Nero the man behind the myth
About this guide

This guide gives you an overview of the exhibition’s layout and main texts. An online large print guide containing the entire text is also available.

Your visit will take about one hour.
Nero
the man behind the myth

Nero is one of the most infamous Roman emperors.

Does he deserve his reputation for cruelty and excess?
Introduction

A young ruler

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

Nero’s memory was contested. In the end, the judgements of elite authors like Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio prevailed. In light of new research, now is the time to re-evaluate their stories.
Nero was the final ruler of Rome’s first dynasty, the Julio-Claudians, which comprised members of two interrelated families, the Iulii and the Claudii.

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

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

Nero was Augustus’ great-great grandson. As the principate came under strain during the reigns of Augustus’ three successors, Nero offered a politically useful link back to its founder. In order to strengthen his position, the emperor Claudius married Nero’s widowed mother, Agrippina, and adopted Nero as his heir.
From republic to empire

**Imperial women**

Augustus had no son. The line of succession therefore ran through the women of the Julio-Claudian family. It included the children of Augustus’ daughter and sister, and his wife Livia’s sons. As a result, these women achieved unprecedented public prominence. Many members of the senatorial elite resented their influence, portraying them negatively in their writings. Agrippina in particular played a significant role as the great-granddaughter, great-niece, sister, wife and mother of successive emperors.
Power and succession

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

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

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

Nero stressed his connection with Augustus, both as his ancestor and role model. In his accession speech he publicly promised to respect the authority of the senate and to rule according to the principles of generosity and clemency. In return, the senators expressed their confidence in Nero by agreeing to deify Claudius, although his rule had been unpopular among them. Claudius’ funeral was enacted with great ceremony, but it was more about acknowledging Nero than commemorating Claudius.
Nero inherited an empire rife with problems. Uprisings in newly conquered territories and existing tensions with rival powers caused him major concern. In the east, a long-running conflict with the Parthians over the buffer state of Armenia kept Nero occupied. To the west, the province of Britain erupted in a violent rebellion led by Boudica, Queen of the Iceni tribe.

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

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

The Parthian empire – a rich and mighty power in greater Iran – was Rome’s only true rival. Rome and Parthia were locked in a longstanding struggle for control of Armenia, a strategically important buffer state between their territories.

After the Parthian king installed his brother Tiridates on the Armenian throne, Nero took military action. When initial successes were followed by setbacks, he agreed a diplomatic solution. Nero conceded that a Parthian prince could rule Armenia, on condition that he be crowned by the emperor in Rome.
Nero implemented far-reaching administrative measures, including tax and currency reforms, in addition to major building projects. He created new venues for the enjoyment of the people and improved the food supply system of Rome, in line with public expectations of a good emperor. Nero also built a new imperial palace.

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

Nero changed Rome’s cityscape on a scale not seen since Augustus. He had a lifelong interest in major engineering works and innovative architectural projects. In the *Campus Martius* he constructed a splendid amphitheatre and great public *thermae* which became the model for later imperial bath buildings. He also built a central food market, the *Macellum Magnum*. While the amphitheatre did not survive Nero’s reign, the market, and especially the baths, were praised long after his death.
Spectacle and splendour

The performing prince

Managing the conflicting expectations and demands of the people and the elite was a major challenge throughout Nero’s reign. Theatres and circuses were popular entertainment venues, but also highly politicised spaces where the audience could express its opinion and appeal directly to the emperor.

From boyhood, Nero was passionate about chariot racing and trained as a musician. He was the first emperor to perform publicly. This enhanced Nero’s popularity with the people and possibly served a political purpose by mobilising them for his cause. His actions provoked great resentment among parts of the senatorial elite.
Nero’s mother Agrippina and first wife Claudia Octavia were crucial for his rise to power. After his accession, his relationships with them changed. Weary of Agrippina’s influence and suspecting her of plotting against him, Nero ordered her death in AD 59. He then divorced and exiled Claudia Octavia, who was executed in AD 62. Their fate echoed those of imperial women before them. Roman princesses were often accused of involvement in conspiracies, and were either exiled or killed. Nero’s actions still tarnished his reputation, despite senatorial resentment of Agrippina.

Nero later married Poppaea Sabina, who gave him a daughter, but both died prematurely. He was survived by his third wife, Statilia Messalina.
One of the defining events of Nero’s reign was the great fire of Rome in AD 64. It raged for nine days, devastating the city. Nero led the relief effort and supervised reconstruction. Despite fires being common in Rome, he was later accused of starting the blaze. To reconcile the gods, Nero blamed a new sect of Jewish origin. Its members later became known as Christians.

This supposed act of arson and the persecutions cemented Nero’s posthumous reputation, creating the enduring image of a tyrant who ‘fiddled while Rome burned.’ However, the emperor was not in Rome when the fire started. The claims that he instigated it appear baseless or purposefully distorted by his political enemies.
Nero’s reign reached its climax in the years following the fire. Rome’s restoration began with the construction of new, improved housing for the people and Nero’s greatest building project to date – the *Domus Aurea* (‘Golden House’).

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

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

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

Under Nero, the Roman aristocracy gathered great wealth. Their luxurious standard of living began to spread to newly rich freedmen and provincials, leading to increased competition. Banquets and lavishly decorated homes were used to express status. Nero’s palace, while exceptional in size, did not outdo his contemporaries in terms of furnishings.

Nero also introduced new forms of entertainment and occasions where people of different classes could mingle. Appreciated by the masses, such inclusiveness antagonised some members of the senatorial elite.
Diplomacy and foreign policy

Nero planned to expand the empire. He extended Roman control over the Black Sea and considered invading Ethiopia. He then prepared a campaign in the Caucasus. Nero’s settlement with the Parthians over Armenia was part of his eastern policy. Shortly after Tiridates’ coronation as king of Armenia in AD 66, Nero embarked on a tour of Greece. He may have intended to follow this with a major military campaign in the east. However, a Jewish revolt in Judaea and rebellions in Gaul (France) and Spain forced the emperor to abandon his plans.
Nero’s public image was carefully crafted. He introduced a new hairstyle, dashing yet refined, and never seen before in imperial portraits. It set a new fashion, as people across the empire imitated his look.

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

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

Violent civil war erupted in the wake of Nero’s demise. Four emperors ruled over the course of a single year. Vespasian, Nero’s former general in Judaea, finally triumphed and became emperor. Nero’s popular appeal persisted for decades after his death, particularly in the east. His legacy lived on. Imposters posing as the late emperor attracted mass followings.
Crisis and death

Dissent

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

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

The end of a dynasty

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

Nero’s death was followed by political turmoil, and military and social unrest. Civil war raged as four rivals vied for power during the ‘Year of the Four Emperors’. Their battles wreaked devastation. Galba succeeded Nero. He was assassinated and replaced by Otho, who in turn was defeated in battle by Vitellius. In AD 69, Vitellius was crushed by Vespasian, who had remained loyal to Nero. Vespasian’s rule ended the upheaval and marked the emergence of a new dynasty, the Flavians.