

Hartje Paper: Watching the World Burn: Nero and the Great Roman Fire

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The song ended on a minor melancholy note that resonated the length and breadth of the ornate palace hall. The producer of such a sound stood at the expansive window gazing out at the megalopolis he ruled. The sun was slowly sinking beneath the soporific city as the inhabitants finished their daily labors and prepared to once again embrace twilight. The emperor's eyes gleamed with anticipation as he watched and waited for the colossal conflagration to commence...

The Emperor Nero Caesar has been remembered in history for a veritable slew of ill thoughts, ill words, and ill deeds. Suetonius, biographer to the first twelve Caesars, records that he had a "naturally cruel heart"¹ and was "universally loathed."² Amongst the more malevolent charges laid at his door by Suetonius and other Roman historians are greed, incest, the murder of his mother, envy, and lewd sexual practices. However, perhaps the most infamous of all of these deeds and actions attributed to Nero is the great fire of Rome in midsummer of 64 CE. Legend and axiom has passed down to modernity the idea that while the bright flames engulfed the city, Nero stood on a rooftop observing, singing, and playing his fiddle.

Beginning on the night of July 18th "the most terrible and destructive fire which Rome had ever experienced"³ started on the level parts of the city and then rushed up the hillside. The flames damaged homes, lands, and took citizens' lives. Almost all the ancient authors, with the exception of Tacitus who lays his castigations upon the fledgling Christians, place the blame upon the Emperor. This is the central debate surrounding the great fire of Rome. Was it the eccentric, and probably insane, Emperor Nero? Or was it a band of Christians, determined to end the Roman debauchery and bring about the end of days that would signal the return of Christ?

Nero was more than prepared to blame the Christians of the city. After the flames had been subdued, he opened his home to many refugees, though the people of the city had very little love for him and "these measures, for all their popular character, earned no gratitude."⁴ Needing to place the guilt upon the head of someone, "Nero fabricated scapegoats—and punished with every refinement, the notoriously depraved Christians."⁵ Tacitus writes that Nero did a myriad of actions against the Christians, including arrest, being torn apart by dogs, crucifixion, and "being made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight."⁶ The idea that the Christians had motive to set the fire has some elements of truth to it. They believed that the flames blazing throughout the city would lead to the apocalypse and the triumphant heralding

return of Jesus Christ.⁷ Their motives were religious in nature, yet one must also look at the other option: that Nero either set it himself, or gave the orders to his officials to begin the blaze.

Suetonius believed that Nero, "pretending to be disgusted by the drab old buildings and narrow winding streets of Rome, brazenly set fire to the city" and being so "enraptured by the beauty of the flames, put on costume and sang the 'Fall of Ilium' from beginning to end."⁸ While it is possible that these ancient authors are simply rehashing stories that rumormongers had begun to spread through the city, if we examine Nero's life we find it is plausible to believe that he would commit such a brazen atrocity. In the primary sources, Nero's life is one of constant eccentric and rather bizarre acts. We have tales of him touring his empire as a singer and performer, jealous and spiteful of men who were his better. He held lavish feasts, raped a Vestal Virgin, attempted to commit incest with his mother Agrippina (and when she warded off his advances, plotted and eventually carried out her death), spent money like it was going out of style, killed his aunt, and was altogether "hopelessly debauched."⁹ When one examines these events, it doesn't take a great leap of faith to imagine that Nero at least ordered the fire to be started, especially when there is evidence he "gave orders to move slowly in the word of extinguishing the fire."¹⁰ While we may never know how the fire started, or indeed who started it, we cannot count Nero out. His paranoia, jealousy, and history of grotesque behavior leave him as a suspect in the great inferno of Rome.

Placing the instrument under his chin and gazing out at the holocaust, Nero gently pulled the bow across the bridge and the seductively violent song began on a minor melancholy note that resonated the length and breadth of the ornate palace hall as down below the screams of the people rose higher and higher.

Bibliography

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Endnotes

¹ Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, *The Twelve Caesars*, Translated by Robert Graves (London: Penguin Books, 1957), 212.

² *Ibid.*, 235.

³ Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, Translated by Michael Grant (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 362.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 365.

⁶ *Ibid.* It should be understood, however, that Tacitus has no sympathy for the Christians whom he believed to be shameful and conduct degrading practices.

⁷ See Ch. Hulsen, "The Burning of Rome Under Nero," in *The American Journal of Archaeology* 13 (1909), 45-48.

⁸ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, 230. Tacitus also discusses the emperor's rather odd behavior and writes that "while the city was burning, Nero had gone on his private stage...and had sung of the destruction of Troy." See Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, 363.

⁹ Walter Allen Jr., Robert J. Barnett Jr., Mary D. Beaty, et al., "Nero's Eccentricities Before the Fire," in *Numen* 9 (1962), 100.

¹⁰ Ch. Hulsen, "The Burning of Rome Under Nero," 48.