expressed form, and was easily thrown off-course by the suspicion, timidity and fear which were among his most conspicuous characteristics. However, what was most remarkable about Claudius, apart from peculiar appearance and behaviour, was a very high degree of erudition: Pliny the elder, himself phenomenally learned, numbered him among the hundred foremost scholarly writers of the day. In his youth Livy had seen him as a future historian; indeed, advised when young to abandon the delicate project of writing a history of recent Rome, he composed twenty books of Etruscan and eight of Carthaginian history and eight more of autobiographical memoirs – all lamentably lost. He also wrote a historical study of the Roman alphabet, to which he added three letters, though they were removed again shortly afterwards.

Claudius was married four times. His first wife, Plautia Urgulanilla, probably helped to inspire his interest in Etruscan history, since she was an Etruscan herself. After divorcing her he married Aelia Paetina for a short duration, before taking Valeria Messalina, aged fourteen, as his bride in 39, and the thirty-four-year-old Agrippina the younger ten years later.

# NERO
## 54–68

NERO (54–68) was born at Antium in December 37, and at first was named Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus. His father was Cnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, belonging to an extremely noble and ancient family, and his mother was the younger Agrippina, daughter of Germanicus and Agrippina the elder. When he had reached the age of two his mother was banished by GAIUS (Caligula), who seized his inheritance the following year after the death of the child's father.

Under CLAUDIUS, however, the younger Agrippina (his niece) was recalled from exile, and arranged for her son to receive a good education. After she had married the emperor Claudius in 49, the eminent Stoic philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca (Seneca the younger) became the tutor of the boy, who was betrothed to Claudius' daughter Octavia (he married her four years later). In 50, Agrippina persuaded her husband to adopt Nero as his son, so that





thenceforward he took precedence over Britannicus, the emperor's own younger son by the late Messalina; he now assumed the names of Nero Claudius Drusus Germanicus. On the death of Claudius in October 54, Britannicus' claims were set aside, and, with the support of the praetorian prefect Sextus Afranius Burrus, Agrippina secured the throne for Nero.

Since he was not yet seventeen – far younger than any of his predecessors when they came to the throne – the empire was at first governed by Agrippina, the sister and wife of earlier emperors and now the mother of a third. This unprecedented phase of female rule was underlined by the initial monetary issue of the reign, which displayed the heads of Nero and Agrippina facing one another, with precedence accorded to Agrippina. When the imperial council (*consilium principis*) was in session, she used to listen, people said, behind a curtain; and she employed her power to eliminate possible rivals, notably Marcus Junius Silanus who, like Nero himself, was a great-great-grandson of AUGUSTUS.

But her dominant influence lasted only a very short time: already in 55 her son assumed priority over her on the coinage, and her name and portrait never appeared on any subsequent issue. When early in the same year Britannicus died at a dinner-party in the palace – allegedly murdered by Nero, although this could not be proved – Agrippina was said to have been dismayed, since she wanted to keep the youth in reserve in case her son became too recalcitrant. That remains conjectural; but her power was seen to be waning when the emperor transferred her to a separate residence, thus bringing her impressive Palatine receptions to an end.

The Empire now settled down to a period of sound government under the guidance of Seneca and Burrus. The late Claudius was deified (he was the first emperor since Augustus to receive this honour, which prompted some derogatory jokes), and Nero promised to employ his ancestor Augustus as his model. He also expressed a flattering, if somewhat unrealistic, desire that the senate and consuls should exercise their governmental functions as in ancient times. Steps were taken to improve public order, guard against forgery and reform treasury procedure; provincial governors and their staffs were forbidden to extract large sums of money from the local populations for their gladiatorial shows; and Nero himself, as he grew up, worked hard, particularly at his judicial duties, to which he contributed useful and practical procedural ideas.

He also entertained progressive, liberal feelings; these led him, for example, to try to abolish indirect taxes throughout the Empire (in response to complaints against tax-farmers), to abolish the stationing of praetorian guardsmen in circuses and theatres, and to forbid the killing of gladiators and condemned criminals in public spectacles. All these ideas proved impracticable, the first because it would have meant that direct taxation had to be greatly increased, the second because brawling in the arena soon became

intolerable, and the third because public support was not forthcoming. Yet such proposals, even if they came to nothing, suggest that Nero, although easily goaded into ferocity by imagined threats to his personal safety, was basically humane. For example, like his mentor Seneca, he expressed objections to taking life, and this aversion extended to capital punishment. He must therefore have found it intensely disagreeable when the city prefect Lucius Pedanius Secundus was murdered by one of his slaves, with the result that Nero, according to the law, had to have all four hundred slaves of Pedanius' household put to death, despite strong popular pressure in their favour.

Setbacks of this kind gradually dampened such ardour for his administrative duties as he had previously possessed. Eventually they caused him to devote himself more and more to the real interests of his life: horse-racing, singing, acting, dancing, writing poetry and sexual activities of great and indeed almost unlimited versatility, if we are to believe the gossip-writers. Seneca and Burrus tried to canalize these interests so as to prevent them from becoming a scandal, encouraging him, for example, to have a domestic sort of affair with an ex-slave Acte, provided that marriage with her was recognized to be socially out of the question. Agrippina, however, cannot have been pleased that another woman was now in the palace. Moreover, she deplored Nero's un-Roman taste for the arts, not to speak of the effeminate Greek dress that he affected. But when he heard how virulently she was talking against him, in 59, beside the Gulf of Cumae (the Bay of Naples), he arranged for her murder. The historian Tacitus devotes one of his greatest set-pieces to the event, describing how a collapsible ship was provided for her, and how she succeeded in swimming away, only to meet her end on land. The story contains elements of melodrama that can be discounted. Nevertheless, it remains true that he did murder her – and that he reported to the senate that she had plotted against his life, obliging him to have her killed. To posterity, this matricide remained an unforgotten horror. Yet at the time the senators, who had hated her unconstitutional role and arrogant behaviour, did not entirely regret her removal, and Nero was relieved to find that the population and praetorian guard did not seem to mind too much either, even though she had been the great Germanicus' daughter.

In 62, however, an entirely new phase of the reign began, when both Seneca and Burrus disappeared from the political scene. First Burrus was killed by an abscess or tumour of the throat. He was succeeded as praetorian prefect by a pair of colleagues, Faenius Rufus and the far more sinister Gaius Ofonius Tigellinus, a Sicilian who was Nero's evil genius, and encouraged his excesses. Seneca found Tigellinus – and the new self-willed emperor – too difficult to work with; so he resigned, to enjoy the enormous wealth which, despite his critics, he had succeeded in amassing. Soon afterwards Nero showed his new-found independence by changing wives. He divorced Octavia, who, although





harmless, was exiled and put to death in 62. Her place was taken by Poppaea Sabina (the wife or mistress of his fashionable friend OTHO), a beautiful amber-haired young woman who, according to rumour, bathed in asses' milk.

But Tigellinus, who connived in these events, perhaps underestimated the senators' unfavourable reaction to Nero's activities in a different field, that of the arts. At first the emperor had limited his stage appearances to private stages, but in 64 he broke out from this restriction and launched his public début at Neapolis. There, to the pleasure of the passionately phil-Hellenic Nero, his audience were Greeks; but in the capital too, in the following year, at the second performance of the Neronian Games which he had instituted on the Greek model, he started to appear before Roman spectators. Tacitus offers a highly coloured and venomous account of these activities, going on to describe how the emperor subsequently instituted Youth Games, attended by every sort of immorality, at which (despite stage fright) he himself performed, escorted by a *claque* of knights known as the Augustiani. He also wrote poetry, stringing together – according to the historian – suggestions thrown out by his drinking companions. Suetonius, less unflatteringly, cited notebooks and papers that prove that Nero did in fact write original verses. He also took quite an expert interest in painting and sculpture.

However, these aberrations, as senators regarded them, did not perturb the peace, prosperity and sound government of the Empire as a whole. Only a few distant frontiers experienced warlike operations. In Britain the expansion of Roman rule, signalled by the fall of the Druid fortress Mona to Gaius Suetonius Paulinus, was temporarily delayed by the revolt of the Iceni in East Anglia. This had been provoked by Roman taxation and British unwillingness to repay a ruinously expensive loan from Seneca. In 60 the tribe's queen Boudicca (Boadicea) overran the Roman settlements at Camulodunum, Londinium and Verulamium, putting seventy thousand Romans or Romanized natives to the sword before she was finally defeated near Atherstone. Meanwhile, beyond the opposite extremity of the Empire, the greatest general of the day, Cnaeus Domitius Corbulo, had received an important command whose aim was to detach Armenia from Parthian control. He had nearly completed his task when it was interrupted by the serious defeat of a colleague, Caesennius Paetus, near Elazığ in eastern Turkey in 62. In the following year, however, Corbulo re-established Roman military superiority, concluding an agreement with the Parthians which enabled Tiridates I, their protégé on the Armenian throne, to accept the status of a Roman client. In 66, amid massive celebrations, Tiridates visited Rome as Nero's guest.

During this period, mints in the capital and at Lugdunum in Gaul were issuing the most superb brass and copper coinages ever produced in the Roman world. The emperor's gross, baroque features were depicted with an intriguing blend of magnificence and realism; while an extensive range of designs and inscriptions on the reverses of the coins commemorated, one after

another, the benefactions he claimed to have lavished upon the peoples of Rome and the Empire. In addition, some of the pieces even discreetly refer to his interest in the theatre and in horses – tastes which are set within a traditional, creditable framework by allusions to Apollo the lyre-player and to cavalry manoeuvres.

Nevertheless, the situation at Rome was taking a turn for the worse. A crucial event was the Great Fire of Rome in 64, which deprived numerous families of their homes and caused widespread discontent. According to a famous passage of Tacitus, Nero tried to pin the blame for the conflagration on the city's small Christian community (regarded as a dissident group of Jews) and burnt many of them alive; the martyrdoms of Saint Peter and Saint Paul were ascribed to these persecutions. Still, the rumour persisted not only that the ruler had sung his own poem 'The Sack of Troy' (not 'fiddled', as convention has it) while enjoying the spectacle of the flames, but also that he had actually started the fire himself, in order to be able to annex some land he wanted for the erection of his Golden House.

In previous years Nero had constructed an impressive mansion for his own accommodation; this house, under the name of Domus Transitoria, was however now to become the mere entrance hall to the new and vastly greater Golden House, which, together with its grounds, extended over a very large area of Rome, hitherto thickly inhabited by his subjects: never before or since has a European monarch carved out such an enormous area as a personal residence in the very heart of his capital. Designed by Nero's architect-engineers Severus and Celer, the Golden House was a series of separate, graceful pavilions and kiosks set amid the vistas of an alluringly designed landscape, including a large artificial lake stocked with many varieties of fish and animals. The main residential section of the palace, on the Esquiline Hill, is hard to picture today, because it was subsequently built over and now lies far underground. But its domed octagonal hall, lit from a central round opening, was an early and ambitious example of brick-faced concrete construction. The building displayed every sort of technical wonder, including baths flowing with sulphurous and salt waters, the world's largest hydraulic organ, moving panels that showered down flowers and scent on the diners below, and a cupola, surmounting the main banqueting hall, which revolved mechanically 'like the heavens'. When the Golden House was complete, the emperor cried out: 'Good, now I can at last begin to live like a human being!'

Meanwhile, however, his relations with the senatorial class were deteriorating sharply. One of Tigellinus' first actions had been to revive the hated treason law and to liquidate a number of possible suspects. Then the year 65 witnessed what was regarded as a serious plot. Known as the Pisonian conspiracy, its guiding spirit or figure-head, according to one account, was a certain Gaius Calpurnius Piso, an attractive but superficial nobleman. But an alternative version named the leaders as Faenius Rufus – the joint praetorian





prefect, resented because his influence had been eclipsed by Tigellinus – and the retired statesman Seneca. The truth will never be known, but nineteen executions or suicides followed, and thirteen banishments. Piso, Faenius and Seneca were among those who died; so did Seneca's nephew the poet Lucan, who had been one of Nero's closest friends; and another victim was a daughter of Claudius.

During the years that followed the government continued to punish suspects. An austerely philosophical personage, Thrasea Paetus, was one of those who succumbed. The eminent commander Corbulo, and the army chiefs of Upper and Lower Germany, likewise met their deaths. They were eliminated by order of Nero himself who had gone to Greece to display his artistic prowess, winning contests in Games (he was granted the prize for the Olympic chariot-race although he fell out of his chariot), collecting works of art, inaugurating a Corinth canal (which was never finished), and ostensibly 'liberating' the Hellenes whom he loved. At Rome, amid continuing executions, a shortage of food caused great hardship, and tension was so acute that the ex-slave Helius, whom Nero had left in charge of the capital, felt obliged to cross over to Greece and summon him urgently back.

Indeed, during January 68 Nero made a spectacular return to the capital. But in March, Gaius Julius Vindex, governor of Lugdunese Gaul, rose in rebellion against him. Galba, in Spain, lent his prestige to the revolt; Lucius Clodius Macer struck out on his own in north Africa; and even the Rhine legions, though they destroyed Vindex at Vesontio, ceased to accept the authority of Nero. The crisis could have been overcome if he had acted with resolution, but all he seemed able to do was to imagine fantastic acts of vengeance or to think of winning back his seditious troops by a dramatic display of weeping. Tigellinus was seriously ill and therefore powerless, and the praetorian prefect of the time, Nymphidius Sabinus, prompted his guardsmen to abandon their allegiance. When Nero heard that the senate, too, had turned against him and condemned him to be flogged to death, he decided, with the assistance of a secretary, to commit suicide on 9 June by stabbing himself in the throat with a dagger. His last words were 'Qualis artifex pereo', 'What a showman the world is losing in me.'

Suetonius offers an impression of his appearance and behaviour:

> He was about the average height, his body marked with spots and malodorous, his hair light blond, his features regular rather than attractive, his eyes blue and somewhat weak, his neck over-thick, his belly prominent, and his legs very slender. His health was good: for all his extravagant indulgence he had only three illnesses in fourteen years, and none of them serious enough to stop him from drinking wine or breaking any other regular habit. He was entirely shameless in the style of his appearance and dress, but always had his hair set in rows of curls, and when he visited Greece, let it grow long and hang down his back. He often gave audiences in an unbelted silk dressing-gown and slippers, with a scarf round his neck.