

There are, of course, two forces to fire, beneficial and destructive. In honour and worship of the positive value of fire the Romans organized the cult of Vesta with its six Vestal Virgins to tend the sacred, eternal flame. However, it is to the ruinous and fear-provoking side of fire that this article turns its attention.

The horror in the Republic was that, for fear of creating a politically dangerous para-military force, the city had no fire department, leaving the extinguishing of conflagrations to the efforts of the zealous but untrained citizenry and the slaves of wealthy residents whose property was threatened. There exists in Plutarch a classic anecdote about how the triumvir Crassus made millions by buying up burned, burning and about to burn property for peanuts; then with his squad of 500 slaves he controlled the blazes and rebuilt the buildings. Because buildings were of poor inflammable quality, crowded close together, and heated with dangerous hypocausts under the floor or upsetttable charcoal braziers, fires were an ever present threat to rich and poor alike. Later the many imperial baths were also places which caught fire regularly.

Two serious fires in Augustus' day, one in 23 B.C. and another in A.D. 6, caused the emperor to create the first fire department and night watch, the Vigiles. Seven cohorts, 1,000 men each, of freed slaves under the command of an equestrian prefect were set up. In spite of this, fire remained an ever present worry to the inhabitants. A number of ravaging blazes did damage to the city before the Great Fire of A.D. 64 when Nero was princeps. This is the most famous of all fires in which only 4 of the 14 regions of the city were untouched.

For nine days this holocaust blazed burning up the very heart of the city and causing untold misery. Whether Nero started it or not we shall never know. Some accounts put him out of town when it began and relate that he did much to relieve the destitute and homeless. About 300 acres had been totally destroyed, land Nero would use to construct his Golden House with attendant gardens.

Nero tried to put into effect tougher fire prevention regulations such as limiting the height of apartment buildings (which Augustus had done to little effect), putting down guidelines for safer construction avoiding certain materials and shared walls, and encouraging the use of fire-resistant stone. Streets were widened and porticoes were built to protect people from falling debris.

Despite all these rather unenforceable regulations and a vigilant fire brigade, Rome continued to be a city plagued by holocaust. In the years 80, 104 and 191 A.D. vast blazes rocked the tinder-box city by the Tiber. As the poet Juvenal put it so succinctly there really was only one answer: "No, no, I must live where there is no fire and the night is free from alarms".