

# NERONIAN ASTROLOGICAL CHARTS

We know something about three of the astrologers who feature prominently in the story. Thrasyllus, close friend of the emperor Tiberius, was the towering intellect of his time. His son Tiberius Claudius Balbillus, born in Alexandria in about 3 A.D., was equally eminent. Like his father he was a polymath; astrology was his principal interest, but not his only one. He served as Director of Alexandria's Museum and administrator of imperial buildings in Egypt. He also held other important administrative posts in the empire.

Ptolemy Seleucus is a shadier figure. He was Otho's astrologer (see Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, Otho), so there is every reason to believe that he was also consulted by Otho's wife Poppaea. He successfully predicted that Vespasian would become emperor, and afterward became a fixture at Vespasian's court (Tacitus, *Histories* 2).

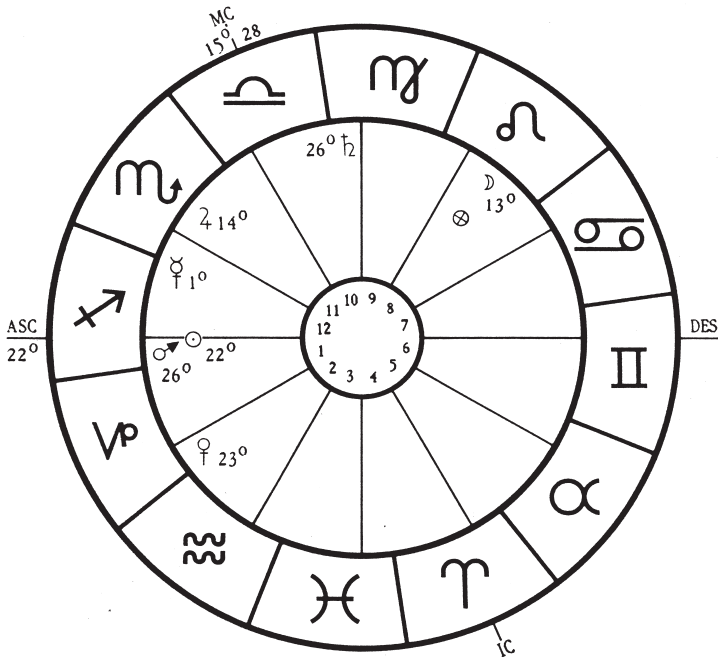
Only fragments of the astrological methods of Thrasyllus and his son survive in the commentaries of other writers, and nothing of Ptolemy Seleucus's. However, the substantial agreement between the two astrology manuals that have come down to us intact, the second-century *Tetrabiblos* and the fourth-century *Matheseos*, suggest that the basic tenets of astrological dogma were widely accepted and remain so up to the present day.

One prominent exception is the familiar twelve-house system where each of the houses is dedicated to a particular area of life: Character, Money, Misfortune, Power etc. Although these houses are featured prominently in the enormously popular *Matheseos*, they are

hardly mentioned at all in Claudius Ptolemy's much earlier *Tetrabiblos*, although Ptolemy may have had the equal house system in mind when he describes the four cardinal points of the chart: the ascendant, midheaven, descendant and the lower heaven or nadir of the chart.

Since the solar system is a vast chronometer with gigantic planets circling the sun with far greater predictability than any pendulum, then as now the current and future positions of the planets could be calculated with the use of astronomical tables. But so can the positions of the planets in the past, even the remote past. With the help of computer programs we can pinpoint the ever-changing positions of the planets during Nero's time with a higher degree of accuracy than the Neronian astrologers themselves.

The confluence of these two facts, our knowledge of ancient astrological dogma and our ability to recreate the positions of the ancient planets, gives us a key to unlock the secrets of the past. Where we know the date and time of birth of someone like Nero, we can re-create, with a fairly high level of confidence, what his astrologer would have told him lay in wait at any time in the future.



**Nero: 07:32:00 a.m., December 15, 37 A.D., Antium, Italy**

“The Sun was rising and his earliest rays touched the newly-born boy almost before he could be laid on the ground.” This piece of information, from the historian Suetonius who was born the year after Nero’s death, gives us the exact birth time necessary for drawing up an accurate horoscope. According to the most famous astrological manual that has come down to us, Firmicus Maternus’s *Mathesios* written in 334 A.D., the sun on the ascendant (the eastern horizon) “foretells the greatest good fortune ... if Mars is in aspect to or in conjunction with the Sun, this indicates generalship and imperial powers, but together with ill-will, danger, impediment, contests and difficulties” (Firmicus, p. 88). Interestingly, Firmicus here also says that if the sun on the ascendant is in conjunction with malefic planets (such as Mars), the eyesight will be weakened. Nero was nearsighted.

Jupiter square the moon “indicates infinite riches for the mother and for the native himself. They attain the highest office and great fame and are deservedly promoted over their friends” (Firmicus, p. 190).

There are also unfortunate aspects to Nero's chart:

Mars conjunct the sun on the ascendant indicates not only weak eyesight but the early death of the father and instability of mind (Firmicus, p. 200). Nero's father died when he was three.

Nero's moon is waning and is in aspect (square) to his Jupiter. According to Firmicus this indicates children who "will be adopted: or exposed, and later returned to their parents. They seek income by their own efforts, and over a period of time receive advancement and achieve power and fame." Nero was taken into the household of his paternal aunt when, in his third year, his father died and his mother was exiled. His ambition was to achieve fame as a musician.

Venus in the domicile of Saturn (Capricorn) predicts that the child will commit incest with his mother (Firmicus, p. 247).

If we assume that Balbillus (Agrippina's astrologer and later also Nero's) believed in the ancient Babylonian theory of Triplicities (signs positioned 120 degrees from each other and therefore "in tune"), he would have noted that Nero's rising sign Sagittarius was "in tune" with Leo, the sign where Nero's moon is placed, the moon that stood for his mother. This would predict that the child and mother would have a harmonious relationship—they apparently did for a time while Agrippina was raising Nero to absolute power. Because Nero's sun was precisely on his ascendant, his Part of Fortune (an imaginary point which is separated the same number of degrees from the ascendant as the sun is from the moon) was conjunct his moon. This Balbillus would probably have taken to mean that Nero's moon (his mother) was his lucky star.

However, the planet that ruled Nero's chart would probably have been thought to be Saturn, "the evil one." Saturn is positioned at Nero's midheaven. He is in aspect to four of the other six planets. He is also the ruler of Nero's horoscopic point, his ascendant.

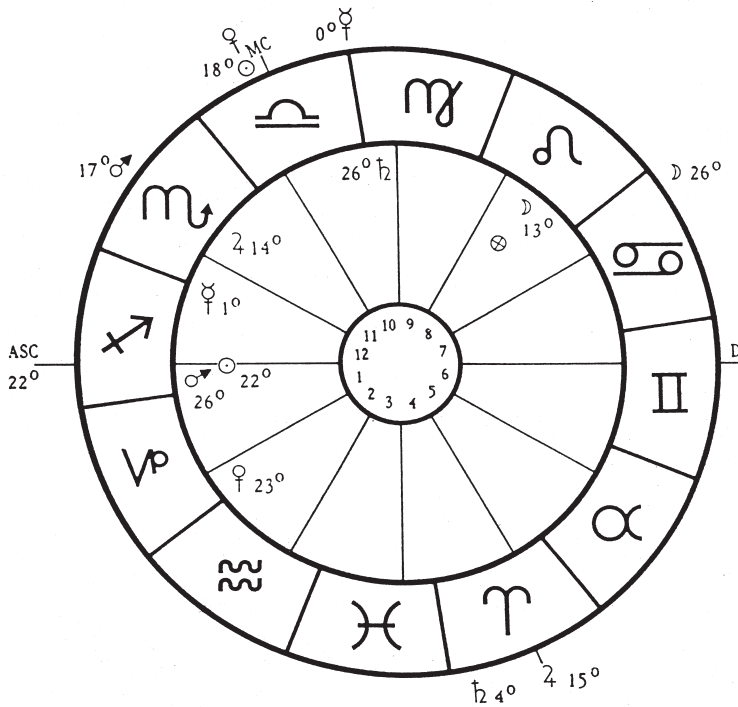
If we assume that Balbillus used the twelve-house system as explained by Firmicus, which is by no means certain, an additional set of interesting predictions can be made.

Nero's moon is situated in his eighth house (Death or Way of Death). When positioned here, Firmicus says, the moon indicates "high position,

large income, honors, and a position of rule ... if Jupiter is in the eleventh house” (Firmicus, p. 185). Elsewhere he confirms the importance of Jupiter in the eleventh house (Friends): “The greatest good fortune and great fame—consular or proconsular power—result from Jupiter in the eleventh house ...” He does, however, go on to qualify this.

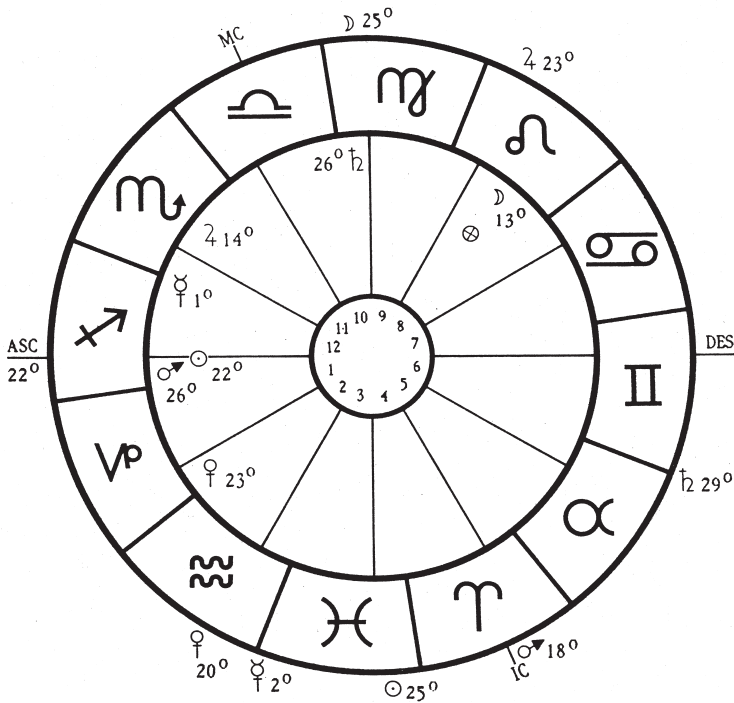
Saturn’s position in Nero’s tenth house, the House of Power or Honors, indicates “emperors, generals and praetorian prefects” (Firmicus, p. 77) although the fact that he is square Mars “will diminish this good fortune” (p. 78).

When reviewing predictions based on Firmicus, one must keep in mind that both Nero’s horoscope and his subsequent destiny had probably entered the body of astrological lore upon which Firmicus later drew.



***Nero's acclamation: 11:07 a.m., October 13, 54 A.D., Rome, Italy***

The historian Tacitus says that Claudius' death was kept a secret to "await the propitious moment forecast by the astrologers. At last, at midday on October 13, the palace gates were suddenly thrown open." (*Annals* 12.66) Only the moon moves fast enough to justify such a perilous wait. As the above chart shows, at 11:08 a.m. the transit moon, whose influence was magnified by the fact that she was moving through a part of the Zodiac which was favorable to her, reached a point which is exactly in a fortunate sextile to Nero's planet Saturn. The Roman "midday" at this time of year was 11:45 a.m. The identity of the moon with Agrippina in Nero's chart should be kept in mind.



***Nero's chart: transits for the Moon of the Year 00:40 a.m.  
March 18, 59 A.D., the death of Agrippina.***

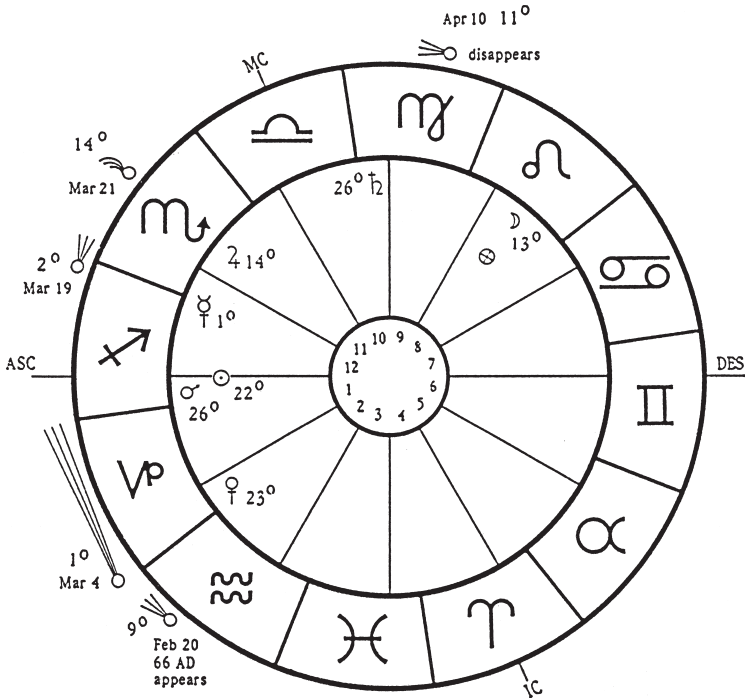
The exact positions of Nero's Saturn and Mars as well as the transit full moon are important for this delineation. At the instant of syzygy (opposition, in this case) the moon was at 25 degrees and 9 minutes of Virgo, which means that she was moving into an unfortunate square with Nero's natal Mars which is at 25 degrees 54 minutes of Sagittarius. The square was exact at 2:44 a.m., two hours and forty minutes after the syzygy. Mars square the waning moon tops Firmicus's list of aspects that forebode a "violent death" (p. 256).

There was a second inauspicious indication for Nero. According to Firmicus the moon moving toward Saturn indicates "enmities and misfortunes" (p. 114). The conjunction between the transit moon and Nero's Saturn took place at 4:25 a.m., one hour and forty-one minutes after the moon's square with transit Saturn. After that time the danger to Nero would have abated.

I therefore have Agrippina instruct Epaphroditus to kill Nero

during the moment of maximum danger (2:44 a.m.) and have the dagger handed to Agrippina after 4:25 a.m. Sunrise was at about 6:15 a.m.

It is important to remember that Agrippina represented the moon in Nero's chart and that the Moon of the Year was thought to be a moment of extraordinary predictive power.



***Halley's comet transiting Nero's chart:  
February 20—April 10, 66 A.D.***

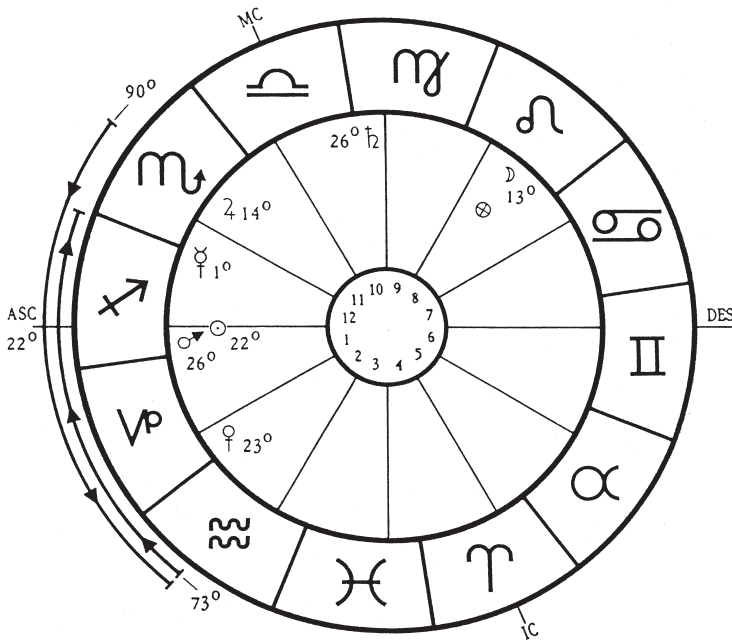
Early in 66 A.D., Halley's comet made one of its periodic flights around the sun. Although not as spectacular as the 1910 visit, the Halley's of Nero's time was much brighter (brightest magnitude +0.7) than during its 1986 visit, with a tail which grew to a maximum apparent length of about 30 degrees (sixty times the diameter of the full moon). Halley's was hidden behind the sun until after perihelion (closest approach to the sun). It was discovered in the evening sky by

the Chinese on February 20 at about 9 degrees of Aquarius, the first recorded sighting of the visit.

Thereafter Halley's rises earlier each morning which means it moves in the direction that its tail is pointing, clockwise through Nero's chart. It shines brightest on March 19, the night after the anniversary of Agrippina's death, when it is positioned at 2 degrees of Sagittarius, Nero's rising sign. Eleven days later it is conjunct Nero's ruling star Saturn at 26 degrees of Virgo. Ten days later it disappears at 11 degrees of Virgo.

The Chinese sightings can be found in Ho Peng Yoke, *Ancient and Medieval Observations of Comets and Novae in Chinese Sources*. My ephemeris for the apparent motion of Halley's through the Zodiac is based on a personal communication from Dr. Donald Yeomans of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, the renowned authority on Halley's comet. I very much appreciate his help.

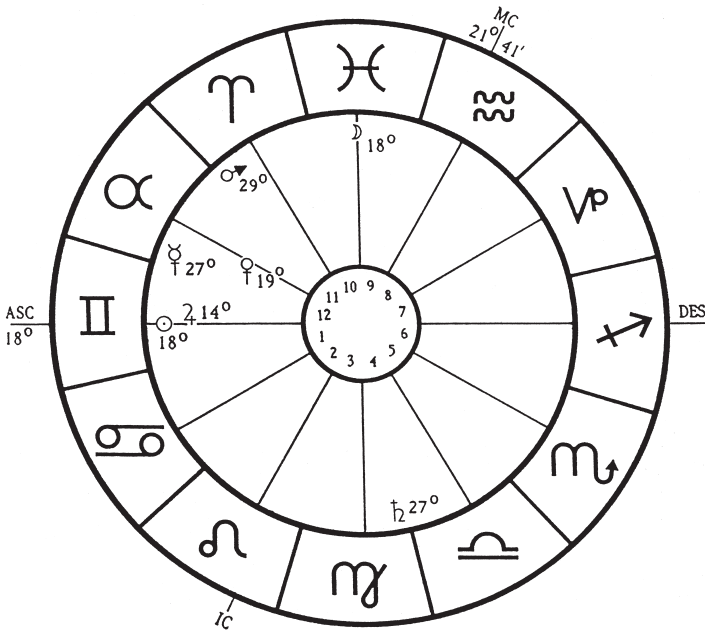
My view that Nero's execution of his most important rivals was in response to the appearance of a series of comets is based on Tacitus, who says (*Annals* 15:44) that Nero habitually "atoned for" the comets which appeared during his reign by spilling aristocratic blood. See also Rogers, *The Neronian Comets*.



***“Beware the seventy-third year”***

The prediction that Nero would live seventy-three years can also be derived from his chart. A fragment of Balbillus’s method of determining the length of life has survived (see Neugebauer, *Greek Horoscopes*, p. 77). His method is based on the idea that a particular planet, selected for its prominence in the chart, gives ninety years of life which are expressed as ninety degrees counted anti-clockwise. Somewhere within this arc of ninety degrees another planet, the destroyer, is encountered. The length of life is found by now counting back clockwise from the point ninety degrees from the starter until the destroyer is reached. Balbillus evidently chose Nero’s Jupiter as his starter. Counting ninety degrees in the order of the signs (anti-clockwise) we reach fourteen degrees of Aquarius. Mars and the sun, both destroyers, intervene. Neither is chosen, presumably because they are within ten degrees of each other (conjunction with another planet is the reason why Mars is not chosen as destroyer in the example reproduced in Neugebauer). This leaves Mercury, not named as a destroyer but a labile planet like the sun and the moon, which along with Mars and Saturn are specified

as destroyers. Thus Mercury becomes the destroyer. In this instance Mercury is positioned in Nero's twelfth house (Enemies). Rounding off to the nearest degree, which is what Balbillus is represented as doing, the angular distance between fourteen degrees of Aquarius and the position of Mercury (one degree of Sagittarius) is exactly 73 degrees which means that Nero will live seventy-three years.



***Nero's death: 4:35 a.m. June 11, 68 A.D., Rome, Italy***

Side by side in the notebooks of the second-century astrologer Vettius Valens are two charts for an unnamed person who was born on December 15, 37 and who died on June 11, 68. What Valens is trying to demonstrate with these charts is how a man's death can be predicted on the basis of the return of the planets to the same basic pattern of aspects as at his birth.

The Moon is square Jupiter at the unnamed man's birth. The moon is once again square Jupiter at his death. The sun is square Saturn at his birth and once again square Saturn at his death. Venus is trine Saturn at his birth. She is once again trine Saturn at his death. Most important of

all, on the day of this man's death, Saturn is within half a degree of its position at his birth.

What is at first perplexing is that the generally accepted date of Nero's death is two days earlier, June 9, when only one aspect (Venus trine Saturn) is the same as in the birth chart. Did Valens deliberately change Nero's birth date to make his point?

I don't believe so. Ancient chronology was often in error and the texts that have come down to us are corrupt. The early third-century historian Cassius Dio points out a further cause of error: emperors, he says, counted the days of their rule from their acclamation, not from the death of their predecessor (Dio 66:17). In order to correct the historical record, he specifies that the interval between Nero's death and Vespasian's succession (July 1, 69 A.D.) was one year and twenty-two days. Counting inclusively, as the Romans did, this yields a death date of June 11, 68 and vindicates Vettius Valens. (See Reece, "The Date of Nero's Death.") This date is also preferred by Edward Champlin in *Nero*, his insightful new history of Rome's most misunderstood emperor (see p. 272).

It is not a mystery why Valens didn't say these were Nero's charts. Casting imperial horoscopes, particularly ones concerning an emperor's death, had been a capital offense since Augustus's day.