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## Rome & Her Greatest Theatric: The Controversies of Emperor Nero

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## Rome & Her Greatest Theatric: The Controversies of Emperor Nero

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By Zoie Dean

One of the most powerful and influential stages in world history belonged to the emperors of Rome, and Nero went down as one of her most heinous and theatric artists. The controversies of Nero's reign left his legacy in a paradox of wickedness and intrigue; a display of human cruelty so convoluted that one simply cannot look away.<sup>1</sup> The depicting of his life by ancient historians left modern historians with the near-impossible task of discerning legend from reality in Nero's most pivotal moments as emperor.<sup>2</sup> When evaluating Nero's life, it is these moments that spark the most controversy: the murder of his mother with whom he had an incestuous relationship, his self-deifying associations to Apollo, the great fire of Rome and its aftermath in 64 AD, and the castrated "empress" Sporus. These defining moments have continued to shock the world and require a thorough analysis of Nero and the accounts that were left to tell his story. Upon further review of the ancient sources from the perspective of modern historians, it

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Champlin, "Nero Reconsidered," *New England Review* 19, no. 2 (1998): 97. JSTOR.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Barrett et al., *The Emperor Nero: A Guide to the Ancient Sources* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), 190. JSTOR.

becomes clear that Nero was much more complex and calculated than his authors had given him credit for.

The standard position throughout most of history has presented Nero as ludicrous, foolish, and clueless; Nero was simply a child-like tyrant. This view fails to consider a reality presented by more modern perceptions of Nero, as the salacious details of his life have overshadowed his humanity. The revisionist position depicts Nero as a much more intentional and theatrically motivated individual, an apprehensive and strategic emperor who ruled according to his indulgences. To better understand the man behind the madness, one must consider both the ancient and modern literature surrounding the controversies of his reign. One will find that Nero's "madness" is much more calculated than history had given him credit for. The most prominent historical sources concerning Nero originated from his greatest enemies, the Roman elite, who considered Nero to be the antithesis of what made Rome a living, magnificent, empire.<sup>3</sup> Three sources have composed the narrative of Nero's life: Tacitus' *Annals* (Books XII-XVI) written c. 115-120; Suetonius' complete biography titled *Life of Nero* written c. 120s; and Dio Cassius' *Roman History* (Books

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<sup>3</sup> David Shotter, *Nero: Lancaster Pamphlets in Ancient History* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1.

LX-LXII), written c. 220-225.<sup>4</sup> None of these historians painted Nero and his deeds in a pleasant light; however, historian Edward Champlin pointed out an overlooked reality: “The truth is that outside of court circles and Christian congregations, Nero was vastly popular, both before and after his death. He was a popular monster.”<sup>5</sup>

Nero was born in Antium on December 15th, 37 AD; nine months after the death of emperor Tiberius. According to Pliny the Elder he was born feet first, a bad omen that explains why Nero in his entire principate was the enemy of the human race.<sup>6</sup> His father, Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, died by the time he was three years old. His mother Agrippina the Younger was banished shortly after by her brother, the emperor Caligula, who ascended to the throne in 39 AD. This left Nero in the care of his aunt, a hairdresser, and a dancer, until his mother’s return in 41 AD after the death of Caligula.<sup>7</sup> Caligula’s successor and Agrippina’s uncle, Emperor Claudius, restored Agrippina to her property and position,

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<sup>4</sup> Shotter, *Nero*, 106.

<sup>5</sup> Champlin, “Nero Reconsidered,” 97.

<sup>6</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Pliny: Natural History*. Loeb Classical Library 330. Trans. H Rackham, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard UP, 1949) VII:8:45.

<sup>7</sup> Barrett et al., *The Emperor Nero*, 65.

which allowed her to climb back to the top of Roman society.<sup>8</sup> Years later, Agrippina took advantage of the divorce and execution of Claudia's third wife, Messalina, in 48 AD.<sup>9</sup> Agrippina seduced her uncle, and by February of 49 AD, she had convinced him to marry her and adopt Nero as his son and heir.<sup>10</sup> Agrippina had managed to put her son in line for the throne over Claudius' biological son, Britannicus, going as far as to kill anyone who appeared to favor Britannicus over Nero.<sup>11</sup> It was also Agrippina that history assumed poisoned Emperor Claudius on October 13, 54 AD.<sup>12</sup>

Nero ascended to the throne in 54 AD and his mother ruled directly by his side as he let her manage "his affairs, private and public; he gave the watchword, 'Best of Mothers', to the tribune of his bodyguard on the first day of his principate, and later on, he

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<sup>8</sup> Dio Cassius, *Dio Cassius: Roman History*. Loeb Classical Library 176. Trans. by Earnest Cary, (Cambridge, Mas.: Harvard UP, 1925) LX:4:1.

<sup>9</sup> Tacitus, *Annals: Books 13-16*. Loeb Classical Library 322. Trans. by John Jackson, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1937) XII:1-3.

<sup>10</sup> Shotter, *Nero*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Dio Cassius, *Dio Cassius: Roman History*, LX:32:5.; Josephus, *Josephus: The Jewish War*. Loeb Classical Library 203. Trans. by H. ST. J. Thackeray, (Cambridge, Mass.; Harvard UP, 1927) II:8.

<sup>12</sup> Tacitus, *Annals: Books 13-16*, XII:69:1.; Shotter, *Nero*, 14.

was often carried through the streets with her in her litter.”<sup>13</sup> Nero lavished his mother with honors, depicted her head on coins next to his own, and held Senate meetings in his home so that Agrippina could listen in.<sup>14</sup> These frivolous public displays of cooperation hid a dark reality—Nero resented the chokehold his mother had on him. She discouraged his love of the arts and preferences in lovers because they both strayed his attention away from her agendas. A bitter rivalry formed between Agrippina and Nero’s two tutors, Seneca and Burrus, over their influence on the still impressionable emperor.<sup>14</sup> These three individuals and Nero’s wife and stepsister, Octavia, had the most influence on Nero in the first five years of his reign.<sup>15</sup> However, these relationships all took a deadly turn when Nero decided to kill his mother.

Suetonius offered a disturbing account of Nero’s frustration toward his mother’s political interference and his paradoxical lust for her; Nero satisfied this lust in their shared litter on multiple

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<sup>13</sup> Suetonius, *The Caesars*. Trans. by Donna W. Hurley, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011) IX:1. <sup>14</sup> Shotter, *Nero*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Nero’s most famous tutor, Seneca, dedicated his work, *De Clementia*, to his pupil Nero; Seneca Annaeus Lucius, “De Clementia,” In *Seneca: Moral Essays Volume I*. Loeb Classical Library 214. Trans. by John W. Basore, (Cambridge, Mass.; Harvard UP, 1928) I:1.

<sup>15</sup> Barrett et al., *The Emperor Nero*, 70.

occasions.<sup>16</sup> Nero even went as far as to have a prostitute who resembled his mother, and yet his hate for her only grew as she threatened to champion Britannicus to take his place sometime around 55 AD.<sup>17</sup> This left Nero to dispose of his brother by poison, but not before sexually assaulting him.<sup>18</sup> Both Agrippina and Octavia began to panic, as it was evident that after he murdered Britannicus, “Nero openly began to do anything he wanted without any fear.”<sup>19</sup> Tacitus claims that in her desperation, Agrippina resorted to offering herself up to her son.<sup>20</sup> Dio claimed that her use of sensual charms was the result of an escalated fear that he wanted to marry the seductive and influential Poppaea Sabina.<sup>21</sup>

Nero’s indulgence in his desires only became less restricted; Suetonius remarked on his tendency to lustfully pursue legally freeborn boys, married women, and a vestal virgin.<sup>22</sup> According to Dio, it was Poppaea Sabina that ultimately convinced Nero to kill his mother, although many scholars, such as Champlin, find that it was a decision that was truly Nero’s.<sup>23</sup> Suetonius

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<sup>16</sup> Suetonius, *The Caesars: Nero*, XXXIV:1.; XXVIII:2.

<sup>17</sup> Tacitus, *Annals: Books 13-16*, XIII:14-17.

<sup>18</sup> Champlin, “Nero Reconsidered,” 97.

<sup>19</sup> Dio Cassius, *Dio Cassius: Roman History*, LXI:7:4.

<sup>20</sup> Tacitus, *Annals: Books 13-16*, XIV:2:1.

<sup>21</sup> Dio Cassius, *Dio Cassius: Roman History*, LXI:11:3.

<sup>22</sup> Suetonius, *The Caesars: Nero*, XXVIII:1.

<sup>23</sup> Dio Cassius, *Dio Cassius: Roman History*, LXI:12.; Champlin, “Nero Reconsidered,” 100.

claimed Nero deprived Agrippina of all her power and influence before he forced her to move out of his home; afterward, Nero harassed her with constant lawsuits. The plot to kill her was initially via poison, but that failed three times as the resourceful Agrippina consumed antidotes before all of her meals. He then attempted to have the ceiling tiles above her bed manipulated to fall while she slept, crushing her to death. This plan also failed. An elaborate plot to have Agrippina's ship sink and drown her failed when she narrowly escaped by swimming away.<sup>24</sup> With all of his attempts failing, Nero resorted to simply ordering his mother to be killed and pronounced it as a guilt-ridden suicide.<sup>25</sup> Nero murdered his own mother, lover, and the very woman that single-handedly put him in one of the most powerful positions in recorded history.

The strange relationship between Nero and his mother as it has been recorded has created some skepticism among several scholars, especially regarding the nature of Agrippina's death. R.D. Scott addressed the potential bias in the retelling of Agrippina's death by Tacitus, in his article titled "The Death of Nero's Mother (Tacitus, *Annals*, XIV, 1-13)", written in 1974. Scott argued that

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<sup>24</sup> Suetonius, *The Caesars: Nero*, XXXIV:1.

<sup>25</sup> Suetonius, *The Caesars: Nero*, XXXIV.



Tacitus, took full advantage of Nero killing his mother to push his antithesis of Rome and its failing society; Tacitus used his masterful rhetoric to describe Agrippina's death in a manner that furthered his agenda.<sup>26</sup> Scott pointed to the way that Tacitus built upon the differences between Agrippina and Nero in the chapter right before her death, portraying Nero as a childish fool to his mother's calculated intellect. In reality, Nero was far from clueless, but Tacitus actively chose to paint him in this light. Scott further pointed out that throughout the work, Agrippina was painted as a victim by Tacitus and failed to address her lack of innocence; his rhetoric instead displaying her as courageous and forthcoming.<sup>27</sup> Scott explained that the murder of Agrippina was not nearly as one-sided as Tacitus portrays it, and Tacitus was more intent on using the story for his benefit than attempting to accurately portray the reality that Nero was incredibly calculated in his actions. Scott admitted that while nothing justifies what Nero did to his mother, Tacitus was willing to manipulate an already damning narrative to fit "with his pessimistic account of the decay of Roman society."<sup>28</sup> He concluded his article by reminding readers of Tacitus' brilliant

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<sup>26</sup> R.D. Scott, "The Death of Nero's Mother," *Latomus* 33, no. 1 (1974): 105. JSTOR.

<sup>27</sup> Scott, "The Death of Nero's Mother," 106.

<sup>28</sup> Scott, 105.

use of rhetoric in presenting his thesis but warned that Nero was much more intentional and dangerous than Tacitus reveals.<sup>29</sup>

Written shortly after Scott's article, scholar Barry Baldwin published an article in 1979 concerning the ancient historian's claims that Nero treated his mother's corpse provocatively after having her killed.<sup>30</sup> Baldwin's article titled "Nero and His Mother's Corpse" began by recounting the most graphic depiction of this event, provided to us by Suetonius: "Trustworthy authorities add still more gruesome details: that he hurried off to view the corpse, handled her limbs, criticizing some and commending others, and that becoming thirsty meanwhile, he took a drink."<sup>32</sup> Baldwin believed that Nero attempted to recreate a scene from Euripides' *The Bacchae*, and that his actions were for the sake of theatrics.<sup>31</sup> In *The Bacchae*, the character Agave had unintentionally killed her son and in her lamenting embraced each of his limbs. Nero's particular situation was the exact opposite of this, the irony of which was not lost on those who witnessed his performance. Baldwin argued that Nero groping his murdered mother's corpse was not an act of lust, but rather a theatrical

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 114.

<sup>30</sup> Barry. Baldwin, "Nero and His Mother's Corpse," *Mnemosyne* 4, no. 32 (1979): 380-381.JSTOR. <sup>32</sup> Suetonius, *The Caesars: Nero*, XXXIV:4.

<sup>31</sup> Baldwin, "Nero and His Mother's Corpse," 380.

display of his sick sense of humor.<sup>32</sup> Both Baldwin and Scott argued that a deeper inquiry into the murder of Agrippina reveals that Nero was much more intentional than the ancient authors led on, and it was his partiality to dramatics that made it easy for the ancient writers to overlook that he and his mother were cut from the same cunning, wicked cloth.

After the murder of Agrippina in 59 AD, Nero's tutor Burrus died a few years later in 62 AD. This caused Nero's other tutor, Seneca, to be given leave to retire. In the same year, Nero divorced and executed Octavia, "thus in three years Nero had lost the four most significant restraints upon him."<sup>33</sup> The first five years of Nero's reign has been referred to by modern-day scholars as *quinquennium Neronis*, a term used to highlight this shift in Nero's reign.<sup>34</sup> It is post-*quinquennium Neronis* that led to the plummet of Nero's perceived humanity, both ethically and existentially. Scholars question Nero's tendency to blur the lines between worship and identification to Apollo and Sol. Tied into all of this is Nero's love and appreciation for the Greek arts: charioting, singing, poetry, and theater—activities his mother

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<sup>32</sup> Baldwin, "Nero and His Mother's Corpse," 380.

<sup>33</sup> Shotter, *Nero*, 29.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

previously had never let him engage in.<sup>35</sup> His indulgence in Greek culture and activity after her death became a catalyst for his theatrical desires, going as far as to not allow people to leave when he performed, nor could he ever lose a singing, poetry, or athletic competition.<sup>38</sup> This obsession for the Greek arts manifested throughout the entirety of his reign, leaving modern scholars wondering to what extent did Nero's Apollo fascination turn into self-deification.

Scholar Rufus Fears made the argument in his 1976 article titled "The Solar Monarchy of Nero and the Imperial Panegyric of Q Curtius Rufus" that Nero had not done anything that had not been previously done by his predecessors. He explained that astral symbolism had been a popular proponent of propaganda since the beginning of the principate and lists off several of Nero's predecessors employed such a tactic. Fears also claimed that the colossal statue of Nero that was found in his Golden House showed no signs of Sol or Apollo's portrayal. Fears further addressed the ancient sources, saying that Tacitus and Suetonius present Nero as merely worshipping Apollo, not identifying with

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<sup>35</sup> Edward Champlin, "Nero, Apollo, and the Poets," *Phoenix* 57, no. 3/4 (2003): 276-283. JSTOR <sup>38</sup> Suetonius, *The Caesars: Nero*, XXIII:1.

him.<sup>36</sup> Fears summed up his thesis with one last piece of evidence: “In short, there is no clear evidence of an attempt by Nero to identify himself with Sol. In this context, it is important to note that Sol is not even honored on the coinage of Nero.”<sup>37</sup>

Edward Champlin offered a strong rebuttal, refuting several of these points in his article titled “Nero, Apollo, and the Poets”, written in 2003. Champlin began by promptly stating that by 67 AD “Nero ostentatiously identified himself with Apollo the citharode”. He cited J. Toynbee’s 1942 article, “Nero *Artifex*: The *Apocolocyntosis* Reconsidered”, which concluded that Nero’s fascination with Apollo quickly escalated after 59 AD with the death of Nero’s mother.<sup>38</sup> Champlin then highlighted several of the ancient sources that provided proof of Nero’s identification with Apollo, specifically drawing on Dio’s account of the crowds cheering “Hail to Nero Apollo” in 67 AD.<sup>39</sup> Champlin explained that there was coinage of Apollo in 62 AD, and there was also coinage produced in 66/68 AD of Apollo and other deities that

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<sup>36</sup> Rufus J. Fears, “The Solar Monarchy of Nero and the Imperial Panegyric of Q. Curtius Rufus,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 25, no. 4 (1976): 495. JSTOR.

<sup>37</sup> Fears, “The Solar Monarchy of Nero,” 496.

<sup>38</sup> Champlin, “Nero, Apollo, and the Poets,” 276.

<sup>39</sup> Dio Casius, *Dio Cassius: Roman History*, LXIII:20:5.

corresponded with Nero's athletic and artistic victories in Greece.<sup>40</sup>

Further, Edward Champlin in an article from 1998 titled "Nero Reconsidered" explained that Nero's Golden House and colossal statue of himself as Sol were both intended to portray him as the Sun King.<sup>41</sup> A 2016 article titled "Nero's 'Solar' Kingship and the Architecture of the Domus Aurea" supported Champlin's claims. The article studied the symbolic architecture of Nero's Golden House and statue, concluding that "the divinization and 'solarization' of the emperor – placed at the equinoxes as a point of balance in the heavens – are shown to be explicitly referred to in the rigorous orientation of the plan and the peculiar geometry of the design dome."<sup>42</sup> The historical evidence and literature that has been produced in the last twenty years seem to disagree with Fears' conclusion, as the majority of modern scholars agree that Nero certainly attempted to identify himself as a deity in some variation of Apollo, Sol, or the Sun King.

Nero's theatrical nature also contributed to his most criminal acts, as was explored by R.M. Frazer in his 1966 article

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<sup>40</sup> Champlin, "Nero, Apollo, and the Poets," 277.

<sup>41</sup> Champlin, "Nero Reconsidered," 105.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Hannah, et al., "Nero's 'Solar' Kingship and the Architecture of the Domus Aurea," *Numen* 63, no. 5/6 (2016): 511, JSTOR.

“Nero the Artist- Criminal.” Frazer explained that the shocking and repulsive essence of Nero’s actions was much more intentional than he had originally been credited for by ancient sources.<sup>43</sup>

Frazer gave evidence of Nero’s love for theatrics and scheming in the emperor’s night-time activities, which included: disguising himself in costumes and wigs to stalk the streets of Rome, acting as distastefully as he pleased. Frazer further discussed the events that followed his mother’s escape from her defective boat; upon his mother’s messenger’s arrival, Nero threw a sword at the messenger’s feet and concocted an elaborate and fictitious anecdote about her messenger attempting to take Nero’s life.<sup>44</sup>

Frazer’s most compelling argument is the perceived parallels found between Nero’s strange orders and famous plays inspired by Greek mythology. A key example of this is Nero’s specific instructions in the killing of his stepson, Rufrius Crispinus, whom he ordered to be drowned while he was fishing.<sup>45</sup> This attack recreated a scene from a Greek myth that Nero enjoyed performing on stage, presenting himself as Nauplius, who lost his son to drowning while

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<sup>43</sup> R.M. Frazer, “Nero the Artist-Criminal,” *The Classical Journal* 62, no. 1 (1966): 18. JSTOR.

<sup>44</sup> Tacitus, *Annals: Books 13-16*, XIV:7.

<sup>45</sup> Suetonius, *The Caesars: Nero*, XXXV:5.

fishing.<sup>46</sup> Nero had also been previously known to play “Orestes the Mother Killer”, accentuating his sick sense of humor with the comparison to his own matricide.<sup>47</sup> Edward Champlin’s article “Nero Reconsidered” supported this idea of Nero incorporating art into his crimes, stating that he “deliberately invited comparison with the most familiar of Greek heroes, and he acted out the parallels in his life and on the stage.”<sup>48</sup>

Nero’s greatest and most controversial performance came during the great fire of Rome in 64 AD—while the city burned, the emperor fiddled and sang.<sup>49</sup> On July 19<sup>th</sup> of that year, Nero was dressed in a Greek-styled tunic to perform at a singing competition in Antium, the location of his newly built theater. Nero’s song of choice was reportedly about the Trojan War and the destruction of Troy by the Greeks.<sup>53</sup> That very same night, a fire broke out in a shop below Circus Maximus and roared through the narrow streets of Rome. The fire mercilessly destroyed a vulnerable and flammable city. Buildings were gutted from the inside out and

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<sup>46</sup> Frazer, “Nero the Artist-Criminal,” 19.

<sup>47</sup> Frazer, “Nero the Artist-Criminal,” 19.

<sup>48</sup> Champlin, “Nero Reconsidered,” 102.

<sup>49</sup> Mary Gyles, “Nero fiddled while Rome Burned,” *The Classica Journal* 42, no.4 (1947): 211. JSTOR. <sup>53</sup> Stephen Dando-Collins, *The Great Fire of Rome: The Fall of the Emperor Nero and His City* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2010), 88.



collapsed on those who were inside, strong winds acted as a catalyst for the carnage that was left in the fire's wake.<sup>50</sup> Any attempt to stop the fire proved to be futile, and within three days the city was engulfed in a hellish firestorm.<sup>51</sup> Tacitus recounts, "the wailing of panic-stricken women; there were people very old and very young; there those trying to save themselves and those trying to save others".<sup>52</sup> Suetonius says that the fire lasted for six days and seven nights, destroying the homes of decorated generals, temples with historical significance, and memorabilia from antiquity, the Punic wars, and the Gallic wars.<sup>53</sup> Dio graphically describes looting, panic, suffocation, and violent attempts at escape.<sup>54</sup> Within a matter of days Rome was brought to her knees.

Once Nero had returned from Antium he opened up the monuments of Agrippa, the Campus Martius, his personal gardens, and had temporary homes erected for those who were made homeless by the fire.<sup>55</sup> Nero ordered vital supplies be brought upriver from Ostia and the towns surrounding the capital.<sup>56</sup> Four

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<sup>50</sup> Dando-Collins, *The Great Fire of Rome*, 89.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 92.

<sup>52</sup> Tacitus, *Annals: Books 13-16*, XV:38:3.

<sup>53</sup> Suetonius, *The Caesars: Nero*, XXXVIII:1-2.

<sup>54</sup> Dio Cassius, *Dio Cassius: Roman History*, LXII:16:2.

<sup>55</sup> Tacitus, *Annals: Books 13-16*, XV:39:1.

<sup>56</sup> Dando-Collins, *The Great Fire of Rome*, 95.

remained unscathed out of the fourteen districts in which Rome had been divided.<sup>57</sup> Despite Nero's attempts at restoration, rumors circulated that while Rome was on fire Nero had appeared on his private stage and sung about the destruction of Troy.<sup>58</sup> Dio claimed that this affair was not so private, as Nero climbed to the highest point of the palace to give this performance.<sup>59</sup>

A dangerous question emerged: what started the fire? Was it purely an accident, or had it been orchestrated? Rumors that Nero started the fire became prevalent when he began constructing his newest project. All of the main ancient sources reported that Nero took advantage of the fire's destruction to construct a magnificent, opulent palace, which is known today as Nero's infamous Golden House.<sup>60</sup> Nero had made it clear before the fire that he had wanted to construct such an ambitious building and had even constructed other magnificent structures before the fire; however, nothing came close to his new palace. Its opening chamber contained a 120-foot statue of Nero, the walls were overlaid with gold and embedded with precious stones and pearls. The ceilings were made of ivory, engineered to release flowers and

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<sup>57</sup> Tacitus, *Annals: Books 13-16*, XV:40:2.

<sup>58</sup> Suetonius, *The Caesars: Nero*, XXXVIII:2.

<sup>59</sup> Dio Cassius, *Dio Cassius: Roman History*, LXII:18:1.

<sup>60</sup> Suetonius, *The Caesars: Nero*, XXXVIII:1-3.

perfume if requested. The banquet hall was engineered to be constantly revolving, to imitate the heavens. The grounds were surrounded by woods, vineyards, and wild exotic animals.<sup>61</sup> Suetonius claims that upon the Golden House's completion, Nero gave his approval by stating that he had finally begun to have shelter fit for a human being.<sup>62</sup> The abrasive contrast between the fire's massacre and the Golden House's lavishness created an outcry from Rome's elite, and they demanded an answer as to whom had started the fire. Nero was willing to give them an answer.

The ancient sources all say that Nero was to blame for the fire, save Tacitus.<sup>63</sup> The reality was rather he had started it or not, Nero was being blamed and he needed a scapegoat. When the accusations became too dangerous, Nero did not hesitate to find culprits on whom he inflicted the severest of punishments.<sup>64</sup> Nero placed the blame on the Christians, who were already hated for their devotion to what many believed to be an abominable superstition.<sup>65</sup> Tacitus provided the most details of the persecution,

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<sup>61</sup> Suetonius, *The Caesars: Nero*, XXXI.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Barrett et al., *The Emperor Nero*, 152.

<sup>64</sup> Tacitus, *Annals: Books 13-16*, XV:44:1.

<sup>65</sup> Suetonius, *The Caesars: Nero*, XVI:2.

he described Christians being torn apart by dogs, crucified, and tied to stakes to be sat on fire to provide light in the evenings for Nero's gardens.<sup>66</sup> Christian historians would also discuss Nero's hand in the persecution of their early followers. This included the martyrdom of the apostles Peter and Paul, though the persecution is spoken about broadly, without reference to the fire.<sup>67</sup> Nero's persecution of the Christians was so severe that even Tacitus, who despised the sect, admitted: "guilty though these people were and deserving exemplary punishment, pity for them began to well up because it was felt that they were being exterminated not for the public good but to gratify one man's cruelty."<sup>68</sup>

Controversy has continued to develop regarding two key components that surrounded the great fire of Rome: Nero's supposed performance during the fire and the origin of the fire. Scholars have developed several theories about the tragedy of the fire in an attempt to answer these questions, or at least provide an alternative interpretation of these events for consideration. Mary Gyles in her 1947 article titled, "Nero Fiddled While Rome Burned", analyzed the development of the story and language that

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<sup>66</sup> Tacitus, *Annals: Books 13-16*, XV:44:4.

<sup>67</sup> Barrett et al., *The Emperor Nero*, 169.

<sup>68</sup> Tacitus, *Annals: Books 13-16*, XV:44:5.

has evolved over Nero's supposed performance during the fire. Gyles explained that the term "fiddled" is misleading, considering such an instrument that required fiddling did not yet exist during Nero's time.<sup>69</sup> This verb was likely used much later in modern culture's interpretation of the event, and it is not necessarily incorrect in the fact that it alludes to Nero's ability to play an instrument. Gyles discussed that Nero was a musician and was regarded as an avid player of the *cithara*; which is more likely where the rumor stemmed from. She claimed that the historiography showed the western traditional view of Nero's "fiddling" most likely occurred in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when the story had begun to be popularized.<sup>70</sup> Gyles remarks that this simple translation has possibly taken what had been known to be a legend and made it a fact; therefore, she concludes: rather Nero performed while Rome burned or not, no amount of refutation could ever remove modern certainty that he did.<sup>71</sup>

Stephen Dando-Collins offered a revisionist interpretation of Nero's performance, suggesting in his book from 2010 titled, *The Great Fire of Rome: The Fall of the Emperor Nero and His*

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<sup>69</sup> Gyles, "Nero fiddled while Rome Burned," 211.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 213.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 216.

*City*, that Nero merely sang and played sad songs in true anguish at the unfortunate destruction of his city. Dando-Collins said it is possible that in doing so Nero allowed his enemies to manipulate his displays of sorrow into a madman humored by the intentional undoing of his empire.<sup>72</sup> Edward Champlin also discussed the subject in “Nero Reconsidered”, and seemed to agree with Gyles that Nero’s “fiddling” while Rome burned emerged much later; however, he had little reason to doubt the claim that Nero performed the fall of Troy, as it matched his theatrical tendency to attribute Greek myth to himself and current events.<sup>73</sup> The theories developed about whether Nero sang or performed while Rome burned has had no clear patterns among scholars, as beliefs and different interpretations have been sporadic and ever-changing.

One early controversy that scholars do agree on is that Nero did not start the fire. David Shotter in his 2012 monograph *Nero*, relayed this conclusion best: “In reality, we need no explanation beyond Rome’s susceptibility to fire and the fact that a strong wind was blowing at the time of the outbreak, which went on for a week before a policy of deliberate demolition in its path starved it.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Dando-Collins, *The Great Fire of Rome*, 102.

<sup>73</sup> Champlin, “Nero Reconsidered,” 104.

<sup>74</sup> Shotter, *Nero*, 60.

Shotter further points out Nero's undeniable and vigorous attempts to relieve suffering during and after the fire, and that the real crime was not committed until he aptly chose to blame the Christians.<sup>75</sup> Scholar Michael Gray-Fow in his 1998 work titled, "Why the Christians? Nero and the Great Fire" backed this point.<sup>76</sup> Gray-Fow also explained a harsh reality: Christians were hated because of their abhorrent faith, the majority of them were people of zero importance, and very few held Roman citizenship and the legal protections that came with it.<sup>77</sup> At the time, they were the perfect group to place the target that had been on his back. The great fire of Rome displayed Nero's ability to recognize a threat and ruthlessly dispose of it; ironically, his decision to cast the blame on a seemingly irrelevant population ultimately "proved to be a more enduring memory than anything else in his reign."<sup>78</sup> A key contributor to the conviction and condemnation of Nero's role in the Christian persecution comes from the work of an historian of Christianity, Eusebius of Caesarea (260-340 AD). Eusebius was a Greek scholar who was known for using literary analysis and

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Michael J.G. Gray-Fow, "Why the Christians? Nero and the Great Fire," *Latomus* 57, no. 3 (1998). JSTOR.

<sup>77</sup> Gray-Fow, 616.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

research to compare the four gospels, while also being one of the church's earliest historians.<sup>79</sup> Eusebius' influence was far reaching even in his lifetime having participated at the Nicaean council in 325 AD; his works transformed not only the legacy of Christ, but further refocused the narrative of Nero's legacy to display the monster the world knows him to be today. Eusebius' work, *Ecclesiastical History*, painted Nero as favorably as the Roman scholars, though he did not dive deeply into the salacious details of Nero's personal life. Eusebius firmly asserted that if one wishes to know about such details, they can read them elsewhere.<sup>80</sup> What Eusebius does do is condemn Nero as "the first of the emperors to be pointed out as a foe of divine religion."<sup>81</sup> Most importantly, Eusebius attributed the martyrdom of Peter and Paul as Nero's greatest and most despicable act against God and his people.<sup>82</sup> These powerful statements changed the trajectory of the historical view towards Nero's life and reign, as they made him an ultimate enemy of both man and God. Eusebius' retelling of Nero's fight

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<sup>79</sup> Matthew R. Crawford, "Ammonius of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea and the Origins of Gospels Scholarship," *New Testament Studies* 16, no. 1 (1998): 1-2. JSTOR.

<sup>80</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History, Volume I: Books I-V*. Loeb Classical Library 153. Trans. Kirsopp Lake, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard UP, 1926) II: 25.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*



against God laid the foundations of the modern perception of Nero; the seemingly small and weak population that Nero had once thought to be insignificant controlled his story centuries longer than he ever controlled theirs.

The most controversial and salacious details of Nero's reign have yet to be forgotten by history, as the emperor proved to be ruled by the obscenest of indulgences. Twelve days after his divorce from Octavia, Agrippina's fear became true as Nero married the woman that Suetonius would claim to be his one true love, Poppaea Sabina.<sup>83</sup> While the ancient sources presented Poppaea as the epitome of sexual impropriety and excess, in reality, Poppaea was an incredibly cunning woman who used her sexuality to further her position in Roman society.<sup>84</sup> Poppaea's potential for influence would never be fully realized as in 65 AD, Nero allegedly jumped her and proceeded to fatally kick her in the stomach. Poppaea had been pregnant with their daughter Claudia Augusta, and both mother and unborn child were killed in the attack.<sup>85</sup> Nero became engaged in consistent, spontaneous, slaughter as he murdered potential enemies both in the courts and

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<sup>83</sup> Suetonius, *The Caesars: Nero*, XXXV:3.

<sup>84</sup> Anthony A. Barrett, "Nero's Women," in *Age of Nero: The Cambridge Companion*, ed. Shadi Bartsch, et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 73.

<sup>85</sup> Suetonius, *The Caesars: Nero*, XXXV:3.

in his own family. He would have his half-sister, Antonia, murdered for refusing to marry him; Nero claimed he killed Antonia because she had been plotting to kill him. He would rape and murder a young man by the name of Aulus Plautius, whom he charged with being Agrippina's lover and prospective protege.<sup>86</sup> No one proved to be safe from the trail of carnage that followed him, save his future "empress."

Suetonius introduced Sporus by stating simply: "He tried to turn the slave boy Sporus into a woman by cutting off his testicles, and he had conducted to him before many witnesses as his wife in a proper ceremony with dowry and a red veil."<sup>87</sup> Nero met and married Sporus while on his trip to Greece sometime between 66 and 67 AD.<sup>88</sup> Dio claimed that Nero's reasoning for marrying Sporus was his likeness to Poppaea Sabina, whom he began to miss dearly after he killed her.<sup>89</sup> Nero forced him to wear the jewelry and clothing of an imperial woman, and engaged in open, uncomfortable, public displays of affection with Sporus.<sup>90</sup> The nature of this relationship is traditionally thought to be fueled by

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<sup>86</sup> Suetonius, *The Caesars: Nero*, XXXV:4.

<sup>87</sup> Suetonius, *The Caesars: Nero*, XXVIII:1

<sup>88</sup> David Woods, "Nero and Sporus," *Latomus* 68, no. 1 (2009): 73, JSTOR.

<sup>89</sup> Dio Cassius, *Dio Cassius: Roman History*, LXII:28:2.

<sup>90</sup> Suetonius, *The Caesars: Nero*, XXVIII:2.

lust and sexual violence, in accordance with the pattern Nero displayed with his other sexual partners; however, a recent theory has offered a different interpretation.

David Woods provided this new interpretation in his 2009 article *Nero and Sporus*, where he suggested that Nero and Sporus' relationship was not about lust, but rather Nero humiliating an opponent to the throne.<sup>91</sup> Woods suggested that Sporus' appearance being similar to Poppaea would be interpreted by Nero as Sporus being a descendent of Poppaea; therefore, Sporus may have had imperialistic ties. Woods asserted that this explained Nero's decision to have Sporus castrated and turned into a woman—to humiliate and prevent him from ascending to Emperor.<sup>92</sup> Woods attempted to back his claim by providing three key pieces of evidence. The first is that Nero had previously used sexual violence as a way to assert his dominance over those he felt threatened by. Woods found that the two best examples of this are when Nero sexually assaulted both Britannicus and Aulus Plautus before he murdered them.<sup>93</sup> Woods explained that he let Sporus live longer to prolong humiliation and because Sporus ultimately was not as big of a threat as the other two had been to his throne.

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<sup>91</sup> Woods, "Nero and Sporus," 68.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* 76.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

He argued that Nero likely had plans to kill Sporus eventually.

Woods' second argument was that Nero had Sporus castrated; Woods claimed that this proved Nero was concerned about Sporus' lineage and wanted to prevent Sporus from having heirs.<sup>94</sup> Woods' third piece of evidence was that Nero's successors desired to keep Sporus for themselves, despite not being perceived to desire him sexually.<sup>95</sup> Woods said this proved Sporus' lineage, as Nero's successors merely wanted to keep an eye on him. Woods concluded that the nature of this relationship between Nero and Sporus was undeniably riddled with sexual violence and humiliation, but at its core, this relationship was much less about lust than historians originally thought: "In conclusion, the marriage of Nero and Sporus had nothing to do with love...It had been intended simply to humiliate a potential rival for the throne through the use of sexual violence against him."<sup>96</sup>

In 2014 Michael Charles reviewed Woods' work in an article titled "Nero and Sporus Again", where he described Woods' theory as "entirely novel".<sup>97</sup> Charles stated that Woods' theory

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<sup>94</sup> Woods, "Nero and Sporus," 77-78.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* 79.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>97</sup> Michael B. Charles, "Nero and Sporus Again," *Latomus* 73, no. 3 (2014): 667-668. JSTOR.

rests too much on extreme speculation and slowly unraveled each of Woods' key three arguments. Charles began by pointing out that Sporus had been a slave, and no matter how much he resembled Poppaea, Nero would not have been threatened in any way by his lineage.<sup>98</sup> Woods' theory was heavily flawed in its contention that Nero would not have just killed Sporus if he was a threat to his throne; Charles explained that what we know of Nero's behavior gave the opposite of that impression. He further explained that if there was genuine concern about Sporus' lineage, at the very least, Nero's successors would have had him killed. For Woods' theory to work regarding Nero's successors, Sporus' potential lineage would have been common knowledge, and yet, there was no mention of it by the ancient writers.<sup>99</sup> Woods failed to consider what the ancient authors did report; specifically, Dio's claim that Nero had Sporus castrated in an attempt to turn him into a woman because he simply missed Poppaea.<sup>100</sup> Charles concluded that due to the uncertainties at the very core of Woods' theory, it can be given no credibility.<sup>101</sup>

The last two years of Nero's life that followed his marriage

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<sup>98</sup> Charles, "Nero and Sporus Again," 671.

<sup>99</sup> Charles, "Nero and Sporus Again," 679.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 676-677.

<sup>101</sup> Charles, "Nero and Sporus Again," 685. <sup>106</sup> Barrett et al., *The Emperor Nero*, 265.

to Sporus have been difficult to untangle. Scholars do know that in late 66 AD Nero was still on his trip to Greece and would not return until early 68 AD, where he was received enthusiastically by the Roman public.<sup>106</sup> Scholars have never fully known what business Nero had in Greece besides maybe his love for the Hellenistic arts. K.R. Bradley suggested in his 1979 work “Nero’s Retinue in Greece, A.D. 66/67” that no matter what pursuits lied in Greece, it certainly caused further deterioration in an already unstable relationship between Nero and the Senate.<sup>102</sup> A revolt led by Julius Vindex, the son of a prominent Senate member, began in March of 68 AD.<sup>103</sup> Vindex created and led a Gallic rebellion, though this didn’t seem to faze Nero until Vindex enlisted the help of the powerful governor of Hispania Tarraconensis: Servius Sulpicius Galba.<sup>104</sup> Nero assumed consulship likely near the end of April in 68 AD; at the same time Vindex had conflicts with Verginius Rufus which ultimately, though likely not intentionally, resulted in the death of Vindex’s men and his own suicide.<sup>105</sup>

Galba, however, was not done aiding the attempts to end

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<sup>102</sup> K.R. Bradley, “Nero’s Retinue in Greece, A.D. 66/67,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 4, (1979): 152. JSTOR.

<sup>103</sup> Barrett et al., *The Emperor Nero*, 265-266.

<sup>104</sup> C. H. V. Sutherland, et alt. “Galba,” in *Roman Imperial Coinage: Volume I*, ed. R. A. G. Carson, et al. (London: Spink and Son LTD., 2018) 216.

<sup>105</sup> Barrett et al., *The Emperor Nero*, 266.

Nero's reign as he and his men continued to back the Senate.<sup>106</sup> Ultimately it would be the praetorian guard that changed the tide; in exchange for some form of bribe, within a day's time, Nero's guard deserted him.<sup>107</sup> Nero fled immediately and the Senate came forward and stated that Nero was an enemy to the Roman public, and that Galba was to be named Caesar. Word of the declaration reached Phaon where Nero was hiding and being hunted down. Shortly after being informed of the Senate's actions, Nero committed suicide on June 8, 68 AD.<sup>108</sup> Nero left the world in a manner as theatrical as he, his supposed final words potentially characteristic to Rome's greatest performer: "What an artist dies in me!"<sup>109</sup>

Despite the horrors that the ancient sources depicted, ~~the reality was that~~ Nero's death came as a disappointment to the people of Rome. The popularity of Nero among the Roman citizens has often been overlooked or forgotten by modern retellings of history, and it only contributes further to the intricacy of interpreting the true nature of Nero. Albert Pappano discussed this phenomenon in his 1937 work "The False Neros", which

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<sup>106</sup> Sutherland, "Galba," 216.

<sup>107</sup> Barrett et al., *The Emperor Nero*, 266.

<sup>108</sup> Barrett et al., *The Emperor Nero*, 267.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid 278

confidently asserted that “Nero’s life had eventuated, oddly enough, in extreme popularity among some of the lower classes at Rome, as well as throughout the East...”<sup>110</sup> After his death at the beginning of June in 68 AD there was a commonly held and hopeful belief that Nero would return to power, evidence of which came in the form of impersonators termed “false Neros.”<sup>111</sup> Three specific cases of people claiming to be the resurrected emperor Nero have been recorded, and excitable rumors of Nero’s return surfaced around July 68 AD and continued in the years that followed.<sup>112</sup> Though hope of Nero’s return ran rampant amongst the masses, and despite all of his attempts to affiliate himself as Apollo, Nero did not prove to have Apollo’s immortality.

The life and reign of Nero were infested with inconceivable stories filled with horror and savagery, which has led many scholars and individuals alike to question the emperor’s sanity. The emperor’s true nature has become even more difficult to decipher as reality has been obscured by legend and agenda. Many scholars call into question the ancient sources and their intentions, but the fact remains that regardless of the manner in which he acted, Nero

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<sup>110</sup> Albert E. Pappano, “The False Neros,” *The Classical Journal* 32, no. 7 (1937): 387. JSTOR.

<sup>111</sup> Pappano, “The False Neros,” 387.

<sup>112</sup> Pappano, “The False Neros,” 387.



committed truly wicked atrocities. Despite the discrepancies surrounding the actions of Nero, these conclusions are undisputed by scholars both ancient and modern: Nero was indulgent, he was obsessed with power and the theatrics it allowed him, and he was unquestionably cruel. Nero's sanity has been called into question, but the more that time passes the more that scholars have concluded he was much more calculated than sources have given him credit for. After a thorough analysis of the major controversies of Nero's reign, a better conclusion can be drawn about the nature of the emperor.

Edward Champlin offered the most simple and promising answer in "Nero Reconsidered". He discussed the strange adoration the Roman people felt for Nero after his death. Examples of this included the appearance of the "false Neros" and that nearly 90% of the Roman population was not happy about his death.<sup>113</sup> Champlin explained that Nero gave the people what they wanted, a fascinating and theatrical mastermind that entertained the masses and gave them great construction projects. To some extent, he still entertains the masses today. Champlin argues that Nero's humanity has been lost to history. Nero's cunning accompanied by his

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<sup>113</sup> Champlin, "Nero Reconsidered," 107.

fascination for the dramatics has presented him as an erratic and senseless madman, and the ancient sources did not hesitate to present him in this manner either.<sup>114</sup> Champlin concluded that Nero was the epitome of what it looked like to surrender to indulgence, the seduction of extravagance, performance, and absolute power. Finally, Nero kept alive this prowess by any means necessary.<sup>115</sup>

Nero was one of Rome's greatest monsters, one that the modern world still marvels at. He was an enemy of the Roman elite, courts, and later the Christians, and yet he was adored by the lowliest of peoples. Nero was calculated. He submerged himself in the benefits of power. He eliminated, or humiliated any conceivable threat to that power, and presented himself as though he were a god. Nero was a man who shamelessly pursued absolute power, theatrically displaying the corruption that comes with exacting and maintaining that kind of influence. No matter the status of his sanity, popularity, or perception of the ancient and modern historians, a simple truth remains: Nero was amongst the vilest of men, monsters, and "gods."

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid. 108.

<sup>115</sup> Champlin, "Nero Reconsidered," 108.

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