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READINGS IN THE  
**CLASSICAL  
 HISTORIANS**

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former governor of Africa, Marius Priscus, for extortion. In 112-113 he occupied the prestigious proconsulship of Asia. Unlike the most important people of the day, however, he never received a second consulship. Whether he lived to witness the accession of Hadrian in 117 is uncertain, but the evidence to that effect is not very convincing.

Five works by Tacitus have survived. His treatise *On the Origin, Geography, Institutions and Tribes of the Germans*, generally known as the *Germania*, appeared in 98. Enlivened by graphic features and incidents, it broke new ground as a geographical and ethnological survey. Writing at a time when Trajan, in the year of his accession to the throne, was fighting against the Germans, Tacitus displayed foresight in seeing these peoples, despite their undeveloped organization and lack of unity, as a grave future menace to Rome. Yet he also, in accordance with moralizing tradition, inserts implied and even explicit contrasts between the current decadence of Rome and the vigorous simplicity of the Germans, even though they were feckless and addicted to drink—reflecting the freedom that Rome had lost long ago.

In the same year, 98, Tacitus published his earliest work of a partly historical character, the *Agricola*. True, like the *Germania*, it includes a lot of ethnology and geography, with reference, on this occasion, to Britain, for it was there that Agricola, Tacitus' father-in-law, had been the provincial governor from 78 to 84. Agricola seems to have been an industrious and rather dull administrator who built on the work of his predecessors, but the purpose of Tacitus' essay is to praise him, in keeping with the ancient Greco-Roman tradition of the eulogistic, semi-biographical type of literature known as the encomium or *laudatio*. The *Agricola* handles the genre with a high degree of literary skill and flexibility, raising the question of what the correct action is for a citizen living under a tyranny and attempting to describe the events of Agricola's governorship, to infuse into the piece, that is, a historical element, since the *Agricola* is proclaimed an introduction to the *Histories*.

And after a *Dialogue on Orators* (c. 102), a discussion of public speaking, the *Histories* followed, in about 109. It is a remarkable piece of historical analysis, covering the period of Roman history during Tacitus' early manhood, that is, from the downfall and death of Nero (68) to the death of Domitian (96). Originally the work may have been divided into twelve books, but only the first four and part of the fifth are extant: unfortunately the later part of the work, reflecting Tacitus' firsthand experience is lost. The surviving books deal with the Civil Wars of 68-70, the German rebellion of the same time (together with Petillius

## TACITUS: LATIN HISTORIAN

The family of Publius Cornelius Tacitus probably came from Cisalpine Gaul (north Italy) or the Narbonese province (southern France). It is quite likely that his father was a procurator (imperial representative) in Lower Germany and paymaster general for the Roman armies on the Rhine. Tacitus was born in A.D. 56/57. About 75, during the reign of Vespasian, he was studying rhetoric in Rome under leading experts on the subject, and a medieval writer describes him as the librarian of Titus (79-81); later he became one of the most highly regarded orators of his time, but none of his speeches survives.

In 76 or 77 he served as an officer (military tribune) in a legion and in 77 married the daughter of the consul of the year, Cnaeus Julius Agricola. Shortly after the accession of Domitian (81-96), he was appointed to a quaestorship, which admitted him to the Senate. In 88 he became praetor and was also enrolled in the Board of Fifteen, to which was entrusted the maintenance of the Sibylline Books (*quindecimviri sacris factundis*). Thereafter he departed for the provinces, where he spent four years and for part of the time, perhaps, commanded a legion. While he was still away, his father-in-law Agricola died, but when Domitian terrorized the Senate during the last years of his reign, Tacitus was in Rome. Under the next emperor, Nerva, he became consul (*suffectus*, i.e., after the initial consuls had resigned in the course of the year), and in 100, under Trajan, he joined the younger Pliny in prosecuting a

Cerialis' cunning justification of Roman rule), and an account of the crushing of the First Jewish Revolt by Vespasian and his son Titus, with a brief description of the Jewish people. The whole period is seen as dominated by wild, uncontrollable forces and irrational emotions: greed, lust for power, barbarous mob violence, hysteria, the breakdown of all loyalty except to oneself. The overall impression is of the futility of human behavior.

Tacitus' final outstanding work, the *Annals*, was probably published shortly before the death of Trajan (117), though it has also been attributed to the beginnings of the subsequent reign of Hadrian. Tacitus himself appears to have entitled the book "From the Death of the Divine Augustus," since it is with that event, in A.D. 14, that it begins, concluding with the death of Nero, which marked the start of the *Histories*. Originally, it seems, the *Annals* included eighteen books, of which most of Books 1-6 and 11-16 are extant, bringing the story up to A.D. 66. The traditional annalistic form is followed, although its spirit is rejected in favor of far more wide-ranging effects.

After a scathing depiction of Augustus as a gigantic fraud who deceived men for their own good—and exemplified the ironic contrast between public appearance and the realities of power—the first six books provide an unforgettable but simultaneously somewhat misleading account of the emperor Tiberius (14-37). Admittedly a somber ruler, though apparently honest, he is depicted by Tacitus as a stock tyrant who, despite the continuing, diminishing fiction that the emperor was only "the first among equals," gradually unveiled his true and permanent hideous colors—ruthless, unjust, suspicious, astute and lecherous. This hostile and partial picture, redolent of hatred—and by no means always confirmed by Tacitus' own presentation of the facts—was evidently influenced by Tacitus' own participation in the grim last years of Domitian (d. 96), when senators stood in constant fear of the dangerous, disagreeable emperor. Moreover, Tacitus may well have suffered from an uneasy conscience, because he had accepted high office from Domitian and must have had to acquiesce in the persecution of his friends and colleagues.

The other surviving part of the work, looser in construction but full of sharp novel effects, including a new role for women, deals with the latter portion of the reign of Claudius (from A.D. 48) and the first twelve years of the regime of his successor, Nero. This was an age of appalling imperial women. We are first told of the immoralities and downfall of Claudius' wife Messalina and of that emperor's subsequent marriage to

Agrippina the younger, who murdered him in 54. When, however, her son Nero succeeded Claudius to the throne, he assassinated his stepbrother Britannicus and then Agrippina herself and his first wife Octavia, who was succeeded by the sinister Poppaea. Next follows a conspiracy against Nero and the reprisals that ensued, with which the work, as we have it, breaks off.

Tacitus claims to be unmoved by partisanship or anger, but his protest carries little weight, since motivated by the events of his own time, he retrospectively sees the early emperors as monsters that they had scarcely been. It is true that much of what happened in their reigns was sordid or criminal, and Tacitus' absorbing psychological studies seem to carry all the more conviction because there is very rarely a better source against which what he tells us can be checked. As we have seen in the case of Tiberius, the cunning manner in which the successive events are presented is often extremely unfair. Tacitus makes a big show of meticulous selection from his authorities, yet this selection often proves to be yet another means of introducing a further damning, invidious innuendo.

His primary purpose, as he himself tells us—and here he is following a well-established tradition—is to identify vices and virtues, both of which emerge in dramatic shape, not without the influence of Virgilian epic and the tragic theater. And although Tacitus does not neglect the empire's provinces, the drama appeared to him to center upon the sinister imperial court, particularly upon the potent, terrifying figures of the emperors. Since they ultimately controlled and dominated everything, Tacitus concentrates his closest and most shattering scrutiny upon them and their motives and ethical standards. The deepest of all his principles was the conviction that one-man rule, such as had come into force in Rome, was fundamentally evil. This belief must have become somewhat embarrassing when Tacitus came to compose his principal works under the relatively enlightened Nerva and Trajan, and the historian expresses grateful consciousness of his good fortune in being able to write when things were becoming better. That is, he hoped against his better judgment for a ruler who would not, or would not too rapidly, be spoiled by power. Yet one can see why, despite his intention of doing so, he never addressed himself to the history of his own times.

Not only the emperors of the past, however, but their Senate, too, figure prominently in his story, because Tacitus was one of its members, who, like so many of his predecessors, wrote from a senator's standpoint. Yet his extensive allusions to the Senate are designed only to underline

its degrading impotence under the heel of the reigning despots whose vast power thus, once again, receives crushing emphasis. In his heart, Tacitus probably preferred the Republic at its worst to the principate at its best. All the same, he was fully aware that the Republic belonged to the past and that its resuscitation was wholly impossible.

Furthermore, if an emperor was bad, he believed that his subjects should not even try to oppose him openly, which would have been merely melodramatic and purposeless, but should limit themselves to passive resigned distaste and disapproval. This, however, was a sentiment far from unconnected with Tacitus' thoughts about his own career, since it was a means of justifying the high offices that he himself accepted at the hands of the tyrannical Domitian.

The series of grim regimes and the universal moral degeneration that had made them possible and then had deepened because of them made Tacitus an embittered man. He is ambiguous and inconsistent on the question of whether divine direction guides the world or is non-existent, although Gibbon called him the "supreme philosophical historian." At some periods, he believes, fate or deity, if there is such a being or thing, must surely be blind or even malevolent. Human nature, too, can be equally disastrous and disagreeable. Nevertheless, the potentialities of the human spirit do inspire Tacitus with admiration, for even in times of oppression or civil war he can point to people who contrive to behave with courageous pertinacity and goodness. And it is that determination—to note what men and women are sometimes capable of at their best—that entitles Tacitus to be regarded as one of the outstanding humanists of the ancient world.

It is often impossible to identify the literary authorities upon whom Tacitus drew to select so judiciously. The antique title of his work, the *Annals*, despite its deviations from the narrow annalistic pattern, indicates that Roman traditions were in his mind, and many a stock rhetorical emotional type and situation recall his debt to the Greeks as well. All these inherited features are blended into a masterly artistic achievement, an achievement very largely the result of his manner of writing. Tacitus wrote in a totally personal, highly individual knife-edged development of Sallust's staccato style, combined with the Silver Latin "point" that had been a feature of post-Augustan writing. His vividly abrupt sentences and flashing, dramatic epigrams abound in poetic vocabulary and terminate in unexpected, trenchant, scathing punch lines.

This highly individual, difficult style was one of the main reasons that Tacitus found no followers during the later years of the ancient world or

in the medieval period. One compliment was offered by Ammianus Marcellinus (c. 330–395), who deliberately inaugurated his own very distinguished history at the point where Tacitus left off. This was so isolated a tribute, however, that we depend upon only one surviving codex for the first six books of the *Annals* and on another single codex for the six later books that survive, as well as for what remains of the *Histories*. Beginning in the sixteenth century, however, Tacitus' reputation achieved the immensity it deserved. It was due to him that imperial history became the history of emperors. And he came to be seen for what he was, a unique dissector of political intrigues and delineator of personalities. So many-sided were the attitudes embodied in his writings and so complex their attraction that writers of successive centuries called upon him to provide justification for every sort of political view, ranging from republicanism to autocratic government. He was also the most favored historian of some of the founders of the United States of America, including the second and third presidents, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. "Tacitus I consider the first writer in the world without a single exception," Jefferson wrote.

The passages here offer an unflattering estimate of Augustus; an account of Germanicus' unwise visit to the Teutoburg battle site; and a summing up of Sejanus after his fall. We also have Tacitus' not wholly pessimistic comments on the ingloriousness of imperial history. Then we move to Tiberius' withdrawal to Capri for his last eleven years, his character and the fall of the dreadful Messalina; the fiasco of the mock naval battle attended by Claudius; the great fire of Rome; the horrors of the Civil Wars; his view of Agricola in Britain; and his famous description of the Germans.



## Augustus (31 B.C.)

I have decided to say a little about Augustus, with special attention to his last period, and then go on to the reign of Tiberius and what followed. I shall write without indignation or partisanship: in my case the customary incentives to these are lacking.

The violent deaths of Brutus and Cassius [92 B.C.] left no Republican forces in the field. Defeat came to Sextus Pompeius in Sicily [36 B.C.].

Lepidus was dropped, Antony killed [30 B.C.]. So even the Caesarian party had no leader left except the "Caesar" himself, Octavian. He gave up the title of *Triumvir*, emphasizing instead his position as consul; and the powers of a tribune, he proclaimed, were good enough for him—powers for the protection of ordinary people.

He seduced the army with bonuses, and his cheap food policy was successful bait for civilians. Indeed, he attracted everybody's goodwill by the enjoyable gift of peace. Then he gradually pushed ahead and absorbed the functions of the Senate, the officials, and even the law. Opposition did not exist. War or judicial murder had disposed of all men of spirit. Upper-class survivors found that slavish obedience was the way to succeed, both politically and financially. They had profited from the revolution, and so now they liked the security of the existing arrangement better than the dangerous uncertainties of the old régime. Besides, the new order was popular in the provinces. There, government by Senate and People was looked upon skeptically as a matter of sparing dignitaries and extortionate officials. The legal system had provided no remedy against these, since it was wholly incapacitated by violence, favoritism, and—most of all—bribery.

To safeguard his domination Augustus made his sister's son Marcus Claudius Marcellus a priest and a curule aedile—in spite of his extreme youth—and singled out Marcus Agrippa, a commoner but a first-rate soldier who had helped him win his victories, by the award of two consecutive consulships; after the death of Marcellus [23 B.C.], Agrippa was chosen by Augustus as his son-in-law. Next the emperor had his stepsons Tiberius and Nero Drusus hailed publicly as victorious generals. When he did this, however, there was no lack of heirs of his own blood: there were Agrippa's sons Gaius Caesar and Lucius Caesar. Augustus had adopted them to the imperial family. He had also, despite pretended reluctance, been passionately eager that, even as minors, they should be entitled Princes of Youth and have consulships reserved for them. After Agrippa had died [12 B.C.], first Lucius Caesar and then Gaius Caesar met with premature natural deaths—unless their stepmother Livia had a secret hand in them. Lucius died on his way to the armies in Spain, Gaius while returning from Armenia incapacitated by a wound.<sup>100</sup>

Nero Drusus [Drusus the elder] was long dead. Tiberius was the only surviving stepson; and everything pointed in his direction. He was adopted as the emperor's son and as partner in his powers (with civil and military authority and the power of a tribune) and displayed to all the armies. No longer was this due to his mother's secret machinations,

as previously. This time she requested it openly. Livia had the aged Augustus firmly under control—so much so that he exiled his only surviving grandson to the island of Planasia. That was the young, physically tough, indeed brutish, Agrippa Postumus. Though devoid of every good quality, he had been involved in no scandal. Nevertheless, it was not he but Germanicus, the son of Nero Drusus, whom the emperor placed in command of the eight divisions of the Rhine—and, although Tiberius had a grown son of his own, he ordered him to adopt Germanicus. For Augustus wanted to have another iron in the fire.

At this time there was no longer any fighting—except a war against the Germans; and that was designed less to extend the empire's frontiers, or achieve any lucrative purpose, than to avenge the disgrace of the army lost with Publius Quinctilius Varus.<sup>101</sup> In the capital the situation was calm. The titles of officials remained the same. Actium had been won before the younger men were born. Even most of the older generation had come into a world of civil wars. Practically no one had ever seen truly Republican government. The country had been transformed, and there was nothing left of the fine old Roman character. Political equality was a thing of the past; all eyes watched for imperial commands.

Nobody had any immediate worries as long as Augustus retained his physical powers, and kept himself going, and his House, and the peace of the empire. But when old age incapacitated him, his approaching end brought hopes of change. A few people started idly talking of the blessings of freedom. Some, more numerous, feared civil war; others wanted it. The great majority, however, exchanged critical gossip about candidates for the succession. First, Agrippa Postumus—a savage without either the years or the training needed for imperial responsibilities. Tiberius, on the other hand, had the seniority and the military reputation. But he also possessed the ancient, ingrained arrogance of the Claudian family; and signs of a cruel disposition kept breaking out, repressing them as he might. Besides, it was argued, he had been brought up from earliest youth in an imperial household, had accumulated early consulships and Triumphs, and even during the years at Rhodes<sup>102</sup>—which looked like banishment but were called retirement—his thoughts had been solely occupied with resentment, deception, and secret sensuality. And then there was that feminine bully, his mother. "So we have got to be slaves to a woman," people were saying, "and to the two half-grown boys Germanicus and Drusus."<sup>103</sup> First they will be a burden to the State—then they will tear it in two!

Amid this sort of conversation the health of Augustus deteriorated. Some suspected his wife of foul play. For rumor had it that a few months earlier, with the knowledge of his immediate circle but accompanied only by Paullus Fabius Maximus, he had gone to Planasia to visit Agrippa Postumus; and that there had been such a tearful display of affection on both sides that the young man seemed very likely to be received back into the home of his grandfather. Maximus, it was further said, had told his wife, Marcia, of this, and she had warned Livia—but the emperor had discovered the leakage, and when Maximus died shortly afterwards (perhaps by his own hand) his widow had been heard at the funeral moaning and blaming herself for her husband's death. Whatever the true facts about this, Tiberius was recalled from his post in Illyricum (immediately after his arrival there) by an urgent letter from his mother. When he arrived at Nola, it is unknown whether he found Augustus alive or dead. For the house and neighboring streets were carefully sealed by Livia's guards. At intervals, hopeful reports were published—until the steps demanded by the situation had been taken. The two pieces of news became known simultaneously: Augustus was dead, and Tiberius was in control.

*Tacitus. Annals, I. 1-5 (trans. M. Grant)*

## Nero's Desire to Sing and Act (A.D. 59)

Nero had long desired to drive in four-horse chariot races. Another equally deplorable ambition was to sing to the lyre, like a professional. "Chariot-racing," he said, "was an accomplishment of ancient kings and leaders—honored by poets, associated with divine worship. Singing, too, is sacred to Apollo: that glorious and provident god is represented in a musician's dress in Greek cities, and also in Roman temples."

There was no stopping him. But Seneca and Burrus tried to prevent him from gaining both his wishes by conceding one of them. In the Vatican valley, therefore, an enclosure was constructed, where he could drive his horses, remote from the public eye. But soon the public were admitted—and even invited; and they approved vociferously. For such is a crowd: avid for entertainment, and delighted if the emperor shares their tastes. However, this scandalous publicity did not satiate Nero, as his advisers had expected. Indeed, it led him on. But if he shared his degradation, he thought it would be less; so he brought on to the stage members of the ancient nobility whose poverty made them corruptible. They are dead, and I feel I owe it to their ancestors not to name them. For though they behaved dishonorably, so did the man who paid them to offend (instead of not to do so). Well-known knights, too, he induced by huge presents to offer their services in the arena. But gifts from the man who can command carry with them an obligation.

However, Nero was not yet ready to disgrace himself on a public stage. Instead he instituted "Youth Games."<sup>128</sup> There were many volunteers. Birth, age, official career did not prevent people from acting—in Greek or Latin style—or from accompanying their performances with effeminate gestures and songs. Eminent women, too, rehearsed indecent parts. In the wood which Augustus had planted round his Naval Lake, places of assignation and taverns were built, and every stimulus to vice was displayed for sale. Moreover, there were distributions of money. Respectable people were compelled to spend it; disreputable people did so gladly. Promiscuity and degradation thrived. Roman morals had long become impure, but never was there so favorable an environment for debauchery as among this filthy crowd. Even in good surroundings people find it hard to behave well. Here every form of immorality competed for attention, and no chastity, modesty, or vestige of decency could survive.

The climax was the emperor's stage debut. Meticulously tuning his

lyre, he struck practice notes to the trainers beside him. A battalion attended with its officers. So did Burrus, grieving—but applauding. Now, too, was formed the corps of Roman knights known as the Augustiani. These powerful young men, impudent by nature or ambition, maintained a din of applause day and night, showering divine epithets on Nero's beauty and voice. They were grand and respected as if they had done great things.

*Tacitus, Annals, XIV. 14-15 (trans. M. Grant)*

## The Great Fire of Rome: The Christians Blamed (A.D. 64)

Disaster followed.<sup>129</sup> Whether it was accidental or caused by a criminal act on the part of the emperor is uncertain—both versions have supporters. Now started the most terrible and destructive fire which Rome had ever experienced. It began in the Circus, where it adjoins the Palatine and Caelian hills. Breaking out in shops selling inflammable goods, and fanned by the wind, the conflagration instantly grew and swept the whole length of the Circus. There were no walled mansions or temples, or any other obstructions, which could arrest it. First, the fire swept violently over the level spaces. Then it climbed the hills—but returned to ravage the lower ground again. It outstripped every countermeasure. The ancient city's narrow winding streets and irregular blocks encouraged its progress.

Terrified, shrieking women, helpless old and young, people intent on their own safety, people unselfishly supporting invalids or waiting for them, fugitives and lingerers alike—all heightened the confusion. When people looked back, menacing flames sprang up before them or outflanked them. When they escaped to a neighboring quarter, the fire followed—even districts believed remote proved to be involved. Finally, with no idea where or what to flee, they crowded on to the country roads, or lay in the fields. Some who had lost everything—even their food for the day—could have escaped, but preferred to die. So did others, who had failed to rescue their loved ones. Nobody dared fight the flames. Attempts to do so were prevented by menacing gangs.

Torches, too, were openly thrown in, by men crying that they acted under orders. Perhaps they had received orders. Or they may just have wanted to plunder unhampered.

Nero was at Antium. He only returned to the city when the fire was approaching the mansion he had built to link the Gardens of Maecenas<sup>130</sup> to the Palatine. The flames could not be prevented from overwhelming the whole of the Palatine, including his palace. Nevertheless, for the relief of the homeless, fugitive masses he threw open the Field of Mars, including Agrippa's public buildings, and even his own Gardens. Nero also constructed emergency accommodation for the destitute multitude. Food was brought from Ostia and neighboring towns, and the price of corn was cut to less than  $\frac{1}{4}$  sesterce a pound. Yet these measures, for all their popular character, earned no gratitude. For a rumor had spread that, while the city was burning, Nero had gone on his private stage and, comparing modern calamities with ancient, had sung of the destruction of Troy.

By the sixth day enormous demolitions had confronted the raging flames with bare ground and open sky, and the fire was finally stamped out at the foot of the Esquiline Hill. But before panic had subsided, or hope revived, flames broke out again in the more open regions of the city. Here there were fewer casualties; but the destruction of temples and pleasure arcades was even worse. This new conflagration caused additional ill-feeling because it started on Tigellinus' estate in the Aemilian district.<sup>131</sup> For people believed that Nero was ambitious to found a new city to be called after himself.

Of Rome's fourteen districts only four remained intact. Three were leveled to the ground. The other seven were reduced to a few scorched and mangled ruins. To count the mansions, blocks, and temples destroyed would be difficult. They included shrines of remote antiquity, such as Servius Tullius' temple of the Moon,<sup>132</sup> the Great Altar and holy place dedicated by Evander<sup>133</sup> to Hercules, the temple vowed by Romulus to Jupiter the Stayer, Numa's sacred residence,<sup>134</sup> and Vestia's shrine containing Rome's household gods. Among the losses, too, were the precious spoils of countless victories, Greek artistic masterpieces, and authentic records of old Roman genius. All the splendor of the rebuilt city did not prevent the older generation from remembering these irreplaceable objects. It was noted that the fire had started on July 19, the day on which the Senonian Gauls had captured and burnt the city.<sup>135</sup> Others elaborately calculated that the two fires were separated by the same number of years, months, and days.

But Nero profited by his country's ruin to build a new palace. Its wonders were not so much customary and commonplace luxuries like gold and jewels, but lawns and lakes and faked rusticity—woods here, open spaces and views there. With their cunning, impudent artificialities, Nero's architects and engineers, Severus and Celer, did not balk at effects which Nature herself had ruled out as impossible.

They also fooled away an emperor's riches. For they promised to dig a navigable canal from Lake Avernus to the Tiber estuary, over the stony shore and mountain barriers. The only water to feed the canal was in the Pontine marshes. Elsewhere, all was precipitous or waterless. Moreover, even if a passage could have been forced, the labor would have been unendurable and unjustified. But Nero was eager to perform the incredible; so he attempted to excavate the hills adjoining Lake Avernus. Traces of his frustrated hopes are visible today.

In parts of Rome unfilled by Nero's palace, construction was not—as after the burning by the Gauls—without plan or demarcation. Street fronts were of regulated alignment, streets were broad, and houses built round courtyards. Their height was restricted, and their frontages protected by colonnades. Nero undertook to erect these at his own expense, and also to clear debris from building-sites before transferring them to their owners. He announced bonuses, in proportion to rank and resources, for the completion of houses and blocks before a given date. Rubbish was to be dumped in the Ostian marshes by corn-ships returning down the Tiber.

A fixed proportion of every building had to be massive, untimbered stone from Gabii or Alba (these stones being fireproof). Furthermore, guards were to ensure a more abundant and extensive public water-supply, hitherto diminished by irregular private enterprise. Household-ers were obliged to keep firefighting apparatus in an accessible place; and semidetached houses were forbidden—they must have their own walls. These measures were welcomed for their practicality, and they beautified the new city. Some, however, believed that the old town's configuration had been healthier, since its narrow streets and high houses had provided protection against the burning sun, whereas now the shadowless open spaces radiated a fiercer heat.

So much for human precautions. Next came attempts to appease heaven. After consultation of the Sibylline books, prayers were addressed to Vulcan, Ceres, and Proserpina. Juno, too, was propitiated. Women who had been married were responsible for the rites—first on the Capitol, then at the nearest seaboard, where water was taken to sprinkle her

temple and statue. Women with husbands living also celebrated ritual banquets and vigils.

But neither human resources, nor imperial munificence, nor appeasement of the gods, eliminated sinister suspicions that the fire had been instigated. To suppress this rumor, Nero fabricated scapegoats—and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians (as they were popularly called). Their originator, Christ, had been executed in Tiberius' reign by the governor of Judaea, Pontius Pilatus.<sup>136</sup> But in spite of this temporary setback the deadly superstition had broken out afresh, not only in Judaea (where the mischief had started) but even in Rome. All degraded and shameful practices collect and flourish in the capital.

First, Nero had self-acknowledged Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large numbers of others were condemned—not so much for incendiarism as for their antisocial tendencies.<sup>137</sup> Their deaths were made farcical. Dressed in wild animals' skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight. Nero provided his Gardens for the spectacle, and exhibited displays in the Circus Maximus, at which he mingled with the crowd—or stood in a chariot, dressed as a charioteer. Despite their guilt as Christians, and the ruthless punishment it deserved,<sup>138</sup> the victims were pitied. For it was felt that they were being sacrificed to one man's brutality rather than to the national interest.

*Tacitus, Annals, XV. 38-44 (trans. M. Grant)*