

HI 600: **Madman, Matricide, and Monster: The Historiography of the Emperor Nero**

Nero succeeded to the imperial throne in AD 54 when his stepfather Claudius died under suspicious circumstances. It was rumored that he had been poisoned by his wife Agrippina, the mother of Nero. At the time he became emperor, Nero was sixteen, the youngest individual to do so. After an initial period of great promise, thanks to the guidance of his tutors the philosopher Seneca and the prefect of his body-guard Burrus, Nero's rule quickly deteriorated in a reign of cruelty and terror. In 68 his reign ended when he committed suicide after it had become known that the armies in Spain and Germany refused to support him any further. To many, Nero represents the best example of how absolute power corrupts, especially when the ruler is so young and inexperienced. He killed his stepbrother and his own mother, forced Seneca to commit suicide, played the fiddle when Rome burned, and blamed the Christians for starting the fire, thereby starting the first persecution in history against the Christians. And yet, there is sufficient evidence that Nero was the victim of a bad press after his demise. Nero was indeed the last of his family to rule; the new emperor Vespasian clearly did everything to distance himself from his predecessor and to blacken his name. This seminar will examine how Nero has been treated in contemporary and later historiography and popular imagination. What is true and what is false about the most cruel emperor in Roman history?

Required books:

Miriam T. Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty*, New York 2000. ISBN 0415214645.

Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, Penguin Books, ISBN 0140449213

Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, ISBN 0140440607.

Students who wish to enroll for this seminar are requested to supply the following information to Mailbox 5001 before October 26: Name, Student ID, email address, GPA. Students are also kindly requested to indicate which other courses they have taken which would qualify them for enrollment in this course. In addition, students are invited to write two paragraphs explaining which particular aspect of the emperor Nero they find most fascinating. Prof. Kleijwegt will conduct interviews with students in the first week of November.