

ATHENS AND ROME: LIFE AND CULTURE IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

Lecture 32 – Fire in the City of Rome

CLCS4007

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Frequency of Fire in Rome

Fire in the Records

- ▣ Literary sources may note major outbreaks of fire or burning of significant buildings – e.g. funeral pyre of Clodius and the Curia.
- ▣ Many outbreaks probably unrecorded.
- ▣ Inscriptions referring to reconstructions.
- ▣ Layers of destruction or ash in the archaeological record.
- ▣ Comparing the literary and archaeological records – Sack of Rome c.390 BC.

“Fire also consumed a considerable portion of the Circus itself... the temple of Ceres... shrine dedicated to Spes... The freedmen were thought to have caused this; for all of them who were in Italy and possessed property worth 200,000 HS or more had been ordered to contribute an 1/8 of it. This resulted in numerous riots, murders... they were not brought to order until they were subdued by armed force.” – **Dio Cassius 50.10.3-5 (31 BC).**

Reports of Major Fires

MID-LATE REPUBLIC

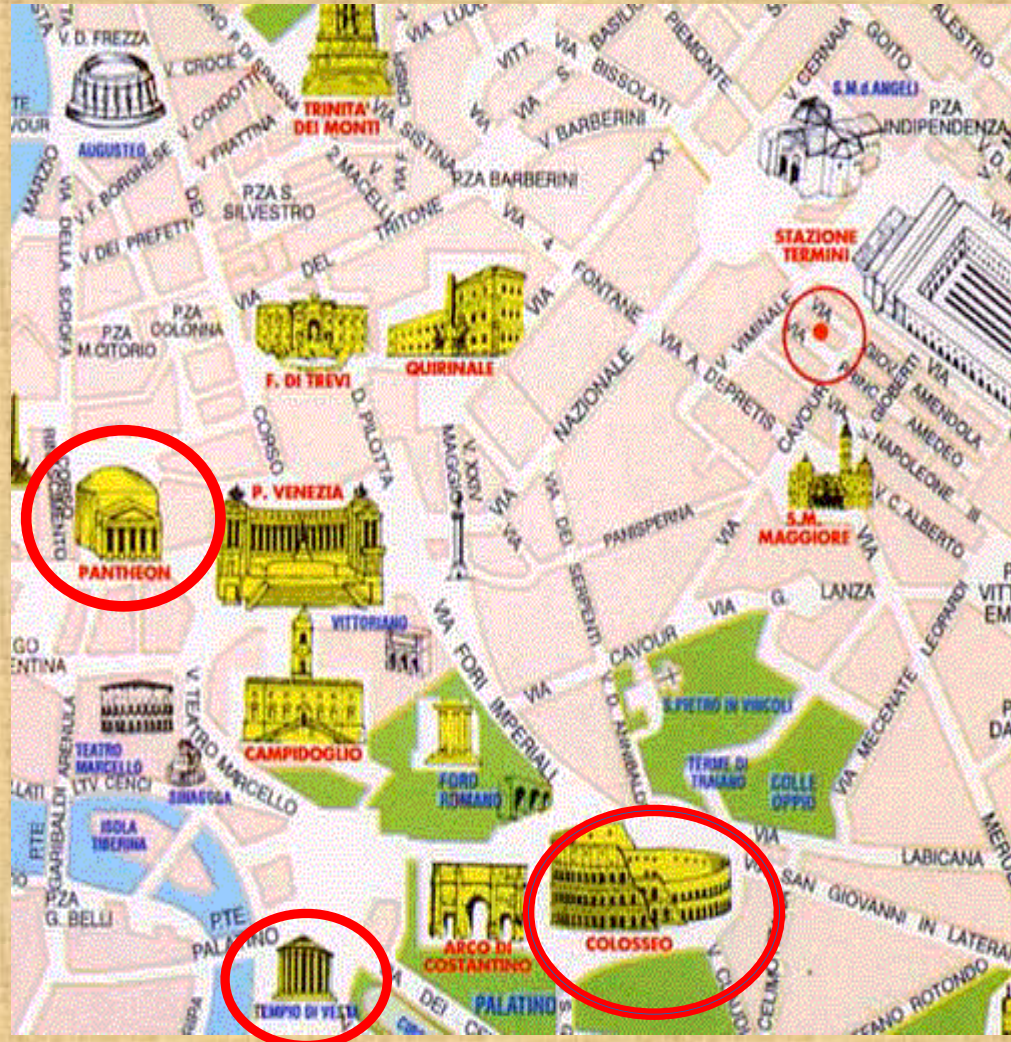
- **241 BC** - destruction of temple of Vesta.
- **213 and 210 BC** - large parts of the forum set on fire.
- **192 BC** - parts of the Forum Boarum destroyed.
- **178 BC** - temple of Venus destroyed.
- **148 BC** - fire in the Regia.
- **83 BC** - temple of Jupiter Capitolinus burnt to ground.
- **52 BC** - destruction of senate house.
- **49 BC** - temple of Quirinus damaged.

JULIO-CLAUDIAN PERIOD

- **12 BC** - various buildings including hut of Romulus.
- **AD 6** - major fire (Augustan reforms).
- **AD 14** - Basilica Aemilia is destroyed.
- **AD 27** - fire destroys many buildings on the Caelian Hill.
- **AD 54** - the Aemiliana district (southern Campus Martius) is subject to a nearly two long day fire.
- **AD 64** - Great Fire of Rome.

Major Buildings Destroyed

- ▣ Temple of Vesta 5 times.
- ▣ Regia and the Theatre of Pompey at least 4 times.
- ▣ Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, the Basilica Julia and the Basilica Aemilia 3 times.
- ▣ Theatre of Marcellus, the Pantheon and the Colosseum at least 2 times.



Causes of Fire

**“For where has one ever seen a place so dismal and so lonely that one would not deem it worse to live in unending dread of fires and falling houses, and the thousand perils of this terrible city...” – Juvenal
Satires 3.2.**

Flammable Materials

- ❑ Conflagrations break out notably in industrial and commercial areas along the Tiber and the areas around the Forum.
- ❑ **Wood** used in large amounts for construction at Rome.
- ❑ **Wattle-and-daub** (timber frames filled in with interwoven willow and covered by stucco and mud):
 - “As to wattled walls, if only they had never been invented, for though convenient and speedily made, they are conducive to great calamity from their acting almost like torches in case of fire. It is much better, therefore, in the first instance, to be at the expense of burnt bricks, than from stinginess to be in perpetual risk.” – *Vetruvius On Architecture* 2.8.20.

Open Flames

- ▣ Cooking, lighting and heating necessary for households – high potential for outbreak of fire.

“According to the regulations of the Etrurian Haruspices... [Temples] of Vulcan [should] be away from the city, which would consequently be freed from the danger of fire; the divinity presiding over that element being drawn away by the rites and sacrifices performing in his temple.” – **Vitruvius 1.7.1.**

Lightening Strikes

“[49 BC]...thunderbolts damaged a sceptre of Jupiter and a shield and a helmet of Mars that were votive offerings on the Capitol, and likewise the tables which contained the laws.” – **Dio Cassius 41.14.3.**

- ▣ Colosseum struck by lightening in AD 217 – upper parts and wooden elements set on fire, gutted the arena.

Arson

“You had bought a house, Tongilianus, for two hundred thousand sesterces : an accident too common in the city destroyed it. A million was subscribed. I ask you, are you not open to the suspicion, Tongilianus, of having yourself set fire to your house?” – **Martial *Epigrams* 3.52.**

“But if the grand house of Asturicus be destroyed, the matrons go dishevelled, your great men put on mourning, the praetor adjourns his court: then indeed do we deplore the calamities of the city, and bewail its fires! Before the house has ceased to burn, up comes one with a gift of marble or of building materials, another offers nude and glistening statues, a third some notable work of Euphranor or Polyclitus, or bronzes that had been the glory of old Asian shrines. Others will offer books and bookcases, or a bust of Minerva, or a hundredweight of silver-plate. Thus does Persicus, that most sumptuous of childless men, replace what he has lost with more and better things, and with good reason incurs the suspicion of having set his own house on fire.” – **Juvenal *Satires* 3.24-25.**

Rebuilding

“And besides this, observing how natural and common at Rome were such fatalities as the conflagration and collapse of buildings, owing to their being too massive and close together, he proceeded to buy slaves who were architects and builders. Then, when he had over five hundred of these, he would buy houses that were on fire, and houses which adjoined those that were on fire, and these their owners would release at a tiny price due to their fear and uncertainty. In this way the largest part of Rome came into his possession.” – **Plutarch** *Life of Crassus* 2.4.

“The Senate and People of Rome restored this temple after it was destroyed by fire.”
– *ILS* 3326 = *CIL* VI 6,937.



Temple of Saturn

“[Fire of AD 27] Tiberius disarmed the criticism by distributing money in proportion to the losses incurred. This earned him a vote of thanks in the senate by eminent members, and, as the news spread, a feeling of gratitude among the general public, because the donations were made without respecting persons or favouring relatives’ positions...” – **Tacitus *Annals* 4.64.**

“In the same year [AD 36] there was a serious fire at Rome. The Aventine and adjacent parts of the Circus Maximus were devastated. Tiberius acquired prestige from this calamity by defraying the value of the houses and apartment blocks destroyed. This generosity cost him one hundred million sesterces.”
- **Tacitus *Annals* 6.45.**

Fighting Fire - ***Vigiles***

Preventive Measures

- ▣ Boundary walls around some houses and stone enclosures around some temples.
- ▣ Building regulations – restrictions on height of buildings.

“Anyone who, knowingly and maliciously, burns a building, or a heap of grain left near a building, after having been placed in chains and scourged, shall be put to death by fire. If, however, he caused the damage by accident, and without malice, he shall make it good; or, if he has not the means to do so, he shall receive a lighter punishment.” – **Twelve Tablets 7.6.**

“A space of two feet and a half must be left between neighbouring buildings.” – (8.1).

Fire Fighting in the Republic

- ▣ *Tresviri nocturni* – responsible for watching over the safety of the city at night, including being present at outbreaks of fire.
- ▣ The *tresviri capitales* had responsibility for the night time security of Rome.

“He [Marcus Egnatius Rufus] had been an aedile [22 or 21 BC], and in addition to having performed his duties well in many other ways, had with his own slaves and other persons whom he hired helped to save the houses that took fire during his year of office, and in return for all this he had received from the people the amount of the expenditures incurred in the discharge of his office and had been elected praetor contrary to law.” – **Dio Cassius 53.24.4-5.**

Cohortes Vigilum – AD 6

“Now Augustus Caesar concerned himself about such impairments of the city, organising for protection against fires a militia composed of freedmen, whose duty it was to render assistance...” – **Strab. Geog. 5.3.7.**

“Augustus divided the city into districts and wards, placing the districts under the control of magistrates annually chosen by lot and the wards under supervision locally elected. He organised stations of night-watchmen [*vigiles*] to watch for fires...” – **Suet. Div. Aug. 30.**

“When many parts of the city were at this time destroyed by fire, he organized a company of freedmen, in 7 divisions, to render help on such occasions, and appointed a knight in command over them, expecting to disband them in a short time. He did not do so, however; for he found by experience that the aid they gave was most valuable and necessary, and so retained them. These night-watchmen exist to the present day, as a special corps, one might say, recruited no longer from the freedmen only, but from the other classes as well. They have barracks in the city and draw pay from the public treasury.” – **Dio 55.26.4-5.**

Equipment

- ▣ *Spartoli* – “little bucket fellows”.
- ▣ *Centones* – patchwork quilts, possibly for catching people jumping from buildings? – soaked to smother flames? - Vinegar – chemical fire extinguisher?
- ▣ *Scalae* – ladders; *perticae* – poles for propping up walls in danger of falling or used to beat out flames?
- ▣ Hooks, picks and axes for breaking/bringing down doors and walls or clearing debris.

Equipment - *Sipho*

- *Sipho* – force pump? – “While I was making a progress in a different part of the province, a most extensive fire broke out at Nicomedia, which not only consumed several private houses, but also two public buildings; the town-house and the temple of Isis...The occasion of its spreading thus far was partly owing to the violence of the wind, and partly to the indolence of the people, who, manifestly, stood idle and motionless spectators of this terrible calamity. The truth is the city was not furnished with either *sipho*, buckets, or any single instrument suitable for extinguishing fires; which I have now, however, given directions to have prepared.” – **Pliny *Letters* 10.33.**
- Literary sources do not make it clear if the *vigiles* in Rome actually possessed this equipment.
- See **Vitervius *On Architecture* 10.7.1-3.**

Equipment - *Ballistae*

- ▣ Debate over use of siege engines for knocking down walls to prevent the spread of fire.
- ▣ Issue around the restoration of a fragmentary inscription. – *CIL* 6.3744.

“...so openly that several ex-consuls did not venture to lay hands on his chamberlains although they caught them on their estates with tow and fire-brands, while some granaries near the Golden House, whose room he particularly desired, were demolished by engines of war and then set on fire, because their walls were of stone.” – **Suetonius *Nero* 38.1.**

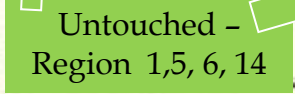
Vigiles in Action

“The cornet player struck up a dead march. One man in particular... blew so loudly that he roused the neighbourhood. As a result the *vigiles* in charge of the near by area, thinking Trimalchio's house was on fire, suddenly broke down the front door and began kicking up their usual sort of din with water and axes. Seizing this perfect chance, we gave Agamemnon the slip and escaped as rapidly as if there really were a fire.” – **Petronius *Satyricon* 78.**

Great Fire of Rome – AD 64

Outbreak of the Fire

- ▣ Began on 19th of July in the part of the Circus boarder on the Palatine and Caelian hills, feeding of flammable merchandise. After six day the initial conflagration dies down, but flares up again in the Aemilian estates (north of the Capitoline hill) – **Tac. Ann. 15.38-40.**
- ▣ Duration – six to seven days – **Suet. Nero 38.**
- ▣ Fire lasted for several days and nights – **Dio 62.17.1.**



- Destroyed – Region 3, 10, 11

“Rome, in fact, is divided into fourteen regions, of which four remained intact, while three were laid level with the ground: in the other seven nothing survived but a few dilapidated and half-burned relics of houses.” – **Tacitus *Annals* 15.40.**

Physical Damage and Human Cost

- ▣ Several granaries knocked down by siege equipment, vast numbers of tenements, historic houses and temples - **Suet. *Nero* 38.**
- ▣ The whole Palatine hill, the theatre of Taurus, and nearly two-thirds of the remainder of the city were burnt – **Dio 62.17.2.**
- ▣ Numerous tenements and temples destroyed; temple of the Moon-Goddess, shrine of Hercules, temple of Jupiter, numerous art works – **Tac. *Ann.* 15.41.**

“In addition, shrieking and terrified women; fugitives stricken or young in years; men consulting their own safety or the safety of others, as they dragged the infirm along or paused to wait for them, combined by their dilatoriness or their haste to impede everything. Often, while they glanced back to the rear, they were attacked on the flanks or in front; or, if they had made their escape into a neighbouring quarter, that also was involved in the flames, and even districts which they had believed remote from danger were found to be in the same plight. At last, unsure what to avoid or what to seek, they crowded into the roads or threw themselves down in the fields: some who had lost the whole of their means — their daily bread included — chose to die, though the way of escape was open, and were followed by others, through love for the relatives whom they had proved unable to rescue.” – *Tac. Ann.* 15.38.

Relief Effort

“...as a relief to the homeless and fugitive populace, he opened the Campus Martius, the buildings of Agrippa, even his own Gardens, and threw up a number of extemporized shelters to accommodate the helpless multitude. The necessities of life were brought up from Ostia and the neighbouring municipalities, and the price of grain was lowered to three sesterces...” – **Tacitus *Annals* 15.39.**

Restoring Rome

“Those parts of Rome left over from Nero’s new place were not rebuilt in the random and disorderly fashion that characterized reconstruction after the Gauls burnt the city [390 BC], but rather in rows of measured streets, wide thoroughfares, and open spaces. Building heights were regulated and porticoes protected the fronts of apartment buildings... Nero stipulated that a certain portion of them [new buildings] must be built without wooden beams, using either Gabine or Alban stone [tufa], since this type of stone stands up to fire... each building (which could no longer share a wall with another building) had to have fire-fighting equipment on the premises. Such regulations adopted for utility lead to a more beautiful city as well.” – **Tacitus** *Annals* 15.43.

“He devised a new form for the buildings of the city and in front of the houses and apartments he erected porches, from the flat roofs of which fires could be fought; and these he put up at his own cost.” – **Suetonius** *Nero* 16.1.

Where were the *vigiles*?

- ▣ No mention of the *vigiles* in Tacitus or Suetonius.
- ▣ Serenus as Prefect of the *vigiles* shortly before the outbreak of the Great Fire?

“Many houses were destroyed for want of anyone to help save them, and many others were set on fire by the same men who came to lend assistance; for the soldiers, including the night watch (*nuktophylakes*), having an eye to plunder, instead of putting out fires, kindled new ones.” – **Cassius Dio 62.17.1.**

“...and a third kind are the *suilli*, very conveniently adapted for poisoning. Indeed, it is but very recently that they have carried off whole families, and all the guests at a banquet; Annaeus Serenus, for instance, the prefect of Nero's guard, together with all the tribunes and centurions. What great pleasure, then, can there be in partaking of a dish of so doubtful a character as this?” – **Pliny NH 22.47.96.**

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