

appropriating the best of Greek art, but powerful Romans had done this before and would do it again, out of aesthetic admiration as much as greed.³⁰¹ Furthermore, Nero's appropriation began with his building of the *Domus Transitoria* and then the 'Golden House', and so antedated his sojourn in Greece.³⁰² Likewise, the execution of Paris, which Dio puts at about this time but dissociates from goings-on in Greece, and which Suetonius reports only as rumour,³⁰³ could well have been due to reasons other than artistic jealousy. Nero was not greatly interested in Paris' artistic speciality,³⁰⁴ and though an entertainer, Paris was deeply involved in court politics. In 55 he was among those who schemed unsuccessfully against Agrippina, escaping her wrath only because he was protected by Nero.³⁰⁵ In the tense circumstances of 65–66, he could well have perished through association with Pisonians.³⁰⁶

9.7 Conclusion

The verdict of this chapter must be like that of Chapter 8: that, where they occurred and are not simply invented, most Neronian killings after 62 were due to political necessity and managed by the Establishment. Nero the cold-blooded 'killer' is a construct. Determined to wring this from whatever evidence was to hand, 'the second-rate writers of later ages enjoyed themselves greatly'.³⁰⁷

³⁰¹ Cf. below 257, 346. Cf. Plin. *HN* 34.84: Vespaian did not return Nero's stolen artworks, but placed them in the Temple of Peace, but see below 257 n. 230.

³⁰² Tac. *Ann.* 15.45.3, 16.23.1; Plin. *HN* 34.84; Bradley 1978a, 172. ³⁰³ Suet. *Ner.* 54.

³⁰⁴ Barrett *et al.* 2016, 247 and n. 30; below 377. ³⁰⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 13.22.3.

³⁰⁶ Cizek 1982, 209. ³⁰⁷ Henderson 1995, 381 (quotation).

CHAPTER 10

Arsonist, Persecutor and Ruthless Property Developer?

10.1 Arson: The Case For

The Great Fire of Rome broke out late on 18 July 64.¹ It burned for six days, died down and then flared up again to rage for another three days.² It affected most of the City, especially those parts not shielded by the Tiber or the Servian wall.³

Tacitus reports:

None ventured to combat the fire, as there were reiterated threats from a large number of people who forbade extinction, and others were openly throwing firebrands and shouting that they had their authority – possibly in order to have a free hand in looting, possibly from orders received.⁴

According to Suetonius:

[Nero] ... pleading displeasure at the ugliness of the old buildings and the narrow, crooked streets, set fire to the city so openly that several men of consular rank did not dare to lay hands on senior members of his personal staff although they caught them on their properties with tow and fire brands, while some granaries ... whose site he particularly desired, were demolished by engines of war and then set on fire, because their walls were of stone.⁵

Similarly, according to Cassius Dio:

Nero set his heart on accomplishing what had doubtless always been his desire, namely to make an end of the whole city and realm during his lifetime ... Accordingly he secretly sent out men who pretended to be drunk or engaged in other sorts of mischief, and caused them at first to set

¹ Tac. *Ann.* 15.41.3. I am grateful to Drs Werner Lütkenhaus and Simon Malloch for their comments on this chapter.

² Tac. *Ann.* 15.40.1–2; *ILS* 4914; cf. Suet. *Ner.* 38.2; Bradley 1978a, 232.

³ Tac. *Ann.* 15.38–41, esp. 40.4: of the fourteen Augustan districts of the city, three were levelled, seven badly damaged and only four unharmed. Panella 2011a, 82; Shaw 2015, 78, n. 29.

⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 15.38.8: *esse sibi auctorem*. ⁵ Suet. *Ner.* 38.1–2.

fire to one or two or even several buildings in different parts of the city, so that the people were at their wits' end, not being able to find any beginning of the trouble or put an end to it ...⁶

That Nero was in some way guilty of arson seems to be confirmed by references elsewhere in Tacitus' *Annals*, in the anonymous *Octavia*, and in Pliny I's *Natural History*.⁷ Champlin emphasises the first of these, a verbatim account of Nero being denounced as an 'incendiary' by the praetorian tribune Subrius Flavius, on trial in 65 for involvement in the Pisonian conspiracy: 'the words of an eye-witness' make it look 'as if Nero was indeed responsible for the fire from the beginning' because 'he wanted to rebuild the city'.⁸

10.2 Arson: The Case Against

That Nero was to blame is unlikely. Tacitus, providing the most detailed extant account of the Fire,⁹ records the suspicion that it was the work of the government,¹⁰ but, though himself no lover of Nero, prioritises accidental cause and describes the accusation as no more than 'widespread suspicion'.¹¹ As for what Subrius Flavius said, one is bound to retort, 'Well he would, wouldn't he?' At first, fighting for his life, he had strenuously denied any association with the conspiracy. Then, closely questioned by Nero, he changed tack and sought to inflict maximum damage on the *princeps*' reputation by hurling in his face every possible major accusation.¹² These ranged from fact (of killing Agrippina and Octavia) to opinion (of conduct unbecoming a *princeps* in the circus and on stage) to rumour (of setting fire to Rome). The last was his weakest weapon, and the more so because by 65 the regime had achieved success in shifting blame to the Christians.¹³ Tacitus admired Flavius, but ignored his allegation of incendiarism in his discussion of the cause of the blaze, as he did with the charge against the Christians which he also plainly disbelieved.¹⁴

⁶ Cass. Dio 62.16.1–2. ⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 15.67.3; Ps.-Sen. *Oct.* 831–3; Plin. *HN* 17.5.

⁸ Champlin 2003, 185, 191. ⁹ Below 237.

¹⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 15.38.1: *an dolo principis incertum*; 38.8: *seu iussu*; 44.3: *iussu incendium*.

¹¹ Tac. *Ann.* 15.38.1, 8; 44.3: *infamia*.

¹² Cf. above 207. Similarly Seneca, in his death speech, threw the charge of matricide against Nero, in a manner meant for general consumption: Tac. *Ann.* 15.62.7–63.1. This is ironical, given his own direct involvement in the event.

¹³ Tac. *Ann.* 15.44.8; below 247.

¹⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 15.44.3. Below 244. Dr Lütkenhaus has pointed out that the close similarity between Tacitus and Dio at this point suggests that the whole encounter between Flavius and Nero was to be found in the common source tradition, and that it was this that disinclined Tacitus from

(Tacitus also makes no mention of arson as a motive in his earlier account of Flavius' contemplating the murder of Nero during the Fire.¹⁵) The notices in the *Octavia* and Pliny I are similarly questionable,¹⁶ and it is significant that Nero is not blamed by the contemporary or near-contemporary Josephus, Martial and Juvenal.¹⁷

Consideration of a range of other points produces a strong circumstantial case in that Nero's favour. The night of 18/19 July 64 – at the height of an Italian summer, bringing out crowds seeking relief after the heat of the day, short, and with the moon only just past full¹⁸ – was not the ideal time for large-scale fire-raising. The Fire did not start in the area that Nero took over for his wider Golden House. Indeed, beginning by the Palatine,¹⁹ it destroyed his own recent major new project, the *Domus Transitoria*, linking the Palatine with the Gardens of Maecenas on the Esquiline, in which he had placed a great collection of works of art.²⁰ Similarly, the second outbreak of the Fire began as an outlying blaze, to the west of the main conflagration area, on property belonging to Tigellinus.²¹ Nero liked the dramatic, and liked to be engaged in what he did. If he had caused the Fire, he would have been on hand from the start, but he heard of its outbreak c. 60 km (36 statute miles) away in Anzio, where he too was probably escaping the summer heat.²² Suetonius, pushing rumour much further than Tacitus, describes imperial chamberlains going about torch in hand, and substantial buildings destroyed 'by war-engines' – presumably rams and grabs rather than artillery.²³ Dio likewise complains that the military was in action not saving houses but spreading the blaze.²⁴ However all this has long been interpreted very differently: either as the work of looters, some perhaps seeking protection by dressing themselves in court livery;²⁵ or as popular misunderstanding of the necessary creation of

transposing the former's accusation back to his discussion of the causes of the Fire. This, however, underestimates Tacitus' skill as an historian: below 244.

¹⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 15.50.6. Above 200. ¹⁶ Bradley 1978a, 231.

¹⁷ E.g. Bradley 1978a, 231, 269; Fini 1994, 151–2.

¹⁸ Full moon was on 17/18 July: Hohl 1918, 381. Cf. Warmington 1969, 124; Bradley 1978a, 230; Griffin 1984, 132.

¹⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 15.38.2; below 237.

²⁰ Suet. *Ner.* 31.1. Bradley 1978a, 171; Griffin 1984, 127–8; Chaisemartin 2003, 158–9; below 242.

²¹ Tac. *Ann.* 15.40.3. Panella 2011a, 82 and figure 10a.

²² Tac. *Ann.* 15.39.1. Waldherr 2005, 12; *contra* Bradley 1978a, 230.

²³ Suet. *Ner.* 38.1: *bellicis machinis*. I owe this observation to Dr Lütkenhaus.

²⁴ Cass. Dio 62.17.1.

²⁵ Hohl 1918, 381 (citing Sievens, 1870, on historical parallels with the great Hamburg fire of 1842); Fini 1994, 157; below 241. Routine looting during fires may be reflected in Suetonius' description of Afranius' (fl. later second century BC) play, 'The Fire': *Ner.* 11.2; Bradley 1978a, 84.

the fire-breaks that finally brought the blaze under control.²⁶ Nero, characteristically, hastened to Rome,²⁷ threw himself into a vain attempt to save the *Domus Transitoria*,²⁸ and then arranged emergency accommodation and cheap food for the victims of the Fire.²⁹ Though he may well also have sung of the sack of Troy,³⁰ it is striking that he did not later explore this theme in his favourite stage roles, which suggests that he felt no direct emotional involvement in the blaze.³¹ Finally, Nero liked being liked, and in 64 had already commenced a scheme of endearing himself to the population of Italy and Rome by making his first public stage appearance at Naples and throwing the City open as his own on the occasion of Tigellinus' banquet.³² He would not have risked the infamy of being discovered an arsonist.³³ It is not surprising that most modern historians have proposed that the Great Fire was an accident, not an act of criminality.³⁴ It was just one of the many chance blazes that plagued Rome and all big pre-industrial cities with their narrow and rambling streets, densely packed jerry-built wooden-framed buildings, and primitive firefighting techniques.³⁵ Rome had suffered major conflagrations before, both under the Republic³⁶ and under the Julio-Claudians, the most recent in AD 6, 27, 36 and 53.³⁷ The fundamental difference between that of 64 and the rest was how badly it got out of hand.³⁸

10.3 Why Nero?

If Nero was innocent of arson, why did people subsequently believe him guilty?³⁹ For the pertinent details we rely mainly on Tacitus. Though comparison between Tacitus, Suetonius and Dio indicates, as usual, their employment of a common source, Tacitus, as we shall also see later in his treatment of the Christians, offers additional information indicating

²⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 15.50.1, *OCD*⁴; Wiedemann 1996a, 251. For a very positive assessment of Nero's fire-control operation see Fini 1994, 156–7.

²⁷ *Contra* Malitz 1999, 67. ²⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 15.50.6

²⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 15.39.2–3. Fini (1994, 157) is again very positive here. ³⁰ Below 238.

³¹ Cf. below 290. ³² Above 206. ³³ Fini 1994, 154.

³⁴ So Hohl 1918, 382: 'Man wird also mit Wahrscheinlichkeit den Brand auf einen Zufall, nicht auf einen verbrecherischen Willensakt Neros zurückführen'. Cf. Warmington 1969, 124; Bradley 1978a, 230–1; Griffin 1984, 132; Rudich 1993, 85; Fini 1994, 160; Wiedemann 1996a, 250; Holland 2000, 163; Beste and Hesberg 2013, 324.

³⁵ Canter 1932, 270, 279–84; Panella 2011a, 79–80. ³⁶ Canter 1932, 271–3.

³⁷ 6: Cass. Dio 55.26.4; 27: Tac. *Ann.* 4.64.1; 36: Tac. *Ann.* 6.45.1; 53: Suet. *Claud.* 18.1. Canter 1932, 274–5; Levick 1990, 112.

³⁸ Griffin 1984, 129: 'there was nothing routine about this blaze'; below 237.

³⁹ Cf. Romm 2014, 168.

personal research.⁴⁰ Thus, for example, unlike Suetonius and Dio, he does not dwell on the number of deaths caused by the first phase of the blaze, and observes that its second phase was more notable for destroying buildings than for taking lives.⁴¹ This seems strange, and Tacitus sought to explain the latter as resulting from a lower density of population in the affected areas. Low mortality is, however, characteristic of big fires in pre-industrial cities because these did not produce large amounts of poisonous fumes and gases and were usually slow-moving enough to allow people to escape. The casualty list of the Great Fire of London 1666 was 'tiny'.⁴² On the other hand, Tacitus' highly compressed narrative requires expansion in order to reconstruct the proper sequence of events. For example, though at first he says that no-one dared fight the Fire, he later states that its first phase was ended by the creation of a huge fire-break below the Esquiline.⁴³ This is probably best understood as indicating that the initial blaze was unusually fierce and fast. It broke out among the highly combustible stock of shops built into the eastern end of the Circus Maximus. From here, fanned by a strong east wind, it sped westwards, with the open circus complex acting as a flue and its dry wooden superstructures further feeding the flames. It ran north around and into the Palatine and on to the Forum. It continued further north and northeastwards, spread by the scattering of embers over a wide area.⁴⁴ Its ferocity probably paralysed those who should have directed the fight against it. Both contemporaries and historians are unanimous in laying much of the blame for the spread of the Great Fire of London on the Lord Mayor, Sir Thomas Bludworth, for his early refusal to demolish buildings to create a fire-break.⁴⁵ A further lesson from 1666 is the subsequent importance in the work of controlling the Fire of James, Duke of York (the future James II).⁴⁶ It could have been that in 64 it was only after the flames had somewhat abated, and after Nero and his staff had arrived to rally people's courage and authorise firefighting methods involving the destruction of property, that effective efforts were made to tackle the blaze.

⁴⁰ Below 244.

⁴¹ Tac. *Ann.* 15. 38.7 (emphasis on the plight of refugees and the *suicide* of survivors), 40.2.

⁴² Tinniswood 2003, 131–5. Holland (2000, 163) makes the point that the London fire 'burned for only half as long a time, and was confined to a smaller area with a lower population'. But a large multiple of a very small number still produces a small number.

⁴³ Tac. *Ann.* 15.38.8, 15; 40.1; above 233.

⁴⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 15.38.2, 43. Canter 1932, 276; Holland 2000, 160; Waldherr 2005, 211; Tomei 2011, 125, 129; Panella 2011a, 82–5 and figure 10a.

⁴⁵ Tinniswood 2003, 44, 187. ⁴⁶ Tinniswood 2003, 111.

Similar unpicking of Tacitus' narrative helps explain how Nero came to be branded an incendiary. Tacitus implies that the process began with reports of Nero's singing to the flames, which aroused hostility even as the *princeps* strove to aid the victims of the disaster.⁴⁷ Tacitus, Suetonius and Dio have different versions of the *princeps*' bizarre performance. The best known is that of Suetonius: that Nero ascended the Tower of Maecenas in his gardens on the Esquiline (Figure 13) and in full view and full stage costume sang 'The sack of Ilium'. Though this smacks of a story still growing in the telling, and Tacitus reports the incident as rumour, that Nero viewed the Fire from somewhere and sang something is very plausible.⁴⁸ Such behaviour is consistent with his character and interests. Nero loved the theatrical, and loved to perform as a singer, accompanying himself on the *cithara*, the 'professional' version (heavier, more complex and so more difficult to master) of the lyre.⁴⁹ The Fire at its peak must have been a magnificent spectacle, too stimulating an experience for a performer to waste.⁵⁰ There will have been the visceral sight and sound of huge, multicoloured, flames, collapsing buildings – many ancient and sacred – and human beings in distress. Comparison with the fall of Troy (thanks to Virgil's 'Aeneid', from the time of Augustus automatically connected to the history of Rome and the Julian dynasty, and in the Neronian period again very much in the air⁵¹) was unavoidable. Nero might well have performed an extract from his own epic on the Trojan war,⁵² and the extract might well have contained his observation, quoted critically by Dio, that Priam, king of Troy, was fortunate in seeing his country and his throne destroyed together. If so, this is another instance of his words being used against him out of context.⁵³ Nero's singing, the consequent spread of disapproval and the transformation of resentment into outright blame must have occurred well after the outbreak of the Fire. Only after he had done all he could to fight the blaze and organise help for its victims would the *princeps* have time for 'aesthetic glee',⁵⁴ and only after

⁴⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 15.39.2–3, 15.44.2. Grant 1970, 151; Fini 1994, 155–6.

⁴⁸ So Grant 1970, 152: 'it is all too probable that Nero did give such a display'; cf. Holland 2000, 164; contra Maes 2013, 296–7.

⁴⁹ Holland 2000, 70 n. 8; Waldherr 2005, 118; Pausch 2013, 52.

⁵⁰ Henderson 1905, 239: 'The scene was a temptation that no impressionist artist could resist'.

⁵¹ Below 268.

⁵² Suet. *Ner.* 38.2–3; Juv. 8.221. Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 15.39.3: in a private theatre in palace gardens; Cass. Dio 62.18.1: publicly, on the roof his palace. Bradley 1978a, 234; Warmington 1969, 124; Cizek 1982, 45–6. Griffin 1984, 132; Fini 1994, 154–5; Reitz 2006, 23–4; Fantham 2013, 26; above 112.

⁵³ Cass. Dio 62.16.2. I owe this observation to Dr Lütkenhaus; cf. above 118.

⁵⁴ Griffin 1984, 132.

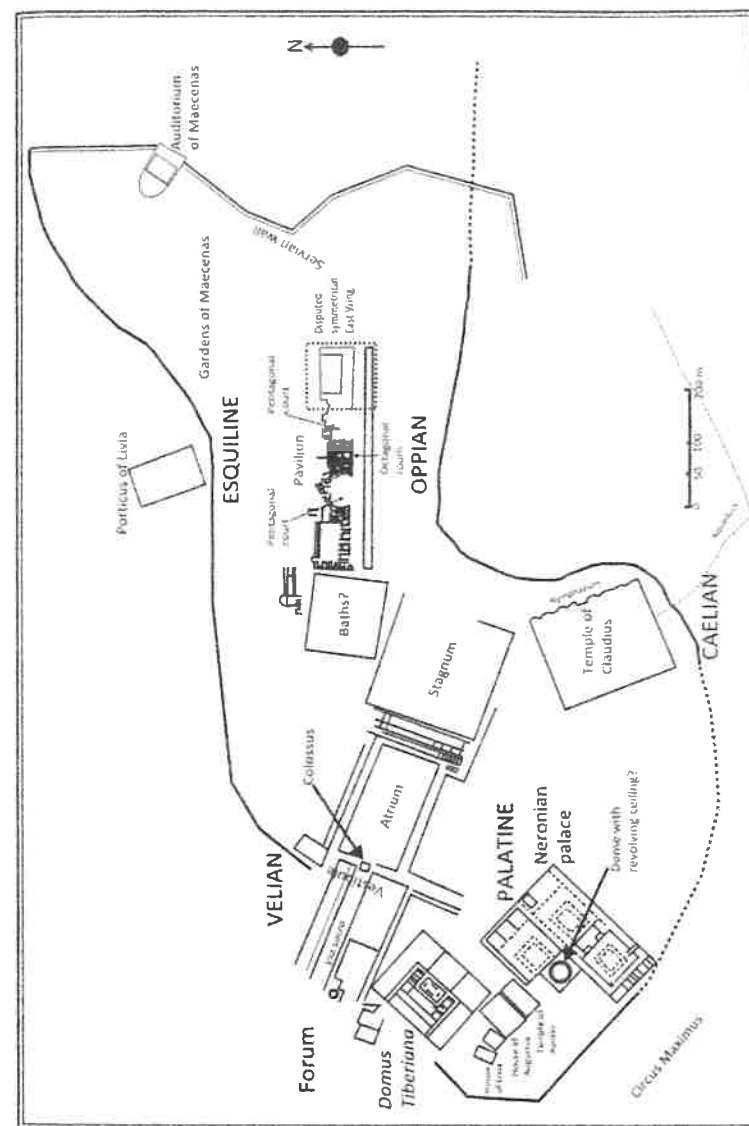


Figure 13 The 'Golden House' complex.

After Claridge 1998, 268; Cluismartin 2003, 157; Carandini 2011, 238; Panella 2011b, 161; Perrin 2016, 242–3

he had sung could people have begun to resent his singing. Tacitus seems in fact to date the rumours that Nero, intent on the creation of a new Rome, was actually responsible for setting and spreading the Fire, to after its renewed outbreak.⁵⁵ How long after he does not say, but that hostility to Nero took some time to show itself may be inferred from the tenor of Tacitus' accounts.

Fire broke out and caused distress, but the Neronian regime kept its head, extinguished the flames and cared for the victims. Unlike the Great Fire of London, we hear of no popular unrest due to shortages of food or shelter.⁵⁶ There was suffering but not despair; no immediate rush to find someone criminally responsible for the disaster. The prescription of age-old expiatory ceremonies suggests the establishment of a senatorial commission to investigate the religious implications of the Fire.⁵⁷ We may surmise from the operation of an earlier enquiry into indirect taxation that it did a thorough job of work.⁵⁸ It could not, therefore, have overlooked the secular side of the disaster, and alongside its religious recommendations it was probably also responsible for the drafting of new regulations concerning the layout and fabric of new buildings in Rome, the use of the public water supply, and the provision of firefighting equipment (probably fire-blankets, buckets, axes, ladders, hooks, shovels, perhaps syringes, and maybe even siphons – early fire-engines).⁵⁹

Tacitus' chronology, however, appears confused here, since he puts the rites after a relatively lengthy discussion of the secular measures. The commission's work could not have begun until the Fire had been fully extinguished and order fully restored. With so much to do, it must have been the end of the summer, at the earliest, before it promulgated the verdict that the Fire was accidental: Tacitus' *forte*: 'by chance', the opposite of his *iustum incendium*: 'premeditated arson'.⁶⁰ This was surely the time for the religious ceremonies appropriate to 'an act of God', including vows to Vulcan, the god of fire,⁶¹ after which came implementation of the secular regulations. The report ended the matter,⁶² but not before an ugly period of witch-hunting had resulted from the drawing of a very different conclusion.

⁵⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 15.40.3; above 235. ⁵⁶ Tinniswood 2003, 103–7.

⁵⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 15.44.1–2. Griffin 1984, 132–3; Closs 2016; cf. Talbert 1984, 386–91 on the continuing importance of senators in religion in this period.

⁵⁸ Below 352.

⁵⁹ Note that Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.44.1) puts the secular measures before the religious. Tac. *Ann.* 15.43.4. Canter 1932, 288; Waldherr 2005, 211; above 124. Cf. Tinniswood 2003, 48–9; Closs 2016, 115.

⁶⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 15.38.1, 44.3. ⁶¹ Tac. *Ann.* 15.44.1–2. Cf. below 247. ⁶² Below 247.

In large pre-industrial towns, minor and medium fires were commonplace. In imperial Rome there may have been around 100 per day.⁶³ Occasionally, small blazes turned into much larger outbreaks, but there was no immediate fear that these would end in disaster. Because fires were frequent, communities devised ways of dealing with them, involving both private and public initiatives.⁶⁴ Julio-Claudian Rome, provided with a professional watch and fire service (the *vigiles*) and gendarmerie (the *cohortes urbanae*), and a large standing garrison (the Praetorians) ready to support these two agencies as needed, was more prepared than most.⁶⁵ People would have expected the Fire of 64 to be contained. That it was not must have left the city population – with many, even those not directly affected, suffering what we might call post-traumatic stress disorder⁶⁶ – increasingly feeling betrayed by the authorities and ready for someone to blame.⁶⁷ A few, guilty about their own poor behaviour (e.g. panicking in the face of danger, resorting to profiteering and looting etc.⁶⁸), may have been especially ready to attack others. There was probably early disquiet at Nero's singing. This was irrational given his earlier firefighting efforts, but as the conviction grew that the administration had failed them, people would have accepted continuing gossip that its head had indulged in personal amusement. Actually moving to blame the *princeps* for the blaze was a greater step, but justification was on hand in another rumour: that the Fire had spread not from a single source but through multiple acts of incendiarism.⁶⁹ This would have encouraged people to believe what they had begun to want to believe. Accident and inattention, and the effect of wind-blown embers,⁷⁰ could be discounted: the Fire was the work of conspiracy. But who were the conspirators? In September 1666, culprits were conveniently to hand. Britain was at war with Holland and France and was doing badly. Accusations of arson could therefore almost immediately be directed at resident citizens of these countries and their alleged English accomplices.⁷¹ In July 64 Rome had no foreign bogeymen to blame. The Gauls and the Carthaginians had been defeated,⁷² and the

⁶³ Bingham 2013, 107. ⁶⁴ Cf. Tinniswood 2003, 46–51.

⁶⁵ Canter 1932, 287–8; Holland 2000, 161–2; Bingham 2013, 106–9; above 62.

⁶⁶ Cf. Tinniswood 2003, 141, 143: '[London's] citizens were haunted by demons'.

⁶⁷ Cf. Hohl 1918, 382; Griffin 1984, 132; Shaw 2015, 91.

⁶⁸ Cf. above 235; Tinniswood 2003, 67–8, 106, 119, 130, 136.

⁶⁹ The charge is implicit in Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.38.6) and Suetonius (*Ner.* 38.1), and explicit in Cassius Dio (62.16.2). Cf. Tinniswood 2003, 58, 119.

⁷⁰ Cf. above 237. ⁷¹ Tinniswood 2003, 51, 58–9; 66; 109; 145–8.

⁷² Though note Tacitus' report that some observed that the Fire had begun on date of capture and burning of Rome by the Senones: *Ann.* 15.41.3.

Germani were yet to come. The only external power that could pose a threat was Parthia: distant; with probably few of its citizens resident in Rome; and, with the settlement of the Armenian question, no longer hostile. However, gathering resentment had to find someone who had both the motive and the capacity to fire-raise on a grand scale, and this left only Nero and his grand plans for a New Rome.

Ultimate responsibility rested, anyway, with the *princeps*, the great patron, answerable for the welfare of all.⁷³ Nero had played the role well. Though he incurred negative gossip through his association with the deaths of Britannicus, Agrippina and Octavia, this had not developed into any serious hostility in the capital.⁷⁴ Such tolerance may be ascribed to the popularity of his accession and general recognition that these deaths, however regretful, were politically necessary. Between 62 and the Fire, indeed, there is every indication that Nero had regained the backing of the *plebs* after their demonstrations in support of Octavia.⁷⁵ Acceptance of his marriage to Poppaea (and, with this, of the rise of Tigellinus) will have been eased by the birth and sad death of Claudia Augusta.⁷⁶ The prestige of the regime was increased by success in Armenia and by its adept handling of a rumoured food shortage in 62.⁷⁷ The *plebs* were treated to great gladiatorial games in 63 and to 'Tigellinus' banquet' early in 64.⁷⁸ Nero probably also helped himself by his relaxed attitude to ordinary people, for example in the way in which he reacted to critical graffiti.⁷⁹ One might expect that additional unease would have been caused by Nero's *Domus Transitoria*, 'The House of Passage', begun around 60.⁸⁰ This flouted convention by cutting across the ancient centre of Rome to connect the Palatine and Esquiline.⁸¹ It was probably no single structure but a suite of buildings and gardens, old and new, around 1 km/0.6 statute mile in extent. By July 64 it was taking shape at both ends (on the Palatine with the so-called Baths of Livia, and on the Esquiline with a fairly standard villa⁸²). In between there must have been at least one useable substantial property: the mansion, perhaps the townhouse of Nero's paternal birth family, the Domitii Ahenobarbi, and the home of his art collection, which Nero tried to save from the Fire.⁸³ However, the *Domus*

⁷³ Wiedemann 1996a, 251; Waldherr 2005, 212; Shaw 2015, 91; cf. below 315–16. ⁷⁴ Above 175.

⁷⁵ Above 193. ⁷⁶ Above 196. ⁷⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 15.18.2. Above 141; below 333 n. 73.

⁷⁸ Below 298. ⁷⁹ Cf. above 107. ⁸⁰ Carandini 2011, 140. For its purpose see below 251.

⁸¹ Ball 2003, 95; Beste 2011a, 153–4; Tomei 2011, 123–4.

⁸² Tac. *Ann.* 15.39.1: *domus eius, quae Palatium et Maccenatis hortos continuaverat*. Above 160; Bradley 1978a, 171; Ball 2003, 2–3, 135–6; Moormann 2003, 382, 386–7; Carandini 2011, 140; Panella 2011a, 78; Beste and Hesberg 2013, 322–3; Perrin 2016, 230–33 and figure 1.

Transitoria seems to have provoked little direct contemporary or historical criticism, perhaps because most of it was built on land already controlled by the Julio-Claudians or purchased fairly on the market, and because, with large parts open to public access, it did not greatly disrupt city life.⁸⁴ (The contemporary Temple of Claudius was set in a large garden, which suggests that it was government policy to give residents more recreational space.⁸⁵) There is no reason to suppose that, by the time of the Fire, Nero was unpopular in the capital, but this makes it all the more remarkable that he could be thought capable of grand arson.⁸⁶ Popularity is fickle. Increased exposure to the public gaze can generate both speedy fame and speedy infamy. The Roman people may have become unsure as to what to make of the new, 'popular' Nero as manifested in his 'coming out' as a public performer at Naples,⁸⁷ his sudden decision not to leave Italy and Rome to visit Greece and Egypt,⁸⁸ his appearance at Tigellinus' banquet,⁸⁹ and his participation in 'lewd' theatricals.⁹⁰ Nero's initial absence from the fight against the Fire may have caused resentment, along with the rumour that he left Anzio only on news of the threat to his *Domus Transitoria*.⁹¹ What he did after he arrived generated suspicion. People find it easier to blame authority when that authority has had a part in the events concerned. In 1666, James, Duke of York, doing sterling work in leading the firefighting, provoked enduring mistrust when it was thought that he, a suspected Catholic, was rescuing 'guilty' foreigners caught by the mob.⁹² Nero's singing caused distrust and, once this was aroused and word got about that the authorities had put their energies into spreading the blaze, not containing it, other details could be thrown in as proof of government arson, such as the interpretation of the creation of fire-breaks as fire-raising.⁹³ It is possible that aristocrats later to involve themselves in the Pisonian conspiracy were not averse to encouraging such gossip.⁹⁴ Finally, the precedent of the *Domus Transitoria* will have helped convince people of the seriousness of Nero's grand architectural plans. Thus, probably not immediately but well before the publication of the findings of the senatorial commission, Nero was accused of incendiarism.⁹⁵

⁸³ Griffin 1984, 128; Ball 2003, 96–7; Beste 2011a, 154; Perrin 2016, 231. *Contra* Waldherr 2005, 207–8, 218–19; Viscogliosi 2011b, 157–8.

⁸⁴ Cf. Hesberg 2011, 110–12. ⁸⁵ Rudich 1993, 85; Romm 2014, 166.

⁸⁶ Below 298. Cf. Meier 2008, 584: 'the "coming out des Künstlers"', though dating this from 59.

⁸⁷ Below 309; cf. Fini 1994, 156. ⁸⁸ Cf. above 205–6. ⁸⁹ Below 313.

⁹⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 15.39.1. Waldherr 2005, 213. ⁹¹ Tinniswood 2003, 157–8.

⁹² Above 235–6; Bingham 2013, 109. ⁹³ Waldherr 2005, 215; above 201.

⁹⁴ Cf. Rudich 1993, 85; Holland 2000, 166. I am grateful to Dr Malloch for his comments on this point; my conclusion is, of course, my own.

10.4 Christians as Scapegoats

To quash such rumours the administration took action which led to local prosecution of Christians.⁹⁵ There are problems in reconstructing what happened. First, while the main literary tradition is unanimous in suggesting that some contemporaries thought Nero guilty of arson,⁹⁶ Tacitus alone has him scapegoating Christians. Second, Nero 'the arsonist' is not found in the earliest Christian tradition; full portrayal of Nero as 'the great persecutor' developed only from the later second century;⁹⁷ and even then no writer, pagan or Christian, has Nero blaming Christians for starting the Fire. One explanation for the tension between Tacitus and the rest is that this results from a later insertion into his text. This is now generally, if not entirely, rejected.⁹⁸ A more recent alternative is that Tacitus retrojected growing concern at the spread of Christianity around 100 into events of the 60s. Shaw proposes that the Neronian administration punished people for arson, but because those punished were not Christians, persecution of Christians 'never happened'.⁹⁹ The real victims of government attention, the 'certain persons ... denounced by the common people of Rome as responsible for setting the fire', were 'Jewish sectarians'.¹⁰⁰ This is, however, to underestimate Tacitus' capacity for personal research, evidenced in both the 'Histories' and the 'Annals'.¹⁰¹ Though his culture and education encouraged him to treat his material rhetorically and morally – he was no dispassionate historian – this never, as Shaw himself says, drew him into 'outright invention'.¹⁰² If we accept Tacitus' rediscovery of a forgotten historical fact, that the Neronian administration had accused a group of residents of Rome of setting the Great Fire and punished them accordingly,¹⁰³ we should also accept his identification of these as Christians. This is all the more so because he had a personal interest in religion, domestic and foreign. Early in his senatorial career he had been a committed *quindecimvir sacris faciundis*, a very senior priestly office 'that would have involved a fairly high degree of sophistication about religious matters';

and in the 'Histories' he shows himself knowledgeable about the Jews.¹⁰⁴ From this, from accounts of contemporaries and probably also from his own experience as governor of Asia c. 112,¹⁰⁵ Tacitus will have been able to recognise Christians when he came across them in the records.¹⁰⁶ But who were these, if they were not recognised by the developing, still predominantly eastern,¹⁰⁷ Christian tradition? Shaw's 'Jewish sectarians' points in the right direction. There is a long-established view that the Roman Christians of 64 may have been on the margins of Christianity and Judaism: converted Jews.¹⁰⁸ Jews were soon to be thought capable of firing Antioch, but this was in the context of a savage war.¹⁰⁹ Though Romans had long experienced exasperation and uncertainty in dealing with Judaism, they broadly respected the faith as ancient, public and respectable. In 64, there was no reason for branding Jews in general as arsonists. On the other hand, as they grasped that local Christianity, despite its dependence on Jewish converts, amounted to something very different, they will have grown particularly suspicious of its novelty, social seclusion, and supposedly impious and immoral practices.¹¹⁰ For scapegoating to work, it has to pick on plausible villains: like enemy aliens in seventeenth-century London,¹¹¹ immediately identifiable,¹¹² already suspect, and ideologically and physically capable of the actions of which they are accused. Metropolitan Romans may well have become distrustful of a breakaway group, relatively small but, thanks to its errant behaviour and strange language, easily recognisable and, perhaps, beginning to proselytise.¹¹³ These made good scapegoats in Rome but went unrecorded in the eastern Christian tradition because they were not part of it.¹¹⁴ They had probably already been labelled *Christiani/Chrestiani*, and described as such in the City records read by Tacitus. Though the term is not literary before the second century, its use by Tacitus for the Neronian principate is not necessarily anachronistic. In Tacitus' words, it was vulgar usage, which would have taken time to be adopted by educated writers.¹¹⁵ Tacitus glossed their

⁹⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 15.44.3. Below 322–3. ⁹⁶ Above 233.

⁹⁷ Stevenson 1967, 3, 5–6, 168; Fini 1994, 151–2; Waldherr 2005, 9; Holland 2000, 172–5; Maier 2013, 388–92; Shaw 2015, 83–5, 96.

⁹⁸ Shaw 2015, 79–80; Barrett *et al.* 2016, 164–5.

⁹⁹ Shaw 2015, 74 (quotation), 85–9, 92, 94, 96. ¹⁰⁰ Shaw 2015, 84 (quotation), 86, 94.

¹⁰¹ E.g. Tac. *Hist.* 5.2–10; *Ann.* 13.20.3, 14.2 *passim*; 15.74.3. Syme 1958, 280–1, 289–98, 378; Heil 1997, 30, 36–9, 54; *FRHist.* 2013, 1.541–5, 2 no. 82; above 147, 237.

¹⁰² Syme 1958, 298–301; Shaw 2015, 82, 92 (quotation), 96; above 9. ¹⁰³ Shaw 2015, 92.

¹⁰⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 11.11.1; *Hist.* 5.2–10. Barrett *et al.* 2016, 166 (quotation); Malloch 2013, 185–7 and personal communication.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Shaw 2015, 91 n. 84; perhaps at the same time as Pliny II was governing Bithynia.

¹⁰⁶ Stevenson 1967, 3; Barrett *et al.* 2016, 166. ¹⁰⁷ *EEC* 2, 671; Shaw 2015, 89.

¹⁰⁸ E.g. *EEC* 2, 671; Holland 2000, 175; Malitz 1999, 70. ¹⁰⁹ Joseph. *BJ* 7.44. *EEC* 2, 671

¹¹⁰ Warmington 1969, 126; Bradley 1978a, 104–5; Fini 1994, 167. ¹¹¹ Above 241.

¹¹² *Contra* Shaw 2015, 89. ¹¹³ Below 323.

¹¹⁴ For the alleged martyrdoms of SS Peter and Paul, see below 323.

¹¹⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 15.44.3: *vulgus Christianos appellabat*. Shaw 2015, 80–1, 84, 85–9; Barrett *et al.* 2016, 167 n. 40; Dr Malloch, personal communication.

beliefs as a new 'pernicious superstition',¹¹⁶ thus suggesting that they were the direct forerunners of eastern Christians of the early second century. This was mistaken, but his mistake should not be taken to mean that they were not authentic followers of Christ. Confirmation of this may be found in Suetonius. He, perhaps drawing on Tacitus' findings, likewise has Nero, rightly, punishing *Christiani*, 'a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition'.¹¹⁷ However, he also records that Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because they were continually causing public disturbances 'at the instigation of Chrestus'.¹¹⁸ Both statements have provoked debate, but it is not unreasonable to interpret the latter as a confused reference to apostatising converts to Christianity causing unrest in the Jewish community in Rome and to suppose that the same people, abhorrent to Jews and pagans alike, returned to be blamed and punished as arsonists under Nero.¹¹⁹

Therefore, as popular suspicions of Nero mounted and with the senatorial commission yet to report, the administration established its own enquiry, set on finding a person or persons to blame. As in 1666, when 'everyone on the margins of society ... became legitimate targets',¹²⁰ Christians living in Rome were brought in for questioning. Interrogation can generate false confessions. In 1666, one Robert Hubert brought about his own execution by admitting to arson and continuing to assert his guilt in the face of all the evidence and the opinion of the English legal establishment. Such behaviour usually results from a desire for celebrity, possibly exacerbated by mental illness,¹²¹ but in 64 it could well have been prompted by profound religious conviction. One can easily imagine how some Christians appeared to confess to arson by expressing grim satisfaction at God's punishment of the heathen City and by eagerly anticipating imminent Armageddon: 'The incendiary language of the Christian fanatic must have given rise to strange misconceptions and misunderstandings'.¹²² Some, indeed, by failing to explain their language or even to deny the accusation, may have wilfully courted martyrdom.¹²³ This would have been good enough for an administration bent on countering the rumour that Nero was to blame. Initial success then prompted the investigators to extend the period of their enquiries¹²⁴ and to sweep more victims into

¹¹⁶ Tac. Ann. 15.44.4: *exitibilis superstitio*.

¹¹⁷ Suet. Ner. 16.2: *genus hominum superstitionis novae et malificiae*. Below 248.

¹¹⁸ Suet. Claud. 25.4: *impulsore Chresto*. ¹¹⁹ Bradley 1978a, 103–5; cf. Shaw 2015, 84.

¹²⁰ Tinniswood 2003, 148. ¹²¹ Tinniswood 2003, 163–8.

¹²² Henderson 1905, 251 (quotation); Holland 2000, 171–2, 177. ¹²³ Cf. Grant 1970, 161–2.

¹²⁴ Fini (1994, 166) suggests to two months.

their net by association – first with those already condemned and then by simple religious affiliation – making all local Christians to blame for arson and, as we shall see, treating them very badly.¹²⁵ The government's stratagem evidently worked well: most inhabitants of Rome appear to have been persuaded that Christians set the blaze, though some were unhappy over the manner of their punishment.¹²⁶ With this, but not before, the feeling probably arose that the gods had punished Rome for harbouring non-believers and that matters had now been set straight. Tacitus' statement that the Christians had suffered directly because of their 'superstition' and their 'hatred of the human race' is, indeed, probably a reflection of second-century Roman prejudice.¹²⁷

Though the administration succeeded in passing the blame for the Fire of 64 on to Christians, apart from in Tacitus' account, Christians as fire-raisers then drop out of the historical picture.¹²⁸ Why? Generally, time moves on, tempers cool and even alleged arsonists are forgotten,¹²⁹ especially when the real causes of blazes are discovered and accepted. The Fire of London was eventually attributed to carelessness at a bakery, and suspicion of foreigners and of James, Duke of York disappeared from folk memory. In 64–65, the senatorial commission finally declared that the Fire of Rome was accidental. When Domitian officially called the disaster to mind, he made much of restoring grand altars and annual ceremonies in honour of Vulcan, generic god of fire, vowed by Nero as a defence against future outbreaks but never fully established.¹³⁰ These measures suggest provision against mischance, not crime; that Nero made his vow following the report of the senatorial commission; and that its verdict had been broadly accepted. Misgivings over Nero will have been further assuaged by the economic activity generated by his building programme, the excitement of *Neronia* II, the prospect of an heir, Tiridates' visit and the Greek 'triumph'.¹³¹ Popular sympathy for the *princeps* may also have been restored by his narrow escape from the Pisonian conspirators, and the death of Poppaea. In 65, Subrius Flavus might maliciously draw on rumour in a last-ditch condemnation of Nero as an arsonist, but even then, less than a year after the Fire, few would have believed him. The process of forgetting Christian involvement will have been further accelerated by another serious fire in 80, under Titus. This, though human

¹²⁵ Below 323. ¹²⁶ Tac. Ann. 15.44.8; below 324.

¹²⁷ Tac. Ann. 15.44.5: *odium generis humani*. Cf. Holland 2000, 165; Tinniswood 2003, 180–1, 186.

¹²⁸ Above 234. ¹²⁹ Cf. Canter 1932, 274, 280.

¹³⁰ ILS 4914. Shaw 2015, 90–1; Closs 2016, 103, 110–11. ¹³¹ Cf. below 343.

agency appears to have been considered (perhaps a lingering memory of 64¹³²), was finally ascribed to broad divine displeasure, unprovoked by the actions or failings of any individual or group.¹³³ The verdict both avoided the turmoil of widespread recriminations and took pressure off the incumbent *princeps*, the figure of ultimate human responsibility.¹³⁴ Thus towards the end of the first century the official line was that the fires of both 64 and 80 were not due to any criminality and certainly not to any *princeps*.¹³⁵ However, in this period when the historical image of the 64 fire and of Nero was being fixed, there persisted a contrary view that fed the developing tradition of Nero 'the monster'.¹³⁶ Christian arson was forgotten but 'the image of a ruler "fiddling while Rome burned" is far too potent, and useful, ever to be discarded from popular imagination'.¹³⁷ Subsequent *principes* were ready to tolerate an unofficial charge of arson against Nero, the vicious foil to their own virtues. This explains Suetonius' severing of Tacitus' connection of Nero's punishment of Christians with the Fire. It allowed him 'unequivocally' to blame the *princeps* for the latter,¹³⁸ while listing the former among the *princeps*' positive measures to 'safeguard public order and restraint'.¹³⁹ Christians were, anachronistically, seen as having been punished for their religion, not for arson.¹⁴⁰

10.5 The Golden House

Like his involvement with the Fire, Nero's subsequent construction of a new residence in Rome – the *Domus Aurea* or 'Golden House' – has long provoked debate. He planned a collection of buildings, architectonic features and parkland stretching from the Palatine to the Viminal in the north and the Caelian in the east (Figure 13).¹⁴¹

Its most famous structure, east of the Palatine, is now known as the Golden House having erroneously been given the name of the entire complex.¹⁴² Archaeologists prefer to call it the 'Pavilion'. The Pavilion looked south down the slope of the Oppian and up that of the Caelian hill, over the area now occupied by the Colosseum. What we know of it derives

¹³² I owe this point to Dr Lütkenhaus.

¹³³ Cass. Dio 66.24.1–3: *to kakon ouk anthrōpinou alla daimonion egeneto*. Canter 1932, 276.

¹³⁴ Above 242; cf. Closs 2016, 116–17. ¹³⁵ Cf. Closs 2016, 110.

¹³⁶ Cf. Closs 2016, 118–19. ¹³⁷ Warmington 1969, 124 (quotation); cf. Tinniswood 2003, 176.

¹³⁸ Stevenson 1967, 4. ¹³⁹ Bradley 1978a, 103.

¹⁴⁰ Suet. *Ner.* 16.2. Bradley 1978a, 103–4; above 247.

¹⁴¹ Suet. *Ner.* 31.1. Meyboom and Moormann 2013, 133, 274.

¹⁴² For an overview: Panella 2011b; Ball 2003, 6; Beste 2011b; Tomei 2011, 131; Viscogliosi 2011b, 137.

from literary texts and archaeological research.¹⁴³ It is conventionally shown as two great peristyle wings, hinged by a 'large octagonal hall, probably roofed with a massive cupola'.¹⁴⁴ Of 'enormous' size, with an overall frontage of c. 370 m, it was built in the style of a portico-villa, 'with the main rooms in the façade which, through a portico and terrace before it, had a fine view on the landscape park lying in front ...'.¹⁴⁵ It was inventively designed, magnificently fitted out with the latest architectural and technological novelties and lavishly decorated.¹⁴⁶ The Forum to the west was connected to the Golden House complex by an extended *via Sacra*. At the top of the *via Sacra* Nero planned to erect a great bronze statue (Colossus), according to Suetonius, 120 Roman feet high (c. 35 m; 116 statute feet).¹⁴⁷ To the east, behind the statue, on the height of the Velian saddle, an extensive forecourt and ornamental lake (*Stagnum*) gave on to the Pavilion and a wide, wooded estate. South of the lake, Nero turned the uncompleted temple of Claudius into an extravagant water-feature.¹⁴⁸ To the west of this, on the Palatine south of the *via Sacra*, was another set of grand new buildings, adjoining a repaired *Domus Tiberiana*.¹⁴⁹ Though somewhat clumsy, it is useful to think of both as the 'Domus Tiberiana/Neronian palace' complex.¹⁵⁰ The full Golden House complex covered an area estimated at between 50 and 80 ha (125–200 acres), potentially twice that of the Vatican City.¹⁵¹ Though the Pavilion was taken to an advanced stage of construction, there are indications that neither it nor the Golden House complex as a whole was ever fully completed.¹⁵² The complex must have been used to impress Tiridates,

¹⁴³ Suet. *Ner.* 31.1–2; Bradley 1978a, 169, 173–81; Griffin 1984, 138–9; Chaisemartin 2003, 156–60; Meyboom and Moormann 2012, 131–3; Beste and Hesberg 2013, 322–8; Meyboom and Moormann 2013, 16–17.

¹⁴⁴ Figure 13; but cf. below 258.

¹⁴⁵ Griffin 1984, 134–5; Fini 1994, 176; Chaisemartin 2003, 158; Meyboom and Moormann 2012, 131, 133 (quotations); Meyboom and Moormann 2013, 22, 70, 79.

¹⁴⁶ Grant 1970, 173; Fini 1994, 177–8; Waldherr 2005, 220; Beste and Hesberg 2013, 326; above 119.

¹⁴⁷ Suet. *Ner.* 31.1; Cass. Dio 66.15.1 (100 feet). Bradley 1978a, 177; Meyboom and Moormann 2012, 133; cf. below 274.

¹⁴⁸ Moormann 2003, 383–4; Meyboom and Moormann 2013, 17. ¹⁴⁹ Below 250.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Perrin 2016, figures 2, 3. Carandini 2011, 143 prefers the rather confusing *Domus Augustiana* to 'Neronian palace'.

¹⁵¹ Griffin 1984, 137–9; Chaisemartin 2003, 156–9; Moorman 2003, 385; Beste and Hesberg 2013, 324; Meyboom and Moormann 2013, 16 and n. 31. Perrin 2016, 236 and figures 2, 3 would make it much larger by including imperial gardens beyond the Servian wall.

¹⁵² Grant 1970, 173; Bradley 1978a, 173, 181; Beste and Hesberg 2013, 324; Meyboom and Moormann 2013, 16; below 259.