

# INTRODUCTION

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Nero Claudius Caesar Drusus Germanicus was the fifth Roman emperor and, upon his death in AD 68, the last representative of Rome's first imperial dynasty, the Julio-Claudians. In the popular imagination, he is the quintessential vicious tyrant, with a prodigious appetite for villainy. But the fundamental forces that shaped his reign derived not so much from the vagaries of a willful autocrat as from historical developments a century or so earlier.

The republic that followed the expulsion of the Roman kings at the end of the sixth century BC had become almost unmanageable by the first century BC, being characterized by the excesses of a series of powerful military commanders, culminating in the most famous, Julius Caesar. The death of Caesar, on March 15, 44 BC, ushered in a power struggle, from which his great-nephew and (posthumously) adopted son, Octavian, better known by his later title, Augustus, emerged triumphant, following the defeat in 31 BC of the combined forces of Mark Antony and the Egyptian queen Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium. In 27 BC, in a gesture that marked a key stage in the transition from republic to empire, Augustus surrendered the territories under his control to the Senate and people, and they in turn bestowed on him a huge "province." Its extent varied over the years, but at its core lay Gaul, Syria, and Spain. The governors (*legati Augusti*) of the individual provinces that made up these regions were appointed by Augustus. These "imperial" provinces, with minor exceptions, housed the Roman legions, and since Augustus also appointed the individual legionary commanders (*legati legionis*), he had effective control of the armies. The remaining "public" provinces (often somewhat misleadingly called "senatorial") were administered by senators appointed by lot from a regulated pool of candidates. With the defeat of Cleopatra, Egypt fell to the Romans. It became an imperial possession, governed by a prefect appointed by the emperor and drawn from the equestrian order (the "knights"). This last was, broadly, a social rank with a property qualification lower than that of senators and that could engage openly in commercial business (senators would do so more covertly), although many equestrians were simply landowners. The imperial system also led to a new category of salaried administrators, recruited from the ranks of freedmen (former slaves), who helped the imperial bureaucracy to run the now huge empire. They become an observable phenomenon in the reign of Caligula.

Significantly, Augustus acquired certain constitutional rights of the officers originally instituted to safeguard the interests of the plebeians, the plebeian tribunes, although he did not hold the actual office (a contrivance that allowed the republic to function as a monarchy). His tribunician power (*tribunicia potestas*) gave him important privileges, paralleling some of the privileges he exercised while consul. He was entitled through this *potestas* to summon the Senate and the popular assemblies and to introduce or veto legislation. In many ways, this special power lay at the heart of the new imperial system.

With great skill during a lengthy reign, Augustus sought to present himself as merely a leading citizen, a *princeps*, essentially a republican magistrate, albeit with special authority. The basic weakness of a political organism that was neither true republic nor true monarchy was that there was no clear principle of succession. Augustus clearly hoped to be followed by someone of his own bloodline, but he and his wife of many years, Livia, a Claudian by descent, did not produce together a son who survived childhood. Augustus was in fact succeeded, in AD 14, by Livia's son from her previous marriage, the uncharismatic Tiberius. The dynasty that was established, which ended with Nero, is thus referred to as Julio-Claudian, after the two great families. Tiberius in turn had no surviving son, and upon his death in AD 37, he was followed by the preferred candidate of the praetorians (the imperial guard). Their choice was Gaius Caligula, an emperor whose reputation for depravity arguably rivals Nero's. The great-grandson of both Augustus and Livia, Caligula had an excellent pedigree—he traced his descent on his mother's side through Julia, Augustus's only daughter, while his father was the immensely popular Germanicus, grandson of Livia (which made Caligula the brother of Agrippina the Younger, the mother of Nero). But his rule was reckless and irresponsible, and came to an abrupt end with his assassination in AD 41. Once again, the praetorians intervened, and power fell into the hands of Caligula's uncle, the lame and much scorned Claudius, who proved in fact to be a shrewd and able politician. It was during his reign that Nero came to prominence.

Nero was born Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus in the imperial villa at Antium (Anzio) on December 15, almost certainly in the year AD 37, during the reign of his uncle Caligula (Chapter I). To what extent his later egregious conduct was predetermined by his family line must remain a matter for speculation. His father, Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, who died during Nero's infancy, belonged to an old and distinguished family, although he does not seem to have lived up to his forebears; Seneca the Elder comments on his laziness, while Suetonius describes him as despicable in every respect. Nero's

mother, Agrippina the Younger, was even better connected, and played the key role in his formative years. She was the great-granddaughter of Augustus, daughter of the highly ambitious Agrippina the Elder and her husband Germanicus, and she was the sister of Caligula. At the time of Nero's birth, she enjoyed privilege and prestige as the sister of the reigning emperor.

By 39, things had turned sour. Agrippina and her sister Livilla were suspected of conspiracy and exiled. At some point after that, Nero's father died, and Nero moved to the house of a paternal aunt, Domitia, to await his mother's recall. Agrippina returned in 41, after Caligula's assassination and the subsequent accession of Claudius, and she was now determined to devote her energies to the promotion of her son's prospects. Following the scandalous fall of Messalina, Agrippina married the emperor Claudius, in 49, and in the following year she persuaded Claudius to adopt her son, who thus acquired the elements Nero and Claudius in his name. In 53, Claudius approved the marriage of Nero to his daughter Claudia Octavia. In the meantime, Agrippina worked to secure the advancement of her favorites, most significantly Sextus Afranius Burrus as commander of the praetorian guard. She also secured the return from exile to Rome of the philosopher Seneca the Younger, reputedly her lover. He was to be Nero's tutor, and he wrote *De Clementia* for the guidance of his pupil.

In 54, Claudius died, reputedly poisoned by Agrippina. The news of his death was suppressed until the succession of the sixteen-year-old Nero could be assured. That it proceeded so smoothly is not surprising, since Agrippina had shrewdly replaced the officers of the guard with her own appointees. Nero was taken to the praetorian camp, where he was enthusiastically proclaimed emperor, and the Senate cooperated by conferring the appropriate imperial powers on him (Chapter II). These beginnings may not have seemed auspicious, but the young emperor soon set minds at rest. He was charming and affable, and he went out of his way to reassure senators of his commitment to maintaining their ancient privileges. In his first speech to them, written for him by Seneca, the young Nero promised to model himself on Augustus, noting that he had not been brought up during civil wars and did not come to his position with resentment or a desire for revenge. He promised to keep his private affairs and state affairs separate, he would not countenance bribery or influence peddling, and, perhaps most encouragingly, he would cut down on the practice of trying cases privately *in camera*.

Tacitus observes that Nero was as good as his word, and several beneficial measures followed. There are reports of debates about the rights of freedmen and about jurisdictional issues between praetors and tribunes, of prosecutions of corrupt officials, and of the reorganization of taxes, much

of this happening in collaboration with the Senate and creating the impression for Tacitus that some elements of the old free republic remained. In late antiquity, writers attribute to the emperor Trajan the claim that Nero was superior to all other emperors for a *quinquennium* (five-year period), more likely than not with reference to these first five years.

The initial phase of the new reign was highly promising, and in this early period Nero was willing to be directed by the praetorian commander Burrus and by his former tutor, Seneca. They served to counter the excessive ambitions of Agrippina, who occupied a central position in the first few months, even to the extent of appearing with her son on his precious metal coinage. But control seems to have been ceded very soon to Burrus and Seneca, and it is interesting to note that even in his first emollient speech, written for him by Seneca, as noted, Nero had made an explicit point of distancing himself from some of the practices of the Claudian period. Agrippina's role was gradually diminished, and she eventually became alienated from her son. By the end of 55, she seems to have withdrawn from any active role in political events.

For all its enlightenment, the first *quinquennium* was not free of dark political shadows (Chapter III). In 55, Claudius's natural son Britannicus died, and Nero was suspected of poisoning him, although his guilt cannot be determined. Also, Faustus Cornelius Sulla, Nero's cousin, was exiled as a potential rival in 58. He had close connections to the imperial family and was the husband of Antonia, Claudius's daughter, and might thus have been seen as a threat to Nero. But it was from 59, Nero's fifth year as emperor that things started to go seriously downhill. In that year, Nero determined to rid himself of Agrippina. Why this occurred at this particular time is not fully understood, since Agrippina had not apparently played any major role in affairs of state since 55. Tacitus claims unconvincingly that Agrippina reasserted herself because of her opposition to an affair that Nero was conducting with Poppaea Sabina, at that time the wife of the future emperor Otho. The tradition tells of an elaborate, if perhaps unbelievable, scheme of a collapsing boat that failed to work properly, and has Agrippina swimming to safety, only to be butchered by agents sent by her son to finish her off.

Whether or not there is a causal connection, Nero's conduct after the murder of his mother became far more egregious and far more despotic. The good will that had accumulated in the first five years dissipated. Without the catalyst of Agrippina's interference, Nero found the guidance of Seneca and Burrus no less irksome than he had found his mother's interference, and he increasingly went his own way.

The most striking manifestation of this willfulness was a growing obsession with public performance. Ironically, Nero's interest in poetry had been

fostered by Seneca, who had discouraged him from reading the early orators, and he had turned to verses, which he was able to compose with considerable facility; Martial, for one, thought highly of his skill as a poet (*Mart.* 8.70.8). Nero's artistic aspirations now seem to have become obsessive. He founded new games. The *Juvenalia* of 59, instituted to celebrate the first trimming of his beard, involved theatrical performances. The Quinquennial Games (*Neronia*) of 61 combined in the Greek fashion chariot races and the musical arts. To the shame of traditionalists, Nero began to perform in public, choosing a Greek city, Naples, for his debut, in AD 64 (Chapter IX).

Outside Rome, matters seem generally to have been handled competently. The Rhine frontier remained stable, the serious rebellion of Boudica and its aftermath in Britain in the early 60s was brought to a successful end (Chapter V), and in 63 peace was concluded with Parthia (Chapter IV). But domestically, the reign began a descent into tyranny. Gaius Rubellius Plautus, great-grandson of Tiberius (through his granddaughter Julia), had lived a life of undistinguished obscurity. That said, he seems to have attracted the same dynastic suspicion that brought down Faustus Sulla. In 60, he was obliged to go into exile (Chapter III). Events took an especially serious turn for the worse in 62, when treason trials, which had initially been suspended, were reintroduced in response to the publication of scurrilous verses attacking Nero. The death of Burrus in the same year no doubt accelerated the process of decline. Seneca attempted unsuccessfully to retire; Nero's refusal to accede to his request may have had less to do with any residual respect for Seneca's counsel than with the prestige that the philosopher's name gave his regime. Nero was now dependent mainly on the malign advice of Tigellinus, the sinister commander of the praetorian guard, appointed to replace Burrus. The murders of the exiled Rubellius Plautus and Cornelius Sulla, and the reluctance of the Senate to condemn their deaths, perhaps emboldened Nero in 62 to divorce the popular Octavia in order to marry Poppaea Sabina (Chapter VII). A bogus affair between Octavia and a freedman was concocted to provide grounds. Her subsequent execution represented a landmark in the estrangement of Nero and the traditional nobility, and the consequent bitterness is reflected in the tragedy inspired by her death, the *Octavia*, once assigned to Seneca but more probably Flavian in date. Poppaea was pregnant at the time of her marriage, and in January 63 bore a daughter, Claudia Augusta, who died four months later and was declared a goddess.

Another turning point in Nero's reign occurred in July 64, when much of Rome was destroyed in a devastating fire that began in the area of the Campus Martius and spread between the Palatine and the Esquiline (Chapter VI). Overcrowded streets and timber buildings meant that fire was a

constant concern in Rome, but this conflagration was unprecedented in its scale. Only four of Rome's fourteen districts were untouched; three were destroyed completely. Nero's conduct seems to have been beyond reproach. He was in his birthplace, Antium (Anzio), many miles away, when the fire broke out. He returned to the city immediately and personally took measures to counter the blaze, creating firebreaks and setting controlled fires. This last strategy seems to have been misunderstood, and created suspicion that he had deliberately committed arson. He organized schemes to feed the newly homeless, to provide a water supply, and later to remove massive amounts of debris. He set up a compensation scheme for those who had lost their houses. He also took the opportunity to redesign the layout of the Roman streets, making them much wider than before, and to require houses to be built to a much more stringent fire-prevention code. The centerpiece of the new Rome was to be his own residence, the "Golden House" (*Domus Aurea*), a splendid structure situated next to a lake and embraced by quiet groves. Nero's scheme was so ambitious that it fed suspicions that he had burned down the city deliberately. The notion of arson was fostered by rumors that he had watched the conflagration from a tower while dressed up as a performer and had read out his great epic on the fall of Troy, "fiddling while Rome burned," as later generations would characterize his behavior.

In 65, a major conspiracy took place, said by Tacitus to represent every class and rank of Roman society, rich and poor, but centered on Gaius Calpurnius Piso (Chapter VIII). The plot was both poorly organized and poorly concealed, and the revenge was ruthless and virtually indiscriminate. Notable among the victims were the poet Lucan and Nero's former tutor, Seneca, who found himself implicated after the event and committed suicide. Later in the same year, Poppaea died, reputedly kicked to death by Nero while pregnant, but in reality perhaps from a miscarriage. She was granted a public funeral and divine honors (Chapter VII).

Nero did gain some advantage when he established peace with Parthia and marked the event with a grand spectacle (Chapter IX). Tiridates I, the Parthian king of Armenia, was invited to Rome in 66 and was entertained with lavish games. But such spectacles barely concealed the political tensions. In 66, Thrasea Paetus, a Stoic and perhaps the most admired senator of his day, was forced into suicide for his overt lack of enthusiasm for the regime. Nero did, however, feel secure enough to be able to leave Italy and to embark on a tour of the eastern provinces, leaving his freedman Helios to look after affairs in Italy. The trip gave the emperor the opportunity to indulge his philhellenism. He took part in artistic festivals and managed to win every prize. At Corinth, Nero declared the Greeks exempt from taxation, a measure that

proved to be short-lived but was enough to establish his popularity in that part of the empire (Chapter IX). But, clearly, all was not well. While in the East, Nero removed from office and put to death three imperial legates, the distinguished Gnaeus Domitius Corbulo, who had given excellent service in Germany and Armenia, and the brothers Scribonius Proculus and Scribonius Rufus, legates of Upper and Lower Germany, respectively.

The fatal threat to Nero would come from the western provinces (Chapter X). Helios anticipated the looming crisis, urging Nero to return to Italy, which he did in late 67. The problems came to a climax in March 68 with the rebellion in Gaul of Gaius Julius Vindex, and the revolt of respected senator and soldier Servius Sulpicius Galba, at that time commanding in Spain. Vindex was in fact defeated and killed two months later, but Nero proved incapable of responding to the crisis effectively, alternating between panic and inertia. Galba eventually showed his hand, openly rebelling against the emperor and reporting to the Senate that he was at their disposal. The unrest spread to Africa, where Lucius Clodius Macer revolted. At the instigation of one of the prefects, the imperial guard switched its support to Galba, and the Senate declared Nero a public enemy. He was obliged to escape to a private villa, where he took his own life with the help of faithful slaves. As his final resting place was being prepared, he supposedly uttered words famous in antiquity as well as now, *qualis artifex pereo* ("what an artist dies in me!").

Nero was clearly neither a competent nor an admirable emperor, but he was especially unlucky in his earliest historical coverage and was discredited by the Flavian emperors who, after some months of turbulence, succeeded him. In this Flavian period, Pliny the Elder called him "poison . . . for the world" (*HN* 22.92) and said of him and the earlier emperor Caligula that they were "the fiery destruction of the human race" (*HN* 7.45), and such judgments in this initial period must have played a major role in shaping the image that emerged in later writers. The negative view of Nero was reinforced by later Christian authors like Tertullian and Lactantius, who vilified him as the Antichrist. That said, after his death, no fewer than three pretenders claiming to be Nero appeared in the East at regular intervals. They received a welcome reception in some quarters, indicating that Nero was not universally unpopular.

#### LITERARY SOURCES

The study of any historical period is dependent on the range and quality of the sources available. The study of ancient history faces, to a greater or lesser degree, a special challenge, since the source material is often scarce and of

dubious value. Hence, a very brief introduction to the topic as it relates to Nero will not be out of place.

Most of the contemporary literary sources for the reign of Nero are now missing and have left traces only in passing references in the surviving authors who made use of them. There are the works written by the members of the imperial family themselves. Claudius, for instance, wrote an autobiography in eight volumes, consulted by Nero but dismissed by Suetonius as nonsense “more lacking in judgment than lacking in style” (Suet. *Claud.* 41.2; Tac. *Ann.* 13.43.4). For the present topic, the most important composition in this category is the memoir of Nero’s mother, Agrippina, cited directly by both Pliny the Elder (*HN* 7.46) and Tacitus (*Ann.* 4.53.3). Broadly speaking, however, imperial writings seem not to have been heavily drawn on. The degree to which other contemporary writers are used by our extant sources is much disputed. The Neronian volumes of Tacitus’s *Annals* stand out from the rest of that work, and from the two other main sources, Suetonius and Cassius Dio, for the way in which Tacitus actually cites the historians he used (not his practice in the earlier books). None of the writings of two of them, Marcus Cluvius Rufus and Fabius Rusticus, has survived. The historian Cluvius Rufus served as the herald of Nero when he performed in Rome, and was assigned the same duty when Nero went on his Greek tour in 67 (Suet. *Ner.* 21.2; Dio 63.14.3). All of Tacitus’s references to him relate to the reign of Nero, although he might well have been cited also in the Caligulan or Claudian chapters now lost. The second writer, Fabius Rusticus, was much admired by Quintilian (10.1.104) and was praised by Tacitus as the most eloquent of the moderns (*Agr.* 10.3). He appears along with Tacitus and Pliny in the will of a wealthy Spaniard, Lucius Dasumius of Cordoba, drawn up in AD 108. He published a history, probably in the Flavian period. Little is known about it, but it was used by Tacitus as a source for the reign of Nero (*Ann.* 13.20.2, 15.61.3).

On one occasion (*Ann.* 14.2), Tacitus weighs the contrasting evidence of both Cluvius and Fabius on the question of who instigated the reported incest between Nero and his mother. Despite his general admiration of Fabius, here he follows Cluvius, who assigns the blame to Agrippina. At *Ann.* 13.20.2, Tacitus cites these two, along with the elder Pliny, on the issue of whether Nero questioned his praetorian prefect Burrus’s loyalty in AD 55. The information from Pliny would have come from a now lost work, his *History*, written in thirty books. That work must also be the source for Pliny’s claim, ridiculed by Tacitus, that Claudius’s daughter Antonia intended to marry the conspirator Piso (*Ann.* 15.53.3–4). All three of these contemporary sources seem to have been anti-Neronian; unnamed historians mentioned by Jose-



phus (*Ant.* 20.154) as favorable to the emperor have been lost without a trace. Tacitus also cites the memoirs of the general Domitius Corbulo and the testimony of the survivors of the Pisonian conspiracy (*Ann.* 15.73.2). Suetonius and Dio almost certainly drew on some of the same sources, and they do indeed assert that they used several authorities, but, unlike Tacitus, they do not name them.

The works of two writers who lived under Nero and wrote about him have survived. Seneca the Younger (before AD 1–65) spent considerable time in Nero's company before his succession, serving for much of his reign as his tutor and later as his adviser. One of Seneca's extant works, *De Clementia*, was written to offer Nero guidance as ruler, but it yields very little direct historical information. Senecan authorship is claimed for a work set in the early part of Nero's reign, the *Apocolocyntosis*, a witty treatment of the death of Claudius and of his reception in the next world, eulogistically effusive about Nero. Seneca was also a writer of tragedies. One group of manuscripts of his plays includes a work relating to the divorce and execution of Nero's wife, *Octavia*. The play postdates Seneca, since it contains a clear reference to Nero's death, and is so hostile to the emperor that it could not have been performed during his lifetime. It is commonly assigned to the Vespasianic period.

Although the *History* of Pliny the Elder (AD 23/24–79), as noted, is lost, his great encyclopedia, *Naturalis Historia*, has survived. Published in thirty-seven books, it provides information on a vast range of topics from the ancient world. References to Nero and his reign are scattered throughout and are hostile in tone. On one occasion, Pliny drew on the memoir of Agrippina, for the information that Nero was born by a breech birth (*HN* 7.46).

There are three surviving "main" sources for the reign of Nero. Tacitus (mid-50s–after 118) is generally acknowledged to be the premier historian of the Julio-Claudian period. Born about the time that Nero succeeded Claudius as emperor, he pursued a successful career under the Flavians, which he capped with a series of important historical writings. In 97–98, he undertook the *Agricola*, a record of the career of his father-in-law, Gnaeus Julius Agricola. The work is something of an encomium of its subject but also an attack on Domitian, whose despotic regime may well have helped shape Tacitus's general views on the principate. By 100, Tacitus had written his *Histories*, which covered the victories and the rule of the Flavian dynasty (only the first four books and fragments of the fifth survive), and then turned to an earlier period for his final and most famous work, the *Annals*, which was intended to cover the period from the accession of Tiberius in 14 to the death of Nero in 68. We do not know when he began, but he was well into the work in 116, since he appears to allude to Trajan's final victory over the

Parthians at that time (*Ann.* 4.5.2). The *Annals* seems to be designed in three hexads (groups of six books), the first covering Tiberius, the second Caligula and Claudius, and the third Nero. Books 1–6 (5 is very fragmentary) have survived, covering the reign of Tiberius, along with Books 11–16 (11 and 16 are not complete), beginning midway through Claudius’s reign and breaking off two years before the end of Nero’s. We cannot even be sure that Tacitus had finished the *Annals* when he died.

Tacitus seems to have flourished under the imperial system, even under the despised and oppressive Domitian. Yet there is no doubting the antipathy that emerges from the *Annals*. Tacitus was profoundly opposed to the principate as a constitutional form and was committed to the old aristocratic system of senatorial government. He could, of course, recognize the benefits of an enlightened ruler such as Trajan, but he felt that the system was inherently deleterious. Hence, we should be cautious about his famous claim to write *sine ira et studio*, “without rancor or bias” (*Ann.* 1.1), an echo of the claim made in the *Historiae* “without partiality and without hatred” (*Hist.* 1.1). It is indeed the case that he rarely seems to present facts dishonestly. But behind the simple facts lurk his own prejudices. His assignment of motives, and his coverage of rumors and allegedly generally held beliefs, cannot help but make an impact on the reader. That said, Tacitus’s bias does not induce him to accept rumors at face value, and on those rare occasions when he cites his sources, he can be critical of them. Generally speaking, while clearly hostile, Tacitus is prepared to report favorable checks on some of the outrages attributed to Nero. As an example, he expresses skepticism about Nero’s responsibility for the Great Fire and is the only one of the three main sources to do so.

Tacitus does on occasion refer to the use of direct oral evidence. His use of archival information is not so clear-cut. One potentially important source would have been the deliberations of the Senate. Once senatorial decrees (*consulta*) were passed, copies of their texts were deposited in the treasury, and this was probably true also of their general proceedings, the *acta Senatus*, although we do not know how detailed those proceedings might have been. Scholars such as Ronald Syme have argued that Tacitus’s stature as a historian is largely the result of his wide use of senatorial records, and many of the details in the *Annals*, such as the proposals and counterproposals with names attached to them, imply the use of such material. A recently discovered decree has in fact given us the opportunity to compare Tacitus’s narrative and the primary evidence. The decree passed by the Senate on December 10, 20, following the trial of Cornelius Piso on a charge of murdering Germanicus (the *senatus consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre*), has come to light in fragments found in Spain, allowing us to test Tacitus’s account of the trial

and subsequent events. It demonstrates that he drew considerably on the decree and to a large degree represents it faithfully. The difficulty is that while his account undoubtedly derives from that primary source, we do not know whether it comes from his own direct personal consultation or through an intermediary. Perhaps surprisingly, there is only one instance of Tacitus recording a direct scrutiny of the records, in the aftermath of the Pisonian conspiracy, where he says that he finds in the *commentarii senatus* that the consul designate Cerialis Anicius proposed a temple be erected to the Divine Nero (*Ann.* 15.74.3).

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus was born, possibly in North Africa, in around AD 70. He was an equestrian and held a number of imperial appointments under Trajan and Hadrian, being at one point director of the imperial archives. He wrote prolifically and widely, the twelve *Lives of the Caesars* being his most familiar work. The structure of the individual lives tends to follow a certain pattern, and he will generally describe at the outset each subject's family background, childhood, education, and entry into public life. Then, at the end, he describes the details of the subject's death, often the length of his reign, and his burial, all in broad chronological order. In between, in the body of the text, there are sections dealing with physical characteristics, private pursuits, and involvement in civil and military activities. Here Suetonius generally organizes his material by topic rather than in chronological sequence, assuming that his reader is broadly familiar with the events. Within this scheme, the individualities of each emperor will be brought out; in Nero's case, the emphasis is on how he used his position as emperor as a platform to realize his love of public performance and to pursue his personal artistic ambitions.

Suetonius is a biographer, not a historian. He is generally uninterested in serious political questions if they do not cast light on the personality of his subject, on whom he places his complete focus. (For instance, he does not mention Corbulo, the great general of the Neronian campaigns against Parthia, in *Nero*.) Generally, he is not motivated by the deep hostility that inspired Tacitus. His main weakness is not *ira et studium*, and indeed, in the case of Nero, he does include items that he says do not garner criticism—*nulla reprehensione* (Suet. *Ner.* 19.3). Far more serious is his willingness to lend an ear to the tales handed down by the tradition. He was in fact more than capable of serious research, at times making use of public records and archival sources, and he can be very skeptical of his literary sources. When he conducts his own investigations (such as on the birthplace of Caligula), the results can in fact be impressive. But his skepticism does not prevent him from repeating the frivolous gossip that his sources often transmit, and he

cannot resist a juicy anecdote, leaving it to the reader to exercise a judgment that modern historians would feel is the responsibility of the narrator. Suetonius also has a tendency to take isolated and very discrete incidents and to present them as though they reflect the general and consistent behavior of his subjects.

Suetonius probably wrote about Nero very soon after Tacitus wrote his *Annals*. Whether he made use of Tacitus or if the *Annals*, in particular the Neronian chapters, were even available for Suetonius when he wrote his *Nero* are contentious issues. He certainly does not generally seem to have derived his information from Tacitus, instead going back to earlier sources. Nevertheless, he does occasionally seem to make pointed references to his superior research, the most famous instance being in a non-Neronian context, the debate over the birthplace of Caligula (Suet. *Cal.* 8). In his *Nero*, he goes out of his way to say that he had seen autographed copies of Nero's poems with emendations and corrections (Suet. *Ner.* 52), implicitly criticizing the implication of Tacitus that the poems were plagiarized (Tac. *Ann.* 14.16.1).

The third main literary source for Nero is Cassius Dio (ca. 164–after 229), a senator from Nicaea in Asia Minor. His history, in Greek, appears to have covered Rome from the time of the early kings down to Severus Alexander (222–235). He writes very much from a senator's perspective and is extremely hostile to Nero. Dio could not be called an analytical historian; generally, he assembles facts without attempting any kind of deep synthesis, and where he lays out a view it is germane only to the topic at hand and is not part of a reasoned theoretical framework. Throughout his history, Dio very rarely cites his sources, and he makes little endeavor to distinguish between credible and absurd information. His main value generally is that, like Tacitus, he treats Nero's reign annalistically, and he can thus provide us with a sequence of events for the last two years of that reign, information missing from Tacitus's *Annals*, which break off in the middle of AD 66. Unfortunately, however, the original text of Dio for the reign is missing, and we are dependent on the epitomes made in the Byzantine period. Since these epitomes are more selections than summaries proper, important topics that he might have covered seem to be omitted in their entirety. Dio is far more hostile to Nero than Tacitus and Suetonius were.

Elements common to Dio, on the one hand, and to Tacitus or Suetonius, or both, on the other, may derive from their use of the same sources rather than from mutual borrowings. Dio often has details missing from Tacitus; as an example, his unflattering comments about Seneca suggest a source other than the pro-Senecan Fabius used by Tacitus.

As well as the literary evidence, there are also inscriptions, and, for our purposes, one of the most important sources of epigraphic evidence is the record of the Arval brothers. The cult's center was located some four miles west of Rome at the shrine of Dea Dia, although some of its rites were celebrated in the city itself. The college was made up of twelve members, as well as the emperor, and most of what we know about it comes from the record of its own proceedings. At some point, the Arvals started to keep a record in stone, and this record, albeit very fragmentary in places, survives from 21 BC to AD 304. The imperial family has a prominent place in the rituals, and imperial birthdays and other important anniversaries are routinely noted. The Arval record can be useful at a basic level for providing information on such items as the day and month of Nero's adoption by Claudius and at times for showing when prominent individuals were in the vicinity of Rome.

It might be noted that monetary amounts are usually given in the ancient sources in sestertii, and we have adopted that practice generally. It is not possible to cite precise monetary equivalents, but it can be noted that in the Julio-Claudian period soldiers in the legions were paid 900 sestertii (225 denarii) annually, before deductions.