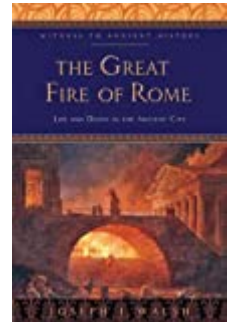


Joseph J. Walsh. *The Great Fire of Rome: Life and Death in the Ancient City.* Witness to Ancient History Series. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019. Illustrations. 192 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4214-3371-4.



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Fires in ancient Rome were common, but the Great Fire was the longest and largest incendiary disaster in the city's history. It sprang up on July 18, 64 CE, and raged for nine days, devastating the city and displacing thousands of residents. The event also brought us the infamous story of the emperor Nero fiddling from his palace as the fire burned. Joseph J. Walsh's new book is a lively account of the catastrophe and its aftermath. This book is part of John Hopkins University Press's Witness to Ancient History series, which publishes short-form, engaging monographs on events, places, and people in classical antiquity. Given this context, the book's concise format is appropriate. It unfolds in a prologue and five chapters: an overview of the dangers of life in Rome followed by chapters organized chronologically about the fire, its immediate consequences, the emperor's role and reaction, and the legacy of the tragic event. End materials include appendices describing the ancient written sources, a concise timeline of the Great Fire, and suggested further reading.

Chapter 1 is a colorful introduction to the diverse hazards of everyday life in ancient Rome. Walsh vividly describes the sights, smells, sounds, and tastes of the ancient city, an excellent counter to the usual whitewashed depictions of Rome that focus on public monuments and urban layout without much of a nod to the sensory experiences of the city. He outlines the evidence for flooding, building collapse, crime, pollution, disease, and fire. He draws primarily from poetry and prose of the late republic and early empire, in which authors—including Cicero, Martial, Seneca, Plutarch, and Tacitus, among others—provide anecdotes and historical context to illustrate these myriad dangers. The section on fire is especially helpful, as it explains just how frequent small fires were, given the wooden construction of most houses and the need for fire for cooking, heating, bathing, and other quotidian tasks. He also describes the development of the fire brigade beginning with Augustus in the first century CE and the significant imperial investment in labor and equipment for fire-fighting. Across the chapter, Walsh's argument is

simply that life in Rome for everyone, but especially for the urban poor, was wrought with difficulty. In this context, the Great Fire seems much less like a historic outlier and more of an inevitability, and rightly so.

The next chapter concerns the fire itself: it reconstructs the path of the blaze within the topography of the city, assesses Nero's troublesome behavior during the disaster, and describes the resulting damage. Tidy maps illustrate the fire's progression across the low-lying parts of the city and, later, some of Rome's hills. Walsh makes a convincing argument that certain buildings and hills escaped severe destruction because the fire brigades concentrated their efforts around the most important symbolic monuments—such as the Temple of Jupiter on Capitoline Hill—as well as on places of most significance to the Roman imperial family, including the palaces of Palatine Hill and the theater district in the Campus Martius. He notes that firefighting techniques, such as fire breaks, were likely employed, but primarily to protect these key places rather than to safeguard residential neighborhoods. A great deal of the chapter is spent on the infamous account of Nero fiddling from his palace as the fire raged. Walsh contends that, even if the story is embellished, it is consistent with our knowledge of Nero's behavior and the Roman cultural context. Throughout, he presents thoughtful interpretation of Tacitus's written history of the fire and does an expert job of assessing the limits and intentions of Roman historical sources, which he describes as being more concerned with expressing moralizing truths than accurate facts. This is especially helpful for the non-expert, who might otherwise be perplexed by the lack of detail recorded in antiquity quantifying lives lost and damage done.

Chapter 3 deals with the immediate aftermath of the Great Fire. Opening with a description of the grueling work of clearing rubble and dead bodies, Walsh paints a grim picture of the fire's consequences. His thoughts on the economic losses for

workers whose livelihoods were destroyed as well as the opportunities for others (for example, construction workers and wagon drivers) dovetail well with current discussions in Roman history concerning urban labor.[1] The bulk of the chapter is devoted to the argument—as old as the fire itself—about whether Nero orchestrated the fire or simply benefited from it, acquiring land to build his lavish new palace and clearing some of the less slightly, poorer neighborhoods. While Walsh does not take a strong stance, he presents a dialogue between the sources that blame Nero (Cassius Dio and Suetonius) and those that do not (Tacitus), another helpful step-by-step lesson in recognizing biases of historical sources of the era. Importantly, he suggests that the rumor could be based on a misunderstanding of firefighting technology on the part of witnesses: controlled burning and firebreak construction may have been misinterpreted as deliberate, malicious destruction on the part of Nero's fire brigade. Nero was blamed by many for arson, and the chapter concludes with an analysis of the emperor's decision to use the early Christians in Rome as scapegoats and punish them in elaborate, cruel public spectacles.

In chapter 4, Walsh presents a longer-term perspective on Nero's transformations to the city after the fire. The first section is dedicated to the urban reconstruction program, which included wider streets and open spaces to serve as firebreaks, limits to the heights of dwellings, and the increased use of stone construction, among other safety measures. Nero also cleared land for his lavish private garden estate and new palace, the Domus Aurea (golden house). Walsh describes the estate based on the written descriptions and limited archaeological evidence. The chapter brings keen attention to the social and economic difficulties that reconstruction would have brought, including altered property lines and Nero's seizure of an immense space for his private enjoyment, which had devastating financial and symbolic impacts on Rome's displaced residents.

The brief final chapter outlines the legacies of the catastrophe. Highlighted are the ways Nero has become an archetypical “superstar bad boy” and his personality is often used to illustrate the shortcomings of historical and modern political villains. Walsh also points to enduring transformations the fire had on Rome, both the redesign of large urban sectors and the later reversals of some of Nero’s most objectionable modifications (for example, the construction of the Colosseum at the spot of Nero’s former private lake, a gesture that returned land back to the people). In the longer term, Nero’s architectural legacy has had an influence on European art and architecture, especially following the rediscovery of the Domus Aurea in the Middle Ages. Walsh also emphasizes the significance of the fire to Christianity and especially to Catholicism. Setting aside arguments about its veracity, Tacitus’s account of the persecution of the Christians following the fire became one of the earliest stories about Christian martyrdom. The most influential of these, of course, is that of St. Peter’s martyrdom in the Circus of Caligula and burial nearby, where St. Peter’s Basilica and the rest of Vatican City would later be constructed.

Citations are relatively sparse and collected in the endnotes rather than as footnotes or in-text citations, which makes the text less useful for specialist scholarly research. From an archaeological perspective, the book also leaves something to be desired. The author does a superb job describing relevant urban topography, but other material evidence is used only sporadically. Walsh sometimes provides incredible detail (for example, in his description of the discovery and remaining evidence for the Domus Aurea) and other times seems to willfully ignore the evidence. For instance, he writes of the city’s reconstruction: “It is virtually certain that brick and concrete also became favored materials, although Tacitus does not mention them” (p. 97). Chronologies of brick and concrete use, of course, are well understood archaeologically and mention of this would only have bolstered Walsh’s argument.[2] Similarly, a

synopsis of known archaeological traces of the fire could have added welcome detail to his description of the fire’s progression based on Tacitus’s account.[3]

Ultimately, the book serves as a concise, engaging read on the history and significance of Rome’s Great Fire. Walsh brings into sharp focus the human impacts of the tragedy and presents a thoughtful and detailed analysis of the unfolding of the fire and its aftermath. His style, with frequent contemporary analogies (for example, similarities with Hurricane Katrina) and references to the modern topography of Rome, makes the book accessible for the novice reader and those familiar with the city’s contemporary places. The book is well suited for undergraduate teaching or as an appealing read for the educated traveler. For the environmental historian without a background in Roman history, the book provides an excellent entryway into this particular environmental disaster. He does what so much classical scholarship on disaster, environmental change, and hardship does not: he clearly centers the human experience.

Notes

[1]. For example, see Sarah Bond, *Trade and Taboo: Disreputable Professions in the Roman Mediterranean* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016); Andrew Wilson and Miko Flohr, eds., *Urban Craftsmen and Traders in the Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Seth Bernard, *Building Mid-Republican Rome: Labor, Architecture, and the Urban Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[2]. For a concise summary, see Lynn Lancaster, “Roman Engineering and Construction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Engineering and Technology in the Classical World*, ed. John Peter Oleson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 256–84. See also Marcello Mogetta, “A New Date for Concrete in Rome,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 105 (2015): 1–40.

[3]. For instance, see Clementina Panella, “Nerone e il grande incendio del 64 D.C.,” in *Nerone*, ed.

Maria Antonietta Tomei and Rossella Rea (Milan: Electa, 2011), 79-91.

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