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The Roman Centurion Court

The Trial of Nero

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SITUATION REGARDING EMPEROR NERO'S TYRANNY AND ABUSE OF IMPERIAL POWER

IN THE CASE OF

The Roman Senate v. Nero

Before: ***Iudex Maximus Hashem Abu Al Ghanam***

Under Seal

CASE DOCUMENTS



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INTRODUCTION

Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus became Emperor of Rome in AD 54 at approximately sixteen years of age. He was the last emperor of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and ruled the Roman Empire for almost fourteen years.

Nero's reign began under the influence of prominent advisers, particularly his mother Agrippina the Younger, the philosopher Seneca, and the Praetorian Prefect Sextus Afranius Burrus. During the early years of his reign, the imperial government generally attempted to maintain cooperation between the emperor, the Senate, and other institutions of Roman government.

As Nero became more independent, however, his relationship with members of the Senate and other political elites deteriorated. His reign became associated with political prosecutions, executions, confiscations of property, and the increasing concentration of authority around the emperor and his court.

Several events form the basis of the present indictment.

The first is the death of Nero's mother, Agrippina the Younger, in AD 59. Ancient sources describe a series of attempts to kill Agrippina before Nero ultimately ordered her death. Tacitus gives a detailed account in which Nero initially attempted to arrange her death through a collapsing or sabotaged ship, and, after she survived, ordered Anicetus and his men to kill her. The historical reliability of the details varies among ancient authors, but the accusation that Nero was responsible for Agrippina's death became one of the defining charges against his reputation.

The second concerns the Great Fire of Rome in AD 64. A devastating fire destroyed or severely damaged large areas of Rome. Ancient writers disagree over whether Nero himself caused the fire. Tacitus explicitly states that the truth was uncertain and that different accounts existed. Nero nevertheless became the subject of public suspicion, and, according to Tacitus, attempted to redirect blame toward Christians in Rome. Christians were arrested and subjected to severe punishments.

The third concerns Nero's treatment of political opponents. During his reign, a number of senators and other prominent Romans were executed or forced to



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commit suicide. Some were connected to genuine conspiracies, while others were prosecuted on political or personal grounds. The Pisonian conspiracy of AD 65 resulted in a major wave of executions, including the deaths of Seneca and other prominent figures. Later, Nero ordered the deaths of figures such as Thrasea Paetus, whose opposition was expressed through political withdrawal and criticism rather than direct armed rebellion.

The fourth concerns the broader question of imperial authority. The Roman Empire was governed through a political system in which the emperor possessed enormous practical influence while the Senate continued to exist as an important political institution. The precise limits of imperial power were not defined by a single written constitution. Instead, authority was shaped by precedent, legislation, senatorial decisions, military loyalty, religious authority, and political custom.

Nero's reign therefore raises a fundamental question for the Roman Centurion Court:

Could an emperor be held accountable for abusing the powers of the imperial office, and, if so, what institution possessed the authority to hold him accountable?

The present tribunal is asked to examine Nero's conduct as a whole, while distinguishing between established historical events, allegations made by ancient sources, and actions whose legality or circumstances remain disputed.

TIMELINE

37 AD: Birth of Nero

Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, later known as Nero, is born on 15 December AD 37.

He is the son of Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus and Agrippina the Younger, the sister of Emperor Caligula and great-granddaughter of Augustus.



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49 AD: Agrippina Marries Emperor Claudius

Agrippina marries her uncle, Emperor Claudius.

She becomes one of the most influential figures in the imperial court and works to secure a future succession for her son Nero.

50 AD: Nero Is Adopted by Claudius

Claudius formally adopts Nero.

Nero becomes a member of the Julian imperial family and gains a position ahead of Claudius' biological son Britannicus in the succession.

54 AD: Death of Claudius

Claudius dies.

Ancient sources, particularly Tacitus and Suetonius, report suspicions that Agrippina was involved in his death, allegedly through poison. The precise circumstances of Claudius' death cannot be established with certainty.

Nero becomes emperor at approximately sixteen years of age.

54–55 AD: Beginning of Nero's Reign

Nero's early government is strongly influenced by Agrippina, Seneca, and Burrus.

The young emperor initially maintains a relatively cooperative relationship with the Senate.

55 AD: Death of Britannicus

Nero's adoptive brother Britannicus dies suddenly during a banquet.

Tacitus and Suetonius report that Nero arranged for Britannicus to be poisoned.

The death removes an important potential rival to Nero's position.



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55–59 AD: Decline of Agrippina's Influence

Nero increasingly distances himself from his mother.

Agrippina's political influence declines as Nero seeks greater independence from his advisers and family.

58 AD: Nero's Relationship with Poppaea

Nero becomes closely associated with Poppaea Sabina.

According to Tacitus, Poppaea's relationship with Nero contributes to the worsening conflict between Nero and Agrippina.

59 AD: Death of Agrippina

Nero decides to remove Agrippina.

According to Tacitus, a ship is deliberately sabotaged in an attempt to kill her. Agrippina survives the shipwreck.

Nero then orders Anicetus to complete the assassination.

Agrippina is killed at her villa near Baiae.

Nero subsequently informs the Senate that Agrippina had plotted against him and had attempted to arrange his assassination.

The Senate responds with public declarations of gratitude and religious honours for Nero.

62 AD: Death of Burrus and Withdrawal of Seneca

Sextus Afranius Burrus dies.

Seneca subsequently withdraws from political life.

Nero's government becomes increasingly independent of the advisers who had influenced his early reign.

62 AD: Execution of Octavia



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Nero's wife Octavia is accused of adultery and treason.

She is exiled and subsequently executed.

Tacitus presents the accusations as politically motivated and describes widespread public sympathy for Octavia.

64 AD: Great Fire of Rome

A major fire begins in Rome and burns for several days.

Large sections of the city are destroyed or damaged.

Nero takes measures to assist the population and begins reconstruction efforts.

However, rumors circulate that Nero himself ordered the fire.

Tacitus states that the truth was uncertain and that different accounts existed regarding its origin.

64 AD: Persecution of Christians

In response to the public suspicion surrounding the fire, Nero's administration identifies Christians as responsible.

Tacitus reports that Christians in Rome are arrested and subjected to brutal executions, including crucifixion, burning, and exposure to animals.

The persecution described by Tacitus is associated specifically with Rome following the Great Fire and should not automatically be interpreted as a universal empire-wide persecution of Christians throughout Nero's reign.

65 AD: Pisonian Conspiracy

A conspiracy led by Gaius Calpurnius Piso is discovered.

The conspiracy involves senators, equestrians, military personnel, and members of Nero's wider circle.

Nero responds with a large series of investigations and executions.



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Seneca is ordered to die.

The poet Lucan and several other prominent Romans are also condemned.

65 AD: Death of Seneca

Nero orders Seneca to take his own life after Seneca is implicated in the Pisonian conspiracy.

Seneca opens his veins and dies.

65 AD: Death of Other Political Figures

The aftermath of the Pisonian conspiracy produces numerous executions, confiscations, and forced suicides.

The scale of the prosecutions increases concerns regarding the emperor's treatment of political opponents.

66 AD: Execution of Thrasea Paetus

Thrasea Paetus, a prominent senator associated with Stoic opposition to Nero, is condemned to death.

Tacitus presents the charges against Thrasea as relating largely to his political conduct and his withdrawal from the Senate rather than participation in a violent conspiracy.

67 AD: Nero in Greece

Nero travels to Greece and participates in athletic and artistic competitions.

He receives numerous victories and honours.

His absence from Rome further demonstrates the increasingly personal and theatrical character of his rule.

68 AD: Revolt of Vindex

Gaius Julius Vindex, governor of Gallia Lugdunensis, rebels against Nero.



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The revolt demonstrates growing opposition to Nero among provincial elites and military commanders.

68 AD: Galba Joins the Revolt

Servius Sulpicius Galba, governor of Hispania Tarraconensis, declares against Nero and receives support from sections of the Roman military.

June 68 AD: Nero Loses Support

The Praetorian Guard abandons Nero.

Without reliable military support, Nero's position becomes untenable.

June 68 AD: Nero Declared an Enemy of the State

The Senate recognizes Galba and declares Nero a public enemy.

Nero flees Rome.

According to ancient accounts, he eventually takes his own life at a villa outside Rome on 9 June AD 68.

68 AD: End of the Julio-Claudian Dynasty

Nero's death ends the Julio-Claudian dynasty.

The Roman Empire enters a period of political instability known as the Year of the Four Emperors.

The events following Nero's death demonstrate that imperial authority had become increasingly dependent upon the support of armies and provincial commanders.



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GENERAL OVERVIEW

The Roman Empire Under Nero

Nero inherited an imperial system created by Augustus and developed by his successors.

Although Rome remained formally connected to Republican institutions, including the Senate and traditional magistracies, the emperor possessed extraordinary political, military, financial, and religious influence.

The emperor's authority was not simply based on a single legal power.

It rested upon a combination of:

- Imperium;
- Tribunicia potestas;
- Control and influence over the army;
- Influence over provincial administration;
- Financial resources;
- Religious authority;
- Political support;
- Personal prestige and legitimacy.

The Senate continued to meet and exercise important functions, but its ability to oppose the emperor depended heavily upon the political circumstances of each reign.

This creates one of the central issues of the present case:

If the emperor possessed extraordinary authority, where were the legal limits of that authority?

Nero's Early Reign

Nero became emperor while still a teenager.

His early government was heavily influenced by Seneca and Burrus, while Agrippina maintained substantial political influence.



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Tacitus describes an early period in which Nero was encouraged to govern moderately and cooperate with the Senate.

The relationship between Nero and the Senate later became considerably more strained.

As Nero increasingly exercised personal control over government, his court became more important to political decision-making.

Nero and Agrippina

Agrippina was one of the most powerful women in the early imperial court.

She had played an important role in Nero's rise to power and initially exercised considerable influence over the young emperor.

Their relationship eventually deteriorated.

In AD 59, Agrippina was murdered.

Tacitus presents Nero as ultimately responsible for ordering the killing and describes multiple stages in the assassination attempt.

However, delegates should recognize that the surviving accounts were written after the events and contain strong moral and political judgments about Nero.

The Court must therefore distinguish between:

Historical allegation: Nero ordered Agrippina's death.

and

Legal question: Whether the evidence is sufficient to establish Nero's responsibility for murder beyond reasonable doubt.



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The Death of Britannicus

Britannicus was the biological son of Emperor Claudius and therefore a potential rival to Nero.

He died suddenly in AD 55.

Tacitus reports that Nero arranged for Britannicus to be poisoned after becoming concerned about his political position.

The death is relevant to the broader indictment because it may demonstrate an early pattern of eliminating potential rivals.

The Defense may challenge the reliability of the ancient accounts and the evidentiary standard necessary to establish that Nero personally ordered the poisoning.

The Great Fire of Rome

In AD 64, Rome suffered one of the most destructive fires in its history.

The fire began near the Circus Maximus and spread rapidly through areas of the city characterized by narrow streets and combustible structures.

Tacitus explicitly states that it was uncertain whether the fire was accidental or deliberately caused by Nero.

This distinction is essential to the present case.

Nero's guilt for starting the fire should therefore be treated as an allegation, not an established historical fact.

The Prosecution may rely on ancient accounts and suspicious circumstances surrounding Nero's actions.

The Defense may argue that there is insufficient evidence that Nero caused the fire and that Tacitus himself acknowledged uncertainty.

Nero and the Christians



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After the fire, rumors circulated that Nero had caused the disaster.

According to Tacitus, Nero attempted to redirect the blame toward Christians.

Christians in Rome were arrested and subjected to extremely severe punishments.

Tacitus describes executions involving crucifixion, burning, and attacks by animals.

The significance of this event extends beyond religious persecution.

The Court may consider whether the imperial government:

- Punished individuals without adequate evidence;
- Used a vulnerable population as scapegoats;
- Ordered punishments disproportionate to the alleged offense;
- Used public executions to restore political legitimacy;
- Abused imperial authority in response to public unrest.

The Defense may argue that Roman law did not operate according to modern principles of religious freedom and that Christians were viewed by Roman authorities through the framework of public order and social stability.

Executions and Political Prosecutions

Nero's reign saw numerous prosecutions and deaths among the Roman elite.

Some individuals were genuinely involved in conspiracies against the emperor.

Others were accused of political disloyalty, insulting the emperor, or other offenses.

The Pisonian conspiracy of AD 65 is particularly important.

The conspiracy represented a genuine attempt to remove Nero, meaning that the emperor had a legitimate security concern.

However, the scale of the subsequent prosecutions raises a different question:



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Did Nero punish genuine conspirators, or did he use the conspiracy as a justification for eliminating political opponents?

This distinction should be central to the Court's deliberations.

The Pisonian Conspiracy

The Pisonian conspiracy was named after Gaius Calpurnius Piso.

It involved individuals from several levels of Roman society.

Once the conspiracy was discovered, Nero's government conducted extensive investigations.

Seneca, Lucan, and other prominent Romans were forced to die.

The prosecution may argue that Nero used the conspiracy to eliminate people whom he considered politically dangerous.

The Defense may argue that a genuine conspiracy against the emperor had been discovered and that the government therefore had legitimate grounds to prosecute those involved.

Thrasea Paetus

Thrasea Paetus provides a particularly important example because his case was different from that of the conspirators.

He was a prominent senator associated with Stoic opposition to Nero.

Tacitus reports that Thrasea was condemned partly because of his political withdrawal from the Senate and his failure to participate in actions that demonstrated support for Nero.

His case therefore raises a significant constitutional question:

Can an emperor lawfully punish a senator merely for political opposition, silence, or refusal to participate in imperial displays of loyalty?



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The Senate Under Nero

The Senate occupied an ambiguous position.

It remained an important political institution and continued to issue decrees, conduct trials, and confer honours.

However, the Senate's ability to act independently was limited by the emperor's political and military power.

Tacitus repeatedly describes senators publicly praising Nero while privately fearing him.

Following the murder of Agrippina, for example, the Senate voted honours and expressions of gratitude to Nero.

This creates an important issue for the Court:

Were senatorial decisions made freely, or were they products of political pressure and fear?

The Limits of Imperial Authority

The Roman emperor possessed enormous authority, but the office was not necessarily understood as unlimited personal ownership of the state.

The emperor was expected to preserve the state, maintain public order, protect the Roman people, and cooperate with traditional institutions.

Nero's case therefore requires the Court to examine whether his actions represented legitimate exercises of imperial authority or whether they crossed the boundaries of acceptable Roman political practice.

Because Rome did not have a modern written constitution defining these boundaries, delegates should rely upon:

- Roman law;
- Imperial powers;
- Senatorial precedent;
- Mos maiorum;
- Previous imperial practice;



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- The treatment of political opponents;
- The relationship between the emperor and Senate.

PARTIES INVOLVED

Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus

Nero is the Defendant before the Roman Centurion Court.

He became emperor in AD 54 and ruled until AD 68.

Nero's Defense may argue that many accusations against him originate from later historians who were hostile to his rule and that the Court should not automatically accept every ancient allegation as fact.

The Defense may emphasize:

- Nero's legal status as emperor;
- His authority over the Roman state;
- His actions following the Great Fire;
- His reconstruction of Rome;
- The genuine existence of conspiracies against his rule;
- The lack of conclusive evidence that he personally caused the Great Fire;
- The political circumstances surrounding prosecutions and executions;
- The possibility that later sources exaggerated his crimes.

The Roman Senate

The Roman Senate acts as the Plaintiff.

The Senate represents the Roman political establishment seeking to hold Nero accountable for alleged abuses of imperial authority.

The Prosecution may argue that Nero:

- Murdered political and familial rivals;
- Ordered the death of Agrippina;



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- Abused the judicial process;
- Persecuted Christians as scapegoats;
- Eliminated senators who opposed him;
- Used imperial authority for personal rather than public purposes;
- Undermined the authority of the Senate;
- Contributed to political instability that ultimately resulted in rebellion.

Agrippina the Younger

Agrippina was Nero's mother and one of the most influential women in early imperial Rome.

She played an important role in Nero's rise to power.

Her death in AD 59 is one of the central charges against Nero.

The Prosecution may argue that Nero ordered the murder of his own mother to eliminate a political rival.

The Defense may argue that Agrippina herself had considerable political ambitions and that the circumstances surrounding her death must be evaluated through the political instability of the imperial court.

The Roman Senate's Political Opposition

Several senators became increasingly uncomfortable with Nero's rule.

Some openly opposed him, while others withdrew from political participation.

Thrasea Paetus represents an important example of opposition that did not necessarily take the form of armed rebellion.

The Court may examine whether political opposition constituted a legitimate exercise of senatorial independence or an unlawful threat to the emperor.

The Christians of Rome

The Christian community in Rome became the target of persecution following the Great Fire.



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Tacitus describes Christians being arrested and executed after Nero redirected suspicion toward them.

The Court may consider whether the persecution constituted an abuse of imperial authority and whether the accused individuals had been given any meaningful opportunity to establish their innocence.

The Defense may argue that Roman authorities did not recognize religious freedom in the modern sense and that the treatment of Christians must be understood within the legal and cultural context of the first-century Roman Empire.

Gaius Calpurnius Piso

Piso was the leading figure associated with the conspiracy against Nero in AD 65.

His conspiracy is important because it demonstrates that Nero faced genuine opposition and potential assassination.

The Prosecution may argue that Nero's response went far beyond those genuinely involved in the conspiracy.

The Defense may argue that the existence of the conspiracy justified strong action to protect the emperor and the state.

Seneca

Lucius Annaeus Seneca was a philosopher, writer, and one of Nero's principal advisers during the early part of his reign.

After the Pisonian conspiracy, Seneca was accused of involvement and ordered to take his own life.

His death is significant because he had previously been one of the principal figures guiding Nero's government.

The Roman People

The people of Rome were directly affected by Nero's government.



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They experienced the Great Fire, Nero's reconstruction program, public entertainment, taxation, and political instability.

The Court may consider whether Nero's actions should be judged primarily by their effect on the state, the Senate, or the wider Roman population.

PREVIOUS EFFORTS AND HISTORICAL RESPONSES

1. Cooperation Between Nero and the Senate

At the beginning of Nero's reign, the imperial government attempted to maintain a cooperative relationship with the Senate.

Seneca's influence contributed to a political approach that emphasized moderation and senatorial participation.

This early period provides a contrast with the later deterioration of relations between Nero and the Senate.

2. The Senate's Response to Agrippina's Death

After Agrippina was killed, Nero presented the Senate with an account portraying her as a dangerous conspirator who had plotted against him.

The Senate accepted Nero's version of events and voted honours and thanksgiving.

This response is significant because it demonstrates how the Senate could publicly support an emperor even in circumstances where fear or political pressure may have influenced its decisions.

3. Reconstruction After the Great Fire

Following the Great Fire of AD 64, Nero undertook extensive reconstruction efforts.

New building regulations and urban planning measures were introduced in the rebuilding of parts of Rome.



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Nero also provided resources and opened parts of his own property to those displaced by the fire.

The Defense may use these actions to argue that Nero acted as a responsible emperor following a disaster.

The Prosecution may argue that reconstruction efforts do not excuse the persecution of innocent people or establish that Nero was uninvolved in causing the fire.

4. Persecution of Christians

Nero's administration responded to the rumors surrounding the fire by targeting Christians in Rome.

Tacitus records that they were arrested and subjected to extreme punishments.

This became one of the most infamous examples of state persecution associated with Nero's reign.

The Court may determine whether the persecution was a legitimate criminal response under Roman standards or an abuse of state power directed against a convenient scapegoat.

5. The Pisonian Conspiracy

The discovery of the Pisonian conspiracy demonstrated that opposition to Nero was not entirely imaginary.

The emperor faced an actual conspiracy involving influential Romans.

However, the subsequent executions and prosecutions raised questions regarding proportionality and due process.

The Court may therefore distinguish between:

the legitimacy of prosecuting conspirators

and



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the legitimacy of Nero's broader response to the conspiracy.

6. The Condemnation of Thrasea Paetus

The prosecution of Thrasea demonstrates the increasingly narrow space for political opposition during Nero's reign.

Thrasea's case is particularly significant because his alleged offense was largely connected to his political conduct and refusal to participate in the Senate's increasingly submissive relationship with Nero.

His execution may therefore be considered evidence of the suppression of legitimate political opposition.

7. The Revolt of 68 AD

The final response to Nero's rule came through military rebellion.

Vindex rebelled in Gaul, Galba joined the opposition in Spain, and eventually the Praetorian Guard abandoned Nero.

The Senate recognized Galba and declared Nero an enemy of the state.

Nero fled Rome and died shortly afterward.

The collapse of his government demonstrates that imperial legitimacy depended not only upon formal authority but also upon continued support from the Senate, army, and political elites.

GLOSSARY

Nero

Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, Roman emperor from AD 54 to AD 68 and Defendant in this case.

Agrippina the Younger

Nero's mother and one of the most politically influential women of the early



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Roman Empire.

Imperator

A title associated with military command and eventually adopted as a central element of the emperor's identity.

Imperium

The lawful authority to command armies and exercise governmental power possessed by Roman magistrates and the emperor.

Princeps

Literally “first citizen.” A title associated with the emperor during the early Roman Empire and emphasizing the emperor's position within the traditional Roman political system.

Princeps Senatus

The “first man of the Senate,” a traditional Republican position associated with seniority and prestige within the Senate.

Senate

The principal political council of Rome, composed largely of former magistrates and members of the Roman elite.

Senator

A member of the Roman Senate.

Senatus Consultum

A formal decision or decree of the Roman Senate.

Mos Maiorum

The traditional customs and practices of Rome's ancestors that formed an important part of Roman political and constitutional life.



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Praetorian Guard

The elite military force responsible for protecting the emperor and maintaining security in Rome.

Praetorian Prefect

The senior commander of the Praetorian Guard and an important political figure within the imperial government.

Julio-Claudian Dynasty

The first imperial dynasty of Rome, consisting of Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero.

Imperial Cult

The system of religious honours and practices associated with the emperor and members of the imperial family.

Treason

In the Roman context, a broad concept involving acts considered threatening to the emperor, state, or public order. Roman concepts of treason did not correspond exactly to modern legal definitions.

Maiestas

A Roman legal concept concerning the dignity or authority of the Roman state and, increasingly under the Empire, the emperor. Charges involving *maiestas* could be used in prosecutions for acts perceived as threatening imperial authority.

Pisonian Conspiracy

A conspiracy discovered in AD 65 to assassinate Nero and replace him with Gaius Calpurnius Piso.

Thrasea Paetus



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A prominent Roman senator and Stoic associated with political opposition to Nero. He was condemned to death in AD 66.

Seneca

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, philosopher, writer, and former adviser to Nero who was forced to commit suicide following the Pisonian conspiracy.

Great Fire of Rome

The major fire that devastated significant parts of Rome in AD 64.

Christians

Members of the early Christian movement who were present in Rome during Nero's reign and were persecuted following the Great Fire according to Tacitus.

Galba

Servius Sulpicius Galba, governor of Hispania Tarraconensis who rebelled against Nero and became emperor following Nero's death.

Vindex

Gaius Julius Vindex, governor of Gallia Lugdunensis who initiated a revolt against Nero in AD 68.

Public Enemy

A person formally declared an enemy of the Roman state. Nero was declared an enemy by the Senate shortly before his death.



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HELPFUL LINKS:

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.02.0078>

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:abo:phi,1351,005:15:38>

<https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman/texts/suetonius/12caesars/nero%2A.html>

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nero-Roman-emperor>

<https://www.worldhistory.org/Nero/>

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