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I

Introduction

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

When Nero succeeded as emperor in October, AD 54, he inherited a form of government put in place some eighty years previously by his illustrious ancestor, Augustus. Still known then as Octavian, Augustus had crushed the combined forces of his rival Antony and Antony's ally and mistress, Cleopatra of Egypt, in September, 31 BC, at the great battle of Actium in northern Greece. His conduct afterward marked the end of a republican system of government that had been in force since the expulsion of the last Roman king, traditionally dated to the end of the sixth century BC. Some four years after Actium, he nominally surrendered to the senate the territories that he had ended up controlling. In gratitude for his generous gesture, the senate bestowed on him the title of Augustus and assigned to him authority over an enormous "province" in the unsettled frontier areas. Its governors ("provincial legates," *legati Augusti*), and the commanders of the legions stationed there ("legionary legates," *legati legionis*—such technical terms are explained in the glossary at the end of the book), were his direct appointees, so that in effect he became commander-in-chief of the Roman armies. The remaining "public" provinces were governed by proconsuls selected by lot from the senate.

Despite the veneer of republicanism and the pretence that Augustus was merely the "leading citizen" (*princeps*), his determination to be succeeded from within his own bloodline betrayed the essential fraud of what was for all intents and purposes a monarchy. To complicate

matters, he and his last wife, the much admired Livia, produced no living offspring. The rulers of Rome's first imperial dynasty were subsequently descended from the Julian line of Augustus, beginning with Julia, his daughter by his previous wife, and from the Claudian line of Livia (the name Livia had been acquired through adoption), and they are familiarly known as the Julio-Claudians. Augustus eventually designated as his successor the Claudian Tiberius, Livia's son by a previous marriage and the husband of Julia. Tiberius was an outstanding military commander, it seems, but destined to be an uncharismatic and undiplomatic emperor when he succeeded Augustus in AD 14. Like Augustus, he had no obvious successor in waiting in his later years. Tiberius died in 37, to be replaced by his grandson (by adoption), Gaius Caligula, a rare example of an emperor whose villainous reputation challenges even Nero's. In AD 41, Caligula was assassinated by officers of his guard and succeeded by his uncle Claudius, a man deemed by many, including Claudius's own mother, to be mentally incompetent, but who in fact proved a highly capable emperor. It was during Claudius's reign that the young Nero first came to public attention.

Nero was born in Antium (Anzio), on December 15, AD 37. His father, Gnaeus, a man of seemingly limited character and few attainments, died during Nero's infancy. His mother, Agrippina the Younger, a great-granddaughter of Augustus, seems to have been the dominant force in the family and was ruthlessly ambitious on her son's behalf. She married Claudius in 49, and within a year had persuaded him to adopt her son. In AD 53, Claudius also sanctioned Nero's marriage to his daughter, Octavia. Claudius died in AD 54, supposedly helped on his way by a poisoned mushroom added to the dinner menu by Agrippina. Nero was whisked off to the camp of the Praetorian guard, and enthusiastically greeted there as emperor. A compliant senate contributed by heaping imperial powers on the sixteen-year-old. The later image of Nero as the bloated tyrant is so firmly stamped onto the popular imagination that it is perhaps hard now to appreciate that the succession of this handsome and charming youth was greeted by Romans with exuberant enthusiasm as the dawn of a new Golden Age. The fervor of the time was palpable, reflected in the ecstatic response of the bucolic poet Calpurnius Siculus, "a golden age is

reborn in an age of serene peace."[1] The optimism may seem strangely naive, but the reaction does seem to have been genuine, and widespread. And, most significant for our present purposes, still, in AD 64, on the eve of the fire that devastated Rome, that enthusiasm seems hardly to have abated.

The excited public response to Nero's succession was, of course, carefully orchestrated by the powers behind the throne. His very first speech before the senate was written for him by his old tutor, the philosopher Seneca, and was a model of tact and deference. Nero announced to the delighted, if deluded, senators that he would model himself on Augustus, and, perhaps most important, ensure that the senators would retain their ancient privileges, which of course was bound to be well received. It all created the happy illusion, in the view of Tacitus, that in some ways the old free republic was still alive and well. All in all, an excellent start. This early phase of the reign was not completely free of dark shadows, such as the suspicious death of Claudius's natural son, Britannicus. But it is not until the fifth year, AD 59, that we have the first overt and indisputable proof that Nero could, if need be, behave with breathtaking ruthlessness. For reasons now difficult to determine—perhaps a mixture of political and psychological—he decided to eliminate his own mother, Agrippina. His reputed means were fascinating, and tradition has passed down to us an account of an elaborate, and thoroughly implausible, plan to sabotage a boat on which Agrippina was a passenger, so that it would break apart in mid-ocean. She succeeded in swimming to shore. Nero then sent assassins to her coastal villa to finish the job.

Even the barely disguised murder of a mother seems not to have made any serious dent in Nero's broad appeal. The surrounding towns even went so far as to celebrate the murder, carrying out sacrifices and sending delegations to offer their congratulations. On his return to Rome after the event, the general populace responded with near delirious expressions of enthusiasm. To no small degree Nero's powerful standing was due to his fine sense of knowing what would make the public happy. After murdering Agrippina, he proceeded with breathtaking *sang froid* to establish games in her honor, with entertainment that included a distinguished but unnamed knight who rode an elephant along a tightrope. One of the shows was particularly ominous, although

no one in the audience could possibly have imagined its prophetic significance. "The Fire" by the highly regarded comic playwright, Lucius Afranius, was apparently staged with such vivid realism that the furniture had to be rescued by the actors from a genuinely burning house. They were allowed to keep it.[2]

Perhaps even more than Caligula before him, Nero was fundamentally a "people's emperor." One facet of his behavior that causes deep offense to the later literary authorities was his eagerness to perform as a singer on the stage, or as an actor in the theater, or as a charioteer in races. But these activities apparently did no damage to his standing with the masses at the time. In fact, the masses may well have approved of them. Pliny the Younger, in a panegyric on the emperor Trajan, in AD 100, observed that by Trajan's day the people had turned away from professional actors as something vulgar, while in an earlier age they had actually enjoyed the performances of the actor-emperor Nero.[3] Among the upper classes there was perhaps a certain ambivalence about such conduct. Although in the years preceding the fire they may have felt to a greater or lesser degree uncomfortable with the notion of their emperor performing on stage, they were perfectly willing to countenance it while their own material and political lives were happily prospering. Cynicism was not a scarce commodity in imperial Rome.

In the early 60s any lingering tensions from the fallout from Agrippina's murder seem still to have been limited to court or family circles. In AD 62, Nero divorced the popular Octavia, so he could marry his second wife, Poppaea Sabina. According to Tacitus, the treatment of Octavia did lead to popular disturbances, but significantly Tacitus goes out of his way to emphasize that the protests were not directed against Nero. Instead, they targeted *Poppaea*. In fact, the crowds competed to heap praise on the emperor. We are much accustomed to hearing of Nero the crazed tyrant, the murderer of his family, the persecutor of the Christians, all in all a generally loathsome individual, and we can be lulled into forgetting that before the fire Nero was still very much Rome's Golden Boy. By the first half of AD 64, his personal position must have seemed unassailable.

The fire seems to have been the catalyst for the great divide that opened up between Nero and members of Rome's elite, one that would

ultimately claim Nero himself as a victim. When the governor of Gaul, Gaius Julius Vindex, rebelled in March 68, Nero should have been able to weather the crisis, and five years earlier he almost certainly would have weathered it (the mutinous Vindex was in fact defeated and died two months later). But he dithered, and the lack of support among the senatorial elite encouraged the revolt of the highly regarded military commander Servius Sulpicius Galba, at that time serving in Spain. Nero seemed overwhelmed by events and incapable of responding effectively, alternating between panic and inertia. The unrest spread to Africa, and in Rome the Praetorian guard abandoned him, thus sealing his fate. He was declared a public enemy (*hostis*) by the senate and escaped to a private villa, where he took his own life, in June 68.

Nero's melodramatic death was the prelude to more than a year of political turmoil, as rival commanders competed to fill the vacancy he had created: Galba, Otho, and Vitellius all took turns serving as emperor, but the tenure of each was spectacularly brief. The situation finally settled down when Vespasian, already in de facto control while his predecessor, Vitellius, was still alive, was formally acknowledged as princeps by the senate in December 69. The dynasty that he founded, the Flavians (Vespasian, 69–79, his sons Titus, 79–81, and Domitian, 81–96), seems to have made the denigration of Nero one of the central props of its propaganda, which doubtless helped shape the earliest impressions of the Great Fire and of Nero's responsibility for it.

THE LITERARY SOURCES

Whatever period of history we choose to study, we inevitably find ourselves at the mercy of the sources available. Ancient history poses its own special challenges. Even when sources are relatively plentiful, and we are far better informed about the Julio-Claudians than about, say, the early Middle Ages, the quality of the material can leave much to be desired. A very brief introduction to this issue as it relates to Nero and the Great Fire is therefore appropriate. This short section is far from comprehensive and makes no effort to treat all the ancient authorities who appear in the course of this book. Many of these are incidental, and some brief background information will be provided on

the spot where it seems relevant. The focus here is on the three major literary sources for the Neronian fire, whose accounts appear near the end of the book.

None of the three main authorities for the fire, Tacitus (AD 55?–120s?), Suetonius (AD 70?–130s?), and Cassius Dio (AD 165?–235?) was, at the time he wrote, a contemporary of Nero. They all depended on earlier writings. These are now almost entirely lost and even the identities of their authors are very difficult to determine. There is, however, one extant source cited generally by both Suetonius and Tacitus: the prodigious Pliny the Elder (AD 23 / 24–79), a polymath whose scholarly enthusiasm led to his death during the eruption of Vesuvius. Pliny's great encyclopaedic work, the *Naturalis Historia*, was published in AD 77 in thirty-seven books and survives as an opulent mine of fascinating information on almost every aspect of the ancient world, including the reign of Nero. References to the emperor are scattered throughout the work. The tone of the material is unabashedly negative, with emphasis on Nero's extravagance and willful eccentricity. Pliny does make one specific and potentially significant comment on the fire and Nero's potential culpability, but his information is seriously flawed by a manuscript problem (see chapter 3). He also wrote a more conventional history, the *Historiae*, in thirty-one books.[4] Unfortunately it is now lost, but Tacitus made use of it, citing it for information on the major conspiracy that followed the fire.[5]

Publius (?) Cornelius Tacitus is broadly acknowledged as the senior historian of the Julio-Claudian period. He pursued a successful career under the Flavian dynasty that followed it, which he capped with a series of important historical works. By AD 100 he had written his *Histories*, covering the succession and reigns of the Flavians: only the first four books and fragments of the fifth have survived. He then turned to an earlier era for his final and most celebrated achievement, the *Annals*, dealing with the years from the accession of Tiberius in AD 14 to the death of Nero in 68. We do not know when he began it, but he was still engaged in the work in AD 116.[6] The *Annals* seems to have consisted of eighteen books, but some are missing, the most notable gaps being the entire reign of Caligula and the early part of Claudius's, and the last two years of Nero's.

Tacitus seems to have flourished under the imperial system, even under the despised Domitian, as he acknowledges in his preface to the *Histories*. Yet there can be no doubting the virulent hostility to that system that emerges in the *Annals*. He could, of course, recognize the benefits of individual enlightened rulers like Trajan, but the system itself was inherently injurious. We must therefore be skeptical about Tacitus's famous assertion at the beginning of the *Annals* that he could write "without rancor or bias" (*sine ira et studio*), an echo of the claim made earlier in the *Histories* "without affection and without bias" (*neque amore . . . et sine studio*).[7] Tacitus certainly is not in the habit of presenting facts dishonestly. But behind the presentation of simple facts lurk his own prejudices. His attribution of motives, and his attention to rumors and "alleged" general beliefs, leave their impression on the reader. That said, his bias does not lead him to take the rumors at face value, and on those rare occasions when he cites his sources, he can be critical of them.

Tacitus's account of the fire is an excellent example of his great narrative skills. Serious historian that he is, he expresses appropriate skepticism about Nero's culpability, the only one of the three main authorities to do so, and records that the sources are divided on the issue. But his hostility to the emperor is such that by the end of his narrative the reader is left with a vaguely defined but strangely compelling impression that somehow Nero's behavior was so abominable that he must be held accountable for what had happened. That is a remarkable feat of writing (see chapter 4).

Although his account of the fire is far more detailed than those of Suetonius and Dio, Tacitus provides relatively little specific information about the individual buildings lost or seriously damaged. He does record the destruction of the Circus Maximus and of Nero's Palatine residence, the outbreak on the Aemiliana estate of Tigellinus, as well as the loss of five named religious buildings of considerable antiquity: the Temple of Luna, the Altar of Hercules, the Temple of Jupiter Stator, the Regia, and the Temple of Vesta.[8] But he surely had considerably more potential information at his disposal, since he was acquainted with the testimony of those elderly inhabitants of the city who had lived there at the time of the fire.[9] Frustratingly, he seems to have chosen to make relatively little, if any, use of it.

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus was born around AD 70, possibly in Africa. Equestrian by rank, he was appointed to a number of administrative positions under the emperors Trajan and Hadrian. He wrote prolifically on a range of topics, the *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* being his most celebrated work.

Suetonius is a biographer, not a historian. As a broad principle he usually arranges his material by topic rather than in chronological sequence and seems to take it for granted that the reader will have a general familiarity with the subject. He is rarely interested in serious political issues unless they cast light on the personality of his subject, on whom he directs his complete focus. Generally, he is not motivated by the kind of deep hostility that seems to have engaged Tacitus. His main failing is not *ira et studium*, and indeed, in the case of Nero (and of other emperors), he does include items that he says do not garner criticism—*nulla reprehensione*.[10] Far more serious is his willingness to accept on faith the untested tales passed down by tradition. He was in fact quite capable of serious research, often making use of public records and archival material, and he can be very skeptical of the literary sources. But this admirable skepticism does not deter him from recounting the frivolous gossip transmitted by those same sources, and he cannot resist juicy anecdotes, cheerfully leaving it to the reader to exercise a judgment that modern historians would feel is their own responsibility. Also, he tends to take specific and isolated incidents and to present them as though they reflect the general and consistent behavior of his subjects.

Nowhere in the *Nero* does Suetonius explicitly cite his sources. We cannot know if he made use of Tacitus or if the Neronian chapters of the *Annals* were even available when Suetonius wrote his *Nero*, and the relationship between the two writers is a highly contentious issue. Also, Suetonius's narrative of the fire is highly tendentious. His central purpose is to exploit the event to highlight Nero's cruelty and his indifference to the sufferings of the Romans. He makes no attempt at a sophisticated or investigative account of the disaster or its causes. We must therefore exercise extreme caution in using Suetonius's *Nero* to draw any conclusions about who was to blame for what happened.

Our third major literary source for the fire is Cassius Dio Cocceianus, a senator from Nicaea in Asia Minor. His *History of Rome* (*Romaïke*

Historia), written in Greek over a period of more than twenty years, seems to have begun with the early kings and to have ended in the reign of Severus Alexander (AD 222–235). Dio has generally not been considered a deeply analytical historian.[11] Throughout his work, he very rarely cites earlier authorities (Augustus and Hadrian are the only two individuals specifically mentioned as sources of information), although his passing references to writers like Livy suggest that he presumably consulted them. It is therefore not surprising then that he fails to provide the name of any of his sources in those sections of his account of the fire that have survived. But it is to be noted that for Nero's reign (as for other parts of his history), Dio's original text is missing, and we have to rely on epitomes made in the Byzantine period. Since these epitomes take the form of selections rather than of summaries, there is a risk that important topics that he originally covered might be omitted in their entirety.

The main general value of Dio is that, although in many ways his narrative style is highly biographical, in some respects almost a hybrid of Suetonius and Tacitus, he does, like Tacitus, treat his material annalistically, arranging it in broad sequence under the years when it occurred.[12] He thus relates the events of the last two years of Nero's reign, part of the key period that followed the fire. This is particularly useful, since those years are missing from Tacitus's *Annals*, which break off in the middle of AD 66. But possibly because he is in a certain sense a biographer as well as an annalist, Dio is just as prone to gossip and distortion as is Suetonius, and, like Suetonius, he makes no real effort to discriminate between the plausible and the absurd. Also, he views the world very much from a senatorial perspective. It is therefore not surprising that in his account of the fire, as of other episodes of the reign, he is extremely hostile to Nero.

Dio's account of the fire contains elements found also in both Suetonius and Tacitus, such as Nero's poetic performance against the background of the burning city. This information clearly has a common origin, but there are differences in details, and it seems likely that each of the three writers independently used common sources, as well as sources neglected by the other two.

The literary authorities are not of course our only source of information for the past. There is also the evidence provided by archaeology. We

must note a caveat at the outset. There seems to be a rather dangerous article of faith that what is preserved in the archaeological record is *ipso facto* more reliable than information derived from literature, on the grounds that archaeology is uncontaminated by authorial bias. We must avoid falling prey to this widely held misconception—the situation is by no means so clear-cut. While the physical material itself may be untainted, it is almost never as explicit as its literary counterpart, and our understanding of that material is very dependent on how it is interpreted and presented to us by the archaeologist. And since archaeology very often involves the ordered destruction of the site being examined, and the archive of the site will as often as not be held in storage, for practical purposes the information to which we have access will ultimately come filtered through the investigator's interpretations. In the case of the Great Fire we are fortunate that the main body of archaeological evidence for the event has been brought to light by a highly professional team led by Clementina Panella for the Sapienza University of Rome, and it has been published to high scholarly standards. But these standards are not necessarily maintained by other excavators, and elsewhere we must be on guard against conclusions that can be highly speculative and at times fueled by an almost poetic imagination. The archaeologist's idiosyncrasies and preconceptions can occasionally shape what is supposedly objective evidence.

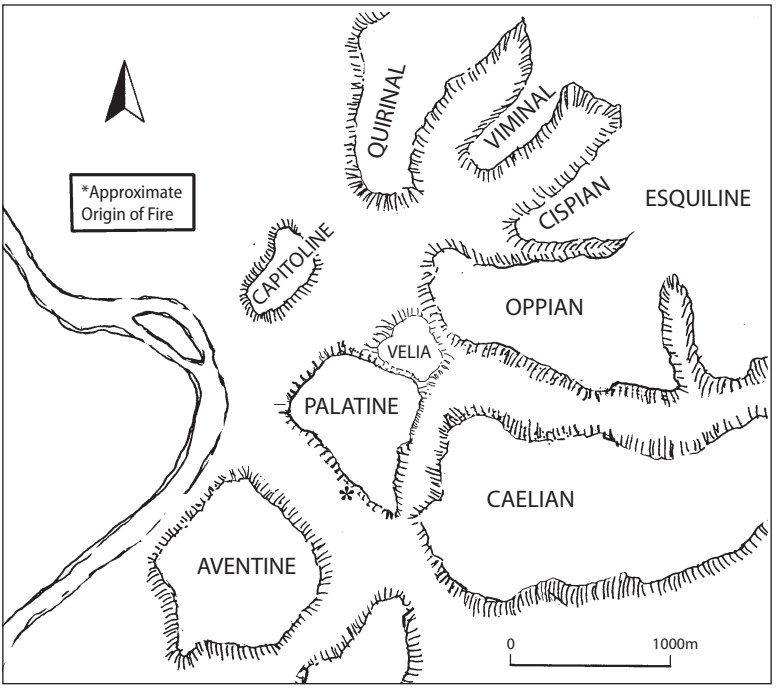
Beyond these general reservations, the Great Fire of AD 64 creates two very specific archaeological problems. A devastating fire can often leave a stark reminder of its presence. This is nicely illustrated by the Romano-British town of Verulamium (St. Albans), which was destroyed during the Boudiccan rebellion, just a few years before the Great Fire. The early debris levels at Verulamium contain a dramatic burned layer which can confidently be ascribed to the consequences of the rebellion.[13] Unfortunately one will look in vain for such overwhelming and explicit archaeological evidence for the Great Fire of AD 64. Rome has enjoyed a long and complicated history, during which it is known to have suffered a number of devastating fires, including one only sixteen years after the Great Fire. Assigning fire debris to any specific event can in some cases be a hazardous undertaking. Also, there is a second problem for the modern researcher, created

by a particularly enlightened scheme of Nero. Among the measures that he undertook after the fire was the clearance of the destroyed material and the subsequent return of the sites, clear of debris, to the owners. Ships carried grain up the Tiber to provide relief for the destitute. Once unloaded, these same ships were then required to fill up with fire debris, which could be carried downstream and serve a useful purpose of filling the marshes near Ostia.[14] Not all of the debris would have been removed, of course, especially where it could be used as fill for Nero's Golden House, built on the land devastated by the fire. But much of the archaeological evidence was carried away literally by the shipload. Nero's admirable recycling program could in a sense be viewed negatively, as an early instance of archaeological vandalism.

ANCIENT ROME

The Great Fire occurred within a particular historical and political context. But it was in itself a physical phenomenon, happening in, and to an extent shaped by, a specific physical environment. Hence it remains for us to consider one final "text," as modernists would define it, the city of Rome itself. This brief section is not of course intended for experts in the topography of ancient Rome.[15]

The location of what would develop into the city of Rome was determined in the first instance by the Tiber, the largest river of central Italy. Flowing southwest from its Apennine headwaters to the Tyrrhenian Sea, the Tiber is powerful and turbulent, and very subject to flooding. Downstream of Rome it begins to be navigable by deep draft ships. This last factor, plus the fortuitous presence of an island that stemmed the power of the current and made a crossing feasible, created the ideal conditions for the development of a major city. The Tiber played a key role during the course of the Great Fire, even though it is never mentioned by any ancient source in that context. The fire was apparently confined to the east bank of the river, which formed a natural barrier that prevented the flames from spreading west, just as in the seventeenth century the Thames would prevent the Great Fire of London from taking serious hold to the south of the city.



1.1. Traditional hills of Rome. A. Louis.

The ancient crossing of the Tiber, the Pons Sublicius (famously defended by Horatius), led the traveler from the west into the most ancient settled part of Rome, in fact a place older than Rome itself, the Forum Boarium, situated along the river between the Capitoline and the Aventine Hills. Its topography made it a natural place to meet and trade, although it may never have been a cattle market, as sometimes popularly supposed (*bos* = ox, cow, bull). Its ancient and crowded nature meant that it was constantly vulnerable to serious fires (see chapter 2). As a marketplace, the Forum Boarium was to be superseded by what would become the heart of the city, the Forum Romanum, which lay to the east of the Capitoline, framed by that hill as well as the Velia and the Palatine. That later forum presumably began as a simple market location, perhaps on the lower slopes of the Capitoline, and grew when the area it later occupied was drained by the great sewer (Cloaca Maxima), traditionally begun during the regal period.[16]

The dominant feature of the east bank of the Tiber was the city's famous hills, ancient ridges formed by erosion above the floodplain of the river below.[17] Natural and human activities have greatly softened their contours; hence, they would have been far more abrupt in antiquity than they are today. To the north of the Forum Boarium, the Capitoline Hill rose up steeply. Its sheer profile made it a natural stronghold, and it was supposedly the only part of the city to survive intact the Gallic sack of 390 BC (see chapter 2). The hill became a major cult center, home to what was arguably Rome's most significant religious monument, the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus.

North of the Capitoline Hill, between the Quirinal and Pincian hills and the river, stretched the expanse of the Campus Martius, roughly 250 h (620 acres). Initially subject to frequent flooding, the Campus lay outside the formal city limits until the imperial period, by which time it had been considerably built over. Augustus chose this district as the site of some of his most significant buildings, including the Pantheon and Mausoleum. Most of the area seems to have escaped the fire in AD 64, and it became a place of refuge for those who had lost their homes.[18]

To the south of the Forum Boarium lay the Aventine, the southernmost of Rome's traditional seven hills. By the time of Nero this precipitous hill had become a fashionable residential area. Fires are recorded on the Aventine from time to time, but there is no explicit evidence that it was directly affected by the Great Fire.

To the north, the more gentle slopes of the Aventine overlooked a shallow valley, originally intersected by a stream. This area was to be occupied by the Circus Maximus, and it was here that the Great Fire of AD 64 broke out, as did a number of earlier, and later, fires. To the north of the Circus Maximus rose the Palatine, its upper plateau later dominated by a huge Flavian palace. The Palatine, especially its southwest quarter, figures prominently in Rome's earliest history, and was the original site of the ancient walled city. In the republican period it became a desirable residential area for A-list Romans: Cicero owned a house on the hill, and Augustus was born and made his home there, ultimately bequeathing the estate to later emperors, and inadvertently also bequeathing the word "palace," or its cognates, to several

languages. According to the literary sources the Palatine lay at the center of the conflagration in AD 64, and many of its buildings were destroyed.

To the east of the Palatine lay the Caelian Hill, at the southeastern limit of the traditional seven hills. The Caelian is a long, narrow, sausage-shaped extension, some two kilometers in length and barely half a kilometer in width. Supposedly covered originally in oak forest, it was heavily populated during the republican period and devastated by a major fire in AD 27; in the subsequent redevelopment it became a desirable residential area for the well-to-do.[19] No source mentions any damage there in AD 64, but there is some archaeological evidence that it might indeed have been affected (see chapter 3).

North of the Palatine there projected a spur known in antiquity as the Velia. Originally, it seems, the Velia was high and steep, and would have dominated the Forum Romanum at the forum's southeastern end (the Capitoline dominated its northwest).[20] But the hill was gradually reduced by concentrated building activity, including construction of the vestibule of Nero's Golden House after the AD 64 fire, and the Hadrianic Temple of Venus and Rome that replaced it, and ultimately it disappeared under the great Fascist thoroughfare, the Via dei Fori Imperiali, opened by Mussolini in 1932.

The Velia formed part of a saddle, which on the north linked the Palatine to one of Rome's most extensive hills, the Esquiline. There is some uncertainty about the nomenclature of this prominence, but it seems to have consisted of, or have included, two distinct heights, the Cispian and the Oppian. The Esquiline was the location of a number of grand estates, such as the Lamian Gardens and the Gardens of Maecenas, which had become imperial possessions by Nero's time. It seems to have escaped the early phase of the fire, which was brought to a stop at its foot, but it may have been severely affected in a subsequent outbreak.[21] The southern spur, the Oppian, was the scene of extensive construction under Nero and contains the best preserved section of his Golden House, built (or rebuilt) immediately after the fire. Between the Esquiline/Oppian to the north and the Palatine and Caelian to the south ran a valley, clearly devastated in AD 64. It was redeveloped by Nero, then redeveloped in turn by Vespasian, in part

to make way for his great amphitheater, to be known later as the Colosseum, and the adjoining gladiatorial school.

While the broad physical features of ancient Rome do not present great problems, its detailed topography is an academic nightmare. Such issues as the location of buildings, or the orientation of major streets, mentioned often in very casual or ambiguous terms in the literary sources, are invariably the subject of major academic debates and controversies. Any attempt to study the course and extent of the fire, or the initiatives taken to rebuild Rome afterward, can at times be bedeviled by the lack of consensus about the city's topography.

THE POPULATION OF ANCIENT ROME

In the midst of the sometimes abstract academic controversies that the Great Fire and its aftermath have engendered, it should always be borne in mind that this was first and foremost a human tragedy. It should give us serious pause that we are unable to put a name to a single individual who died during this catastrophic event. Nor, at the other extreme, do we have a coherent idea of the *total* number of the victims. We can get a general sense of the scale of the disaster from Tacitus's claim that it was the worst Roman fire ever, and Dio's broad observation that it was the greatest calamity to befall Rome down to his own time, the third century AD, with the single exception of the Gallic invasion.[22] But it is impossible even to begin putting an actual figure to the number of fatalities.

Most signifcantly, we do not know the population of Nero's Rome, an issue no less controversial than the serious topographical problems just mentioned. The pioneering work in this sphere was the great demographic study by the maverick German scholar Karl Julius Beloch, published more than 130 years ago, the first attempt to measure ancient populations with something approximating a scientific method, and still almost invariably the starting point of any discussion.[23] The debate about the city of Rome's population has generally been conducted in the context of the size of the population of Italy as a whole. For this we have some data in the form of census figures assembled

during the periodic enumerations of the Roman citizen body and occasionally preserved in the literary sources. The latest figures available for a pre-Augustan census are for the year 70 / 69 BC and indicate a citizen body of 900,000.[24] Following this, Augustus, in the record that he left of his achievements, the *Res Gestae*, provides figures for three censuses undertaken under his stewardship.[25] Under 28 BC he records that 4,063,000 Roman citizens were entered on the roll. Twenty years later, in the census of 8 BC, the total was 4,233,000. In the third and final census that he lists, belonging to the last year of his life, AD 14, 4,937,000 Roman citizens were recorded.

The shift between 28 BC and 8 BC is generally in line with what might be reasonably expected. But the difference between 8 BC and AD 14 is striking. What is truly astonishing, however, is the gap between the figures of what was de facto the latest republican census for which we have data, in 70 / 69 BC, and those of Augustus's first enumeration in 28 BC. The population seems to have jumped more than fourfold. How should this leap be interpreted? There have been various explanations. Low registration in the republican period is one suggestion. There is also the extension of citizenship to the Gallic region north of the Po (the Transpadanes) to be taken into account. One theory is that the republican figures included only those citizens who were of an age to be recruited into the Roman legions. The other possibility is that, unlike his republican predecessors, Augustus included women and children in his totals. There is no broad agreement on these issues.

In any case, these figures are for citizens who held Roman citizenship, the majority of whom probably never set foot in Rome.[26] For the inhabitants of the city itself, we have somewhat similar categories of figures, and they present similar difficulties. Augustus provides information on his "donatives," distributions of largesse to Roman residents. He boasts that his largesses down to 12 BC were received by no fewer than 250,000 people. He further records that by the time of his donative of 5 BC, this had grown to 320,000. In 2 BC he gave donatives to those who were receiving the corn dole, and the recipients on this occasion totaled just over 200,000, a number confirmed by Dio.[27] One is struck by the variations in the three figures. But, even

more seriously, once again we do not know who is included—probably, but not certainly, male heads of households only, but, if so, how many wives, children, and, significantly, slaves are to be added to produce the total number of inhabitants? And did Augustus's figures include people who lived outside the strict city limits, the *pomerium*, but could easily make their way into Rome—Beloch argued that people who lived as far as twenty or thirty miles from Rome were able to participate in the dole, thus including residents of Ostia.[28] We have to add to this already complicated situation the possible shift in population during the fifty-year period between Augustus and the Neronian Fire.

Clearly the data on census figures and donatives are less useful than might have been hoped. Other methodologies have been implemented. Calculations have been made on the basis of the grain supply, but different scholars have drawn different conclusions from the figures.[29] Another approach has been to try to extrapolate the population from the physical size of the ancient city, just under 14 sq km, but with no greater consensus.[30] In very broad terms one might speculate, without doing serious violence to recent general scholarly thinking, that the total population of Neronian Rome might have been somewhere between about 500,000 and 1 million, but emphasis must be put on the word "speculate."[31] And to compound all of this uncertainty, we have no way of knowing what portion of the population lost their lives in the fire. The ancient literary authorities tell of the horrific experiences during its course. But, despite the harrowing accounts of agonizing deaths, those same authorities are not at all forthcoming on the total numbers of casualties, even in very broad terms, which might suggest that the number was, relatively speaking, not quite as high as the authorities seem implicitly to suggest.[32] But that, too, is little more than speculation. In sum, we must reluctantly accept that we have no properly informed idea of the number of casualties of the Great Fire of AD 64.

Modern Rome, a city of more than four million inhabitants, is on the surface indifferent to this great tragedy. Its familiar landscape betrays none of the scars of the inferno that caused such appalling devastation so long ago. But it is a sobering thought that below that

surface, in fact in places many meters beneath the crowded and noisy modern streets, now throbbing with life and activity, vestiges of that ancient catastrophe have survived through the passing centuries, peacefully blanketed by thick layers of accumulated debris. These buried deposits of ash, broken pottery, metalwork, and, inevitably, charred fragments of human bone, have for nearly two thousand years observed a profound silence beneath the bustling streets, frozen in an eternal vigil beneath the famed eternal city.

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Romans are normally indexed by *nomen*, where it is known, but famous individuals, such as emperors, are indexed by the form of the name that is generally familiar.

The entries on the most important literary sources, Pliny the Elder, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio, are restricted to substantive discussions of their evidence.