The emperor Nero (pronounced NEE-ro) was born in 37 C.E. He came to the throne at the age of 16 when his stepfather, the emperor Claudius, died. Nero’s mother, Julia Agrippina (pronounced ah-grih-P EE-na), had married Claudius in 49 C.E. She used her influence to persuade him to adopt Nero and make him heir to the throne. When Claudius died in 54 C.E., all of Rome hailed Nero as the new emperor, despite his youth. At first, Nero seemed to be a fine and worthy ruler. He reduced taxes, banned capital punishment, and forbade contests involving bloodshed. However, his later actions and behavior have given him the reputation as one of Rome’s cruelest emperors.

Nero’s cruelty became evident within six months of his becoming emperor. He began eliminating family members and advisors whom he thought either threatened or interfered with his rule. First, he poisoned his younger stepbrother Britannicus (pronounced brih-TAN-ih-kuss), whom he viewed as a rival to the throne. Then, after allowing his mother to strongly influence his rule, Nero decided she was interfering too much. So, he arranged an “accident” that would result in her death. When she managed to survive the accident, Nero sent soldiers to kill her. Next, Nero grew tired of his first wife, who happened to be his stepsister, Octavia. He divorced her and had her exiled on a false charge of unfaithfulness. Then he ordered her murder and had her head sent back to Rome to amuse his new wife. Finally, Nero turned against Seneca (pronounced SEN-ih-ka), his boyhood tutor and one of his closest advisors. Nero believed that Seneca had taken part in a plot to assassinate him, and he forced the aged writer and philosopher to commit suicide.

Nero’s cruelty was matched by his sense of self-importance. The emperor believed that he could sing and play the stringed instrument the lyre. He sometimes locked people in theaters and forced them to listen to him play. He also competed in athletic events and often bribed the judges and other competitors so that he would win all the prizes. He considered himself a poet, too, and he participated in festivals where he read his poetry.

Nero’s passion for the arts, however, also led him to promote them and thus enhance Roman society. He loved and admired Greek culture, and the only foreign trip he made during his rule was a visit to Greece. Nero sponsored various Roman poets, musicians, and artists. He also established literary academies, which then accepted him as a member.

Nero’s sense of self-importance also led him to begin a building project that cost an enormous amount of money and was never completed. In 64 C.E. he used the Roman
treasury to build a new palace for himself in the center of Rome. After a devastating fire destroyed much of the city, Nero took advantage of the cleared land to plan the Golden House. It was a huge new palace surrounded by fountains, courtyards, a temple, and an artificial lake. At this time, Rome needed a great deal of money to help rebuild the fire-damaged city. Instead, Nero spent enormous amounts of money on “dining rooms with ivory ceilings and panels that turned and showered down flowers, and were filled with pipes for sprinkling the guests with perfumes.” Though builders never finished the Golden House, the project ruined the Roman treasury—and Nero’s reputation.

Many senators and members of the wealthy class blamed Nero for the fire that destroyed much of the city. They claimed he was neglectful and occupied with his own high style of living. Nero tried to protect himself by blaming someone else for the fire: a new religious group known as Christians. Nero claimed that Christians “hated the whole human race,” and he became the first emperor to officially persecute them. People convicted of being Christians were put to death in horrible ways. Many were crucified, or set on fire to serve as human torches to illuminate the elaborate circuses and games the emperor held.

Despite his extreme cruelty and pursuit of personal interests, Nero did manage to maintain a certain level of stability throughout the empire. There were no civil wars during his reign. In addition, the people in the provinces respected the emperor, particularly in the eastern part of the empire. Even within Rome Nero remained popular with many of the common people. They felt he provided for their basic needs—bread, water, and entertainment.

After 14 years of rule, Nero had made many enemies—especially within the Senate. In March of 68 C.E., the governor of the northern province of Gaul (modern-day France) led a revolt against the empire. Nero was very slow to respond to the threat. By the time he finally put down the revolt, Nero had lost nearly all his support in Rome. Even his own guards and palace attendants refused to help him flee. Facing capture and execution, Nero stabbed himself to death as soldiers came to arrest him. His final words were, “What an artist the world is losing.”