

THE ROMAN EMPIRE

IN THE FIRST CENTURY

Episode 3 – Winds of Change

Reconstruction voiceover: “Dearest Mother, what other place could be so desolate, with cliffs so steep, as this rock? What else so barren? So uncivilized?”

Narrator: Near the middle of the first century, a man named Seneca was banished for offending the Roman emperor. He was a living reminder that absolute power could bring absolute ruin. He was not alone. “One man’s exile,” Seneca wrote, “was but a drop in the sea of human upheaval.”

Narrator: For in the first century, no one was immune from imperial abuse. The emperor's whim was law and the emperor’s law could be harsh, especially under Nero. During his erratic rule, fire would gut the city of Rome, Christians would pay the price, and brutality would sweep the empire. Soon, winds of change would begin to blow – first in the provinces, then in the very heart of the Roman Empire in the first century.

Reconstruction voiceover: “In his youth, Claudius set out to write a history. His first public reading was nerve wracking. At the beginning, a fat man sat down and broke some benches. The audience burst into roars of laughter. Even when the crowd settled, Claudius could not control himself. He kept remembering the incident and dissolving into laughter.”

Narrator: Writing 2,000 years ago, an imperial biographer describes a world ruled by Rome; and Rome ruled by an unlikely man. His name was Claudius. Claudius limped and stuttered. An embarrassment to his imperial family, he lived most of his life in the shadows. He found solace as an amateur scholar without power or influence.

Narrator: But as the first century neared its mid-point, a twist of fate had left Claudius emperor and his critics amazed. Claudius took the helm of the world's greatest empire with more confidence than any man since the dynasty began. Claudius expanded Roman territory. To the south, he completed Rome's conquest of North Africa. To the north, he subdued the fiercely independent tribes of Britain. From Turkey to Morocco, from the Red Sea to the North Sea, the many faces of the ancient world had become part of one empire. But Claudius did more than expand the empire. He passed laws protecting sick slaves. He allowed conquered peoples to become citizens, even members of the Senate.

Ronald Mellor, Professor of History, UCLA: I like Claudius. I find Claudius very winning, not just because of the adversity of his youth, his illness, his limp, his stutter. But when he does come to power, he is truly humane toward slaves. He

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cares about the peoples of the empire and he seems to be quite remarkable for a man who had no chance whatever of attaining the imperial throne.

Narrator: But the tranquil years would soon veer sharply off course and the empire would confront the ugly face of imperial rule. Despite his power, Claudius was fragile. His life had been plagued by plots and betrayal. Most of his family had been killed by political enemies. Claudius himself had endured the execution of a disloyal wife. Now, in the year 49, Claudius was seeking a new wife. Roman society mobilized; the rivalry was intense. Many families sought to link their bloodlines with the emperor. While they schemed, Claudius hesitated, and tensions grew. Finally, Claudius made a decision that startled Rome. Writing some years later, a historian named Tacitus explained why: the emperor chose to wed his own niece – a woman of steely resolve and questionable character. Her name was Agrippina.

Reconstruction voiceover: “From this point, the empire was changed. All obeyed a woman. But this was a woman without feminine frivolity. She was openly severe and often arrogant. Agrippina’s dominance was almost masculine.”

Judith P. Hallett, Professor of Classics, University of Maryland, College Park: The most tragic thing about Agrippina is that she wrote memoirs and they have been lost. I would give anything to hear her side of the story. The frustrating thing about uncovering Roman women is that so little from them survives. It may not have been very different from what Roman men would have said about them, but it would be wonderful to hear her rationale for why she did what she did – her way.

Narrator: Agrippina turned her back on Roman ideals of feminine virtue. She seized power directly, and used it proudly. Agrippina struck down her rivals. She founded a colony in her own name; and reversing her new husband, Tacitus tells us, she secured the pardon of one of his exiles: the writer and philosopher Seneca.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Agrippina did not want to be known only for wicked deeds, so she obtained a pardon for Seneca. She assumed this would please the public because he was a popular author. She also wanted Seneca to tutor her young son.”

Narrator: Her son was Nero, a twelve-year-old boy by a previous marriage, and still just a pawn in Agrippina’s drive for total control. Another pawn was Seneca, all too eager to leave exile behind him.

Reconstruction voiceover:” Seneca, she believed, would join her plans for supremacy out of gratitude for her favors.”

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Narrator: As Seneca returned to the capital's ruthless politics, he faced a stark dilemma. He had always scorned luxury and power, and condemned moral slackness. But Seneca was obliged to Agrippina and driven by ambition. After languishing for a decade in obscurity, he was drawn to the promise of influence and to the thrill of Rome.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Look around at the huge influx of people which even a city as large and diverse as Rome can scarcely house. From the whole world, they converge. Ambition draws some; others are compelled by duty. Many thirst for liberal studies, others crave spectacles. Some put their beauty on sale; others sell their eloquence. The entire human race has flocked here, a city offering rich returns for both virtues and vices."

Narrator: Inside the Imperial Palace, Seneca would encounter far more vice than virtue. For after luring Claudius into marriage, Agrippina had begun to weave an elaborate plot. First, pushing aside Claudius' son, she convinced the emperor to adopt Nero and designate him heir. With the line of succession now clear, Tacitus says, Agrippina's only remaining obstacle was her husband.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Her plans for murder were firm. As she bided her time, waiting for opportunity, Agrippina sought the right poison. A specialist in the field was chosen, and by her skill, a potion prepared. It was delivered to Claudius by the eunuch who served and tasted his food."

Narrator: Claudius collapsed, teetered on the brink of death, then began to recover. Horrified, Agrippina quickly enlisted the emperor's own physician in her crime. While pretending to help Claudius vomit his tainted food, the doctor put a feather dipped in poison down the emperor's throat. "Dangerous crimes," Tacitus commented, "bring ample reward." Claudius, the emperor of Rome, was dead.

Narrator: Within hours, the palace gates were thrown open. Agrippina's son was declared emperor. Seneca was launched on a path that would battle his deepest convictions. The reign of Nero had begun.

Reconstruction voiceover: "I am a Jewish man, educated strictly according to the law of our fathers."

Narrator: In the Roman province of Judea, during the lifetime of Emperor Claudius, an ardent young Jew named Saul headed for dilemmas of his own. He was seeking the arrest of religious heretics, members of a tiny Jewish sect known as "the Followers of Jesus." Saul was dedicated to wiping them out.

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Reconstruction voiceover: “Indeed, that is what I did in Jerusalem. I imprisoned many and cast my vote against them when they were marked for death. In my extreme fury, I pursued others even into foreign cities.”

Narrator: But as he walked the road from Jerusalem to Damascus, Saul’s future suddenly changed, and with it, the future of his troubled province, its Roman rulers, and of world religion itself.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Around mid-day, a mighty light from the heavens flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ I replied, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth.’ I said, ‘What should I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Get up and go to Damascus. And there you will be told all that has been ordained for you.’ Since I could not see, those who were with me took my hand and led me to Damascus.”

Narrator: Saul became Paul and he dedicated the rest of his life to spreading the word of Jesus with the same zeal he had once directed to wiping it out. Paul’s fervor drew converts – and hatred. One night, his claim that Jesus was Messiah drew a violent mob. Trapped in a top-floor apartment, Paul avoided death by hiding in a basket. Supporters lowered him to safety through a window. It was but one in a lifetime of narrow escapes. For the next thirty years, Paul traveled some 10,000 miles across territory ruled by Rome. He preached in the empire’s great cities: Ephesus, Philippi, Corinth, Athens, and others. These were cities that enjoyed imperial grandeur, but they were also teeming with the poor and desperate subjects of Rome. They made eager audiences for Paul’s message of eternal life.

Allen Callahan, Associate Professor of New Testament, Harvard Divinity School: There is a legend that says that Paul’s family was originally enslaved by Romans and then later liberated from slavery by Romans and this is how Paul’s family received Roman citizenship. That is, Paul has internalized the experience of slavery and freedom. Paul speaks a message that finds power in this powerlessness. It finds community where community has been destroyed. Paul is the premiere poster child for the real Roman Empire. In this way, he speaks to the underside of the Roman imperial experience.

Narrator: Like Jesus before him, Paul spoke to people in their homes and synagogues. But while Jesus had preached only to Jews, Paul believed his message should be taken to non-Jews: to the gentiles of the Roman Empire. That meant relaxing timeless Jewish laws about food and circumcision. It was a radical slap at Jewish tradition and key to the spread of this new faith.

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Erich Gruen, Professor of History and Classics, University of California, Berkeley: The fact that Paul was a staunch advocate of going to the gentile, not requiring that they circumcise themselves or follow the Jewish dietary laws, was certainly in the long run, of the greatest importance. This meant that Christianity could develop into something that was independent of Judaism. In Paul's day, Christianity was still an outgrowth of Judaism.

Narrator: Paul's abandonment of the laws of his ancestors horrified many Jewish followers of Jesus. But Paul was adamant. As he left the region of Galatia, now part of Turkey, Paul learned that his disciples were backsliding, and requiring converts to be circumcised. Paul sent an angry letter.

Reconstruction voiceover: "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? I wish those that set you adrift would castrate themselves! You were running well. Who kept you from pursuing the truth? Look! I, Paul, say that if you are circumcised, Christ will bring you no reward. For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision nor foreskins prevail, but only faith acting through love.

Allen Callahan: Paul was a man of very deep convictions, passionate convictions. He is very invested in the people to whom he is writing. They are his life. He takes that very seriously. The passion and the pathos of those troubled relationships that he's negotiating long distance come through in his letters.

Narrator: Tradition holds that Paul returned to Jerusalem, intent on voicing his views; that he was imprisoned for causing a riot by bringing non-circumcised men into the temple. In jail, Paul reportedly revealed his Roman citizenship and was sent to Rome. Along the way, he was shipwrecked.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Three times I was shipwrecked, five times I received the 40 lashes minus one. Once they stoned me. I've been in danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from false brothers – hungry and thirsty, often without food. In addition to these threats, every day I am weighed down by my worry for all the churches."

Erich Gruen: It's been said that Christianity might have been possible without Jesus, but it was certainly not possible without Paul. That's a very accurate statement because Paul was able to spread that message to various parts of the Mediterranean from Palestine to Rome.

Narrator: No one knows how or where Paul died. On this, the bible is silent. But wherever he spent his final years, Paul's success outstripped his boldest dreams. He had been stubborn and proud, but Paul had transformed a Jewish splinter group into the beginnings of a world church – a church that would one day conquer Rome itself.

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Reconstruction voiceover: “There is a proverb: ‘You have as many enemies as you have slaves.’ But in truth, we make them our enemies. We abuse them as if they were beasts of burden. When we recline for dinner, one wipes our spittle, another picks up the scraps and crumbs thrown down by drunkards. The point of my argument is this: treat your inferior as you would like to be treated.”

Narrator: The new emperor's tutor, Seneca, had devoted much of his life to ethical problems. He was a follower of Stoic philosophy. In an age of slavery, Stoics advanced the notion of universal humanity, a brotherhood of man that predated Christian doctrine. In an age of opulence, Stoics shunned ostentatious living. In an age of absolute rule, Stoics walked a narrow path between integrity and hypocrisy.

Richard Saller, Professor of History and Classics at the University of Chicago: Seneca was the leading Stoic philosopher of his day. The main teaching of Stoicism was the acceptance of one's fate to play the role that one had been assigned by fate in the world. Seneca's fate was to participate in court politics.

Narrator: Seneca participated in court politics through Nero, now a 16-year-old boy whose path to the imperial palace had been bathed in blood. Seneca's task was to mold this spirited son of a power-hungry family into a tolerable world leader. At first, his chances were good, for the young Nero had a sensitive nature. He loved theater, music, and, the biographer Suetonius reports, the popular pastime of horseracing.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Nero had been passionate about horses from early childhood. At the beginning of his reign, he played every day with toy chariots made of ivory. Soon he wished to drive a chariot himself. So first practicing with his slaves, he appeared before the whole city in the circus.”

Narrator: The Roman Circus, or racetrack, was a rough and raucous place. Chariot drivers were usually slaves or former slaves. Fans often cursed rival teams with ferocious partisanship.

Reconstruction voiceover: “I entreat you, O demon, whoever you are and demand of you from this hour, from this very moment; you crucify the horses of the green and white teams. And that you kill the drivers Clarus and Felix and crush them. Do not leave any breath in them!”

Narrator: Nero's enthusiasm for the sport of commoners scandalized Rome's elite. But it endeared him to the masses. “For such is a crowd,” sneered the stately historian, Tacitus, “Eager for excitement and thrilled if the emperor shares their tastes.” Nero did, long past his childhood years.

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Judith P. Hallett: It is not clear to me that Nero ever changed or that Nero ever grew up. That was both his strength and his weakness. Nero was an extraordinarily popular emperor. He was like Elvis.

Narrator: But in ancient Rome, popularity was a mixed blessing. As the pliable young emperor indulged his various passions, efforts to control him reached a fevered pitch: particularly between the emperor's mother and Seneca.

Narrator: Seneca exerted power discreetly, but Agrippina would not tread lightly. She heard stories that her son seduced married women and young boys. That he castrated and "married" a male slave and, according to the gossipy Suetonius, much worse.

Reconstruction voiceover: "As soon as it was dark, he was in the habit of going to the taverns wearing a wig. He would wander the streets, looking for action, and not just juvenile pranks, either. He attacked people on the way home from dinner, stabbed them when they fought back and threw their bodies into the sewers."

Narrator: As stories of Nero's degeneracy increased, so too did Agrippina's disapproval. Relations between mother and son deteriorated fast.

Keith Bradley, Professor of Greek and Roman Studies, University of Victoria: As Nero grew older he quickly, I think, began to realize that he could not rule in his own right as long as Agrippina still had the ambition to rule through him. It was the clash between two titans, you might say, people both of enormous egos and people with great power lusts. The system didn't allow both of them to rule. So she had to disappear, and if she wouldn't go voluntarily, well, that left Nero little choice.

Narrator: He decided to kill her. The plot began at a seaside resort. Nero invited his mother to sail down to reconcile their differences. When the reunion ended, Agrippina set out for home. Tacitus tells the story.

Reconstruction voiceover: "The ship had just set sail. Agrippina was attended by two servants. One of them stood near the rudder, the other leant over her feet, happily recalling the apologies of Nero and Agrippina's restored favor. Then, a signal was given. The roof collapsed under weights of lead. Agrippina's attendant was crushed and died instantly. But chance intervened; Agrippina was saved by her sturdy couch."

Narrator: Amid the confusion, Agrippina swam to safety. Nero was stunned to learn that his mother had survived. Back in the imperial palace, he called for Seneca and the commander of his palace guard, a man named Burrus.

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Reconstruction voiceover: “It is unclear if they had been advising Nero from the beginning, but the emperor summoned these men immediately. Shuddering, Nero shouted that Agrippina could appear at any moment. ‘She could incite the soldiers! She could arm her slaves!’ Seneca and Burrus were silent for a long time. Then Seneca ventured to ask whether Burrus’ troops should complete the murder.”

Narrator: Burrus refused to involve his elite battalion. So Nero sent some regular soldiers to finish the job.

Reconstruction voiceover: “An armed and threatening force circled her villa and broke down the doors. They found her in a dimly lit room with a single maid. The assassins surrounded her bed. First, the captain struck her head with a club. Then another soldier drew his sword for the deathblow. Agrippina cried out, ‘Stab my womb!’ Again and again they thrust their swords and she was stabbed to death.”

Narrator: Rome was appalled. Matricide was among the worst impieties a Roman could commit. Nero solemnly informed the Senate that the imperial mother had conspired to overthrow him, her own son. But the excuse was obviously a fiction and it was not Nero’s idea. Seneca had concocted the story to justify his pupil’s acts. The moral philosopher was increasingly implicated in the brutal realities of imperial politics.

Reconstruction voiceover: “I write this to you from my winter quarters. I salute you.”

Narrator: Britain was the northern limit of the Roman Empire. Soldiers and their families found it a remote, hostile land with few amenities.

Reconstruction voiceover: “I ask that you send me what I need for the use of my lads, things I need as soon as possible, since I’ve just been transferred here: six woollen cloaks and five tunics.”

Narrator: Lonely letters preserved in mud for 2,000 years echo the yearning for loved ones and for the comforts of home.

Reconstruction voiceover: “I have sent you some socks, two pairs of sandals, and two pairs of underwear.”

Narrator: In the year 60, Britain had been a province for less than 20 years. Like other provinces far from Italy, supply lines were thinly stretched. Without hope of quick reinforcements, three legions and a few forts held the entire province.

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Some settlements, such as the infant community of Londinium, were cities in the making.

Narrator: Rome held tenuous control by maintaining client kings from local tribes and by encouraging tribes to war among themselves. As long as Rome's governor kept them divided, the Imperial Army was the strongest force on the island.

Narrator: That equation, common throughout the empire, broke down just four years after Nero became emperor. It started among the Iceni, a local tribe allied with Rome. When their king died, he left half his estate to his two daughters. He offered the other half in tribute to Emperor Nero. The historian Tacitus tells the story.

Reconstruction voiceover: "The King hoped by such subservience to safeguard his kingdom and home from harm. What happened was just the opposite. First, his wife Boudicca was whipped and his daughters were raped. Then the army laid waste to his land and his household was raided. The King's own relatives were enslaved."

Reconstruction voiceover: "In response to these outrages, Boudicca, the widowed queen, rallied neighboring tribes. Together they attacked Londinium. The British tribes routed Roman forces."

Narrator: It was an astonishing upset and it was not the last. As the Romans fell back in retreat, the tribes of Britain seemed poised to reclaim their native land. Boudicca, defying all odds, was poised to enter history among the most fearsome and charismatic leaders ever to defy Rome. As her emboldened forces prepared for another attack, Tacitus has Boudicca mounting a rostrum and issuing a rallying cry worthy of admiration.

Reconstruction voiceover: "I do not fight to reclaim my birthright. But like you, I fight to avenge my stolen freedom, my abused body, and my raped daughters. The Gods bring vengeance to the just. The one legion that dared raise arms against us has fallen. The others yearn to escape. If you consider our numbers and our reasons for war, you will conquer the Romans or die trying."

Keith Bradley: It could be said that Boudicca was an object of respect to some Romans, who must have admired the courage that a woman displayed in mounting a rebellion against Roman troops. Of course, at first she was spectacularly successful. She led an uprising that made the Romans seriously think about the limits of their power in Britain. They had to respond to her very quickly indeed.

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Narrator: The startled Romans did respond quickly. Soon, reinforcements arrived and the battle-tested Roman army turned the tide. Some 80,000 Britons were massacred. Boudicca poisoned herself. Suicide was better than slavery, the predictable fate for defeated enemies of Rome.

Narrator: Tacitus called the outcome a “glorious victory comparable with bygone triumphs.” But he meant to be ironic. The Roman “peace,” Tacitus knew, was imposed by brutal war. Prosperity in the capital was often bought with the blood of conquered peoples. “Rome creates a desert,” Tacitus later wrote, “and calls it peace.”

Reconstruction voiceover: “This year saw many omens; unlucky birds settled on the capital, houses fell in numerous earthquakes and the weak were trampled by fleeing crowds.”

Narrator: Britain had been stabilized. But in Rome, the situation was worsening rapidly for the empire and for Seneca. New advisors had gained the emperor’s ear. They criticized Seneca for his excessive wealth and unseemly popularity. They urged the emperor to discard his childhood teacher.

Narrator: Perhaps recognizing his weakened position, perhaps losing his appetite for affairs of state, Seneca asked Nero for permission to retire. The emperor refused. For the next two years, Seneca’s life was precarious. Then, in AD 64, a new disaster struck.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Fire began in shops near the circus. Fanned by the winds and fed by merchandise, the flames engulfed the entire district. They surged up the hills consuming all in their path, gaining strength in the city’s narrow, twisting roads. The cries of women, children, invalids, frantic people trying to help themselves or others, all added to the panic. The great fire of Rome lasted for six days and seven nights. Of Rome’s fourteen districts, only four remained untouched. Countless temples, homes, and shops were destroyed.”

Narrator: When the fire burnt itself out, Nero surveyed the smoldering ruins. He opened public buildings, even his own property, to the homeless. But according to Tacitus, the emperor’s aid was cold comfort.

Reconstruction voiceover: “However well intended, his relief measures were in vain because a rumor had spread that while fire ravaged the city, Nero was on his private stage, singing.”

Narrator: Nero hadn’t “fiddled while Rome burned,” but his gaiety was equally damning. Worse, it was even said that Nero started the fire himself to clear land

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for a new palace. The emperor's popularity plummeted. Hostile lampoons appeared on city walls. Insolent citizens even dared to insult Nero in person.

Narrator: Rumors of his role in the fire were so widely believed that the emperor decided to divert attention away from himself. He found a scapegoat in Rome's strange new religious sect: the Christians.

Reconstruction voiceover: "To suppress the rumor, Nero shifted the blame for the fire onto that band called the Christians, hated for their shameful practices."

Narrator: Jesus had been crucified barely thirty years before and while his followers were spreading His word, the number of Christians in Rome was still very small. But already, as Tacitus reveals, Christian converts were viewed with suspicion.

Reconstruction voiceover: "The founder of that sect, Christ, had been executed. His death had briefly suppressed the destructive cult, but again it erupted, not only in Judea, the birthplace of the evil, but also in Rome where shameful atrocities fester and spread."

Karen King, Professor of New Testament Studies and the History of Ancient Christianity, Harvard University: The Christians would have been a good target. After all, their main hero was a criminal who had been put to death by Roman order. In addition to this, they were doing things like exchanging a kiss among brothers and sisters at their meetings, which sounded a little bit like incest. They were also eating the body and drinking the blood of their God, which sounded a bit like cannibalism.

Narrator: Nero rounded up all the Christians in the city. They were hideously tortured and executed. Then Nero plundered the empire for funds. Temples were robbed of their statues. Treasures that generations had dedicated to the greatness of Rome were absorbed into imperial coffers.

Narrator: For Seneca this was the last straw. He pretended illness and confined himself to bed. Eventually Nero allowed his aging tutor to retire to the country. There, on his private estate, Seneca could reflect on the tattered remnants of his honor.

Reconstruction voiceover: "If someone who barks against philosophy should ask the standard question, 'Why do you preach more boldly than you live?' I will someday reproach myself more strongly still. But for now, I make this defense: I am not wise and never will be. Demand not that I be equal to the best, but better than the wicked."

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Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, Director, British School, Rome: Seneca of course, knows very well that he isn't a perfect man. To play around in the court is to be trapped in a system of hypocrisy. Quite frankly, he pushes Stoicism at the end of his life, when he's trying to distance himself from the vast embarrassments he's got involved in. He's gradually realized that he can't control the young Nero.

Narrator: Nero was beyond anyone's control. With his mother dead, his tutor retired, Rome was subject to the whims of an unstable tyrant. Only one course of action could remove him.

Reconstruction voiceover: "A conspiracy was born and grew, a plot which senators, knights, and even women competed to join out of hatred for Nero."

Narrator: In the year 65, a few defiant Romans began talking of murder, but stymied by fear, they hesitated. Finally, a freed slave named Epicharis took charge. She found a disgruntled officer who had access to the emperor. Meeting him in secret, she begged the officer to strike the first blow and free Rome of the tyrant.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Epicharis began by listing the emperor's crimes. There was only one way, she said, to punish Nero. And the officer could expect a worthy reward."

Narrator: It was a fatal mistake. The officer betrayed Epicharis to Nero and Nero sought revenge. He demanded the names of the plotters. Epicharis refused. He raged, he threatened and worse.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Assuming a woman's body was not equal to the pain of torture, he ordered her torn to pieces. But neither whips, nor fire could break her iron will. Even when dragged back a second day on dislocated limbs, she didn't betray her co-conspirators. Thus, this freed slave woman outshone freeborn men, knights, and senators."

Narrator: The next day Epicharis tied a noose around her neck and ended her life. With the plotters still at large, Nero redoubled his guard and unleashed a reign of terror. Countless people, some innocent, some guilty, were sucked into the fury of Nero's revenge. Seneca was one of them. On meager evidence, the emperor sent an officer to demand the philosopher's suicide.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Seneca embraced his wife and gently begged her to live and temper her grief. But she chose to die with him. With a single stroke of the blade, they sliced their arms. Seneca, hardened by frugal living, did not bleed easily. He cut the veins of his knees and thighs. But still he did not die. He asked

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his doctor to dispense some poison hemlock. He drank it in vain. Finally, he was carried into the baths, where he suffocated in vapor.”

Narrator: Few philosophers had reached such powerful heights. Few paid so dearly. Seneca’s actions fell short of his ideals. But history, he hoped, would judge him well.

Reconstruction voiceover: “The man who considers his generation alone is born for few. Many thousands of years and people will come after him. Look to these. If virtue brings fame, our reputation will survive. Posterity will judge without malice and honor our memory.”

Narrator: As Seneca's life blood drained away, the wicked were left ruling Rome alone. While Rome was besieged by its own ruler, the empire’s distant subjects were once again chafing under Roman rule – this time, in the province of Judea. After 70 years of subjugation, the region was slipping into chaos. Bandits prowled the countryside. Jewish terrorists began attacking people who collaborated with Rome, people like Josephus, a wealthy Jewish priest who feared for his life.

Reconstruction voiceover: “These criminals would kill men in broad daylight in the middle of the city, especially during festivals. They would mingle in the crowd, hiding small daggers under their clothes and using them to stab their enemies. Many were killed each day and terror stalked the city.”

Narrator: Judea was one spark away from revolt. That spark came in the year 66. Someone emptied a chamber pot outside a synagogue defiling the holy site. The Jews were outraged; rioting erupted. During the melee, some Jews shouted insults at the Roman governor, a man named Florus. Enraged, Florus pulled Jewish leaders before a tribunal.

Narrator: It was a pivotal moment in Josephus’ life and in the lives of others struggling between cooperation with Rome and their Jewish heritage.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Florus demanded the Jewish leaders hand over the hecklers. The men refused, insisting they could not identify the guilty from the innocent. Florus, they said, should pardon the unknown scoundrels for the sake of the whole city. Provoked even more by this impudent speech, Florus shouted to the soldiers to plunder the market and to kill all they saw. Even prominent citizens were taken to Florus, who had them whipped and crucified.”

Erich Gruen: Florus conducted a wholesale massacre in the streets of Jerusalem and the brutality and viciousness reached a point where Josephus himself, or so he tells us, that Josephus decided that under these circumstances, there was no way he could do anything other than take up his post as a leader of the Jews.

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Narrator: Within months, the former priest was leading a full-scale Jewish rebellion, and confronting a battle-tested Roman army as it swept across his homeland. "From one end of Galilee to the other," Josephus recounted, "there was an orgy of fire and bloodshed." Eventually, Josephus and his beleaguered troops took refuge within the walled city of Jotapata. The Romans surrounded it. On the 47th day, just before dawn, Roman soldiers scaled the city's high walls. While the Jews slept, Roman troops streamed into the city. Forty thousand Jews were killed. Josephus and 40 others fled to a concealed cave. There was no escape and choosing death over surrender, his followers prepared to kill themselves. But Josephus argued that Jewish law prohibited suicide.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Trusting God, I staked my life on a fateful gamble. 'Since we expect to die,' I said, 'let us draw lots and assign our deaths to each other. He who draws the first shard will fall by the hand of the next and so on. In this way, no one will kill himself.' My listeners were convinced and I drew with the rest. Each died in turn. Soon, whether by chance or God's will, I was left with only one man. Eager to avoid the fate of the lottery, I persuaded him to stay alive."

Erich Gruen: Josephus tells this story. You would think it would be embarrassing, humiliating and utterly self-destructive, in a way, to tell this story. Why does he tell it? I don't think anybody has come up with an adequate explanation of Josephus' psyche here. One can talk guilt feelings and so on. There may be a much simpler explanation. Namely, that he got out of the siege of Jotapata alive when nobody else did. I think it was a source of considerable hostility to the Jews so he needed to come up with some explanation.

Narrator: The "explanation" took shape just hours later. When Josephus emerged from the cave, he was brought before Vespasian, the victorious Roman general. Josephus was sure to face death or slavery. But his guile did not desert him. Jewish prophets had predicted that a new world leader would emerge from the east. Josephus declared that Vespasian was that man. Bemused, Vespasian let Josephus live. But as the Roman army prepared for its final attack, events in Rome brought the campaign to an abrupt halt and the imperial household to a frenzy of panic. Nero's biographer reports that the emperor's reign of terror had finally gone too far and in the year 68, Josephus' prediction was becoming reality: Nero was losing his grip.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Having endured such a tempestuous emperor for almost 14 years, the world at last dismissed him. The uprising began in the northern territories."

Narrator: Nero had tried to purge the ranks of the military. Armies from two provinces rebelled and began to march towards the capital.

THE ROMAN EMPIRE

IN THE FIRST CENTURY

Reconstruction voiceover: “When Nero learned of the revolt he collapsed and lay on the floor, stunned and deathly silent. When word reached him that other armies had also defected, he tore up the dispatches and tried to enlist his officers to flee with him. Some turned their backs and others openly refused.”

Narrator: Senators also turned on Nero. They declared him a public enemy, permitting him to be killed with impunity. Terrified, the emperor fled to the country with his few remaining slaves.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Although he was barefoot and wearing only a tunic, he grabbed a hooded cloak and galloped away to an old villa. While waiting for servants to prepare a secret entrance, he cleaned his torn cloak of thorns then crawled in. He ordered them to dig his own grave. Weeping as he spoke, he moaned over and over, ‘Such an artist dies in me!’ With the help of his secretary, he drove an iron blade into his throat.”

Narrator: The Dynasty of Augustus was extinct. The empire was rudderless. As the year 68 drew to a close, rival generals began marching towards the capital. Civil war closed in on Rome.

ENDS