

**scripta 15.7: Tacitus describes Nero's treatment of the Christians**

This text is taken from Tacitus, Annals 15.44. In the aftermath of the fire, Nero was keen to distract attention away from the rumour that he was responsible. When Nero's attempts to win back popular support by cash handouts did not work, Tacitus writes that Nero decided to try and redirect the public anger onto the new religious movement - the Christians - instead.

In this extract, Tacitus describes how the Christians were publicly and hideously executed.

Human resources and the emperor's bribery did not work - and neither did the appeasements offered to the gods: the rumour did not go away and large numbers believed that the fire had been ordered by Nero. And so, because he wanted to get rid of this rumour, Nero used the Christians as scapegoats and inflicted on them the most novel punishments. The common people already hated these men because of their shameful practices. Jesus Christ, the source of their name, had been killed at the hands of the procurator, Pontius Pilate, while Tiberius held power. Their deadly cult had been suppressed temporarily, but was beginning to spread again, not only throughout Judaea - the origin of this blight - but even through the city of Rome. Therefore, at first men were arrested who confessed, then - by their evidence - a huge number were convicted not so much for the crime of arson but because they were hateful to the human race. Wrapped in animal skins they were mauled by dogs and died, or they were tied to crosses and, when the daylight failed, they were burned to provide night-time light. Nero had offered his own gardens for this spectacle and he put on a public show in the Circus. As a result, pity started to grow on the basis that these men were being destroyed not really for the public benefit but to satisfy the savagery of one man.

- 1) What rumour was Nero trying to stop and how did he try to do this initially?
- 2) Why did Nero choose the Christians as targets for blame?
- 3) Explain in your own words how the Christians were killed.
- 4) What does this passage imply about the relationship between Nero and the Roman people?