**Nero – An Ancient Roman Tyrant**

This handout is based on a simplified version of the BBC Website’s account of the [Emperor Nero](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/nero.shtml).

**Nero was the fifth Roman emperor and the last of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. He is remembered as an ineffectual, neglectful and brutal leader.**

Nero once famously jested: “Mushrooms must be the food of the gods since Claudius became a god by eating one.”

**a** Which underlined word means *cruel and vicious*? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**b** Which underlined word means *careless, failing to show care and attention*?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**c** Which underlined word means *inadequate, incompetent or ineffective*? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**d** Which underlined word means *a line of hereditary rulers*? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Biography**

Nero was born near Rome on 15 December 37 AD. Through his mother Agrippina, he was the only surviving direct male descendant of the emperor Augustus. In 49 AD, Agrippina married her uncle, the emperor Claudius, and began to promote her own son's claim to become emperor at the expense of Claudius's own son, Britannicus. She persuaded Claudius to adopt Nero as his son. When it seemed as if Britannicus might be favoured over Nero, Claudius was poisoned at a banquet. Nero became emperor in 54 AD.

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**e** **Discussion:** Who had a motive and an opportunity to poison Claudius?

Agrippina clearly wished to rule through Nero. Her portrait even appeared briefly on the coins alongside his portrait. But the new emperor paid more heed to his advisors, Burrus and the philosopher Seneca, and the result was five years of exemplary government.

Behind the scenes, however, Nero was already showing anxiety or paranoia about rivals for his power. He ordered the poisoning of his step-brother, Britannicus, a year into his new reign. In 59 AD, he had his mother put to death. In 62 AD, Burrus died and Seneca retired, removing the key restraining influences on Nero. Free from their influence, Nero divorced his wife Octavia, who was later executed, and married his mistress Poppaea.

Two years later, much of Rome was destroyed in a fire, for which Nero was blamed, although this is now regarded as unlikely. Nero diverted blame from himself by accusing the Christians - then a minor religious sect - of starting the fire, leading to a campaign of persecution. He provided help for Romans made homeless by the fire and set about the necessary rebuilding of the city, appropriating a large area for a new palace for himself. This was the architecturally and artistically innovative 'Golden House' (Domus Aurea).

**f** Use colour coding or symbols to show which word or phrase above matches each definition or explanation below. One example has been completed:

(i) killed by order of a powerful person or group

(ii) victimization, bad treatment

(iii) avoided criticism by finding a scapegoat or by framing someone

(iv) woman other than his wife with whom a man has a relationship

(v) listened to, paid attention to

(vi) excellent, faultless, above reproach

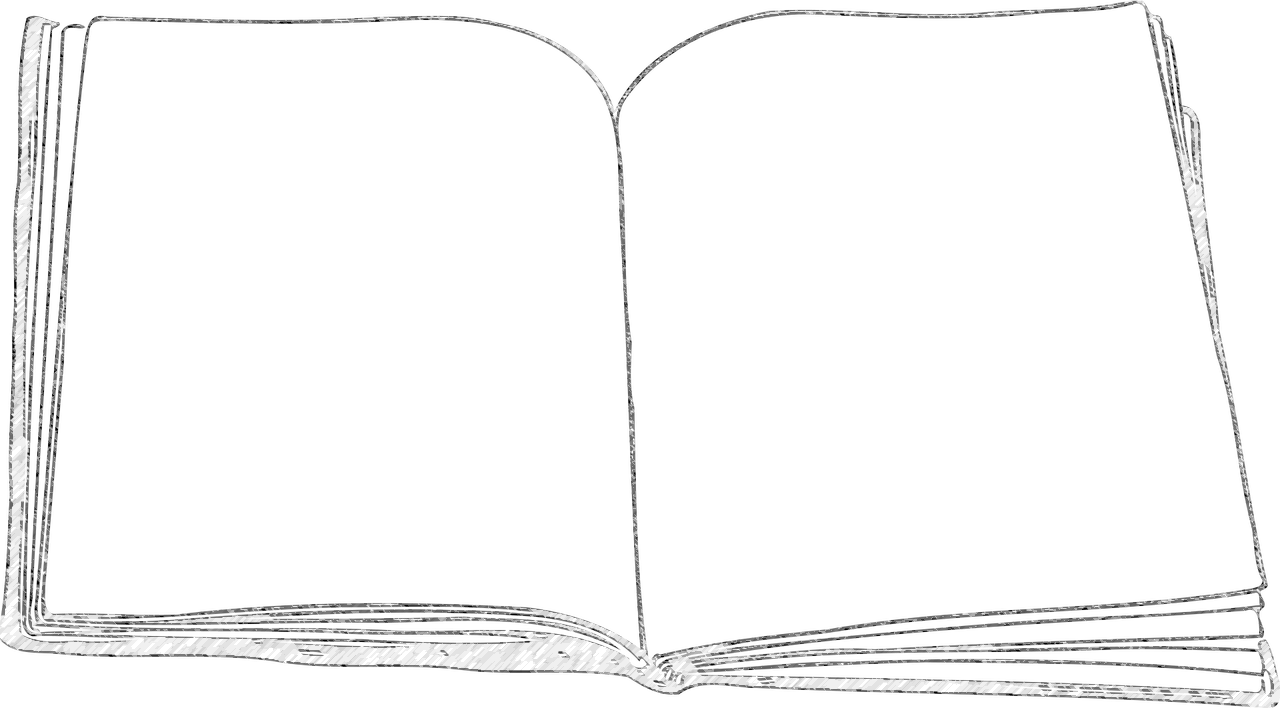
(vii) creative, original

(viii) controlling, holding back

Meanwhile, the Roman empire was in turmoil. There were revolts in Britain (60 AD - 61 AD), led by Boudicca, and also in Judea (66 AD - 70 AD). In 65 AD, there was a conspiracy against the emperor. As a result, a number of prominent Romans were executed on Nero’s orders, including Seneca and his nephew Lucan.

In 65 AD, Nero is believed to have kicked his wife Poppaea to death. His next wife was Statilia Messalina, whose first husband Nero ordered to be executed.

In 68 AD, the Gallic and Spanish legions, along with the Praetorian Guard, rose against Nero and he fled from Rome. The senate declared him a public enemy and he committed suicide on 9 June 68 AD.

**g** Fill in either the **appropriate year** or a corresponding **event** in the shaded cells of the table below:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Year** | **Event** |
|  | **Nero was born.** |
| **49 AD** | **Agrippina, Nero’s mother, marries her uncle, Claudius.** |
| **54 AD** |  |
|  | **Britannicus was poisoned.** |
|  | **Nero had his mother put to death.** |
| **60-61 AD** |  |
|  | **Burrus died; Seneca retired.** |
| **64 AD** |  |
| **65 AD** | **Conspiracy against Nero, prominent Romans executed, Nero kicked his wife to death** |
| **68 AD** |  |

**h** Find an **example** to illustrate each of the following **conclusions**. The first question has been completed as an example:

(i) Nero sometimes acted out of fear that real or imagined rivals would seize power.

**Nero ordered the poisoning of his step-brother, Britannicus, who might have had a claim to become the Emperor.**

(ii) Even people who were close to Nero were not safe from his murderous tendencies.

(iii) During his rule, there was unrest in the Empire.

(iv) Poisoning was one way of arranging an assassination in ancient Rome.

(v) Nero used a minority group as a scapegoat for the catastrophic fire of Rome.

(vi) Nero was prone to outbreaks of violent anger.