

## The Rhetoric of Disasters at Rome

In 64 CE, a fire raged for six days and seven nights in Rome, ravaging the city and leaving tremendous losses in its wake. Entire neighbourhoods perished (Tac. *Ann.* 15.38-41; Dio 62.17.1-18.3) and afterwards only four of the city's fourteen districts remained intact. Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.39) reports that Nero provided food and shelter for the masses suddenly left homeless, but appreciation for his efforts soon dissipated as rumours circulated that while Rome burned, he sang of the fall of Troy from his private stage. Tacitus at least attempts some objectivity regarding Nero's part in the calamity, noting divergent views about the fire's origins and the emperor's reactions. Suetonius (*Ner.* 38) and Dio (62.16.1-2), on the other hand, both attribute the fire to Nero himself, and claim he delighted in the sight of Rome engulfed in flames, watching the conflagration from the palace rooftop prior to taking the stage. And this was reputedly not the first time he sang as the world around him was in peril: during his theatrical debut in Naples, an earthquake struck yet he continued his performance undeterred (Suet. *Ner.* 20).

In his study of disasters in the Roman world, Toner (2013: 123) asserts that emperors' behavior during catastrophes "provided powerful evidence for the inextricable link between comportment and morality." Disasters – and the narratives crafted about them – afforded opportunities to assess the qualities leaders possessed and the extent of their willingness to look after people in a crisis. 'Good' emperors rose to the occasion. Titus, for example, "displayed not only the deep concern of a *princeps*, but also the singular feeling of a parent" when multiple calamities marred his short reign, including the eruption of Vesuvius, a devastating fire in Rome, and a grievous plague (Suet. *Tit.* 8.3). One would expect, in turn, to find stereotypically 'bad'

emperors rejecting a paternal stance, responding instead with selfishness and immorality and perhaps even profiting from others' misfortunes as Nero supposedly did. Such behavior is consistent with the general characterization of unpopular emperors in imperial histories and biographies, which appears to draw on literary traditions originating with portrayals of tyrants in Greek tragedy that were then exploited in late Republican political invective (Dunkle 1967). But is the relationship between leaders' morality and disasters so straightforward? Is the account of Nero's actions during and after the Great Fire merely one instance in a wider trend of correlating the mismanagement of crises with the moral failings of much-maligned leaders like Tiberius and Domitian, or is the case of Nero anomalous or at least more complex? Furthermore, should a distinction be made between the appraisal of leaders' responses to disasters once they occurred and the perceived cause-and-effect relationship that understood these individuals' immoral and irreligious behavior to be responsible for the calamities in the first place?

A careful examination of the literary and epigraphic evidence documenting the actions of several emperors vilified by contemporary and later sources reveals that imperial responses to disasters at Rome, as well as in the provinces, were often complicated and multifaceted, as was their representation in literature (Mitchell 1987, Barreda and Sanz 2015: 132-40; Keitel 2010). Disaster narratives offered scope for exploring the characters of some of Rome's most notorious leaders, men who were routinely the object of vitriol yet might exhibit unexpected generosity and compassion to aid recovery (e.g., Suet. *Tib.* 48, Tac. *Ann.* 2.47) or display surprising concern for preserving cultural heritage (e.g., Suet. *Dom.* 20), a casualty of Rome's frequent natural and man-made disasters that is sometimes overlooked. Rather than seeing stark polarities in which 'good' and 'bad' emperors make admirable and deplorable decisions respectively, a more fruitful

approach may be to seek out the complexity in leaders' responses and their characters by probing the subtleties of disaster narratives.

### Bibliography

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