



Nero

Jacob Abbott

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Jacob Abbott was a well-known 19th century historian who wrote biographies on various leaders and famous individuals, including this one about the notorious Roman emperor Nero. Throughout the annals of history, there have been few figures as reviled as Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, better known as Nero Claudius Caesar Drusus Germanicus, or more simply, Nero. Even today, he remains one of the Roman Empire's most famous – or notorious – figures, a villain whose impact on popular culture is so vast that his name crops up consistently to this day in literature, film, TV and mediums as unlikely as video games and anime.

Nero ranks among the very worst of the Caesars, alongside the likes of mad Caligula, slothful Commodus, and paranoid Domitian, a figure so hated that, in many ancient Christian traditions, he is literally, without hyperbole, considered the Antichrist; according to a notable Biblical scholar, the coming of the Beast and the number 666 in the Book of Revelation are references to Nero. He was the man who, famously, “fiddled while Rome burned”, an inveterate lecher, a murderous tyrant who showed little compunction in murdering his mother and who liked to use Christian martyrs as a source of illumination at night – by burning them alive. His economic policies, according to many historians, virtually bankrupted Rome.

The best known accounts of Nero come from biographers like Tacitus, Cassius Dio, Suetonius and Josephus, but there are also indications that, to some extent, reports of Nero's cruelty were exaggerated.

Nero was popular with the common people and much of the army, and during his reign the Empire enjoyed a period of remarkable peace and stability. Many historians, including some of his ancient biographers – such as Josephus – suggest that there existed a strong bias against Nero. Part of this is because his successors wished to discredit him, and justify the insurrections which eventually drove him, hounded from the throne, to a lonely suicide. Much of the bias against Nero can also be attributed to the fact that he was a renowned persecutor of Christians, and since many of the historians who wrote about Nero in the years after his death were Christians themselves, it made sense for them to have a jaundiced view of their erstwhile nemesis. Because of this, some historians have suggested that Nero's demeanour and reputation might not be as black as the original sources might be inclined to suggest.

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