**Historical Context**

Emperor Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, usually referred to as just Nero or Nero Claudius, was the successor and the stepson of Emperor Claudius, officially being named princeps in 54 CE. Nero was the last emperor of the Julio-Claudian line, committing suicide in 68 CE and thus, being succeeded by Galba and the 'year of the four emperors'. (Drinkwater, 2018b) His rise to power is significant as it is often attributed to the political manoeuvring of his mother, Agrippina the Younger, who early in his reign, appears alongside him on the obverse of coins. Though Agrippina the Younger had appeared on the same face of coin as her husband, Emperor Claudius, these early coins of Nero's reign depict busts of mother and son facing each other, establishing her officially as the 'Queen Mother'. (Drinkwater, 2018a) In these early years of accession, Nero made 'Augustan' promises of an improved continuation of the Claudian reign, such as relief of taxes and granted praetorian cohorts monthly allowances of corn gratis. According to Cassius Dio, senators settled in for a peaceful and good rule. (Cassius Dio, Roman History, 61.3)

Nero has not gone down in history that way however, as lovers of Roman Empire history will know. Tacitus, Cassius Dio and Suetonius all remark on his disinterest in political affairs (Cassius Dio, Roman History, 61. 4) (Suetonius, Nero, 15) Nero had a dramatic personality and his love for theatre is well attested. He appeared in plays and on stage, playing the lyre and singing. Famously, he once flooded a stage with water and portrayed naval battles such as production of the Battle of Salamis with the Persians and the Athenians. (Suetonius, Nero 10-12) Things started to change after the assassination of his mother, which no doubt he had a hand in. He brought back treason-trials in 62CE and in 64CE the famous Great Fire of Rome was lit, burning 10 districts of Rome. Modern scholars recount that Nero, who was in Atrium at the time, returned quickly to Rome to inspect the extent of the damage and created firebreaks by demolishing smaller buildings and setting smaller controlled fires. (Barrett, 2020) However, due to suspicion and distrust that already surrounded Nero’s character, these actions were construed into the rumours that Nero himself deliberately set fire to the city. The construction of his “Golden House” intensified these allegations as it was so grand that it led to the belief that he burnt Rome down to possess the land. (Barrett, 2020)After a major conspiracy against Nero was exposed in 65CE, leading to the suicide of his former tutor, Seneca, the political situation around Nero became more dangerous as opposition to his regime grew. When a rebellion caused the imperial guard to switch their loyalties from Nero to his successor, Galba, Nero was declared a ‘public enemy’ and driven to his aforementioned suicide.(Barrett, 2020)

**Class Discussion Question**

*There are a lot of different interpretations about the reign of Nero. What do you think? Was Nero a tyrant or simply misunderstood? Or was he a bit of both?*

* Discuss with reference to selected ancient sources
* Consider the nature of the sources – what were the authors’ historical contexts, and reasons for writing?

**Class Activity**

In pairs, have one student describe Nero’s features on this coin as if you were speaking to a forensic artist, while the other attempts to draw him based on based on each of your descriptions. Then select another early Imperial portrait (i.e. Augusts, Tiberius, Claudius) and repeat the activity with roles swapped.

Compare the elements of the portraiture. What did the ancient artists prioritise or highlight? Why do you think they made these choices?