

**scripta 15.6: Tacitus describes the great fire in Rome**

This text is made up of sections from Tacitus, Annals 15.38. Tacitus vilifies the emperor Nero, presenting his reign as a time of extreme cruelty, perversion and self-indulgence. One of Nero's defining characteristics was his love of performing on the stage, something which was seen as culturally low-grade and unsuitable therefore for a Roman as exalted as the emperor.

In this famous passage, a terrible fire gripped Rome but Nero - who was away from the city at the time - is reported to have reacted by taking to the stage and performing a song about the destruction of Troy. Tacitus' account gives a vivid account of the human despair caused by this disaster and the contrast between this and those who were keen to make use of it for their own benefit. The passage starts and ends with the suggestion that Nero may have caused the blaze, perhaps with the intention of clearing space in the city for an overwhelmingly lavish new imperial palace.

Tacitus' account is much longer than the sections given below. Taken in full, it is an excellent example of his skill in picture-painting and his empathetic account of past events.

Disaster followed. It is unclear whether it came about by chance or because of some devious plan of the Princeps, but it was more serious and more devastating than anything which had happened to this city previously during violent outbreaks of fire. The flames surging through the city made their attack first on the low-lying areas, then rose up to the higher ground and, in the speed of its damage, outran the preventative measures.

In the face of this, there were the wails of terrified women; there were people who were thinking about themselves and people who were thinking about others; some were dragging the weak with them, some were waiting for them, in some places there was hesitation, in others a mad dash, and all of this made it harder to get out. Many found that while they were pausing to look behind them, they then became surrounded by the fire to the front and the sides. Finally, people filled the streets or just lay down in the fields, some in despair because they had lost all their possessions, others in grief for their relatives whom they had not been able to save, even though an escape route lay open. No one dared to defend themselves because of the repeated threats of the many men who were forbidding anyone to extinguish the fire; others were openly throwing fire-brands about, either because they wanted to loot more freely or because they had been ordered to do this.

At that time, Nero did not return to the city before the fire had reached his own home. The rumour spread that at the very moment when the city burned, Nero had stepped up upon his private stage and had sung of the destruction of Troy, likening the present ills to the ancient disaster.

- 1) Tacitus tells us that he does not know for sure why the fire happened but he offers two possible causes. What were these?
- 2) List as many details as you can from this passage which emphasise the severity of the fire.
- 3) How does Tacitus create a sense of chaos during the fire?
- 4) How does Tacitus use this episode to criticise Nero?