

Nero: the man behind the myth

What comes to mind when you think of Nero? Probably that he was a tyrant who craved absolute power, who fiddled while Rome burned, who had his wife and mother killed, and who lived a life of debauchery. Quite a charge sheet! But what if this is all wrong? What if it was all invented to blacken Nero's name and we're still being duped by this fake news nearly two thousand years later? This is the provocative question posed by the British Museum show, *Nero: the man behind the myth*.

We're faced with the collision of fact and fiction early in the show. There's the famous bust of Nero from the Capitoline Museum in Rome. But it isn't Nero; only a fragment is ancient. The rest is a 17th century reconstruction that owes more to the restorer's idea of what a tyrant should look like than to historical accuracy. Here too is Peter Ustinov, the celluloid Nero distractedly plucking a lyre as Rome burned in the Hollywood blockbuster 'Quo Vadis'. We're nicely primed for what lies ahead.



Head of Nero, AD 50–100 (with later restorations) Marble. Musei Capitolini, Sala Imperatori, Rome

To modern sensibilities, the facts of Nero's life are eyebrow-raising – betrothed at 11, married to his stepsister at 15, made emperor at 16, ruled for 14 tumultuous years, took his own life at 30. What we know of his life apart from these facts though is largely due to three historians – Tacitus, Cassius Dio and Suetonius. But these accounts, often written decades after Nero's death, were calculated to denigrate Nero as the last of the Julio-Claudian emperors and legitimise the emperors who followed him. At the best, these accounts are a selective retelling; at worst, they are wholesale fabrications. As Thorsten Opper, co-curator of the show comments, 'anything you know about Nero is based on lies and manipulation'. With quiet, almost forensic precision, this show gives us the chance to make up our own minds.



Marble bust of Nero. Italy, around AD 55. With permission of the Ministero della Cultura – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Cagliari.

So let's work through the charge sheet starting with Nero as tyrant. Nero became emperor when the empire was under huge stress. To the east, the Parthian Empire was testing Rome's frontiers; in Rome itself, the senate and the nobility were challenging the emperor's authority; while to the west, rebellion led by the Celtic queen Boudica broke out in newly conquered Britain.

In an especially powerful section, the show gives a glimpse of the harsh realities of life in Roman Britain. Slave labour mined ore for the heavy iron ingots on display, while nearby is a gang chain. Worn around their necks, five prisoners would have been bound painfully close together by this. In the rebellion and reconquest, the major Roman cities of London and St Albans were badly damaged. Colchester was destroyed and in 2014, a remarkable hoard of jewellery, coins and military decorations was discovered here under a Roman house. Buried for safekeeping as the family fled for their lives, the house had burned down and the valuables never retrieved.



The Fenwick Hoard, England, AD 60–61. © Colchester Museums. Image Credit - Douglas Atfield

Nero's response to these geopolitical challenges was carefully calculated, mixing military force with diplomacy. He brokered a power sharing arrangement with the Parthians over the disputed territories. In Britain, the uprising was quickly suppressed but rather than seek revenge, Nero opted for reform, despatching a high-ranking official to rebuild the province. Back in Rome, Nero showed the same instincts to push through tax and currency reforms that harmonised imperial and local currency. Unpopular with the wealthy, these changes were welcomed by the merchant classes and retained by future emperors. So power-crazed tyrant? Not so much.

How about the enduring charge of fiddling while Rome burned? The city was prone to fires, often starting in the slum housing built by unscrupulous landlords but there is no doubting the severity of the Great Fire of 64AD. In another vivid display, a huge iron window grate found at the fire's starting point in the Circus Maximus demonstrates the fire's intensity.

The trouble is, Nero wasn't in Rome, fiddling or otherwise, when the fire broke out. He was 30 miles away at his seaside palace in Antium. What's more, when the fires subsided, Nero showed his reformist instincts again, instituting a new building code and overseeing the construction of new public buildings including an enormous marketplace, an amphitheatre, and a vast complex of public baths. So not guilty on the fiddling charge.



A warped iron window grate found at the fire's starting point in the Circus Maximus demonstrates the fire's intensity (personal photo)

Next on the charge sheet are matricide and uxoricide. But killing your mother and your wife, especially when pregnant, are such well-established tropes in classical literature, we should immediately be on our guard. After all, in the public imagination, these are the sort of acts that make tyrants tyrants.

The role of Agrippina, Nero's mother, was certainly striking. A woman of undoubted intelligence and political ability, she wielded great and perhaps unprecedented power at court, provoking resentment among Rome's conservative elite. The show neatly demonstrates her prominence on coinage. Coins issued shortly before the death of Claudius, Nero's predecessor as emperor, show her on the front of the coin with Nero on the reverse. Then after on Nero's accession, they show him and Agrippina nose to nose, equals in power (and according to the Nero haters, sexual equals in bed too). Then came her fall and demise. A few years later, Nero is in the foreground with Agrippina behind, then she disappears completely.

No doubt the conservative Senate were deeply resentful of her prominence and conspired against her. Maybe Agrippina had outlived her usefulness to Nero too now he was firmly established as emperor. Either way, it was in Nero's interests to do away with his mother and the evidence suggests he may have lured her to her death at a banquet outside Rome.



Gold coin showing Nero and Agrippina, Italy, 54 AD © The Trustees of the British Museum.

With the death of Poppaea, Nero's wife, the evidence is even less compelling. Distraught on her death, Nero loved his wife deeply and was desperate for a male heir. Suetonius says Poppaea was angry with him for staying out late after chariot racing. So perhaps this was a domestic row that got out of hand and Poppaea miscarried, dying as a result and not from a premeditated kick to her womb. The evidence is not convincing either way.

So the charge of matricide may be technically proven but with mitigating circumstances while for uxoricide, perhaps Nero is due the benefit of the doubt.

Finally, what about Nero's love of debauchery? Surely this emperor who dined on flamingos' tongues; who never wore the same clothes twice; who cheated at chariot racing and who pranced about on stage singing and acting woefully; who showered precious oils on his guests' heads as they banqueted in his gilded palace; who twice 'married' male servants, once as husband, once as wife (the list goes on and on!), surely this Nero must be guilty as charged?

Well, that's all in the eye of the beholder. Nero clearly loved theatricality. He let the public watch him exercise to contrast his vigour and youthfulness with frail, remote Claudius. He spent lavishly on spectacles with gladiators, wrestling and chariot racing, cheering on his favourite team, the Greens, even racing himself. He sang and acted well on stage; even Suetonius admits these performances bought 'so much joy to all the people'. The public loved him for all this. They scratched his likeness onto buildings. Men even copied his 'dashing but refined' hairstyle as the show describes it. But the conservative elite hated him for what they saw as his unseemly behaviour that shamed his imperial position.



Terracotta relief showing a chariot-race, Italy, AD 40–70 © The Trustees of the British Museum.

As for his gilded palace, there's not much left of the Domus Aurea, but enough remains to show that its 300 rooms were decorated with frescoes and gold leaf. There's no evidence though for the mile-long colonnade or the 120-foot statue of Nero, nor the other excesses usually held against him, and no evidence either for the ungent-dropping ceilings. In fact, most rooms seem to have been dining rooms, a necessary investment perhaps when you're attempting to keep 600 senators happy by having them round your place to eat each week.



Fresco fragments from the Domus Aurea, Italy, AD 64–68 © The Trustees of the British Museum

Nero's 'crime' then was to fail to keep Rome's elite onside. Rebellion broke out again, in Gaul first, then more seriously in Spain, led this time not by local insurgents but by Roman generals. The senate long unsure of Nero's ability to hold the Empire together turned decisively against him and decreed he should take his own life. Servius Galba, leader of the Spanish uprising, replaced him as emperor but lasted only a few months and within a year, Rome had had four emperors. Eventually Vespasian emerged triumphant and the show finishes with his bust. Except it isn't him. Nicely bookending the show, it's another recarving; this time a bust of Nero has been altered to look like Vespasian. In a final piece of drama, the ghost of Nero hovers above Vespasian.



Portrait head of Vespasian AD 70-80 © The Trustees of the British Museum (personal photo)

This show is tremendous; I've been thinking about it ever since. It's calm and authoritative, moving with ease from splendour to brutal physicality and back again. We might think we know about Nero but we really don't, and the cool, even austere, staging lays out the evidence piece by piece to quietly correct this. I'm not sure it fully clears him of all charges; the facts are buried too far back for this. But he was probably no worse than other emperors; a spoiled young aristocrat maybe from a strange society very different from our own, but no monster. Most of all though, the show urges us

to think about how opinions are formed. 'Who controls the narrative?', Opper comments again, 'It's the people in control'. And rarely has a reminder to question the motives of those who write what we read been as timely as now.