

**The Eccentric,
Self-Indulgent**

Emperor Nero

(Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus)

Western Civilization I

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Like the notorious Caligula, Nero made a reputation for himself as a mad, eccentric, self-indulgent human being. He saw fit to engage in acts of cruelty against both blood and non-blood alike at whim. During my research of Nero, I found this aspect of his life, though disturbing, most interesting. In the line of background on this hugely peculiar man, and to understand his idiosyncrasies, at minimum from my perspective, it helped me to identify the era in which he was born and the moral practices of his time.

Life

Nero was born in the year 37 as Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus. He later became Nero Claudius Caesar Drusus through adoption by Claudius at age 13. He was the only son of Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus and Agrippina, the younger sister, and reputed lover of Caligula. One source states Julia Livilla was the youngest of the three sisters.

(Balsdon 42) The fact that Agrippina and Caligula were lovers may have influenced the abnormal aspects of Nero's life that could explain much about the unconventional behavior to follow.

His maternal uncle Caligula had only started his reign on March 16 of that year at the age of 25. His predecessors, Octavian and Tiberius had lived to become 76 and 79, respectively. Providing that Caligula lived long enough, he could produce his own heirs. To be an *heir* was key in this realm, since Nero was born into a life of privilege and satirically his kin had a predilection for dying before their time. Ambitious Agrippina wanted her brother to name her son as an act of favor. This brought her son to the attention of Caligula possibly marking the child as his uncle's heir. Caligula had other

ideas. He offered to name his nephew "Claudius" after their lame and stuttering uncle. This implied that his nephew was as unlikely a candidate for Augustus as Claudius. Another source has it that Claudius was a laughing stock. (Seutonius 6) In retrospect, had this marked the beginning of an omen in the life of Nero with respect to his peculiar quirks?

A notorious scandal early in his reign was Caligula's particularly close relationship to his three sisters Drusilla, Julia Livilla, and Agrippina. All four were featured on Roman currency. The three women seemed to have gained his favor and with it, some amount of influence. Historians Josephus, Suetonius, and Dio Cassius reported that the siblings had engaged in sexual relations. (Nero, Wikipedia) This meant that Lucius had become the son of an influential even if notorious woman. Even though Agrippina lost her position by her brother, she continued as an important figure in Nero's life.

Conspiracies

In September 39, Drusilla's husband Lepidus had reportedly managed to become lover to both Agrippina and Livilla, seeking their help in gaining the throne. He was immediately executed and Agrippina and Livilla were exiled to the Pontian Islands. Only two years old, Lucius was presumably separated from his mother at this point. Considering his father died of edema in 40, Lucius was essentially an orphan with an uncertain fate under the increasingly erratic Caligula. This, to me, could very well have

been the impetus for Nero's odd, if not heinous future behavior. Nonetheless, his luck changed again the following year.

On January 24, 41 Caligula, his wife and infant daughter were murdered by a conspiracy under Cassius Chaera who helped Claudius gain the throne. Caligula's death was pertinent to leaving Nero open as heir. Claudius recalled his nieces from banishment and Agrippina was soon remarried to the wealthy Gaius Sallustius Crispus Passienus. He died between 44 and 47, and the determined Agrippina was reportedly suspected of poisoning him in order to inherit his fortune. Lucius was then the only heir to his now-wealthy mother.

Adoption by Claudius

Claudius was married to Valeria Messalina who was executed in 48, accused of conspiring against her husband. The determined Agrippina soon replaced her deceased aunt, which inevitably indicated that she married her own uncle. On January 1, 49 she became the fourth wife of Tiberius Claudius Nero Caesar Drusus. The marriage lasted five years. Early in the year 50 the Roman Senate offered Agrippina the honorable title of Augusta, previously only held by Livia (14-29).

On February 25, 50 at age 13, Lucius was officially adopted by Claudius as Nero Claudius Caesar Drusus. Nero was older than his adoptive brother Britannicus and effectively became the coveted heir to the throne at the time of his adoption. Claudius honored his adoptive son in several ways: he was proclaimed an adult at the age of 14, appointed proconsul, entered and first addressed the Senate, made joint public

appearances with Claudius, and was featured in coinage. This was a substantial amount of authority to be afforded an individual during the crucial and defining years of adolescence.

In 53, he married his adoptive sister Octavia at age 16. Given the time and even taking into account people of privilege, did nobody see this as strange, premature, or at the very least, unconventional?

Emperor

Claudius died in 54 and Nero was soon established as Augustus in his place. It is not known how much Nero knew about or was involved in the death of Claudius. However, Suetonius wrote that even if Nero was not the instigator, he was privy to it. To support this theory, it was noted that he openly praised mushrooms as “the food of the Gods, as the Greek proverb has it” (Nero Wikipedia) for their potentially poisonous qualities. And, coincidentally, they were used to administer the toxin to Claudius. After Claudius' death, Nero maligned his every word and act.

Nero was the youngest Emperor yet at age 17. Historians wrote that Nero only acted as a figurehead early in his reign. Actual decisions were believed to have been left to the more capable hands of his mother, Agrippina, whom Roman writer Tacitus claims poisoned Claudius. Was it the practice of the time to furnish such enormous responsibility with a 17 year old? As a critical thinker, my question was what good could be culled from the mind of such a youngster, except to provide posterity with interesting

reading? I found subsequent research on his behavior to border on the side of astounding, if not deplorable.

The first five years under Nero were known as fine administration, even resulting in the coining of the term "Quinquennium Neronis," or loosely translated as *the fifth anniversary of Nero*. Matters of the Empire were handled effectively and the Senate enjoyed a period of renewed influence in state affairs. However, problems soon arose in Nero's personal life with the increasing competition for influence between Agrippina and Burrus and Seneca, his praefectus praetorianus, or imperial bodyguard, and his tutor, respectively.

Nero was reportedly unsatisfied with his marriage and thus neglected Octavia. He entered into an affair with Claudia Acte, a former slave. Agrippina attempted to intervene in favor of Octavia and demanded that her son dismiss Acte. Burrus and Seneca, on the other hand, chose to support Nero's decision.

Nero resisted his mother's intervention in his personal affairs. Her influence over her son declining, Agrippina turned to a younger candidate for the throne. Nero's 15-year-old stepbrother, Britannicus, was still legally a minor under the charge of Nero but was approaching legal adulthood. Britannicus was a likely heir to Nero and Agrippina knew ensuring her influence over him could strengthen her position. However, Nero wasn't having any of it and the youth died suddenly and suspiciously on February 12, 55, the very day before his proclamation as an adult had been set for. (Seutonius)

Not surprisingly, Nero took the life of Britannicus by poison, not only due to jealousy for the fear that he might have received greater respect from the people

because of the memory of his father, but from fear that his voice was deemed more pleasurable than his own. Nero fancied himself a singer/entertainer. (Nero, Wikipedia)
This might have gone over well by today's standards, yet during Nero's time it was considered extremely inappropriate behavior. It seems the passage of time did little to develop or increase the health of his state of mind.

He obtained a potion from Locusta, an expert poisoner. The effect was slower than he anticipated, and once he had beaten the woman and forced her to mix another, this time right then and there. (Seutonius) The boy dropped dead at the very first taste. Nero lied to his guests and announced that he had succumbed to a recurring illness. The next day the boy was hastily and unceremoniously buried in a pouring rain. (Halsall translated by J.C. Rolfe)

Matricide

Agrippina's power further declined while Burrus and Seneca jointly became the most influential men in Rome. While his advisers took care of affairs of state, Nero surrounded himself with a circle of favorites. Roman historians reported his nocturnal behavior as weighed down in drunken revelry and violence while daily matters of politics were neglected. Among his new favorites was Marcus Salvius Otho. Otho was as dissolute as Nero but served as a good and intimate friend to him. Intimate, indeed. He may have even been Nero's lover. (Nero, Wikipedia)

Otho introduced Nero to Poppaea Sabina, who would first marry Otho and then Nero. (Pearson) Poppaea was described as a woman of great beauty, charm, and wit. Poppaea established her position as Nero's favorite mistress, while Agrippina was her

enemy. The following year would mark a turning point in the emperor's reign. Nero and/or Poppaea reportedly schemed the murder of Agrippina.

They deprived her of all her honors and of her guard of Roman and German soldiers. Nero even forbade her to live with him and drove her from the Palace. He continued to find ways to harass her, bribing men to annoy her with lawsuits while she lived in the city. After she retired to the country, men passed her house by all means to break her rest with abuse and mockery. Terrified by her violence and threats, he was determined to take her life. He attempted this several times with poison only to find that she had made herself immune to his potentially lethal tactics by employing her own antidotes.

He resorted to tampering with the ceiling in her bedroom, engineering a mechanical device that loosened its panels and dropped them on her as she slept. The news of this leaked out through those connected with the plot, so he devised a collapsible boat to destroy her by shipwreck or by her cabin falling in.

He then pretended a reconciliation and in a cordial letter, invited her to come to Baiae and celebrate the feast of Minerva with him. On her arrival, he instructed his captains to wreck the galley in which she had come, by running into it as if by accident. He detained her at a banquet, and when she would return to Bauli, offered her his contrivance in place of the craft, which had been damaged, escorting her to it in high spirits and even kissing her breasts as they parted. Consequently, he spent the rest of the night restless in intense anxiety, awaiting the outcome of his design.

He learned that everything had gone wrong and that she had escaped by swimming. Driven to desperation, Nero had planned to have a dagger thrown down beside her freedman Lucius Agellus when he joyfully brought word that she was safe and sound. He then ordered that the freedman be seized and bound, on the charge of being hired to kill the emperor, that his mother be put to death, and the pretense made that she had escaped the consequences of her detected guilt by suicide. (Suetonius)

Seneca attempted to convince the Senate that she was orchestrating a conspiracy against her son, but the reputation of the Emperor was damaged beyond repair by this case of matricide. Nero later said that he was haunted by the sight of his mother's ghost in the wisp of the torch lights. Otho was soon also removed from the imperial court, and sent to Lusitania as governor.

A Series of Scandals

The year 62 brought another turning point for several reasons. Burrus died and Seneca asked Nero for permission to retire from public affairs. Gaius Ofonius Tigellinus replaced them as praetorian praefect and counselor. Caligula had exiled Tigellinus in 39 on charges of adultery with both Agrippina and Livilla, only to be recalled from exile by Claudius. Ambitious Tigellinus managed to become a favorite of Nero and, reputedly, his lover.

Now 25, Nero had reigned for eight years, and had yet to produce an heir. When Poppaea became pregnant, Nero finally decided to marry his mistress, but his marriage to Octavia had to be dissolved first. He declared the divorce on grounds of infertility,

leaving him free to marry Poppaea and wait for her to give birth. However, the sudden death of Octavia on June 9, 62 resulted in incidents of public protest.

The Great Fire of Rome erupted on July 18 and 19, 64. The fire burned for a week, leaving much of the city in ruins. Nero was said to have been vacationing in his native Anzio but returned in haste to Rome. He viewed the fire from the tower of Maecenas, exulting "in the beauty of the flames." (Nero, Wikipedia) Rumors circulated that Nero had played his lyre and sang the "Sack of Ilium" dressed in full costume on top of Quirinal Hill, while the city burned. Over the years, this turned to a legend that Nero had fiddled as Rome burned; an impossible act as the fiddle had not yet been invented. (Nero, Who2)

Nero the Artist and the Olympic Games

Hated by many citizens, with an increasing list of political enemies, Nero started to appreciate his loneliness, when in 65 he discovered that Gaius Calpurnius Piso intended to take his place. Old friends like Seneca were involved in the plot. Other conspirators were forced to commit suicide. Nero ordered Gnaeus Domitius Corbulo, a popular and valuable general, to commit suicide because of the mere suspicion of new threats. This decision was enough to move military commanders, locally and in the provinces, to start planning a revolution. To add to the destruction, Nero personally ordered the crucifixion of Saint Peter and later, the beheading of Paul of Tarsus.

Suicide

In 68 A.D., Gaius Julius Vindex, Governor of Lugdunensis, Clodius Macer, legate, or emissary in Africa, and Galba, once servant to Nero, and governor, declared their allegiance to the Senate and the Roman people, rather than to Nero. Such unrest coupled with intrigue provided Nero's enemies with their chance to depose him. Unable to face the fact that he was no longer in control, he committed suicide on June 9, 68 A.D. He stabbed himself in the neck proclaiming, "Qualis artifex pereo!" or *what an artist dies in me!* (Nero, Wikipedia)

Roman Times

Although at first Nero's acts of depravity, lust, extravagance, avarice and cruelty were gradual, some thought that they might be dismissed as senseless acts and the immaturity of youth. However, I found it a decided relief that even for the time their nature was such that no one doubted they were defects of his character. His life provided an interesting study for anyone fascinated by how traits are passed down from generation to generation. Nero was known for sexually abusing boys, seducing married women, desiring relations with his own mother (Oedipus Complex) and marrying men. I gained the knowledge through this research that homosexual relations were not uncommon during this time. (Halsall) The witty jest that Suetonius wrote is still sound, that it would have been well for the world if Nero's father Domitius had a castrated boy for a wife. (Nero, Wikipedia)