What is the Historical Significance of the Roman Emperor Nero?
Contents:

Section A: Plan of Investigation
Section B: Summary of Evidence
Section C: Evaluation of Sources
Section D: Analysis
Section E: Conclusion
Section F: List of Sources
Section G: Appendices
A. Plan of the Investigation:

This investigation aims its focus upon the reign of Nero, attempting to access his significance in both an ancient and modern context. I have chosen this question because I believe despite the chronological distance, Nero’s reign still homes very true to those of modern tyrants and bears important messages to historians.

In order to answer this question, I have broken my analysis down into Nero’s modern context and a brief discussion of how the modern media portrays his character. Following this, I proceed to analyse Nero’s impact on his empire and discuss the reliabilities and limitations of the ancient historians who wrote about him.

Throughout the study, I make use of both modern and ancient sources, including works by ancient historians Tacitus and Suetonius, works by modern historians like Miriam Griffin and also works by major TV channels which portray the character of Nero*.

Section Word Count: 149 (6 under word limit)
B. Summary of Evidence:

Upon his ascension to the throne in 54AD, following the death of Claudius (his adoptive father), it is often mused by ancient and modern historians that it was Agrippina (the wife of Claudius), who ruled the Empire, through Nero (still a teenager).

In the Spring of 59 AD, Nero invited Agrippina to join him, despite their then strained relationship (caused in part by Nero’s affair with Acete\(^1\), despite his arranged marriage). Once Agrippina was on her return trip, Nero tried to have her boat sunk (“when at a given signal the ceiling of the place, which was loaded with a quantity of lead, fell in”), Agrippina escaped, only later that night to be murdered by soldiers on Nero’s behalf\(^3\).

Accelerating to 62 AD, signs of stress where forming in Nero’s reign, mainly in the form of violations of the promises he made when he succeeded the throne (“the most serious breach of accession promises, before 62, was the excessive power and influence accorded the imperial freedmen”\(^4\)), despite a stable beginning excluding Agrippina’s murder.

The true turning point for Nero’s character was the great fire of Rome in 64 AD. During the fire, ten of Rome’s fourteen districts burnt down. Despite claims he did little more than “play the lyre” as Rome burnt\(^5\), Nero reacted swiftly, ordering immediate relief for people affected by the fire, opening up sections of the palace and gardens to the public as places of temporary, make-shift shelter\(^6\).

Nero’s greatest moment of leadership arose here; he began vast re-construction plans for Rome, offering to pay personally for the clearing up of the debris. Nero used this as an excuse to build himself a luxurious palace “The Golden House”\(^7\) (Griffin informs us moredarkly that Romans mused Nero had started the fire, creating room for this immense project) Had the golden house been completed, it would’ve rivaled the seven wonders of the (ancient) world, demonstrating Nero’s lack of self-restraint and overindulgence in greed and luxury.

---

6. Ibid.

---
By mid 66 AD, Nero began a violent purge of the senate (following a conspiracy to murder him), persecuting all aristocrats and senators of Rome with treason, giving them only two options, commit suicide and leave all their wealth to Nero, otherwise they and their families would be systematically murdered.

Rome’s people where totally ignorant of the impending economical ruin or the purges (the costs for the re-construction of Rome had spiraled out of control, temples empire-wide where pillaged for gold) due to Nero’s lavish public spectacles, which bore the disproval of the Roman élite (mainly because the events promoted a positive image of the emperor, who organized them and not the senate who weren’t involved in the process.) His extremely unstable personality was underlined one night when he returned home from a chariot race in a rage, in which, he kicked is second wife Poppaea and his un-born child to death.

By mid 68 AD, Nero was forced to withdraw from a tour of Greece at the news a governor in the Gaul provenance declared an open revolution on Nero.

By May 68 AD, the governor of North Africa, joined the revolt, shutting down grain supply to Rome. This resulted in wider wavering of loyalty to Nero, who supposedly planned to stop the impending rebel armies with a gargantuan drama production.

On the 9th of June 68AD, Nero woke alone in his half built palace; the remaining senate had declared him an enemy of the state. Construction had stopped due to economical devastation. Nero assembled an entourage of a mere four freemen, one of whom suggested hiding in the emperor’s old villa to escape persecution. Nero realised that his empire was crumbling, he had lost all he inherited as emperor of Rome and he would be murdered by the senate or the rebel forces. Reaching such a bitter endgame, Nero committed suicide. His supposed last words were “What an artist dies with me.”

C. Evaluation of Sources:

**Source 1 [appendix A]**

In terms of **origin**, the sources (coins 1-4) are in chronological order from the reign of Nero. Giving each an exact date of origin is difficult, though we can establish that coin 1 was created at the start of Nero’s reign\(^{15}\). In terms of **purpose**, the coins were mainly used as a tool (by all emperors) for propaganda, their faces on at least the more valuable of coins, ensuring their image was viewed throughout the empire. This makes the sources of **value** in that they show historians the “official” version of events during Nero’s reign (despite the obscured origin). In terms of **purpose**, it was Nero who granted the minting of gold and silver coins to the senate when his reign began\(^{16}\) (though we don’t know which senator oversaw the aspects such as design and distribution), demonstrating Nero was at least initially keen to share power with the senate. In this case entrusting them with some of his widest reaching propaganda.

In terms of limitations, the coins only show historians the image Nero or the senate wanted to create of him, making them biased and rather un-informative of the actual events of Nero’s reign (bar the obvious loss of Agrippina’s power) as well as what other’s would have thought of him.
Source 2 [appendix B]

These sources have their values in that they where both written shortly after the reign of Nero by two historians given more trust than the majority by historians studying ancient Rome.*

They reflect that there was diversity of opinion on the Emperor at the time, this makes them of value in regard to understanding the differences of opinion on Nero. Their exact purposes, un-clear, like the motivations of the authors, is still of value in its base (to create an account of Nero’s reign), given the reputation and careers of the two creators.

In terms of limitations, what limits both sources, is that they were written at a time when Nero would have been widely detested (the collapse of his reign had triggered a bloody civil war). Hence, making a positive account of him would have been a probable commercial suicide which would have been against their (probable) aims of writing for a profit.

[See appendix B for notes on the messages of the authors.]

Word count: 377 (23 under words under)

---

*2. Tacitus, an ancient Roman historian, was also a member of the senate, which meant he had access to important historical records when writing his works. Of all the historians of ancient Rome, his are some of the best preserved, his two major works are the Annales (which cover the four emperors that followed Augusts, including Nero and is noted for its depth in conveying both the events and personalities of the people it mentions) and Histories which covers the death of Nero to the downfall of Domitian.

Suetonius, was an Equestrian (the rank below senator) he was born in “the year of four emperors” the year of civil war and chaos that followed Nero’s death and died under the reign of Hadrian. His most famous work (the one I use) is called De vita Caesarum which covers the lives of twelve emperors, including Nero. His work is thought to be the source of image that Nero played the lyre as Rome burnt. His piece on Nero portrays him as singing a poem about the fall of Troy and fiddling as the city burnt, though, the actual instrument was not invented until after Nero’s death (this may be a mis-translation).


D. Analysis:

**Modern Significance:**

In both a historical and modern context, the reign of Nero bears much significance. Nero’s *reign* reflects the possible answer to some of the most terrifying questions in history, such as, what would happen if a mad-man with sever insecurities and a god-complex were to become the world’s most politically powerful individual?

But most of all, Nero bears significance in comparisons to modern day tyrants. His purges of the senate bearing a ghostly reminiscence of Stalin’s political purges. His lustful and over-indulgent lifestyle reflecting perhaps some of the monarchs of Medieval Britain. In short, Nero could be viewed by historians as a mirror of some of the world’s worse rulers yet to come. Perhaps best said by Mark Twain (the American writer) “The past does not repeat itself, but it rhymes”.

Hence, in understanding Nero, historians may be able to get a better grasp on the way in which a paranoid dictator’s mind would work, the actions they could take and the way in which they would guise their possible politico-violence to the public eye.

**Pyscho-Historical significance:**

Nero is Pyscho-Historicaly significant in reflecting how dictators are interpreted by different generations. Appendix A, shows Nero as a teenager, controlled by his megalomaniac mother, only to mature into an adult megalomaniac in his own right, killing the woman who, “nearly all implicated” in the murder of her husband. This demonstrates the crucial need of understanding Nero’s origin and whether it bore significance on his later actions.

However, Simon Baker*, the BBC’s* and indeed modern media’s portrayals of Nero’s upbringing seems overly sympathetic and over-emphasised, Baker and “Power and Glory” constantly refer to the way in Nero’s purges of the senate, murder of his wife and other atrocities, are motivated by child-hood influences. This makes Nero significant from the outset. It shows wider, modern interpretations place possibly excessive value upon childhood, in the outcome of later life when generally interpreting historical figures.

Oscar Wilde once proclaimed, “The only form of fiction in which real characters do not seem out of place is history. In novels they are detestable”

This encapsulating the way historians and the media try to use Nero’s childhood (his own history) as the driving force behind his life because it is the only way a justification for his actions can be found.

---

17. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claudius (19/08/08)

*3. Author of “Rome the rise and fall of an Empire” book

*4. The creators of the “Rome, rise and fall of an empire” TV series
Political significance:

Nero also holds significance in showing the way paranoia can fuel politically motivated violence. To a historian who pays attention to less superficial aspects, but to events such as the previously mentioned purge of the senate, fuelled by a wide-branching conspiracy against Nero which was foiled\(^18\), shows perhaps that child-hood was far from the sole and most major factor to blame for the tyranny of Nero. Hence, Nero influences the way we interpret modern dictators, himself an archetype of the dictator figure.

Significance in interpretation:

Nero’s reign has been a point of debate since the time of the Roman Empire. He has bore a significance in showing modern historians how even the ancient historians writing close to his reign disagreed. This enables us to compare the interpretations of different generations on a world leader. However, the sources, at times, can give us reasons to ridicule their work. Perhaps the most laughable claims are about the sleeping habits of the emperor (Of which Suetonius would have had no knowledge) “he was frightened by manifest portents from dreams, auspices and omens…” \(^19\).

In terms of consistency of fairness, Tacitus is possibly a slightly more believable source, recounting the words of important figures such as Marcellus\(^20\) and Curtius Montanus \(^21\). This offers us a wider range of views. Tacitus’s views sum up as Nero had little bearing on Roman future, merely a momentary spike in a long chronological graph.

Overall Significance:

Nero’s significance on the outcome of the Roman Empire seems more like Tacitus’s than Suetonius’s idea. Although awful, his reign had major impacts only in the short term. The civil war that followed his death died within a year and the economy of Rome also regained its former strength over time. Hence, his only significant impact upon the future of Rome, would have been that his purges caused need for a stronger senate, with new-blood, (given the purges decimated so many of the higher class families).

Word Count: 712 (aprox 62 words over)

---


\(^19\). Suetonius, Aprox 110 AD, De Vita Caesarum, ISBN : N/A, Chapter XLVI

\(^20\). Tacitus, aprox 2cnd centaury AD, Histories, ISBN: N/A, Book 14, section 16.28

\(^21\). Tacitus quoted him as saying “The first day after the downfall of a wicked Emperor is the best of opportunities.” - Tacitus, aprox 2cnd centaury AD, Histories, ISBN: N/A, Book 4, section 4.42
E. Conclusion

Overall, we can conclude Nero’s significance in a modern context is in reflecting the way Psycho-Historical interpretations are made and how some Historians over-value certain factors when approaching this. In Terms of ancient Rome, his impact was mainly upon politics and the way contemporary historians of the era interpreted his character and reign.

My overall opinion drawn from this investigation is that although Nero bore significance in several areas, that which he had the greatest impact upon was in the political shaping of Rome.

Word count: 86 words (64 under)

Total Word Count: 1,980 (20 words under)
F. List of Sources:

Books:


Tacitus, aprox 2nd century AD, *Histories*, ISBN: N/A
downloaded from: http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/asbook09.html

Suetonius, Aprox 110 AD, *De Vita Caesarum*, ISBN: N/A
downloaded from: http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/asbook09.html


Film:


BBC, 2006, *Rome, Rise and fall of an Empire: Nero* (Episode 1), BBC,
ISBN: 0-563-49360-7, aprox point: 0:00 – 60:00

Websites:

http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/asbook09.html (Online archive of translated ancient sources) – August 4\textsuperscript{th} 2008

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clauirdius (For information about the death of Claudius) – August 20\textsuperscript{th} 2008

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nero (To cross-reference various parts of various books used) August 2008

www.unrv.com/early-empire/messalina-agippina.php (For information about Agrippina and her early influence over Nero.) August 20\textsuperscript{th} 2008
Section G, Appendices:

Appendix A (Sources A):

Top left coin (1):
Top centre coin(2):
Top right coin(3):
Bottom left coin(4):
Appendix B (sources B):

“He had a longing for immortality and undying fame, though it was ill-regulated. With this in view he took their former appellations from many things and numerous places and gave them new ones from his own name. He also called the month of April Neroneus and was minded to name Rome Neropolis.” - Suetonius: De Vita Caesarum--Nero, c. 110 C.E. Chapter LV.

“But he showed no greater mercy to the people or the walls of his capital. When someone in a general conversation said: "When I am dead, be earth consumed by fire," he rejoined "Nay, rather while I live," and his action was wholly in accord.” - Suetonius: De Vita Caesarum--Nero, c. 110 C.E. Chapter XXXVIII

“Do you suppose that Nero will be the last of the tyrants? Those who survived Tiberius, those who survived Caligula, thought the same; and yet after each there arose another ruler yet more detestable and more cruel…. But the influence of an example outlives the individual character. We have lost our vigour…we are no longer that Senate, which, when Nero had fallen, demanded that the informers and ministers of the tyrant should be punished…The first day after the downfall of a wicked Emperor is the best of opportunities." Tacitus

“…disgusting licentiousness at home on the part of Nero, who in a slave's disguise, so as to be unrecognized, would wander through the streets of Rome, to brothels and taverns, with comrades, who seized on goods exposed for sale and inflicted wounds on any whom they encountered, some of these last knowing him so little that he even received blows himself, and showed the marks of them in his face.” Tacitus

Notes on appendix B:

In terms of message, whilst both emphasise Nero's temper and violence, Suetonius interlinks them with the theatrical sense of grandeur which Nero became fixated with, discussing Nero’s vanity as well as violence.

Tacitus, however, seems to question Nero’s long term impact, discussing how Rome had had bad Emperors previous to Nero, perhaps insinuating in the long term of Rome, Nero held little significance.