

CSCP Support Materials
for
Eduqas GCSE Latin
Component 3A

Latin Literature (Narratives)
Suetonius, Nero

For examination in 2024 and 2025



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Cover image: Silver Denarius of Nero, Rome, AD 64 - AD 65

American Numismatic Society

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A note on the use of these resources

The notes and commentaries presented here are provided by CSCP **to support teachers** in preparing their students for Eduqas GCSE Latin, component 3A. They contain a good deal of information intended for general interest and to satisfy the curiosity of teachers and, at their discretion, of students. There is **no expectation that all these notes need to be learned by students**. The examination requires knowledge outside the text **only** when it is needed in order to understand the text. In particular, there is no requirement for knowledge of the writings of other authors; they are provided to emphasise that Suetonius provides just one of the accounts we have of Nero, and that Suetonius has his own, possibly biased, perspective.

Introduction

Suetonius: His life and works

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (born c. AD 70) was educated in Rome and spent his adult life there. He was a secretary (*ab epistulis*) at the imperial palace until an 'incident' possibly in AD 122 led to his dismissal. His most famous work *de vita Caesarum*, seems to have appeared within ten or so years of the accession of Hadrian in AD 117. It covers the lives of the twelve Caesars from Julius to Domitian, with Nero being the sixth emperor in the sequence. The subject matter was potentially difficult as much of it had been covered by the historian, Tacitus, in his *Histories* and *Annals* and the later emperors were within living memory. Indeed, *The Lives of the Caesars*, were not always panegyric in style, there were unsavoury anecdotes, as Suetonius had access to the imperial archives, eyewitness accounts and references to personal letters (e.g. *Divus Augustus* 76) which enlivened the writing.

Suetonius himself seems to have been a studious boy. In Rome he attended lectures on grammar and rhetoric and was friends with the younger Pliny. From his letters to Pliny we can learn about the lives of educated men of higher rank in Rome in the late 1st century AD. There was the fear of living under the authoritarian emperor Domitian and the necessity to curry favour with those who might help you to succeed in public life. It seems the young Suetonius might have tried the life of a lawyer, but he was not a polished orator; his friendship with Pliny helped him acquire a small estate where he could indulge in scholarly pursuits, and later, at Pliny's request, he was granted the legal privileges of a father of three children (*ius trium liberorum*) despite having none. These rights included preferential treatments for magistracies and special seats in the theatre.

Suetonius seems to have been in his late forties or early fifties when he began to write his *Lives*. By then he was already established as a scholar and a public figure with a long family history of association with Roman emperors. His grandfather had been associated with Caligula's court and Suetonius continued to live and work around or for the imperial palace for his whole life.

After his dismissal Suetonius continued to write, including a work (*On Public Offices*) that may have been connected with Hadrian's reorganisation of his palace staff. We do not know the date of his death.

Nero

Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (AD 37-68) became emperor in AD 54 when he was just sixteen. He was the son of Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, consul in AD 32, and the younger Agrippina who was the daughter of Claudius' brother, Germanicus. Agrippina was the great-grand-daughter of Augustus, and Ahenobarbus was the grandson of Mark Antony via his marriage with Augustus' sister, Octavia (see Figure 1 below). Roman imperial family trees are very complicated!

Nero's claim to be emperor was tenuous, but his adoption by Claudius in AD 48 at the age of eleven, (even though the emperor already had a son by his third wife, the disgraced Messalina), gave him more security, something which had been lacking in his early life, and a new name, Nero. When the young Domitius (as Nero was originally

named) was three, his father died and instead of inheriting the estate, it was taken over by the then emperor, Gaius (Caligula) who was Nero's uncle. His mother was banished and the young Domitius, as he was then known, was brought up by his father's sister, Domitia Lepida, who just happened to be Messalina's mother. (This was not the Domitia he had killed (*Nero 34*) who was another sister. Domitia Lepida was put to death by Claudius.) When Claudius became emperor in AD 41 he restored the inheritance and recalled Agrippina, causing Messalina, jealous of a rival to her son, to try to have him killed. The story that the would-be assassin was scared away by the miraculous appearance of a snake (*Nero 6*), may have been manufactured later on to strengthen Nero's claim to be emperor.

The young Nero showed signs of cruelty quite young, and he was a witness in the trial of his aunt, Domitia Lepida, which resulted in her death at the command of the then emperor, Claudius (*Nero 7*). He was certainly a bright young man, who performed well in public, whether in court or in the senate and he seems to have, at first, been popular with the Praetorian guard. Becoming emperor at sixteen, even for one who had been brought up for several years in the imperial palace, must have been hard, and for the first few years of his reign, Nero was guided not only by his former tutors, the writer and philosopher, Seneca and the *equus*, Burrus, but also by his mother. She seems to have gained a reputation as a power-hungry woman, though this may have been propaganda put about, possibly by Nero, after her death. We do know that she appeared on coins with her son, acting almost as co-regent.

The prescribed material necessarily has to pick and choose from the biography of Nero, but the overall view aims to provide a coherent narrative. Nero's family was prominent in politics in the 1st century BC and Suetonius gives several examples to show how Nero himself took after his ancestors. In addition, use of the same name in different generations of the same family was common amongst the Romans, but the frequency with which the names Lucius and Gnaeus appeared in the family was noteworthy even for Suetonius who also commented (*Nero 1*) that close study of the Domitian family history showed that even though Nero sometimes caricatured their virtues, he had inherited many of their vices as well as their names. One of his ancestors accused Julius Caesar of defying laws and auspices (signs from the gods) and tried to deprive him of his command in Gaul; another was a close colleague of Mark Antony but eventually threw in his lot with Augustus; another ancestor had been a famous charioteer and, as well being a successful general was arrogant, extravagant and disrespectful of other senators. It seems he, like his grandson, Nero, also made *equites* and respectable married women act on the stage. Nero's father, Gnaeus Domitius, was, Suetonius says, *detestabilis* (despicable), cruelly violent and dishonest; it was only the death of the emperor, Tiberius, that saved him from being tried for adultery and incest. Is it any surprise that Nero exhibited some of these character traits?

Nero's love of theatre and chariot-racing is a theme in Suetonius, and Tacitus (*Annals* 14.14) also comments that he longed to drive in a four-horse chariot race and had the deplorable ambition (*foedum studium*) to sing with a lyre. Suetonius talks of concerts where no one was allowed to leave before the end, meaning that women gave birth and men pretended to be dead so that they would be carried away. Such stories are

possibly exaggerated, but we do know that Nero competed in singing contests and was awarded prizes, and that when he competed in a ten-horse chariot race at Olympia in Greece, despite falling from the chariot and not completing the course, he won the prize there too. It is such stories that remain in the memory and Nero's love of theatricality made everything a spectacle. The first few years of his reign, it seems, were less extravagant as his advisers, Seneca and Burrus, and his mother, Agrippina appeared to hold him in check, but after Agrippina's death (possibly murder) Burrus disappeared, probably poisoned, and in AD 65 Seneca was forced to take his own life after being accused of taking part in a plot to kill Nero. Nero now had no one to tell him what to do and his reckless spending resulted in him seizing the estates of those he believed had not left him enough in their wills. By the late 60s AD Suetonius suggests Nero was universally hated, and bad omens were constantly seen. His final hours, his flight and death were typically theatrical. The Roman aristocracy hated him as he had humiliated and robbed them but as with many figures that are larger than life, many believed he would return.

The narrative

The episodes in the prescribed sections take place mostly in, or around Rome, though in other sections Suetonius records that Nero travelled around Italy and spent time on the coast at Baiae near Naples. The sections chosen give only one perspective on Nero, as indeed do the writings of other ancient authors. Nero was a divisive figure in antiquity and, as with all ancient texts, we have to understand that bias may be present in representing him. All history should be seen in context, and we must bear this in mind too as we read ancient authors and try to form a picture of the characters they describe.

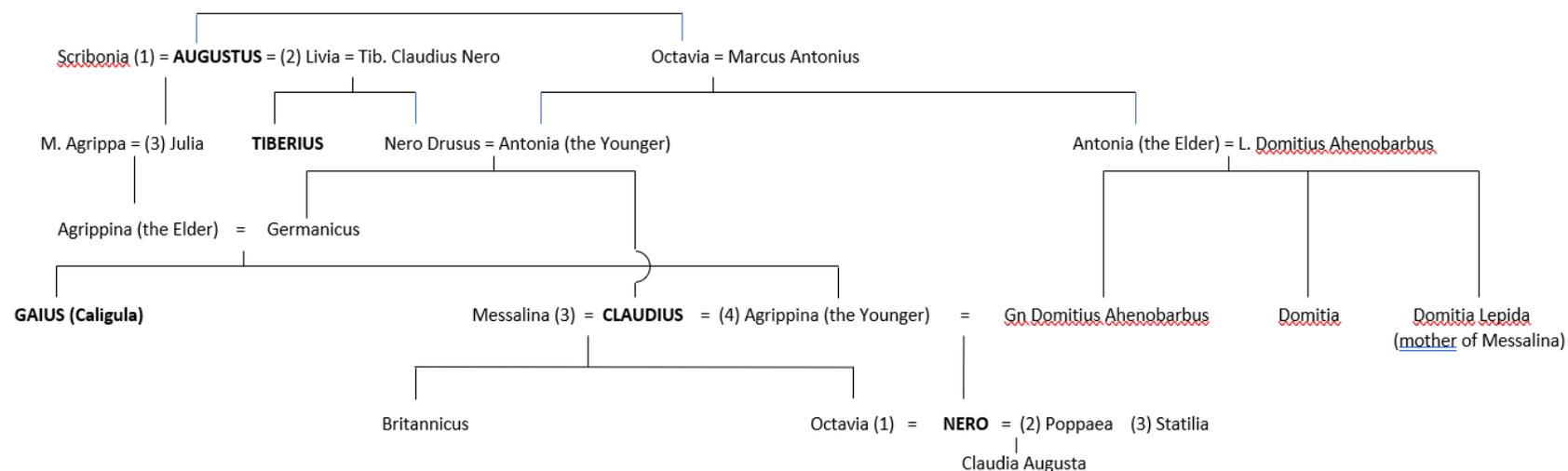
Map showing Nero's birthplace and place of Agrippina's death



Figure 1: Map showing Antium and Baiae

Nero's Family Tree

Julio- Claudian Family Tree, showing key figures in the story and descent of Nero only



Key: Emperors in bold

Number in brackets indicates which number wife of the husband nearest to the brackets.

Figure 2: Julio-Claudian family tree, showing key figures in the story and descent of Nero only

Themes

What is the difference between history telling the deeds of famous men and biography? Wallace-Hadrill (1995) points out that the distinction becomes blurred when an individual plays a dominant role in the historical narrative of the period. Suetonius avoids the path of historical narrative preferring to group events thematically in order to focus on 'the actions and character of his subjects' (Warmington, 2003, p.viii).

He was fortunate that several members of his family seem to have had close contact with the later emperors. His grandfather was on the edge of Caligula's court circles and his father was a military tribune in the camp of Otho (the second of the four emperors in that turbulent year, AD 69). Suetonius himself worked in the imperial service in three notable posts (*a studiis*: the man whose job was to find texts of replies to requests embassies might make, *a bibliotecis*: control of the libraries, and *ab epistulis* – the last and most prestigious as it involved dealing with the letters written by the emperor), so it is no wonder Suetonius had a detailed understanding of how the emperors worked and of their characters as seen through their correspondence.

Suetonius did not arrange his works chronologically but by topic. Most lives cover ancestry, place of birth and any related omens, childhood, entry to the public view and principate, aspects of government, legislation and judgements, public works and games, campaigns and public and private behaviour. In his Life of Nero, Suetonius begins with Nero's ancestors and ends with Nero's death. Following that, we are given an account of the entertainments that he gave and how he established a festival of competitions in music, athletics and horsemanship in Rome. Having completed a list of Nero's acts, of which Suetonius declared some forgivable or even praiseworthy, he moved on to Nero's follies and crimes. Included in this section is the tour of Greece in which he competed in musical competitions which were rescheduled to happen during his tour. There had been indications of his arrogance earlier in his reign, Suetonius tells us, but now that he was older they could not be put down to youthful indiscretion but to character fault, and we are then returned to the beginning of the reign to hear about Claudius' death and the poisoning of Britannicus, Claudius' own son. Agrippina's death is seen as a sign that Nero was growing more bold, and there follow accounts of his marriages and the fire in Rome of AD 64 as further examples of his excesses. There is then a section on how Fate took her part in Nero's downfall including a brief account of a plague causing vast numbers of deaths (AD 65) and the rebellion of Boudica in Britain in AD 60/61. The end of the biography from chapter 46 onwards follows a chronological narrative of his death and then a brief excursus on Nero's looks and character (51-56). This includes reference to notebooks of poems that Suetonius had seen which showed how Nero drafted out his poetry. The conclusion that the biographer drew from all this was that Nero had a thirst for popularity and immortal fame, and as most shocking evidence of this, Suetonius claims that he planned to rename Rome itself as Neropolis (the city of Nero). It is good to bear in mind that Suetonius follows in a Roman tradition of making hostile judgements of some biographical subjects once they are safely dead (Warmington, 2003, p. ix) so that his more extreme descriptions of Nero's behaviour may be exaggerated.

Further reading (and listening)

Warmington, B.H. (2003) *Suetonius Nero*, Bristol, Bristol University Press

Suetonius, The Twelve Caesars, trans. Graves R. (2007 revised edition) Penguin (Nero chapter)

For an entertaining overview of Suetonius' life and works teachers might like to listen to this episode of *Natalie Haynes Stands up for the Classics*, though some of the humour may not be suitable for classroom use.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000czlf>

Acknowledgement of works used in preparing these notes

Holland, T. (2015) *Dynasty: The Rise and Fall of the House of Caesar*, Little, Brown Book Group

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Virgil, *Aeneid* (trans. West D.) (2003) London: Penguin

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Warmington, B.H. (2003) *Suetonius Nero*, Bristol, Bristol University Press

Reading the Text

The key aims are:

- understanding the meaning of the Latin
- developing literary appreciation

It is often useful to adopt the following approach when introducing students to original literature:

- Read the Latin aloud to emphasise phrasing and stress word groups
- Break up more complex sentences into constituent parts for comprehension
- Focus on comprehension of the text and understanding the content through questioning and using the vocabulary
- Look closely at how the Latin is expressed and the ways in which the literary devices enhance the meaning.
- Although a sample translation is provided in the course resources, teachers might want to encourage their students to make their own version after various options have been discussed and evaluated. The first step is a literal translation, then something more polished in natural English that is as close to the structure and vocabulary of the original Latin as possible. Students will soon see that a degree of paraphrase may be required when the Latin does not readily translate into correct and idiomatic English.

About the Notes

The prescribed text is broken up into short sections and the notes on each passage are followed by a Discussion and Questions. The notes focus both on language and content, but also include some comment on style and literary effects. The Discussion and Questions focus mostly on understanding the Latin, the context and the style. The notes are designed to provide for the needs of a wide spectrum of teachers, from those with limited knowledge of Latin and who are perhaps entirely new to reading Latin literature, to teachers experienced in both language and literature. It is hoped that all will find something of use and interest.

The notes and commentaries presented here are provided by CSCP to support teachers in preparing their students for Eduqas GCSE Latin, component 3A. They contain a good deal of information intended for general interest and to satisfy the curiosity of teachers and, at their discretion, of students. There is no expectation that all these notes need to be learned by students. The examination requires knowledge outside the text only when it is needed in order to understand the text. In particular there is no requirement for knowledge of the writings of other authors; they are provided to emphasise that Suetonius provides just one of the accounts we have of Nero and that Suetonius has his own, possibly biased, perspective.

Section A

Nero succeeds Claudius as emperor

Notes and Discussion

Nero was sixteen years old when, on the 13th October AD 54, he was acclaimed emperor following the death of his adoptive father Claudius. It had become accepted tradition for the new emperor to be first acclaimed by guards in the palace before addressing the Praetorian Guard (i.e. the emperor's bodyguards) at their camp, as the support of the army was vital for a new emperor. The historian Tacitus (*Annals* 12.69) tells us that, while there, he promised them financial gifts equal to those given by Claudius on his accession. The Senate, as the legislative body of the state was the next group he visited, and they gave him the honours and titles due to the emperor. It seems that although he refused the title *pater patriae* on this occasion, coinage of late AD 55 and 56 which is in the British Museum, indicates that he soon changed his mind. Tacitus (*Annals* 12.69) comments that some of the palace guard looked around for Britannicus when Nero appeared, wondering where Claudius' own son was. Britannicus was born to Claudius' third wife, Messalina who had been put to death at Claudius' orders. Britannicus later died, possibly under suspicious circumstances, in late AD 54 or early AD 55 just before his fourteenth birthday. The scandalous circumstances leading to Messalina's death may have contributed to Nero's accession.

Questions

1. Why would it be important for the new emperor to have the army on his side?
2. Why would the Senate be so keen to ratify Nero, Claudius' adopted son as emperor, when Claudius' own son was still alive?
3. Why do you think Nero refused the title *pater patriae* (Father of His Country)?

Section B

Nero begins his reign well.

Notes

It is not necessary for students to know everything that these notes contain. They are here to provide context. Knowledge outside the text is only required for students to understand the text and wider knowledge will not be tested in the examination.

- 1 **ostentatione pietatis** – in a show of duty. Suetonius' choice of *ostentatio* suggests he wants his readers to see that Nero was not really honest in the way that he portrayed himself during the funeral.
- 2-3 **memoriae Domiti patris ... habuit** – a statue to his father was erected the next year and the Arval Brotherhood, who gave annual sacrifices in honour of the Lares and other gods to ask for good harvests, offered prayers on his birthday.
- 3-6 **matri summam ... permisit** – other writers (Tacitus, Cassius Dio) note that in the early years of Nero's reign, Agrippina held a lot of power and that she even appeared on coins with her son.
signum excubanti tribuno – Tacitus also mentions this watch word (*Annals* 13.2)
eiusdem ... lectica ... vectus est – Dio mentions the use of the same litter (*Roman History* 61.3). It is always good to be able to corroborate the evidence an ancient author gives.
- 6-7 **Antium coloniam deduxit** – he founded a colony at Antium (his birthplace). Tacitus tells a different story – Antium (originally founded 338 BC), only received its reinforcements of wealthy veterans in AD 60 and the town's fortunes were not restored by their arrival. There is no mention of the expensive harbour (*Annals* 14.27). Suetonius either wished to make it look as though Nero was more active in his early days or he mistook the dates.
- 9-10 **atque ut certiolem adhuc indolem ostenderet** – notice the choice of *adhuc* and the use of the purpose clause – *ut ... ostenderet* – in the light of his later behaviour this seems rather a cynical move.
- 10-11 The translation is **neque ... omisit** (neither did he miss) **ullam occasionem** (any opportunity) **exhibendae** (of showing) **liberalitas neque clementia** (his generosity, nor his mercy) **ne comitatis quidem** (nor even his friendliness).
Many Roman authors would have employed a standard tricolon here: ... *neque ... neque ... neque*, but Suetonius draws attention to the last element – *comitatis* – by varying the structure. This is called *variatio*.

Discussion

Emperors traditionally had a public funeral which included a speech often given by their successor. Claudius' funeral was followed by his enrollment amongst the gods (*consecratio*). Tacitus writes that Nero's speech (*laudatio*) was written by Seneca, the philosopher and dramatist, who had been Nero's tutor and now became his adviser. He also mentions that the passages praising Claudius' foresight and wisdom (*providentia et sapientia*) caused laughter amongst the audience. The funeral itself was modelled on that of Augustus in AD 14. Such a lavish funeral had not been seen since then, as Tiberius', although public, seems to have been scaled down because of popular resentment to his reported savagery, and the funeral of Claudius' predecessor, Caligula (Gaius), had been private as he had been incredibly unpopular and had also been assassinated by the members of the Praetorian Guard. Claudius was the first emperor since Augustus to be deified and it has been suggested that this was due to Nero's mother, Claudius' widow, who wanted her son to be able to put *divi Claudii* (son of the divine Claudius) on his coinage. Claudius' deification was considered a joke by some people, and this is shown by Seneca's satire *Apocolocyntosis* (The Pumpkinification of Claudius) which told of the former emperor's reception among the gods.

Suggested Questions for Comprehension

To familiarise your students with the text, read the entire section of the text aloud, emphasising phrasing and word groups. Then reread each section and ask leading questions so that the class can comprehend the meaning of the Latin text. Once the class are familiar with the Latin, it may be desirable to produce a written translation, but the understanding of the Latin should be the primary objective.

Lines 1-3 (**orsus ... habuit**):

- How did Nero begin his reign?
- What honour did Nero give to Claudius after he had praised him?
- Who else did Nero praise at the funeral?

Lines 3-6 (**matri ... vectus est**):

- To whom did Nero entrust the management of his public and private affairs?
- What was the watchword Nero gave to the tribune on duty?
- How did Nero travel with his mother?

Lines 6-9 (**Antium ... fecit**):

- Where did Nero establish a *colonia*?
- Who did Nero bring to live there?
- What information does Suetonius tell us about the harbour that Nero built there?

Lines 9-12 (**atque ... omisit**):

- What did Nero do to make people think he was good-natured?
- Who did Nero claim to have chosen as a role model?
- What else does Suetonius tell us about how Nero began his reign?

Questions on Content and Style

Lines 1-3 (**orsus ... habuit**):

- In the first words of this section how does Suetonius suggest that Nero was not sincere?
- How does Suetonius emphasise the lavishness of Nero's show of piety to Claudius?

Lines 3-6 (**matri ... vectus est**):

- Pick out the two words that tell us the extent of responsibility that Agrippina had.
- How does Suetonius draw attention to the two-word password given to the guards?
- How does Suetonius emphasise the close relationship Nero had with his mother?
- Why might Suetonius have thought it important to include this information about Nero and his mother?

Lines 6-9 (**Antium ... fecit**):

- How does Suetonius emphasise the importance of the colony and harbour at Antium?
- Why might he have chosen to found a colony here?
- How did Nero plan to make this *colonia* flourish?

Lines 9-12 (**atque ... omisit**):

- Why might Nero say he was ruling according to the principles of Augustus?
- Why might Nero have wanted to appear to display the qualities of generosity and mercy and friendliness ?
- How does Suetonius draw the reader's attention to the good qualities Nero wanted to show he had?

Section C

Nero puts on a variety of games and theatrical events for the people of Rome.

Notes

- 1-2 **spectaculorum ... munus** – ‘he put on very many and different sorts of shows: youth games, chariot races, stage plays and a gladiatorial display’. The position of *varia* to complement *plurima* draws attention to the sheer number of shows and their variety and prepares us for the list that follows. *iuvenales ludi* – are first in the list because they were a novelty introduced by Nero in AD 59. According to Dio (*Roman History* 61.19), they were celebrating the first time Nero cut his beard which was a traditional Roman rite of passage. Oddly they seem to have been repeated every year until AD 64 at least (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.33) when they were held in Nero’s gardens.
- circenses ludi* and *scaenici ludi* were the traditional Roman games – chariot races and theatrical shows of various kinds.
- gladiatorium munus* – gladiatorial displays were not officially part of the *ludi* as they were technically a sacrifice of blood in honour of the dead, but they had come to be regarded as just another form of popular entertainment.
- 2-4 **iuvenalibus senes ... ad lusum** – although, Suetonius does not mention it, Tacitus says that the youth games were generally private and were held in Nero’s gardens (*Annals* 15, 33, 1). Tacitus also mentions that age, birth or official career was not a bar to taking part (*Annals* 14.15).
- 4 -5 **circensibus loca equiti secreta a ceteris tribuit** – it was common practice for different social groups to have allocated seating.
- commisit ... quadrigas** – the verb is promoted to be juxtaposed with *tribuit* and to leave *quadrigas* as the final word to emphasise the oddity.
- 5-9 **pro aeternitate imperii** – after his mother Agrippina’s murder (Tacitus, *Annals* 14.8), Nero wrote a letter to the Senate in which he claimed that his mother had been plotting to kill him (Tacitus, *Annals* 14.10) and these entertainments seem to have happened shortly afterwards, possibly to celebrate his survival.
- ex utroque ordine et sexu ... notissimus eques** – chronology may be fluid here, but it does seem that at the *iuvenalia* after his mother’s death in AD 59, eminent men and women took part in the games.
- 9-10 **inducta Afrani togata, quae incendium inscribitur** – Lucius Afranius was a Roman playwright, who died in 46BC. All his works are all lost. He wrote domestic plots from Roman rural towns – *comoediae togatae*. The name of this play may be foreshadowing the fire of AD 64.
- 12 **missilia** – Nero did not actually throw the things that were mentioned; *missilia* were balls with the names of the prizes written on them which the crowd scrambled for, no doubt much to Nero’s delight. Augustus indulged himself in this way on occasion (Suetonius, *Augustus* 98). The extensive list that follows this demonstrates Nero’s extravagance and leaves the largest items to the end for dramatic effect.

Discussion

In this section Suetonius gives a selection of the entertainments that Nero put on to celebrate his reign and to win the approval of the people. It was the Roman poet Juvenal, writing some years after Nero's reign, who talked of *panem et circenses* (Satire 10.81) – saying that the common people were more interested in food and entertainment than their freedom and that the provision of such spectacles was a political necessity for an emperor. Nero was well known to love the theatre and chariot-racing, but his generosity (or extravagance) led to 'fiscal crisis and extortion' (Wallace-Hadrill, 1995). Dio (*Roman History* 61.17) talks of the degradation of the descendants of past Roman heroes. Nero, as Tacitus (*Annals* 13.30) confirms, does not appear to have had respect for the dignity and descent of high-status Roman citizens.

Suggested Questions for Comprehension

Lines 1-5 (**spectaculorum ... quadrigas**):

- What different types of entertainment did Nero give? List them.
- Who does Suetonius say attended the youth games as spectators?
- What do we learn about where spectators sat at such events?

Lines 5-11 (**ludis ... haberent**):

- Which types of people took part in these games?
- Describe what happened with the Roman *eques* and the elephant.
- What was the name of the play by Afranius?
- Explain how the actors in this play benefitted from Nero's generosity.

Lines 11-16 (**sparsa ... agri**):

- List the things that were scattered upon the crowd.
- Can you think of a modern-day equivalent of this?

Questions on Content and Style

Lines 1-5 (**spectaculorum ... quadrigas**):

- How does Suetonius emphasise the number and variety of entertainments given by Nero?
- Which entertainment do you think you might have enjoyed most and why?
- What do you think is the oddest of the entertainments? Why?

Lines 5-11 (**ludis ... haberent**):

- What is the effect of word choice such as *aeternitate* and *maximos*?
- Why might Suetonius have included the story about the elephant?
- Why do you think that Suetonius thought it important to mention which type of people took part in these games?
- Why would putting on games help Nero to stay in power?
- How might the title of the play by Afranius be prophetic?

Lines 11-16 (**sparsa ... agri**):

- *omnium rerum per omnes dies*: what effect does the repetition have?
- Suetonius lists the things that Nero offered to the crowd in a long list without the use of conjunctions. What effect does this have?
- How does Suetonius maintain interest in the list of things?
- How do these lines emphasise Nero's generosity and extravagance?

Whole passage

- How accurately do you think Suetonius' describes the games and events given by Nero?

Section D

Nero's behaviour deteriorates.

Notes

- 1-4 **petulantiam ... esse:** Suetonius gives five types of bad behaviour that Nero displayed and gives an example of two in this section; there are further examples to be seen in the rest of this chapter (Suetonius, *Nero* 26) which is not included in the prescription. He says that they were initially considered youthful mistakes (*iuvenili errore*) but as they continued and, presumably, as Nero grew older and did not stop, there could be no doubt that these were character flaws (*natura illa vitia*).
- 4-8 **post ... assuerat:** Suetonius gives an example of one of Nero's night-time activities. He adds in his own comments – *ludibundus nec sine pernicie tamen* (in playful mood, not however without mischief). Tacitus does not mention that those who fought back were dropped into the sewers, although this does not mean that it did not happen.
- 8-10 **tabernas ... absumeretur:** the accusation of a high-ranking man holding auctions or markets for things which were not his own and in his own house (*quintana domi constituta*) was serious on several levels. It was not only a crime – selling stolen goods – but also showed lack of integrity in high office. Cicero in his second *Philippic* in 44 BC had accused Mark Antony of something similar (*Philippics* 2.92).
- 9-10 **partae et ad licitationem dividendae praedae pretium absumeretur**
The translation is: The proceeds (**pretium**) of the spoils acquired (**partae ... praedae**) and divided up (**et ... dividendae**) for bidding (**ad licitationem**), were squandered (**absumeretur**).

Discussion

At first it seemed that Nero's excessive behaviour could be put down to youthful exuberance but as his 'youthful mistakes' became more well-known, the people around him began to realise that these were character faults. Suetonius lists five of these character faults, each with an example to illustrate, though in our section we only have examples of *petulantia* (petulance or careless behaviour) which amounts to 'hooliganism', and *avaritia* (greed). The element of disguise in the hat or wig that Nero wore for these 'escapades' is not a surprise given his love of the theatre, and greed is shown by his auctioning of the proceeds of the break-ins followed by his squandering of the profits. Tacitus (*Annals* 13.25) and Dio (*Roman History* 61.9) date these incidents to early in Nero's reign, AD 56. Suetonius goes on to tell us that these escapades were also dangerous to Nero, as he was almost beaten to death by a Senator whose wife he had assaulted.

Suggested Questions for Comprehension

Lines 1-4 (**petulantiam ... esse**):

- Which five vices does Suetonius say that Nero practised?
- Which Latin words describe how Nero practised these vices? What do they mean?
- Suetonius says that Nero practised these vices as if they were youthful mistakes. What other explanation for them was clear to other people?

Lines 4-8 (**post ... assuerat**):

- What does Suetonius say that Nero did after dusk?
- What did Nero wear on his head on these occasions?
- What did Nero do if he met people coming home from dinner?
- What did he do with them if they fought back?

Lines 8-10 (**tabernas ... absumeretur**):

- What did Nero do to the shops while he was wandering the streets?
- What did he organize in his own home?
- What happened to the proceeds after the spoils were acquired and divided up for auction?

Questions on Content and Style

Lines 1-4 (**petulantiam ... esse**):

- Why do you think that Suetonius lists all these types of character failures in Nero?
- What is the significance of the contrast between *iuvenili errore* and *naturae illa vitia*?
- Suetonius lists the character defects in a dramatic opening sentence followed by *sensim*. What effect does this have?

Lines 4-8 (**post ... assuerat**):

- What details does Suetonius add to his story to make it dramatic?
- How does he bring it to a surprising conclusion?
- What is the point in Suetonius telling his readers this story in such detail?
- Do you think this is a true story or malicious gossip? How could we decide at such a great distance in time from the events?

Lines 8-10 (**tabernas ... absumeretur**):

- What effect does Suetonius achieve by going on after the tale of violence to talk about breaking into shops and selling the proceeds?

Whole passage:

- In this passage, how does Suetonius convey the nature and extent of the change in character that took place in Nero as his rule progressed?

Section E

Nero's murderous nature shows itself.

Notes and Discussion

Nero's worst crimes in the view of Suetonius, involved his *saevitia* (savageness or cruelty), and although Nero does not seem to have been actively involved in Claudius' death on 13th October AD 54, he evidently knew about it and had no qualms about referring to it. Several ancient sources agree that the death was suspicious (Tacitus, Dio, Pliny, Martial and Juvenal) and in his *Life of the Divine Claudius* (chapter 43) Suetonius comments that the death occurred shortly after it became clear that Claudius was regretting his decision to marry Agrippina and adopt Nero. Levick (*Claudius* 1990, p 76) notes that this may have been Agrippina's later propaganda after she quarrelled with Nero, and that the idea was most likely to have arisen amongst the friends of Claudius' natural son, Britannicus, whose death shortly after Nero's accession was also suspicious. The comment about mushrooms relates to the way the poison was administered to Claudius either at a meal on the Capitoline Hill where he was dining with the priests, or by Agrippina at a family banquet. Accounts vary: - Tacitus (*Annals* 12.66) tells us that the poison did not work at first because Claudius was drunk and that he was initially saved by 'evacuating his bowels', but that Agrippina's horror at this was so great that she persuaded the imperial doctor to coat a feather in poison and put it down Claudius' throat in an effort to make him vomit. Suetonius (*Claudius* 44) however, says that the emperor lost the power of speech and died in great pain early the next morning. Lurid stories are the stuff of biography, but Suetonius claims he is not as prone to them as some, since his form of biography was 'composed neither to instruct nor to titillate but to inform' (Wallace-Hadrill, 1995).

The reference to 'food of the gods' was a joke because it was mushrooms that had led to Claudius' death and therefore to his deification.

Tiberius Claudius Caesar Britannicus was the emperor's son by Messalina, his disgraced third wife. He gained the *agnomen*, Britannicus, after his father's conquest of Britain in AD 43. Although was in line to succeed his father, this changed after Messalina's death and Claudius' marriage to Agrippina, shortly followed by the adoption of Nero, who until his adoption in AD 50 was known as Domitius. With Nero's adoption, Britannicus became more isolated, until, conveniently, the boy died shortly before his fourteenth birthday when he could have taken on the *toga virilis* and his status would have increased. Removal of Britannicus would have become imperative for Nero and Agrippina in case he became the focus of a plot. The practice of removing potential rivals had precedent and there are similarities to the deaths of possible rivals to Tiberius in AD 14 (Agrippa Postumus) and to Caligula in AD 37 (Tiberius Gemellus).

Suetonius introduces Locusta, the expert poisoner, and the gruesome stages of Britannicus' poisoning are explained with Nero playing the leading role. Tacitus (*Annals* 13.15-16) tells a similar story but is more focused on the dinner party and, in his account, after a failed attempt with poison administered by his tutors, Britannicus is poisoned at a family banquet where his sudden seizure is put down to epilepsy.

Questions

1. Why might Suetonius have returned to the beginning of Nero's reign having already progressed so far into this biography?
2. Why would Suetonius emphasise that Nero was not directly involved with the death of Claudius?
3. What is the purpose in explaining how Nero ensured that the poison would have the required effect?
4. What impression do we get of Nero's character from this chapter?

Section F

Nero's difficult relationship with his mother.

Notes and Discussion

Along with the fire of AD 64, the murder of Agrippina was one of the most notorious incidents of Nero's principate and the three main sources – Suetonius, Tacitus and Dio – all tell a similar story, though Tacitus' version is probably the best known.

Agrippina's controlling behaviour towards her son in the early days of his principate were recorded by Tacitus (*Annals* 13.13) and Suetonius (*Nero* 34) and seem to confirm the tradition that she wished to enjoy real power through her son. Note that in Section B we learnt that she was given control over all his affairs both public and private. Nero tired of this behaviour and in AD 55 he deprived her of all honour and power, though it seems she retained influence over his private affairs. Following an accusation, probably false, that she was trying to incite rebellion, which was divulged to Nero by a freedman of his aunt, Domitia (sister of Domitia Lepida, mother of Messalina), Nero expelled his mother from the palace (*Annals* 13. 19-22) and she eventually went to Antium (modern Anzio) as well as staying at Bauli near Baiae, in the region of Naples. There is no evidence in the sources to substantiate Agrippina's alleged threatening behaviour in the years following her expulsion in AD 55, but Nero may have been annoyed that she tried to restrain his enthusiasm for singing and chariot-racing as his participation, especially in chariot-racing seemed to increase in the year after her death (*Annals* 14.13).

Following several alleged attempts at poisoning Agrippina, which were apparently unsuccessful because she had been taking antidotes, Nero finally arranged a method of incredible complexity (Nero seems to have had an addiction to mechanical wonders as exemplified by the installation of a revolving ceilings at the Golden House in Rome). Suetonius follows Tacitus' account, though he tells it all from Nero's point of view rather than switching between Nero and Agrippina as Tacitus does (*Annals* 14. 1-8).

Nero's aunt, Domitia, was also murdered by means of an extra strong laxative (she had been confined to bed with constipation – *Nero* 34). There had been a long-standing rivalry between Agrippina and Domitia, after Domitia's husband had divorced her to marry Agrippina. Tacitus does not include this story which (if Suetonius' reference to Nero being old enough for a beard is true) happened in AD 59.

Questions

1. What evidence is there in the text you have read so far that Agrippina was keen on holding power?
2. Why might she have felt that this was a reasonable expectation?
3. Was Nero's reaction proportionate?
4. Why would Agrippina have been taking antidotes to poison?
5. Why do you think that Nero tried such a complex method of killing her?
6. Why do you think that Agrippina accepted the invitation to dinner at Baiae after she had learned about the plot with the collapsible ceiling in her bedroom?

Section G

Nero's marriages and his mistreatment of Octavia.

Notes

- 1-5 **uxores ... trucidavit:** Suetonius lists Nero's three wives.
quaestorio patre: Poppaea's father was T Ollius who was an eques. She took the name of her maternal grandfather, T Poppaeus Sabinus, who had been consul in AD 9. Her husband, Crispinus, the *eques Romanus* was Praetorian prefect from 47-51 when he was dismissed by Agrippina. Statilia's background was even more noble.
in honore ipso: ie for his own benefit.
- 5-7 **Octaviae ... ornamenta: consuetudinem:** in this context *consuetudinem* means 'sexual intercourse'. The response to the friends who criticised him sounds plausible. It suggested that at this point he was happy for Octavia to keep her status as his wife as long as he had nothing to do with her. Marriage to the daughter of the previous emperor would have been politically important to Nero, especially if there were criticisms from those who were suspicious of Britannicus' death.
- 7-13 **eandem ... fateretur:** presumably these events are after the beginning of the affair with Poppaea when Octavia had become a problem to Nero. Tacitus does not mention the attempts to strangle her, and Nero's assertion that Octavia was *sterilem* (unable to have children) are bizarre given that she was accused of being pregnant with the child of an Egyptian flautist. *improbante* and *parcente* both agree with *populo. etiam relegavit:* to Pandateria. Anicetus was allegedly the mastermind behind the collapsible ship which failed to kill Agrippina. After his false confession, he was exiled to Sardinia where he died a natural death.
- 14-17 **duodecimo ... incesserat:** *duodecimo die* – indecent haste perhaps?
unice: adverb from *unicus* – only, solely.
Suetonius' comment about Nero loving her alone is immediately followed by him reporting that Nero caused her death: **ictu calcis occidit** (killed her with a kick of his heel) **ex aurigatione sero reversum** (having returned late from a chariot race). We know from *Nero* 22 that he was obsessed with that sport.
- 17-18 **ex hac ... infantem:** Claudia Augusta is not the child that Poppaea was carrying when Nero kicked her as she was born in very early AD 63 while Poppaea died in AD 65. Claudia Augusta survived for four months and was deified on her death (*Annals* 15.23).

Discussion

Nero's record with his wives was not good. His first wife was Octavia, the daughter of Claudius and the disgraced Messalina. He was betrothed to her in AD 49 which Tacitus suggests was partly to create a rivalry with Britannicus in case he later moved against those who had secured his mother's death (*Annals* 12.9). Nero married her in AD 53 when he was sixteen and she was thirteen. By AD 55 he was tiring of his 'aristocratic and virtuous' wife according to Tacitus who also claims that Agrippina was furious that he was spending his time with an ex-slave called Acte, and it is suggested that this reaction was yet another reason for Nero deciding to kill his mother. By AD 62 however Nero was involved with Poppaea Sabina, so Octavia had to go. Tacitus (*Annals* 14. 60-64) tells a horrifying story of conspiracy against Octavia to destroy her reputation by accusing her of an affair, though the majority of her maids refused to make false testimony against her. Nero, Tacitus says, was taken aback by the strength of public feeling for his wife and decided to reinstate her, but the public joy was short-lived and Poppaea was soon back in favour after repeating the false accusation that Octavia was pregnant by an Egyptian flautist. Eventually he exiled her to Pandateria, a favourite place of exile for imperial women, where she was soon dead. Octavia was in her very early twenties.

Statilia Messalina, Nero's third wife, managed to outlive him. She was the great granddaughter of T. Statilius Taurus, a general in the time of Augustus, and was apparently very beautiful. She had been married four times before she married Nero. Suetonius says only that in order to marry Statilia, Nero had to kill her husband, Julius Vestinus; Tacitus gives us more information. Vestinus was killed in AD 65 during the cull of nobility during the Pisonian Conspiracy (Section H), although it seems he was not involved. Vestinus' seems to have had a sharp intellect (*acre ingenium*) and Nero used the excuse of the conspiracy to rid himself of the man who stood in the way of his marriage. Nero and Statilia were married in AD 66. It is said that Otho, who briefly succeeded Nero, wished to marry her.

Poppaea Sabina is the wife that is the most famous and not only for her machinations against Octavia and the hatred Agrippina allegedly had for her. Suetonius tells us that when she caught Nero's eye she was married to an *eques*, Rufrius Crispinus, but in his *Life of Otho* 3.1 he follows the story found in Tacitus (*Histories* 1.13) that Nero forced Crispinus to divorce Poppaea. She and Nero were married in AD 62 and her daughter, Claudia Augusta, was born in January the next year, but died aged four months. The child was later deified. Poppaea died in AD 65 and was buried in the Mausoleum of Augustus. Nero deified her shortly before his own death. Tacitus (*Annals* 16.6) and Dio (*Roman History* 62.27) give the same cause of death but without the nagging that Suetonius mentions.

Suggested Questions for Comprehension

Lines 1-4 (**uxores ... trucidavit**):

- How many wives did Nero marry after Octavia?
- Who was the first of these? What rank was her father? Who was she formerly married to?
- Who did Nero marry after Poppaea? Who was her great-great-grandfather? How many times was he consul?
- Who did Nero kill in order to marry Statilia Messalina?

Lines 5-10 (**Octaviae ... relegavit**):

- What did Nero say to his friends when they criticized him for rejecting intimacy with Octavia?
- What did Nero consider doing to Octavia before he divorced her?
- What reason did Nero give for divorcing her?
- What did Nero do to Octavia when the people complained about the divorce?

Lines 10-13 (**denique ... fateretur**):

- On what charge did Nero kill Octavia?
- Which two Latin words describe the charge? What do they mean?
- Who did Nero bribe when everyone denied Octavia's guilt?
- What did he bribe him to falsely confess?

Lines 13-18 (**Poppaeam ... infantem**):

- How long after his divorce from Octavia did Nero marry Poppaea?
- How did Nero feel about Poppaea at this time?
- How did he later kill Poppaea?
- What had Poppaea done to rouse Nero's anger?
- What was the name of the child Nero had with Poppaea? When did she die?

Questions on Content and Style

Lines 1-5 (**uxores ... trucidavit**):

- Why would Suetonius give details of the backgrounds of Poppaea and Statilia?
- Which of his wives do you think brought him the most status and which do you think was his favourite?

Lines 5-13 (**Octaviae ... fateretur**):

- Why did Nero go to so much trouble to put the blame for the divorce on Octavia?
- Why do you think Anicetus agreed to make a false accusation against Octavia?

Lines 13-18 (**Poppaeam ... infantem**):

- Why do you think Nero married Poppaea so quickly after his divorce from Octavia?
- What do you think of Nero's behaviour towards Poppaea as reported by Suetonius?
- Why might Tacitus and Dio have left out the detail about nagging?

Section H

Nero's cruelty to those around him.

Notes and Discussion

Nero's tutor Lucius Annaeus Seneca the Younger (to differentiate him from his father Seneca the Elder who was a writer and teacher of oratory) was brought back from exile in Corsica in AD 49 to tutor Nero. After Nero's accession he, together with Sextus Afranius Burrus, provided competent government until about AD 60. In AD 65 Nero accused Seneca of being part of the Pisonian Conspiracy against Nero's life (See Section G) and drove the old man to suicide rather than allowing him to return to his vast estates and enjoy a comfortable retirement. The detail given by Suetonius that Burrus was promised cough medicine and was sent poison is indicative of Nero's cruelty in his determination to break away from those who had guided him in his youth. Suetonius also mentions that Nero poisoned the food and drink of the freedmen who had arranged his adoption by Claudius (*Annals* 14.65). Tacitus comments that they died in the same year as Octavia, which looks very like Nero clearing out the old guard.

The sighting of a comet has often been a portent of death or some other great event and Nero took full advantage of this. The executions of large numbers of the nobility was a consequence of the discovery of the Pisonian Conspiracy, which allegedly wished to replace Nero with Gaius Calpurnius Piso. The growing distaste of the Roman nobility for Nero's autocratic behaviour would have been the cause of this conspiracy. Tacitus discusses the Pisonian conspiracy in detail (*Annals* 15:48-74) but there is no mention in Tacitus of the Vinician Conspiracy (the second conspiracy that Suetonius briefly refers to here) which may have been in AD 66 or 67.

Nero's cruelty is clearly shown by Suetonius when he writes that the children of the condemned conspirators were banished and killed. If there had been an organised conspiracy against Nero, then it seems that he deserved it!

Questions

1. What do we learn about Nero from this section?
2. Why do you think he started to get rid of his childhood advisers at this point in this reign?
3. Do you think there really was a second conspiracy or was it an excuse?

Section I

The Great Fire in Rome

Notes and Discussion

This section deals with the famous episode of the great fire on 19th July AD 64. There were often fires in Rome and the wooden tenement buildings that were common in places like the Subura (home to the urban underclass of Rome) were particularly prone to burning. This is part of a tradition that was particularly hostile to Nero. Tacitus gives a full account (*Annals* 15.38ff) and tells us that the fire started in the Circus Maximus spreading to other parts of the city and lasting for six days before being stopped at the foot of the Esquiline Hill. The map below shows the Circus, the Palatine and Caelian Hills and the Field of Mars (Campus Martius) which Nero opened for the fugitives from the fire.

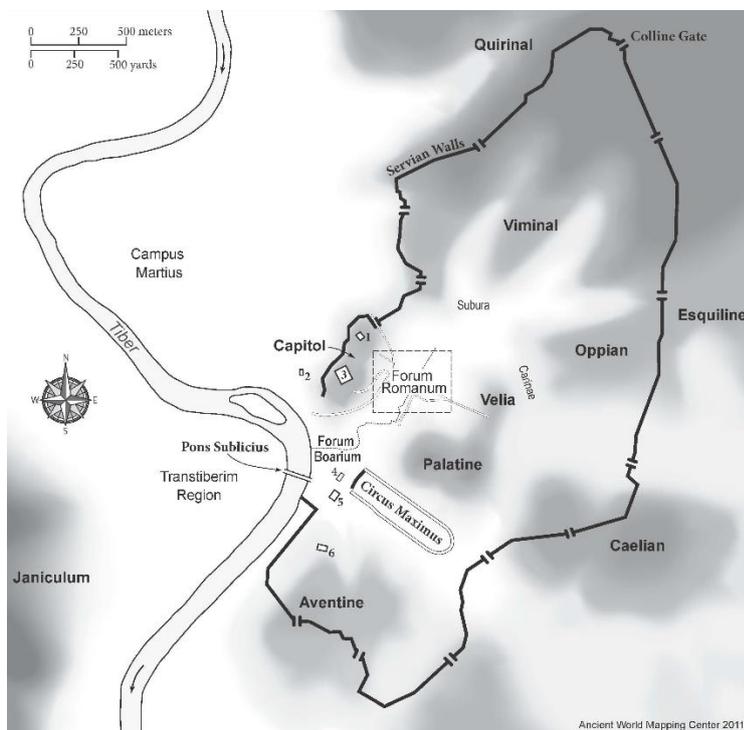


Figure 3: Map showing areas of Rome opened as safe places from the Fire

Tacitus' account does not blame Nero explicitly saying that the fire took place 'whether by chance or by a stratagem of the emperor'. Suetonius' version is clear that Nero was to blame and he gives as a reason Nero's plans for an improved layout for the city (*Nero* 16) since he disliked the old, winding streets. He also deliberately demolished and set light to some stone granaries to make space for his new palace. The fire spread to destroy numerous further buildings (tenements, houses of former leaders, temples and memorable monuments). Tacitus also mentions that people believed Nero was keen to build a new city and name it after himself. Later in his account though, Tacitus talks about Nero profiting by erecting a new palace – the Golden House – but also paying from his own money for houses for the people which were to be built on broad streets with spacious courtyards.

According to Tacitus, Nero had been in Antium when the fire started and only returned to Rome when the fire approached the house he had built to link the Gardens of

Maecenas to the Palatine Hill. This might suggest that he was not directly responsible for the fire, although he could still have arranged for others to start it. The idea of Nero 'fiddling while Rome burned' is present in Suetonius, Tacitus and Dio in different ways. Dio says Nero was on the roof of this palace, Tacitus says he was in a theatre and Suetonius places him in the Gardens of Maecenas. It was well-known that Nero enjoyed music and this would be an enduring and possibly believable, image.

Questions

1. Why might the ancient sources have placed the blame for the fire on Nero?
2. How likely do you think it was that Nero was responsible?
3. How did Nero benefit from the fire? Did the people of Rome benefit?
4. How likely was it that Nero really did 'fiddle while Rome burned'?

Section J

On hearing of further rebellion, Nero is in despair.

The narrative jumps forward four years to AD 68 during which time Nero's excesses increased. In March AD 68, first the Gallic provinces rebelled, followed in April by the legions in the Spanish provinces under the command of Galba, an old soldier who had been a consul in Tiberius' reign (AD 33) and who had a reputation for cruelty. He retired towards the end of Claudius' reign but was appointed governor of Hispania by Nero in AD 59 or 60. He would become Nero's successor as emperor. Nero had remained calm on the surface when Gaul rebelled, though he had made arrangements to dispatch soldiers to deal with the situation, but on hearing of rebellion in Spain, he was more concerned as Galba was from a noble family and had fought with honour on the German frontier during Caligula's reign. Galba would be a much more likely figure for rebels to rally around than the Gallic chieftain, Julius Vindex, whose senatorial status had controversially been granted by the emperor, Claudius. (For the debate on the granting of senatorial status to chieftains of northern and central Gaul in the senate see Tacitus Annals 11.22-25.) Our narrative picks up the story as Nero hears of the Spanish rebellion.

Notes

1-2 **nuntiata ... concerpsit:** news of the revolt of the Spanish legions arrived as Nero was eating.

prandere to eat breakfast, though it can also mean lunch – essentially to eat a meal that is not *cena*.

concerpere to tear or rip. The action shows Nero's anger and frustration.

2-7 **sumpto ... est:** the reintroduction of *Locusta* is apt as she was responsible for providing the poison for Britannicus.

A *pyxis* was a box usually used for cosmetics and small pieces of jewellery. It was conveniently small but unsurprisingly (in view of Nero's love of display) made of gold.

in hortos Servilianos – Holland (2015) refers to them as one of Nero's estates further out of town. Platner (1926) places them in *Regio XII* on the southern side of Rome.

de fugae societate – it looks as though Nero realised he had to flee but was hoping for guards to protect him as he travelled to Ostia, the port of Rome, to board a ship.

tergiversantibus ... detrectantibus: presumably some of the guards were more definite in their refusal to accompany him than others. One guard quotes Virgil's *Aeneid* (12.646) which shows the popularity of the epic. Such a quote would be similar to some of Shakespeare most famous lines being quoted today (eg 'To be or not to be ... ' from Hamlet).

- 7-11 **cogitatione ... adiit:** as is often the way when a difficult decision has to be made, Nero put off making it.
stationem militum recessisse: this would be the cohort on duty at the palace.
misitque circum amicos: this would involve sending messengers out to his friends who understandably, had either left the city or pretended not to be in. Nero's desperation is evident by the fact that he then went to their houses himself.
- 12-14 *verum ... veneni:* even this personal visit was unsuccessful, and Nero returned to find that his staff had now left after looting what they could from his private quarters, including his own bedlinen and the precious poison.
- 14-18 *ac statim ... Tiberim: Spiculum murmillonem* – this may be the Spiculus who was a favourite gladiator, but there is a confused anecdote apparently from Dio, preserved by John of Antioch, that this was a prefect of the Praetorian camp who was killed by the Praetorians when they deserted Nero. This would explain him not appearing when Nero called.
quasi praecipiturus se in Tiberim: another theatrical gesture from Nero?

Discussion

Nero's behaviour when he heard of the uprising amongst the legions in Spain was markedly different from when he heard about the uprising in Gaul. He ripped up the dispatch. His anger was probably due to the realisation that the revolt of legions led by a man such as Galba, indicated that the Roman upper classes were now openly showing their hatred and contempt for him. Nero's understanding is further shown by the fact that he ensured he had the means for suicide and his trip to see Locusta, who last appeared supplying the poison to kill Britannicus (Section E), is evidence of this. Taking this remedy of last resort with him, he then went to the Servilian Gardens which according to Platner (1926) were in Regio XII, to the south of the *Domus Aurea*. There, he tried to gain the support of the imperial bodyguards and ask them to flee with him as an escort; this would have been on the 8th June AD 68. The support of the Praetorian guard was key to the safety of the emperor. It was Praetorian officers who assassinated Caligula and Praetorians who proclaimed Claudius emperor afterwards, and, as Suetonius mentions in Section A, Nero went straight to them after Claudius' death to ensure their loyalty. The officers were hesitant which suggests that they knew Nero would not be able to re-establish his power even if he managed to flee Rome. One of the tribunes even quote Virgil's *Aeneid* to Nero suggesting that death is not such a bad option (*Aeneid* 12. 646).

In the few lines that are omitted from the set text, Suetonius talks of Nero considering heading to Egypt, in hopes of being given the office of prefect of Alexandria which would give him power and preserve his life. However, seeing that the Praetorians were set against him, Nero returned home to bed, presumably to the *Domus Aurea* (Golden

House, the magnificent, rambling palace that he had constructed after the fire). He awoke to find himself deserted not only by his bodyguard but by his friends also. Suetonius gives us a vivid picture of Nero wandering around Rome to his friends' houses to plead for their support. He returned home again to find that his staff had now fled, but only after looting his room and taking his bedlinen and the box of poison. Even at this low point, Nero still retained an air of theatricality. After failing to summon a gladiator to kill him, he ran outside, apparently set on jumping into the river Tiber. He did not..

Suggested Questions for Comprehension

Lines 1-2 (**nuntiata ... concerpsit**):

- What was Nero doing when the report of the revolt of the rest of the armies was brought to him?
- What did Nero do with the report?

Lines 2-7 (**sumpto ... est**):

- Who did Nero get poison from?
- Where did he hide it?
- Where did he go then?
- Who did he urge to escape with him?
- In which two ways did these people react? What did one of them say?

Lines 7-11 (**cogitatione ... adiit**):

- How did Nero feel when he saw these reactions?
- What did he finally do?
- When did he intend to make a decision about what to do?
- When did he wake?
- Who did he send messages to when he found that his bodyguard of soldiers had withdrawn?
- What did he do when he didn't hear back from them?
- Who went with him?

Lines 12-14 (**verum ... veneni**):

- Where did Nero go when he found the doors closed and nobody answering?
- What had happened while he was out?

Lines 14-18 (**ac statim ... Tiberim**):

- Who did Nero try to find?
- What did he want them to do?
- What did he say when he could not find them?
- What did it seem he was going to do when he rushed forward?

Questions on Content and Style

Lines 1-2 (**nuntiata ... concerpsit**):

- Why might Nero have acted in the way he did when he received the letter?

Lines 2-7 (**sumpto ... est**):

- How rational do you think Nero's behaviour was after receiving news that the Spanish legions were rebelling?
- Why might he have gone to get poison?
- Why might some of the Praetorian guards have made excuses to the emperor?
- The words 'At this point, is it such a wretched thing to die?' are quoted from Virgil's *Aeneid* where the Rutulian king, Turnus refuses to run from the prospect of death at the hands of the hero Aeneas. Why do you think the guard might have used this phrase then?

Lines 7-11 (**cogitatione ... adiit**):

- Why do you think Nero went back to his palace to go to sleep after seeing the Praetorians?
- Why does Suetonius give us details about how Nero visited his friends' houses?

Lines 12-14 (**verum ... veneni**):

- Why do you think no one opened their door to Nero?
- Why would the staff loot the palace before leaving?

Lines 14-18 (**ac statim ... Tiberim**):

- Do you have sympathy for Nero?
- Do you think he was really going to jump into the Tiber?

Section K

Nero makes his way to his freedman's villa.

Notes and Discussion

In his narrative, Suetonius concentrates on Nero's actions, making a dramatic story. The route Nero took was the Via Nomentana which was in the opposite direction from Ostia, the Roman port, and which passed perilously close to the Praetorian camp.

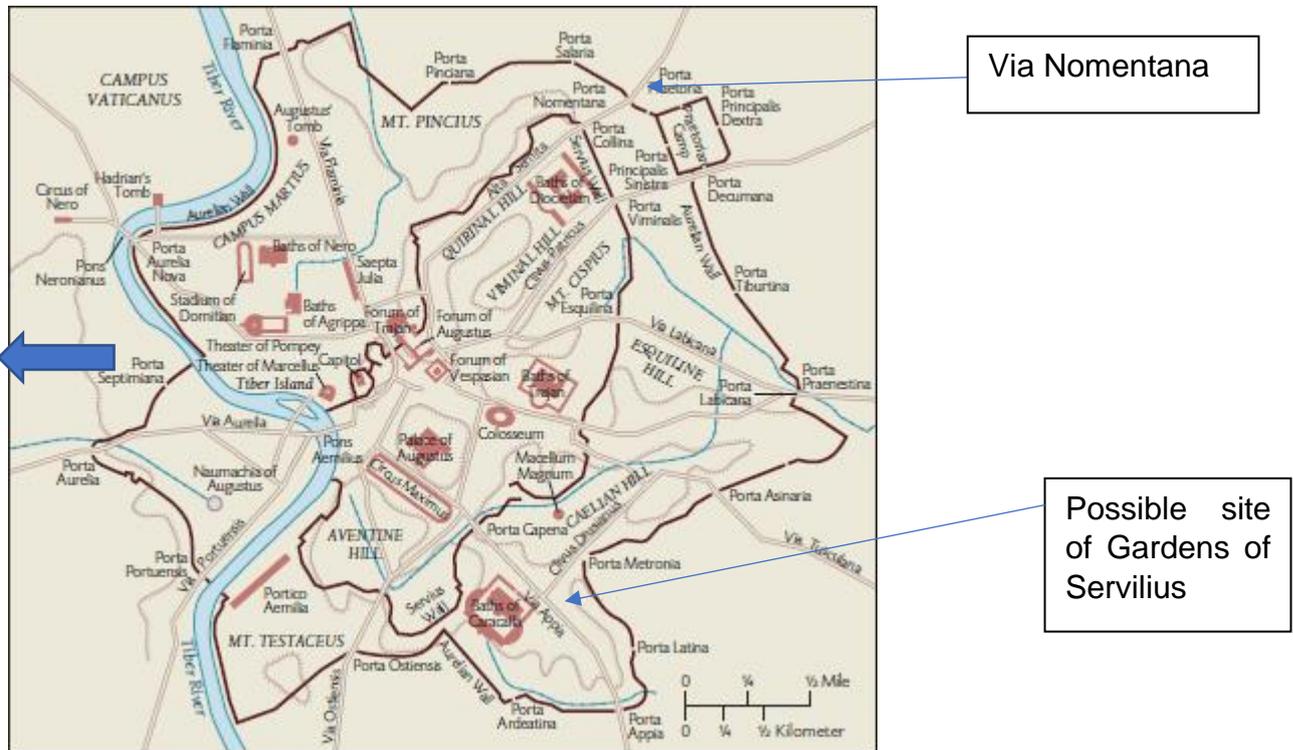


Figure 4: Map of Rome showing sites mentioned in Sections J and K.

That Nero could hear the soldiers shouting was not surprising given his chosen route, as it would have taken him past the Praetorian camp (see map above). The offer of a safe house made by Phaon, the freedman, might seem generous, but he might also have had an ulterior motive. Warmington suggests that the route, in the opposite direction from Ostia and passing so close to the Praetorian camp, was dangerous and his being guided there was a sign of disloyalty amongst the palace freedmen. They may have hoped to save their own lives by making sure that Nero committed suicide and, because Phaon's house was on the opposite side of Rome from the port, they had effectively prevented Nero from escaping to the East.

Nero travelled without his usual retinue of servants, taking only four. His fear is well conveyed by Suetonius even down to the nervousness of Nero's horse which nearly gave away his identity. The Praetorian veteran may have saluted Nero because he recognised the emperor or because he recognised that he was a man of noble birth. The arrival at the back entrance to the house is accurately described as Nero would never have approached a house by any way but the formal, front entrance. The fear of Nero and his companions is shown by the fact that they tunnelled through the wall rather than risk going to the main entrance.

Questions

1. Why do you think Phaon offered his villa to Nero?
2. How effective would Nero's disguise have been?
3. Why would Suetonius include examples of direct speech in his description of Nero's journey out of Rome?
4. What are the most effective details that Suetonius includes?
5. What do you think of Nero at this point in the story?

Section L

Nero's death.

Notes

- 1-5 **tunc ... pereo: dimensus ad corporis sui modulum** – note the precise details of Nero's request for his grave.
frusta marmoris – the use of *frusta* might suggest building material left lying around?
- 5-10 **ferrum ... visentium:** the section about Nero's death is slightly shortened in our prescription. Nero seems to have been unable to go through with killing himself and relied upon his secretary to help him.
in auxilium ... simulanti – one of the guards who had gone over to Galba perhaps?
sero ... fides – was Nero genuinely consoling himself or did he realise the pretence and was he being ironic?
atque ... visentium: a rather gruesome image from Suetonius.
- 10-14 **nihil prius ... fuerat:** literally that there should be no power for anyone over his head *ne potestas ... fieret*. When Galba died, his head was cut off and presented to Otho, the next emperor. This was a sign of disrespect for the dead person and Nero was keen for this not to happen to him.
Icelus, was a favourite of Galba's (see above) and was allegedly the person who brought the news of Nero's death to Galba.

Discussion

Nero's realization that he is doomed is typically theatrical. He had his slaves prepare a grave for him, lined in marble, but rather pathetically, for an emperor, lined in bits of cast-off marble which are lying around. Care for the corpse was of immense importance in the ancient world and was generally done by the women of the household. We are often told that Nero's last words were '*qualis artifex pereo!*' ('I die as such a great artist!'), and these words are believable because of Nero's love of theatre, but both Suetonius and Dio (*Roman History* 63.29) agree that he later quoted Homer's *Iliad* (10. 535) as he heard the approaching cavalry, and after that he spoke to the soldier who arrived and began to staunch his bleeding. Epaphroditus, who helped him commit suicide, was Nero's secretary in charge of petitions (*a libellis*) that were brought for the emperor's attention. He had held the post since at least AD 65 as he is mentioned in Tacitus' account of the suppression of the Pisonian conspiracy of that year. He survived Nero's death and according to Dio (*Roman History* 67.14) was exiled by the emperor Domitian and executed in AD 95.

The set text here omits some parts of Suetonius' version. The missing lines explain that shortly after arriving at Phaon's villa, a letter arrived which Nero read, and which caused him to turn pale. It seems that the Senate had declared him a public enemy, and that meant he would suffer a particularly gruesome death. Holland (2015) also raises the possibility that Phaon had tipped off people as to where Nero was, and the

arrival of a soldier shortly afterwards would seem to suggest that Galba's agent knew where to find him. An insight into what happened to enemies of the state is shown in the set text in Nero's plea not to let his head be cut off, but to be buried in one piece. No more seems to be known about Icelus except that after Galba became emperor, Icelus (now with the added name of Marcianus) was known as one of Galba's three 'imperial nursemaids.' Icelus, along with the other two companions, was later sentenced to death without trial by Galba (Suetonius, *Galba* 14).

In the first chapter of his *Life of Galba*, Suetonius muses on the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. He details portents that occurred just before Nero's death. In particular that the tree which Livia, wife of the emperor Augustus, had planted from a twig miraculously brought to her by a hen, withered and died. This was the tree from which the Caesars cut the laurel to make wreaths for their triumphs and cuttings of this tree apparently wilted when each emperor who had cut them, died (Suetonius *Galba* 1).

Suggested Questions for Comprehension

Lines 1-5 (**tunc ...pereo**):

- What did Nero order to be made in front of him?
- What did it have to be the right size for?
- What three things did he want to be brought?
- Where were the pieces of marble to go if they could be found?
- Which items were for the care of his corpse?
- What did Nero keep saying as he wept while watching each thing being done?

Lines 5- 10 (**ferrum ... visentium**):

- Who helped Nero to drive a sword through his throat?
- What did the centurion who burst in place on Nero's wound?
- Which Latin word shows that wasn't really trying to help Nero? What does it mean?
- What did Nero say at this point?
- What two words tell us how the people watching felt? What do they mean?

Lines 10-14 (**nihil prius ... fuerat**):

- What part of his body did Nero ask his companions to keep everyone from having?
- How did he want his body cremated?
- Whose freedman was Icelus? Why might this be important?
- When had Icelus been thrown into prison?
- How long before these events had he been freed? What does this tell us about his involvement in the revolt?

Questions on Content and Style

Lines 1-5 (**tunc ...pereo**):

- What do Nero's actions in these lines tell us about his state of mind?
- What do you think Nero meant by *qualis artifex pereo*?

Lines 5- 10 (**ferrum ... visentium**):

- Why might Epaphroditus have been one of the companions Nero took with him to the villa?
- What do you think of the actions of the soldier who tried to stop Nero bleeding?
- Why does Suetonius give us such a gruesome picture of Nero as he died?

Lines 10-14 (**nihil prius ... fuerat**):

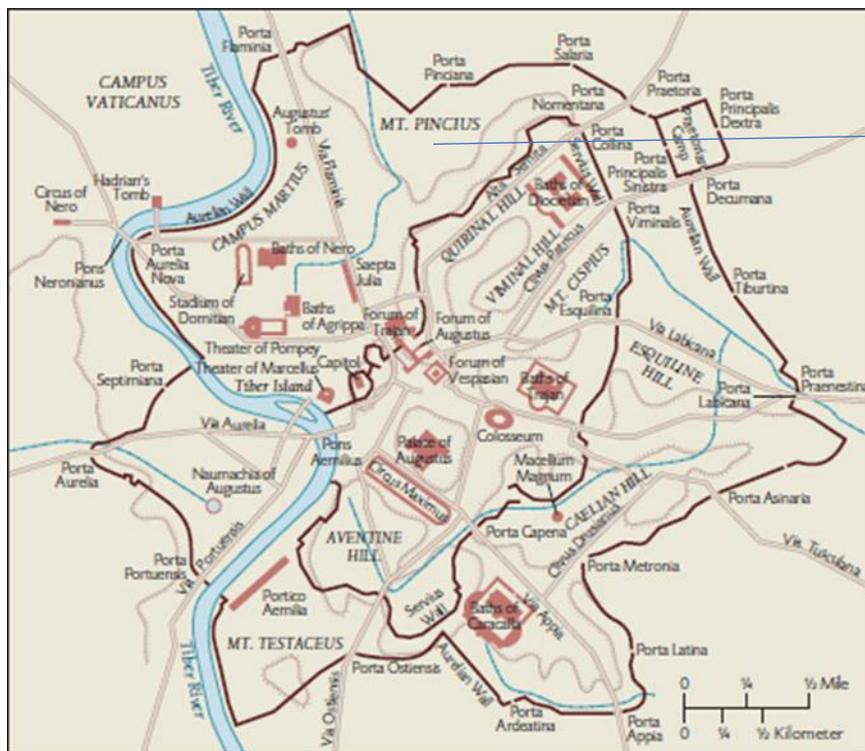
- Why might Nero's enemies have wanted to cut off his head?
- Why do you think Icelus agreed to Nero's request about his cremation?

Section M

Nero is buried but memory of him lingers.

Notes and Discussion

After his cremation, Nero's ashes were not placed in the Mausoleum of Augustus where other members of the Julio-Claudian family were buried, but in the family burial ground of his father's family, the Domitii, which was on the edges of ancient Rome. Because of the reference in Suetonius to it being visible from the Campus Martius, it is possible to pinpoint it to the Pincian Hill named after one of the families that occupied it in the 4th century AD. In Nero's time it was known as the Hill of Gardens (*collis hortorum*). The Borghese Gardens in modern Rome are nearby. Ironically Nero's ashes were buried very near the route he took out of Rome to Phaon's villa along the Via Nomentana.



Possible location of Nero's burial in his family tomb.

Figure 5: Map showing possible location of Nero's tomb

Little is known of Egloge or Alexandria other than that they were Nero's nurses as a child. His mistress, Acte, was mentioned by Suetonius (*Nero* 28) when he says that Nero tried to persuade some friends of consular rank to swear that she came from a royal family so he could marry her. She was a freedwoman. Nero's funeral cost 200,000 sesterces. At current levels, a sestertius (originally a silver coin but in Augustus coinage reform reduced to brass) would be worth approximately £1.30, which means that the funeral would be about £260,000 in today's money. Not very much for an emperor. (NB calculations of this sort are very vague as everything depends on the prices of other things. For instance, a loaf of bread cost roughly half a sestertius, a bucket two sestertii, a tunic fifteen sestertii, a donkey five hundred sestertii.) The white robes in which Nero was buried were those, according to Suetonius, which he had worn on the *Kalends* of January (1st January), the day on which consuls took up office. Nero was a consul from April until his death in AD 68. Ancient writers loved

coincidences and the reference to Nero dying on the anniversary (9th June) of Octavia's murder would have delighted Suetonius.

The final lines of the text tell how the people reacted. Suetonius talks of the ordinary folk of Rome (the *plebes*), running through the city wearing the felt cap given to slaves when they were freed (*plebs pilleata*) as a demonstration of their liberty now that Nero was dead. However, Tacitus (*Histories* 1.4-5) claims that it was those who of the lowest classes, who were addicted to the circus and the theatre, who were resentful at Nero's death. This would seem to be supported by Suetonius (*Otho* 7) who issued edicts under the name of Nero in an effort to gain popular support (also confirmed in Tacitus *Histories* 1.78). It is therefore not so surprising that there were some who brought flowers to his tomb. Otho (Suetonius *Otho* 7) also replaced some of Nero's statues and Vitellius, the emperor, often invoked Nero's name (Suetonius *Vitellius* 11). As a point of interest, if you go to the *Forum Romanum* in Rome, you will see that flowers are still brought by the people of Rome to the temple of Julius Caesar in his memory.

It is perhaps no wonder that some, mainly the lower classes, mourned Nero; they had benefitted from numerous entertainments, it was the senators who had been more likely to experience Nero's cruelty directly. The rest of AD 68 and the first six months of AD 69 were turbulent with three emperors taking power and being deposed before Vespasian was proclaimed emperor thirteen months after Nero's death. He reigned for ten years and brought much greater stability to Rome and the empire, if not the excitement and theatricality of some of the later Julio-Claudian emperors.

Questions

1. Why do you think Nero's nurses and his mistress were the ones to bury his ashes?
2. Do you think he should have been buried in the Mausoleum of Augustus?
3. Why might there have been different reactions to Nero's death amongst the people of Rome?
4. What do you think Nero's legacy was?