

## The Great Fire of Rome

by S.B.P. Haag

Huge urban conflagrations are notorious, terrifying, and inevitably, I suppose, fascinating. The Great Fires of London, San Francisco, Chicago come quickly to mind. Some result from a natural disaster, for example, earthquake (Lisbon, San Francisco). Some follow a deliberately planned human attack, which without a doubt constitutes an appalling mass murder (Dresden, Nagasaki). Some have the horrid fascination of being started by some tiny mishap (Chicago, London: remember Mrs. O'Leary's cow or the baker's shop in Pudding Lane?).

Ancient Rome suffered from a number of widespread fires, but the worst was certainly the Neronian or Great Fire of AD 64. Tacitus describes it in Book 15 of his *Annals* (chapters 38-43) as "the most appalling and destructive fire which the city ever experienced." For a week or more the fire roared through the overcrowded alleys and apartment buildings, temples, shops and recreational areas of midsummer Rome. No doubt the weather was hot and dry, for it was mid-July, and Romans with a grim taste for the ironies of history recalled that July 19th was also the traditional date on which the Gauls had sacked and burned Rome almost half a millennium earlier.

The cause of the fire's outbreak was then and remains uncertain. Tacitus simply says that it broke out in shops which were selling inflammable

goods, presumably oil, wax, wooden articles or something of the sort. These *tabernae* were at the north-eastern end of the Circus Maximus, perhaps in the arcades abutting the vast banks of seats of the great racecourse, and along the streets between the Circus, the Palatine and the Caelian Hills, the tenth and eleventh 'regions' or, as we might say, 'wards' of the city. In spite of the hostile assumption by other ancient authors, such as Suetonius (*Nero*, 38), Cassius Dio (*R.H.* 62.16) and Elder Pliny (*N.H.* 17.1), that Nero himself caused the fire to be set, Tacitus makes it clear that Nero was not actually in Rome at all, but at Antium, on the coast ca. 40 miles south of Rome, when the fire began. Yet even Tacitus recognises that there were two accounts from the start of the fire's origin: chance (*fors*), or the emperor's criminal intention (*dolus principis*).

July 19th was a windy day, and the fire swept along the full length of the Circus, some third of a mile or so, says Tacitus, since there were no obstacles to delay its advance, such as the high walls surrounding temples or private mansions, which might act as firewalls. He describes the speed with which the flames spread first through the constricted and twisting alleys and roads on the low ground, then up onto the hills and down again into more of the narrow lanes between the all too flammable blocks of housing and shops typical of old Rome.

The people caught up in the fire naturally panicked. Tacitus tells of the "cries of terrified women, weak old age, inexperienced children, those who thought only of themselves, those who thought only of others, while some dragged the injured, others waited for them, some delayed, some hurried on - all were in everyone's way." In their desperate attempts to escape, many lost everything: possessions, family members, their own lives. Many fled into neighbouring regions of the city, only to find that they were not yet safe from the flames, which apparently "nobody dared to fight." Tacitus clearly reports that threats were made against any who did attempt to put out the fires, while "others quite openly were hurling firebrands, shouting that they were under orders to do so." Suetonius supports this claim, though he puts the worst possible construction on it. Nero's own slaves, he says, were responsible for burning senators' mansions, temples, granaries and tenements alike, so that the imperial looter *par excellence* could enrich himself yet further at his citizens' expense. However, Tacitus goes on to explain that the fire was eventually halted near the Esquiline Hill "by the extensive demolition of buildings, so that cleared ground and open sky could oppose the continuing violence of the conflagration." We may believe, then, that while looters and arsonists were perhaps criminal enough to take advantage of the panic and to spread the flames, there may well have been efforts, under official orders, to burn entire blocks in an attempt to clear an adequate firebreak. That would certainly have been easily misconstrued into the rumour that Nero was responsible for the disaster.

the far side of the Tiber where the Vatican now stands. He also ordered the construction of temporary shelters for the homeless, and brought disaster relief supplies from neighbouring communities, including grain from the Ostian warehouses downriver. All to little effect, comments Tacitus, "for the rumour got about that when the fire began he had given a lyric performance, on his private stage, of the 'Fall of Troy', likening that old disaster to this one."

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All the same, Nero apparently tried to help. He must have left Antium as soon as the news reached him, if, as Tacitus writes, he came as the flames neared his palace, the Domus Transitoria, which lay between the Palatine and the Esquiline. Not that anything could be done to save the whole district: palaces and slums alike burned. Nero threw open for the victims' relief large areas of the Campus Martius along with the public buildings associated with Agrippa's name, as well as his own ancestral gardens on

Six days and seven nights Rome burned, writes Suetonius, and the homeless took shelter even in the tombs which lined the roads outside the city. Tacitus' estimate of the carnage: "four regions remained untouched, three were razed to the ground, the other seven retained only a few ruined and smouldering relics of buildings." Modern scholars suggest that the 14th, 1st, 5th and 6th regions survived intact; the 3rd, 10th and 11th were