiridates' nine-month journey to Rome. As a Zoroastrian priest, Tiridates could

not travel by sea. His retinue numbered in the thousands.

Image caption:
Reconstruction drawing showing the head and body together. This gives an impression of what complete statues of Nero looked like. None survive.

Power and beauty

This portrait dates to the last years of Nero's reign. It was probably created to mark his 10-year anniversary as emperor. Nero's forehead is framed by a row of curls and his hair is worn long, intended to convey a sense of vigour, refinement and god-like beauty. Contemporary poetry likened Nero to Apollo and Mars. His elaborate hairstyle set a new trend that remained fashionable for decades.

Marble, Rome, Italy, AD 64–8
State Collections of Antiquities and Glyptothek
Munich

Imperial victories

Celebrating Nero's success over the Parthians, the breastplate of this statue depicts the emperor as the Sun riding in his chariot. The same image decorated the awning of the Theatre of Pompey in Rome during Tiridates' coronation. Below, two mythological figures symbolise the Parthian submission to Rome. The statue originally carried a portrait of Nero like the one displayed above, stressing his martial qualities.

Marble, Cerveteri, Italy, AD 66–8
Vatican Museums, Vatican City

Nero and Tiridates

In AD 66, Nero finally met Tiridates at Naples and organised spectacles in his honour in nearby Puteoli (Pozzuoli). Nero showed the reach of his empire by presenting Ethiopian performers, while

Tiridates proved his martial skill with a bow. Afterwards they travelled together to Rome. The inscription records the offices of Cassius Cerealis, an eminent citizen who organised games honouring Nero in Puteoli's amphitheatre.

Marble, Pozzuoli, Italy, AD 54–68
Parco Archeologico dei Campi Flegrei – MiC

Image caption:
Nero used this coin as a propaganda tool, stressing that he had turned the military setbacks against Parthia into a success.
© The Trustees of the British Museum

The temple of Janus
The gates of the temple of Janus in Rome were symbolically closed during periods of peace and opened in times of war. Augustus closed the temple gates on three occasions. Nero followed suit in AD 66, marking the end of war with Parthia. This act was also celebrated with the issue of a special coin, shown here.

Copper alloy, minted in Lugdunum (Lyon, France), AD 66
British Museum

Alcimus the stage worker
Tiridates' visit to Rome was celebrated with unparalleled public splendour. Ceremonies took place in the Theatre of Pompey, which was covered in gold for one day. This stele commemorates Nero's servant Alcimus, a guard and stage worker at the theatre. He is depicted with the tools of his trade. He may have been involved in preparing the stage for the events Nero held there.

Vatican City, Rome, Italy, AD 54–68 (cast)
Vatican Museums, Vatican City

Public image
Nero's public image was carefully crafted. He introduced a new hairstyle, dashing yet refined, and never seen before in imperial portraits. It set a new fashion, as people across the empire

imitated his look.

The emperor's popular appeal was also reflected in other media, including graffiti and informal images. Such evidence suggests that Nero was adored by the people, and contrasts with the picture painted by hostile ancient writers after his death.

Emulating the emperor

Akin to a modern compact mirror, these objects comprise two circular cases with a reflective surface on the inside. The lids incorporate coins with Nero's image. The choice of decoration reflects support and appreciation for Nero on a more personal level. Many people saw Nero as a positive model, attempting to fashion themselves in his image. This trend spread all the way to Britain.

Copper alloy and bronze, AD 64–8, 1) Coddenham, Suffolk, donated by Sir William Middleton; 2–3) near Paris, France
British Museum

Image caption:
Coiffures styled with curling irons were popular among Rome's gilded youth, but were considered vulgar and unmanly by traditionalists. Nero broke with this convention and people imitated him.
© The Trustees of the British Museum

Caricature of Nero

The doodle you can see above the case was scratched into the wall of a shop or tavern on the Palatine Hill in Rome. It looks like a portrait of Nero. It is probably testament to the emperor's popularity among the people.

Duration: 1 minute.
This is silent.

Digging the Corinth Canal

Later sources stressed Nero's intention to perform at all the Greek festivals, but he was just as concerned with his planned military campaign and longer-term projects. In Corinth, in November AD 67, he granted Greece freedom from taxation. Nero also broke ground on a canal through the

isthmus of Corinth that would facilitate navigation. He put to work 6,000 prisoners taken during the rebellion in Judaea, who used pickaxes like the one here. The project was abandoned at Nero's death and only completed in 1893.

Iron, AD 1–100
British Museum

Map caption:
After Tiridates' coronation in AD 66, Nero travelled to Greece. He participated in all the major games (🏵) and was proclaimed periodonikes ('winner in the whole series'). Events forced him back to Rome.

Wall quote:
He crossed over into Greece, not as his ancestors Agrippa and Augustus had done, but for the purpose of driving chariots, playing the lyre, making proclamations, and acting in tragedies.

– Cassius Dio, *Roman History*

Crisis and death

Despite Nero's popularity with the people, groups of disaffected senators eager for power began to conspire against him. Some provincial governors and parts of the army openly rebelled. Eventually, the senate declared Nero an enemy of the state. In the end he had no choice but to take his own life. His death on 9 June AD 68 brought the Julio-Claudian dynasty to an end.

Violent civil war erupted in the wake of Nero's demise. Four emperors ruled over the course of a single year. Vespasian, Nero's former general in Judaea, finally triumphed and became emperor.

Nero's popular appeal persisted for decades after his death, particularly in the east. His legacy lived on. Imposters posing as the late emperor attracted mass followings.

To the left:

Dissent

Many senators felt disrespected and threatened by Nero's measures. In AD 65, the senator Gaius Calpurnius Piso led a plot against him – the Pisonian Conspiracy. This marked a critical turning point in Nero's reign.

After the plot was uncovered many of the conspirators, including the author Petronius, were ordered by Nero to commit suicide. Others were exiled or publicly defamed. Seneca, then retired from political life, was implicated. Nero commanded him to take his own life. Many people rejoiced in Nero's salvation, but other plots followed.

Long live the emperor

The residents of Mogontiacum (Mainz) in Upper Germany showed their loyalty and delight at Nero's salvation from the conspiracy by erecting a tall column in his honour. It was crowned with a life-size statue of Jupiter and decorated with 28 deitiesincluding the sun god Sol. The

monument was dedicated to 'Jupiter, greatest and best, for the safety of Nero.' The emperor's name was erased after his death.

Salvation

Coins bearing the image of Salus, goddess of safety and salvation, were issued in the aftermath of the Pisonian Conspiracy. They celebrated the successful thwarting of the plot and publicly expressed Nero's favour with the goddess, who had ensured his safety. Salus is shown here seated on a throne, wearing draped clothing and holding a *patera* (libation bowl) in her right hand.

Gold, minted in Rome, AD 65–6
Bequeathed by Sir Allen George Clark
British Museum

Image caption:
Reverse of an *aureus* of Nero, depicting the goddess Salus.
© The Trustees of the British Museum

To the right:

The end of a dynasty

By AD 67, Nero had few allies left among the senators, who held powerful political and military positions across the empire. Gaius Iulius Vindex, governor of Gaul (France), rebelled. Others followed, drawing parts of the army into mutiny. At the same time, a food shortage in Rome lost the emperor crucial support among the people. As the rebellion gained momentum, the senate declared Nero an enemy of the state. Faced with execution, Nero killed himself in June AD 68. He was thirty years old. Following his death, statues and other images of the emperor were destroyed or removed.

Nero's demise

Tiberius Claudius Epaphroditus – imperial freedman and Nero's secretary – proved his allegiance to the emperor by helping to thwart the Pisonian Conspiracy.

Loyal to the last, Epaphroditus accompanied Nero

when he fled Rome to the suburban villa of another devoted freedman, Phaon. When Nero committed suicide, Epaphroditus assisted him. This inscription, naming Epaphroditus' titles and the honours he had received, was found in his gardens on the Esquiline Hill in Rome.

Rome, Italy, AD 69–96 (cast)
Roma, Museo Nazionale Romano

Nero died aged 30. One writer said that the powerful were pleased, the people were sad and the army had mixed feelings.

How do you feel?

Nero's funeral

This simple funerary inscription commemorates Nero's wet nurse, Claudia Ecloge, 'the most faithful'. Accompanied by the emperor's first love, Claudia Acte, she arranged Nero's funeral and deposited his ashes in the mausoleum of his father's family, the Domitii. Her loyalty is a poignant testament to their strong and enduring bond. Claudia Ecloge's final resting place was possibly on the site of Nero's suicide.

Marble, Rome, Italy, AD 50–100
Roma, Musei Capitolini, Antiquarium

To the left:

Civil war

Nero's death was followed by political turmoil, and military and social unrest. Civil war raged as four rivals vied for power during the 'Year of the Four Emperors'. Their battles wreaked devastation. Galba succeeded Nero. He was assassinated and replaced by Otho, who in turn was defeated in battle by Vitellius. In AD 69, Vitellius was crushed

by Vespasian, who had remained loyal to Nero. Vespasian's rule ended the upheaval and marked the emergence of a new dynasty, the Flavians.

Map caption:
The sites of the main battles (✗) fought during the 'Year of the Four Emperors', in AD 68–9.

1. Lucius Sulpicius Galba

Lucius Sulpicius Galba hailed from a distinguished noble family. Governor of Spain, he was 70 when he rebelled. After Nero's death, Galba marched on Rome with his legions. The senate proclaimed him emperor. Unlike the younger Nero, he failed to gain popularity with the people and struggled to maintain the support of the Praetorian Guard. Galba was assassinated in AD 69, ending a seven-month reign.

Gold, minted in Rome, AD 68–9; copper alloy, minted in Rome, AD 68, donated by Bank of England
British Museum

Crisis and death

2. Marcus Salvius Otho

Marcus Salvius Otho governed Lusitania (Portugal). He supported Galba, but organised a coup when he was passed over for adoption as his heir. Otho took Galba's place, only to face immediate resistance from Vitellius. Their forces clashed at Bedriacum in northern Italy. Defeated, Otho committed suicide, having ruled for only three months. A former friend of Nero, Otho continued the construction of the *Domus Aurea.*

Gold, minted in Rome, AD 69
British Museum

3. Aulus Vitellius

Aulus Vitellius was governor of Germania Inferior (Lower Germany). As Otho took power in Rome, Vitellius' troops proclaimed him emperor. He defeated Otho in battle and was confirmed by the senate. Vitellius attempted to rally public support by honouring Nero. His reign was described as one of excess and self-indulgence. Challenged by Vespasian, Vitellius sought abdication but was ultimately executed.

Gold, minted in Lugdunum (Lyon, France), AD 69
Donated by Marmaduke Trattle
British Museum

4. Flavius Vespasianus

Flavius Vespasianus (Vespasian) was an experienced general of relatively humble origins. He fought for Nero in the Jewish rebellion of AD 66. His legions proclaimed him emperor following Galba's death. War ensued. Vespasian's army defeated Vitellius and he was confirmed as emperor by the senate in December AD 69. He reigned for 10 years and was succeeded by his sons Titus and Domitian.

Gold, minted in Ephesus (Turkey) and Gaul (France), AD 69–71
British Museum

'Year of the Four Emperors'
The coins above show the four men who vied for power and ruled successively over an 18-month period following Nero's death.

Duration: 1 minute.
This is silent.

5. Bloody battles
Nero raised a new legion from loyal sailors of the imperial fleet to fight the rebellious governor Vindex. This helmet belongs to a group that seems to have been manufactured quickly for the soldiers, who later rallied to Otho's cause. They were among the troops defeated by Vitellius at Bedriacum, near Cremona, in April AD 69. Bearing clear impact marks, this helmet testifies to the ferocity of the battle.

Brass, River Po near Cremona, Italy, AD 60–70
Römisch-Germanisches Museum der Stadt Köln

6. Heavy armour

This metal plate decorated a catapult belonging to the Sixteenth Gallic Legion, stationed in Germany. Its troops fought for Vitellius in Italy, overcoming Otho's forces at the first battle of Bedriacum. Eight months later they clashed with Vespasian's army on the same spot. Following their defeat, the Vitellian forces retreated to Cremona and were annihilated. The plate was found in their devastated camp.

Bronze, Cremona, Italy, AD 56–69
Cremona Museums Network

Image caption:
Hypothetical reconstruction of the complete metal plate.

7. Civil war continues

Legions stationed along the Danube river joined Vespasian's cause and were the first of his forces to reach Italy. They clashed with Vitellius' powerful army at Bedriacum, near an important crossing

116

over the River Po. A fierce battle was fought through the night. According to Tacitus, tens of thousands of soldiers lost their lives. Broken and battered weapons from the battlefield, including these spearheads and a spiked foot-trap (caltrop), attest the brutality of the fighting.

Iron and bronze, Calvatone, Italy, AD 69–71
Cremona Museums Network

The destruction of Cremona
After defeating Vitellius' forces, Vespasian's troops attacked Cremona itself. The town was one of the largest and most prosperous in northern Italy. Tacitus describes how it was viciously sacked and burned, causing great civilian suffering. Recent archaeological investigation has unearthed evidence of both the prosperity and the violent destruction of the city, like this mosaic fragment from an ornamental fountain (1) and part of a basin made of exotic marble (2).

Mosaic (1) and marble (2), Piazza Marconi, Cremona, Italy, AD 1–100
Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per le province di Cremona, Lodi e Mantova

Ravages of war

Surviving furnishings from Cremona's buildings indicate a luxurious standard of living. The recently excavated 'House of the Nymphaeum' belonged to a member of the local elite. Its courtyard was decorated with a fountain covered in mosaics. Remains of the upper floor, burned and collapsed during the attack, suggest a lavishly painted room. Vespasian rebuilt Cremona, but it never regained its former prosperity.

Plaster and paint, Piazza Marconi, Cremona, Italy, 20–1 BC
Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per le province di Cremona, Lodi e Mantova

From Nero to Vespasian

After Nero's death, his images were defaced or destroyed in an act of *damnatio memoriae*, the official suppression of his memory. Others were removed and reworked into the portraits of later emperors. This marble portrait of Vespasian, made for insertion into a full-length statue, was re-carved from a likeness of Nero. It retains Nero's deep-set eyes. Small traces also remain in the surface of the marble at the back of the neck. They show that a longer section of hair, characteristic of Nero's coiffure, was removed.

Marble, Carthage (Tunis), Tunisia, AD 70–80
British Museum

Image caption:
Side view of the portrait of Vespasian, showing signs of reworking.
© The Trustees of the British Museum

Reusing imperial images

Above, Nero's portrait is re-carved into a likeness of Vespasian. This type of reworking happened to most of Nero's images after his death. Throughout Roman history, some emperors suffered the same fate.

Duration: 1 minute.
This is silent.

© State Collections of Antiquities and Glyptothek Munich, photographer Renate Kuehling; The Trustees of the British Museum

Now you have found out more about Nero, do you think he was a good emperor who served the Roman empire well? Or do you believe ancient writers' claims that he was a bad emperor?

Legacy

Nero's popularity endured for a long time after his death. Prophecies predicted that he would return and regain his kingdom in the east. Various 'false Neros' appeared and garnered support. One imposter, Terentius Maximus, bore a remarkable resemblance to Nero and sang accompanied by a lyre. He gained a considerable following in the eastern empire before he was executed. However, the powerful voices and partisan views of senatorial authors eventually determined Nero's legacy.

Wall quote:
… eoque pluribus vivere eum fingentibus credentibusque.

… many people pretended or believed that he was still alive.

– Tacitus, Histories

Find out more

Events

Learn more about Nero and his turbulent rule in a programme of events including talks and lectures from leading experts. Visit britishmuseum.org/nero for details.

Related galleries

Greek and Roman sculpture (Room 23)
Roman Britain (Room 49, *The Weston Gallery*)
Ancient Iran (Room 52, *The Rahim Irvani Gallery*)
Greek and Roman life (Room 69)
Roman Empire (Room 70, *The Wolfson Gallery*)

Shopping

Discover a range of products inspired by the exhibition in the exhibition shop and online shop.

Join in online

Share your experience using #NeroExhibition

Hear from exhibition curators and uncover more about Nero on the British Museum blog – visit blog.britishmuseum.org

Become a Member

If you enjoyed *Nero: the man behind the myth*, become a Member and visit again for free. Membership gives you 12 months of unlimited entry to all exhibitions including upcoming shows on Hokusai's newly rediscovered drawings and ancient Peru.

Join on-site now to redeem the price of your exhibition ticket and enjoy a special discount on purchases you make today. Individual Membership starts at £69*, with Joint Membership and guest facilities also available.

Member benefits include:
▪ Free unlimited entry to exhibitions
▪ Exclusive online and on-site events
▪ Access to the Members' Room
▪ The British Museum Magazine
▪ Special offers and discounts

Ask at the exhibition shop or the Membership Desk in the Great Court. You can also join online at britishmuseum.org/membership

*Based on an annually recurring payment by Direct Debit.

Acknowledgements

As part of the Museum's efforts to lessen its environmental impact, materials, fittings and equipment are reused where possible. The Museum aims to make its exhibitions as

sustainable as possible, sharing best practice, resources and the latest innovations with other museums and galleries.

Every effort has been made to contact the copyright owners of images and other print and digital media in the exhibition. If you are a rights holder of an item in this exhibition and are concerned that you did not grant permission to use it, please contact the Museum's Exhibitions Department at exhibitions@britishmuseum.org

Lenders
Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales, Cardiff
Bloomberg LP, London
Colchester Archaeological Trust
Colchester Museums
Egypt Exploration Society, London
Musée du Louvre, Paris
Musei Capitolini, Rome
Museo Archeologico e d'Arte della Maremma, Grosseto
Museo Archeologico dei Campi Flegrei nel

Castello di Baia

Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Cagliari

Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze

Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Venezia

Museo Civico Archeologico, Comune di Cremona

Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome

Museum of London Archaeology

Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen

Parco Archeologico del Colosseo, Rome

Parco Archeologico di Pompei

Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris

Römisch-Germanisches Museum der Stadt Köln

Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per le Province di Cremona, Lodi e Mantova

Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek, Munich

Stiftsbibliothek St.Gallen

Vatican Museums

Wrexham County Borough Museum and Archive

All exhibition services unless otherwise credited
British Museum

Exhibition design
Drinkall Dean

Graphic design
lombaert studio

Digital media design
Centre Screen, British Museum

Digital media hardware
British Museum

Lighting design
DHA Designs Ltd

Construction
Scena

Graphic production
Displayways

Cost management, CDM advice
Greenway Associates, Fraser Randall

Fine art transport
MOMART Ltd

Object mounts
Plowden Smith

Exit survey

We want to hear from you

Scan this QR code or follow the link to find a short survey about the exhibition that you can complete now or later.

To thank you for your help you will have the chance to enter a draw with a £50 prize.

https://link.mhminsight.com/nero