

CLAH4006

**From Village to Empire: An
Introduction to the History of Rome**

**Nero (AD 54-68) and the “Year of the
Four Emperors” (AD 68/69)**

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Nero's Childhood and Youth

Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus
born **Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus** (AD 37-68).



Father – Gnaeus
Domitius
Ahenobarbus



Mother – Agrippina
the Younger



Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus

- Born at Antium on 15th of December AD 37.
- Agrippina banished by Gaius in late AD 39, allowed to return by Claudius.
- Father dies in AD 40 when Nero was three - inherited 1/3 of the estate but it is seized by Gaius.

“Nero therefore grew up in very poor circumstances under the care of his aunt Domitia Lepida, who chose a dancer and a barber to be his tutors. However, when Claudius succeeded Gaius, Nero had his inheritance restored to him in full, and a legacy from his stepfather Crispus Passienus, left him well off.” – **Suetonius *Nero* 6.**

Agrippina's Marriage and Nero's Adoption

- Three candidates after death of Messalina
 - Lollia Paulina – supported by Callistus.
 - Agrippina – supported by Pallas.
 - Aelia Paetina (previous wife of Claudius) – supported by Narcissus.
- Claudius marries Agrippina in AD 49.



Step-brother -
Britannicus



Step-sister + wife –
Claudia Octavia

- Claudius adopts Nero at the age of 12 (Suetonius says at 11).
- Seneca appointed Nero's tutor.
- Nero is allowed to adopt the toga virilis at age of 13.
- Nero married to Octavia in AD 53.



Claudius & Nero as Caesar denarius - **RIC 83.**

Death of Claudius

- Remorse of Claudius for sidelining Britannicus - **Suetonius *Divus Claudius* 6.**
- Three major literary sources all mention tradition of Claudius eating poison mushrooms, administered personally or under direction of Agrippina the Younger – **Suet. *Div Claud.* 44; Dio 61.34; Tac. *Ann.* 12.66-67.**
- Agrippina detains Britannicus, Antonia and Octavia, until support of Praetorian Guards for Nero is confirmed - **Tac. *Ann.* 12.68-69.**

Accession of Nero

“He had reached the age of sixteen when news of Claudius’ death was made known, and he presented himself to the guards that day between the sixth and seventh hours – ugly omens having ruled out an earlier appearance. After being acclaimed emperor on the palace steps, he was taken in a litter to the praetorian camp, where he briefly addressed the troops. He then visited the Senate House, where he remained until nightfall, refusing only one of the many high honours voted him, namely the title Father of His Country, and this because of his youth.”
– **Suetonius *Nero* 8**

Nero's Early Reign

“Divine honours were voted to Claudius, and his funeral solemnities were celebrated precisely as those of the deified Augustus, Agrippina emulating the magnificence of her great-grandmother Livia. His will, however, was not read, lest the preference of the stepson to the son should leave a disquieting impression of injustice and invidiousness upon the mind of the common people.” – **Tacitus *Annals* 12.69.**



Nero and Agrippina II AV Aureus. Struck 54 AD, Lyons mint – **RIC 1.**



Nero & Agrippina II AV Aureus. 55 AD - **RIC 6.**



Divus Claudius AV Aureus. Lyons mint, under Nero, 54-55 AD. DIVVS CLAVDIVS AVGVSTVS, laureate head left - **RIC 4; BMC 4.**



Agrippina crowning Nero - Aphrodisias

Nero's "Five Golden Years"

“For five years he was so effective, especially in improving the city, that Trajan with justice often declared that all other emperors fell behind... Therefore it is evidence that youth is no hindrance to virtue... For the rest of his life he spent in disgraceful fashion...” – **Aurelius Victor** *Liber de Caesaribus* 5.1-4.

- Lowered or abolished some heavier taxes; showed modesty.; put on a variety of popular entertainment; suppressed abuses by public officials – **Suet. Nero** 10-11, 16.
- Renounces former unpopular policies; Nero promises not to intervene in all law-suits, or hear cases behind closed doors; promises to keep personal and state affairs separate – **Tac. Ann.** 13.4-5.
- Nero's advisors [chief advisors Seneca and Burrus] allow him to indulge himself while they conduct public business – **Dio** 61.4.

Infamous Acts of Nero

“Bad Influences on Nero”

- Rise of Poppaea Sabina AD 58 – “Henceforward Nero sought no veil for his debaucheries and crimes.” – **Tac. *Ann.* 13.47.**
- Death of Burrus, Seneca’s departure from public life, and the rise of the Praetorian Prefect Tigellinus - **Tac. *Ann.* 14.51-52.**
- Suetonius lists without chronological precision various virtues and condemnatory acts, though emphasis a decline in behaviour – “At last, after nearly fourteen years of Nero’s misrule, the earth rid herself of him.” – ***Nero* 40.**
- Death of Agrippina, freed from constraints – **Dio 61.19-21.**

Murder in the *Domus Caesaris*

- Britannicus is poisoned on the orders of Nero (AD 55) – **Tac. *Ann.* 13.16; Dio 61.7.4.**
- Farcical attempt to kill Agrippina with a collapsible boat which fails, officer from Naval station at Misenum sent to murder her (AD 59) – **Suet. *Nero* 34; Tac. *Ann.* 14.8.**
- Divorce and then murder of Octavia (AD 62) – **Tac. *Ann.* 14.60; Suet. *Nero* 35.**
- Pregnant Poppaea Sabina kicked to death (AD 65) – **Tac. *Ann.* 16.6; Suet. *Nero* 35.**

Nero's Vices

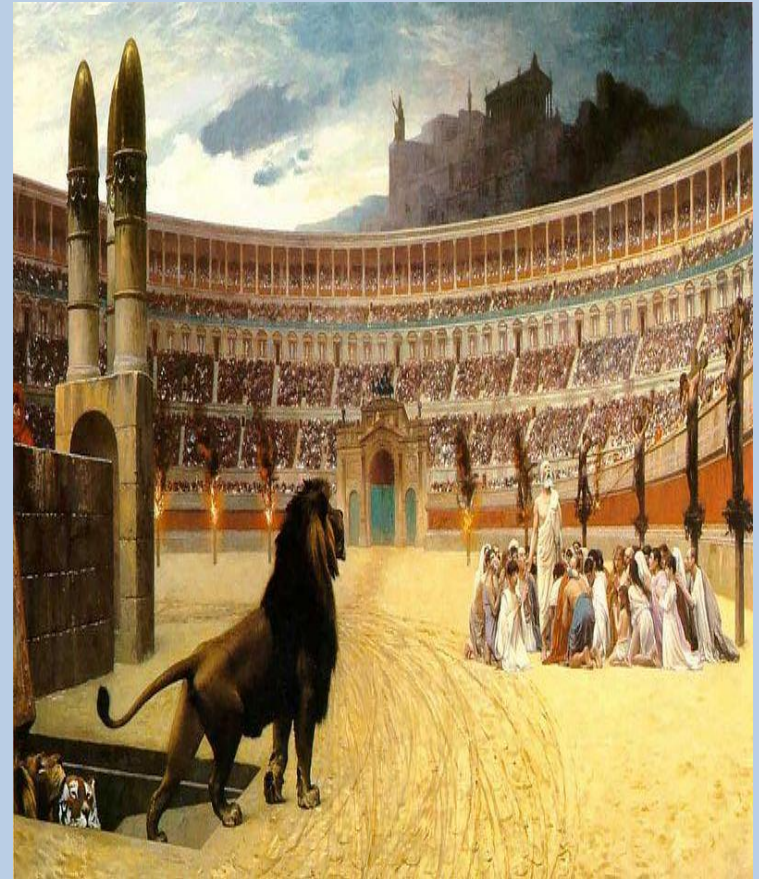
- Hooliganism and riots in the theatre – **Tac. *Ann.* 13.25.**
- Extravagance – “[Nero] believed that fortunes were made to be squandered...” – **Suet. *Nero* 30.1.**
- Banquets and orgies - **Tac. *Ann.* 13.37.**
- Depravity and controversy – raping the vestal virgin Rubria, castrating and marrying Sporus – **Suet. *Nero* 28;** - becomes “wife” of Pythagoras - **Tac. *Ann.* 13.37.**

Great Fire of Rome – AD 64

- Massive fire breaks out in Rome lasting around a week – large swathes of Rome damaged or destroyed - **Tac. *Ann.* 15.38-41.**
- Arson is suspected – Tacitus reports alternative rumours, including of Nero's involvement – Suetonius and Dio directly blame Nero.
- Most modern scholars doubt that Nero was responsible.

Persecution of the Christians

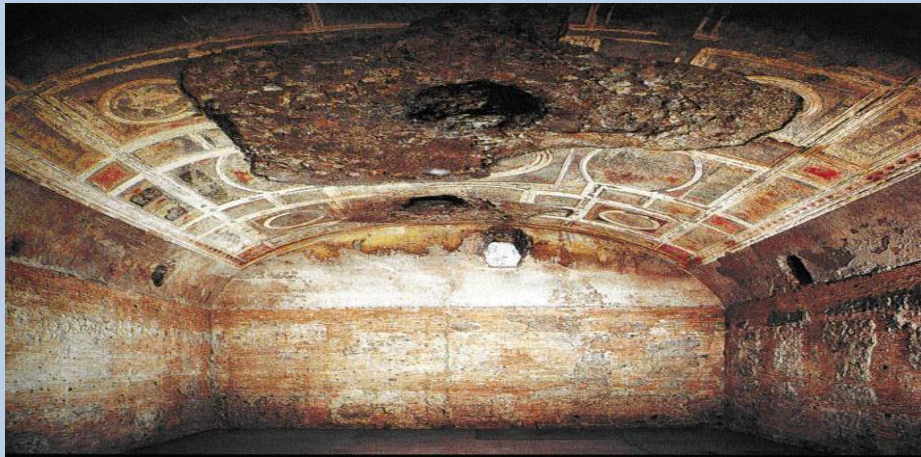
“To quell this rumour Nero falsely accused others – “Christians,” as they were commonly called, already hated for their scandalous conduct- and he subjected them to the most elaborate tortures... First some Christians were arrested who confessed to the crime, and by their evidence a host of others were convicted, not so much for the crime of arson as for their hatred of mankind. Mockery attended their death: dressed in the hides of animals they were torn apart by dogs, nailed on crosses, or were themselves set on fire after dark and used as torches. Nero opened his gardens to this spectacle and made a show of their executions in his circus...” **Tacitus Annals 15.44.**



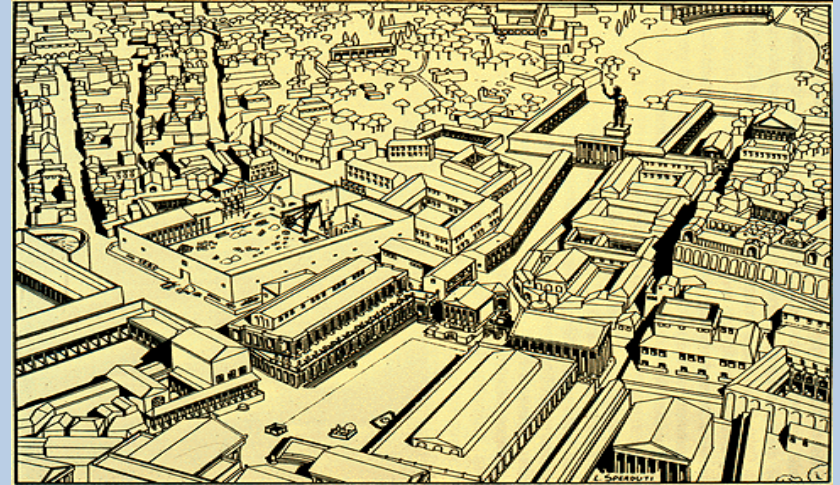
The Last Prayer by J.-L. Gérôme
(1824-1904).

Domus Aurea

“The cause of amazement was not so much its profusion of gems and gold (*luxuria* common enough by then) as its fields and ponds, with woods resembling a wilderness on one side and open spaces with vistas on the other.” - ***Tacitus Annals 15.42.1.***



“In the forecourt of the Golden House stood a statue in the likeness of Nero 120 feet tall.” – ***Suetonius Nero 31.1.***



Artistic Interpretation of the area of the Golden House



Artistic Interpretation of octagonal Room

Nero as Artist and Charioteer

- Nero surrounds himself with a literary and poetic circle – writes poetry himself – **Suet. *Nero* 52.**
- Establishes the Neronia, an artistic and athletic festival – celebrated in AD 60 and 65.
- Nero first performs publically at Naples (AD 64), subsequently performs in Rome at the second Neronia (AD 65) – travels to Greece and competes in Pan-Hellenic games – returns with “Olympic Triumph”.

“When he had finished these ceremonies, he announced a series of horse-races, and carrying into the Circus these crowns as well as all the others that he had secured by his victories in chariot-racing, he placed them around the Egyptian obelisk. The number of them was one thousand eight hundred and eight. And after doing this he appeared as a charioteer...” **Dio Cassius 63.21.1.**

Wars and Provincial Rebellion

War Over Armenia – AD 58-63

- Initial tensions with King Vologeses of Parthia, who establishes his brother Tiridates to the throne of Armenia (AD 55).
- Hostility flares up over Armenia again (AD 58) – Corbulo campaigns in Armenia, sacks capital Artaxata.
- Tigranes is sent to Armenia as Nero's candidate for the Armenian throne.
- Vologeses forces out Tigranes, Caesennius Paetus marches into Armenia with Roman forces, after initial successes is forced to retreat.
- Subsequent agreement reached in AD 63 whereby Tiridates would go to Rome to be crowned by Nero, though this does not happen until AD 65.



Rebellion in Britain – AD 60

- Causes of rebellion – aggressive confiscations and debt-collecting by Catus Decianus – catalyst – death of Iceni king Prasutagus, will made his two daughters and Nero joint heirs of kingdom – will ignored – Boudicca lashed and her daughters raped.
- The main bulk of the Roman forces with the governor Gaius Suetonius Paulinus in Mona (modern Anglesey) – **Dio 62.7; Tac. Ann. 14.29-30.**
- Sack of Camulodunum (Colchester), Londinium, and Verulamium (St Albans) by Boudicca's forces.
- The forces of Suetonius Paulinus and Boudicca fight battle near Watling Street
 - Boudicca's forces (supposedly) 230,000 - **Dio 62.8;**
 - Roman forces were about 10,000 - **Tac. Ann. 14.34.**
- Boudicca dies after battle of sickness or suicide.



Great Jewish Revolt – AD 66-73

- Revolt begins under Nero, but is not finally put down until the reign of Vespasian.
- Many tension in Judaeen society – Philhellenic Vs conservative; nationalist and religious ideology groups.
- Gessius Florus' (procurator) demand for 17 talents (c. 120,000 denarii) from the Temple.
- Greco-Jewish strife in Caesarea Maritima.
- Massacre of Roman garrison in Jerusalem.
- Cestius Gallus (legate of Syria) marches with 30,000 men to Jerusalem but then forced to turn back – large Roman casualties on retreat to coast.
- Vespasian sent to put down rebellion.
- Roman campaigning on hold during AD 68/69.



Conspiracies

Pisonian Conspiracy – AD 65

- Mixture of individuals involved, including Faenius Rufus, joint prefect of the Guards, though no apparent attempt to gain support from provincial commanders.
- Conspiracy led by Gaius Calpurnius Piso – appears to have wanted to become princeps himself – **Tac. Ann. 15.52.**
- The plot uncovered by freedman Milichus of the household of Flavius Scaevinus.
- Rounding up and death of conspirators, Seneca, though not directly involved, is forced to commit suicide.

Subsequent Events

- Persecution of “stoic” opposition - Death of Thrasea Paetus and Barea Soranus (AD 66).
- Vinician Conspiracy AD 66 – led by Annius Vinicianus, son-in-law of Corbulo?
- Death of Corbulo and the two Sulpicii Scribonii, Rufus and Proculus (governors of Germania Superior and Inferior).

Beginning of the End

- Revolt of Gaius Julius Vindex, governor of Gallia Legdunensis – March AD 68.
- On 3rd of April, Galba declares himself legate of the Senate and Roman People.
- Subsequently Clodius Macer, legate of Africa, rebels against Nero.
- By May Vindex is defeated by Verginius Rufus, legate of Germania Superior, but his soldiers declare for him against Nero.
- At some point the troops in Illyria support Verginius Rufus, though date is unclear.
- Ambiguous actions of Petronius Turpilianus.



Galba Denarius. IMP SER GALBA CAESAR AVG, laureate head right / HISPANIA, Hispania standing left holding poppy-corn ear bouquet, two spears & shield. **BMC 18.**



Vindex, 68AD, AR denarius, (3.42g) Vienne (?), Gaul, SALVS GENERIS HVMANIS [Salvation of the Human Race] Victory with wreath and palm, left on globe. / SPQR in wreath. - **RIC 72.**

Suicide of Nero

- Nero apparently unfazed by revolt of Vindex, but in state of panic once news of Galba's rebellion reached Rome.
- Nero has forces stationed in northern Italy under Petronius Turpilianus – ambiguity of Petronius' actions – **Dio 63.27.1a** contra **Tac. Hist. 1.6**.
- The Praetorian Prefect Nymphidius Sabinus convinced the Guard to declare for Galba – Tigellinus ill and inactive.

“He [Nero], then, realising that they were coming near, commanded his companions to kill him. And when they refused, he murmured a groan and said: ‘I alone have neither friend nor foe.’ By this time the cavalry were close at hand, and so he killed himself, after uttering that oft-quoted remark: “Jupiter, what an artist perishes in me!” And as he lingered in his agony, Epaphroditus dealt him the finishing stroke’.” – **Dio Cassius 63.29.2**.

“Year of the Four Emperors”

AD 68/69

IMPERIUM ROMANUM
68 - 69 AD



	GALBA	8 jun 68 - 15 jan 69
	OTHO	15 jan 69 - 16 apr 69
	VITELLIUS	17 apr 69 - 20 dec 69
	VESPASIANUS	21 dec 69 - 23 jun 79

Galba – June AD 68 to January AD 69

- On 9th of June (the day of Nero's death) the Senate declares Galba Emperor.
- Galba over 70 years old and had no heirs.
- Many of Nero's supporters are put to death, including some of his freedmen.
- Galba denies citizenship to the Legion I *Adiutrix*.
- Failure to pay the Praetorian Guard the donative of 30,000 sesterces promised by Nymphidius Sabinus.
- On the 1st of January Vitellius is proclaimed emperor by the Rhine legions.
- Galba formally adopts Lucius Calpurnius Piso Frugi Licinianus on January 10th AD 69.
- On the 15th of January, Galba, Piso and Vinius were assassinated, and Otho declared Emperor by the Senate.

“But being gradually burdened by his years, in martial affairs, he was an "imperator" of a harsh and ancient type...”

Plutarch *Galba* 29.4.



Otho - January to April AD 69

- His reign lasted about two months – from 15th of January to 16th of April AD 69.
- Coup is backed by Praetorians and the legions of the Danube.
- Honours Nero's memory – **Suet. *Otho* 7.**
- Attempts at negotiation with Vitellius fail.
- Vitellius' forces under Caecina Alienus suffer initial defeat by Otho's forces.
- Otho's forces defeated at Bedriacum (northern Italy) on April 14th AD 69, on the 16th he kills himself.

“In the senate Otho spoke at length in a kindly strain and like a popular leader. For part of the time during which he himself was to have been consul, he assigned the office to Verginius Rufus, and all those who had been designated as future consuls by Nero or Galba he confirmed in their appointment.” – **Plutarch *Otho* 1.2.**



Otho AV Aureus. IMP M OTHO CAESAR AVG TRP - Pax standing left holding branch & caduceus – **RIC 3**

Vitellius – April to December AD 69

- On the 19th of April the Senate and People formally declare Vitellius Emperor.
- Vitellius adopts title Germanicus and reluctantly Augustus, but for a long time eschews the title Caesar.
- Also honours Nero's memory, holds a funeral service for Nero – **Tac. Hist. 2.95.**
- Declaration of Vespasian as Emperor by troops in the East – July.
- Forces of Antonius Primus enter Rome in December 21st – fighting in Rome – Vitellius is hunted down and killed.

“The scene throughout the city was cruel and distorted: on the one side fighting and wounded men, on the other baths and restaurants: here lay heaps of dead and close at hand were harlots and their ilk... What was so inhuman was the peoples indifference...” - **Tacitus Histories 3.83.**



Vitellius & His Children Denarius - **RIC 101; BMC 28.**

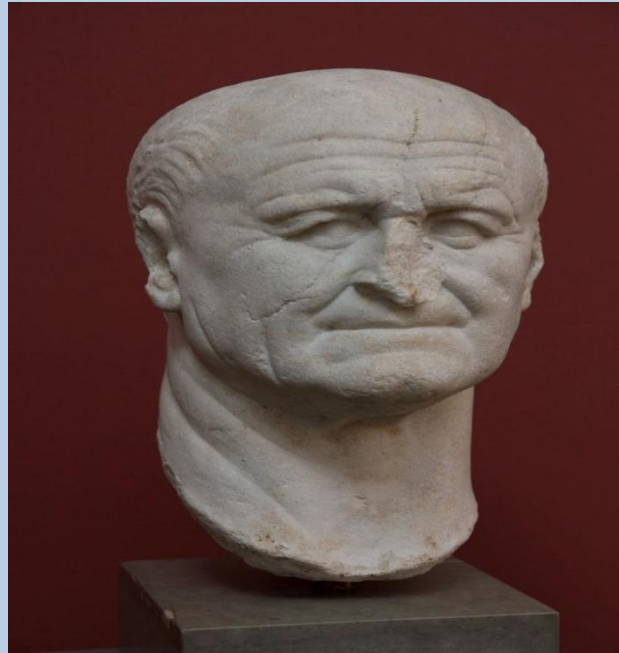
Vespasian – July/December AD 69-79

- On the 1st of July, Tiberius Julius Alexander the governor of Egypt declares Vespasian as his emperor - Vespasian's own legions declare him emperor on 3rd of July (or 11th), soon supported by Gaius Lucinius Mucianus in Syria.
- Vespasian heads to Alexandria - Mucianus marches to Rome.
- Antonius Primus legate of the *VII Galbina* in Pannonia, marches on Italy and prevents Vitellius receiving reinforcements from the Rhineland – defeats Vitellius in Rome in December.
- Vespasian declared emperor by the Senate and People in December AD 69, though he dated his reign from 1st July.

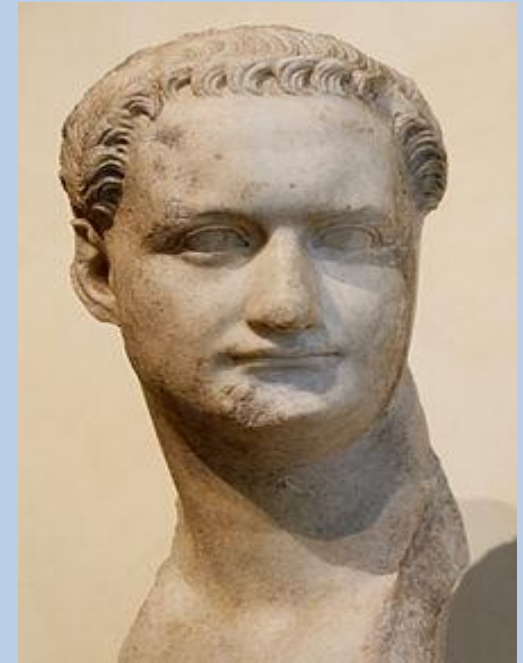
Flavian Dynasty



**Titus – 23rd of June AD 79
to 13th of September AD 81**



**Vespasian – 1st of July AD 69
to 23rd of June AD 79**



**Domitian – 14th of
September AD 81 to 18th
of September AD 96**

Useful Reading

- Potter, D. (2009) *Rome in the Ancient World* (London: Thames & Hudson) pages 187-194.
- Wells, C. M (1992) *The Roman Empire* (London: Fontana Press) – read chapter 7 ‘Emperors Made Elsewhere than Rome’: Galba to Trajan.
- Goodman, M. (2007) *Rome & Jerusalem: The Class of Ancient Civilisations* (London: Penguin Books) - read pages 7-29.