

The Myth of the Neronian Persecution

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*Certains idées reçues sont la mauvaise herbe de l'histoire*¹

ABSTRACT

A conventional certainty is that the first state-driven persecution of Christians happened in the reign of Nero and that it involved the deaths of Peter and Paul, and the mass execution of Christians in the aftermath of the great fire of July 64 C.E. The argument here contests all of these facts, especially the general execution personally ordered by Nero. The only source for this event is a brief passage in the historian Tacitus. Although the passage is probably genuine Tacitus, it reflects ideas and connections prevalent at the time the historian was writing and not the realities of the 60s.

Keywords: Nero; Christians; persecution; martyrs; (St) Peter; (St) Paul; Tacitus; Pliny the Younger; Great Fire of 64 C.E.

In reference to a rather different problem, I once wrote that the purpose of historical research is to create by description and explanation but that sometimes it is destruction that is required. So it is in this case. One of the sure and fixed points in modern historical narratives of the early Church is that the first deliberate action of the Roman state directed against Christians, known by this name, was the mass execution of believers ordered by the emperor Nero in the year 64. Attached to this event, and almost always adduced as supporting evidence of a more general hostile response by the Roman imperial state at that time, are the deaths of two individual Christians: the executions of the apostles Peter and Paul. Nero's spectacular executions of large numbers of Christians in the aftermath of the fire that raged through the city of Rome in July of 64 is commonly regarded as a foundational event in the history of Christian martyrdom. They were the first executions of Christians performed at the behest of the Roman state. In almost every history of the early Christian Church, the event is marked as a dramatic turning point in the relations between Christians and the imperial government.² Given the surprisingly widespread acceptance of the great significance of

¹ The epigraph is taken from Jean-Michel Carrié, *MEFRA* 87 (1975), 1030. The writer offers his thanks to Edward Champlin, Henry MacAdam, and A. J. Woodman for their reading of earlier drafts of this essay and for their valuable critical comments. He adds his thanks to Robert Kaster and Steve Mason for their replies to questions on matters of detail; and to Michael Peachin for a valuable suggestion. He offers further gratitude to the anonymous referees of the *Journal* for their critical comments; he benefited substantially from some of them, although he still dissents from others.

² One could easily designate a host of works. The following are only offered *exempli gratia*: Baus 1965: 129–32; Frend 1965: 160–71, where (p. 160) he sees the events of 64 C.E. as a 'crisis' and a sudden turning point in the normal trajectory of events up to that point, a fundamental idea recapitulated in his general survey, Frend 1984: 109–10; and then in Frend 2000: 820–1: 'The scene was now set for the first great clash between the Christians and the Roman authorities'; finally becoming canonical in Frend 2006: 503–5; see H.-J. Klauck in the same volume (p. 71): 'This [i.e. Nero's attack on Christians because of the fire] led to the first official persecution of Christians ...' Perhaps more compelling because of his harder-edged approach to the facts and

this axial event in Christian history, the thinness of the evidence on all aspects of it is quite striking. The paucity and weakness of the data, however, have not prevented acceptance of the historicity of this ‘first persecution’ as an undisputed fact. Indeed, the degree of certainty in the Neronian persecution stands in almost inverse proportion to the quality and quantity of the data.³ Those who have expressed even modest scepticism about the historicity of the one explicit passage in the historian Tacitus that attests to the executions have been *vores clamantium in deserto*.⁴ The simple argument of this essay, deliberately framed as a provocative hypothesis, is that this event never happened and that there are compelling reasons to doubt that it should have any place either in the history of Christian martyrdom or in the history of the early Church.

ANCILLARY CASES

Before turning to the Neronian persecution of the summer of 64 C.E. as a critical episode in the history of early Christianity, let us begin by dismissing any connections of the executions of the apostles Peter and Paul with the supposed executions of other Christians in the aftermath of the great conflagration that levelled many districts of the city of Rome in July of 64. A specific link between the demise of Peter and specific anti-Christian acts ordered by Nero is perhaps the easiest to dismiss.⁵ Almost nothing reliable is known about Peter’s death. We do not know why it happened or how, or indeed even where. Two facts that were often asserted about his death in Christian accounts in later antiquity — that it occurred in 64 C.E., the year of the fire, and that Peter was crucified — are palpably the construction of writers who very much desired

to historical analysis, is the acceptance by Barnes 2010: 3–5 of its historicity. In the same vein, it might be noted that someone whose signature is her iconoclastic attitude to many early Christian narratives and accounts also accepts the historicity of the event: Moss 2012: 77–8 (although, on p. 185, n. 3, she does admit that ‘there are some methodological problems with using Tacitus as a source for the fire at Rome’). Despite the manifest problems that it presents for a rational history of martyrdom and the early Church, and the relationship between these two and the Roman imperial state, I have not been able to find any mainstream history or textbook of the period that does not accept the plain historicity of the event. Almost all specific investigations — for example, the classic study by Rohrdorf 1982 — simply accept the Neronian persecution as fact and then attempt to find reasons that might connect Christians with it. In Rohrdorf’s view, for example, the connection is made by asserting that rumours had come to the ears of the Roman authorities that the Christians were awaiting the end of the Roman world in a great fiery conflagration. One of the more cogent of recent forays, by Schmitt 2011, despite much good criticism on ancillary matters, still accepts the historicity of the event.

³ I take as exemplary the case of Baus, since he actually advances here and there to express judgements on these matters. For example, on the execution of Peter, Baus 1965: 113: ‘The basis of the Roman tradition concerning Peter is formed by three pieces of *evidence*, chronologically close to one another and forming together a statement *so positive as practically to amount to historical certainty*’ (my italics). Or on ‘Clement’ as referring to persecutions under Nero: ‘The reference to the great number and the manner of executions *hardly admits room for any doubt* that we are here reading of the same events that Tacitus describes’; Clement’s words ‘*no doubt* also refer to the events under Nero’ (again, my italics).

⁴ I select as an example of such a critical investigation that of Koestermann 1967; of the great modern historians, Syme, oddly enough, seems to give the problem a wide berth. For what it is worth, he states that Tacitus ‘registers the name “Christiani” with documentary precision’ (Syme 1967: 469), but this is about the limit of his interest. Failing even to note that the mss. spelling is *Chrestiani*, it does not betoken much real engagement with the problem. From the few remarks that he does make — cited, as relevant, below — it is manifest that Syme regarded the statements in Tacitus as being historically reliable, i.e. that there was indeed a persecution of Christians by Nero in 64 C.E.

⁵ There is no need to dilate at great length on this subject, since much of the deconstruction has already been achieved by Zwierlein 2009, to which reference will be made below concerning individual specifics. To begin, he demonstrates (‘Die literarische Schlüsselstellen’, pp. 7–30) that *1 Pet.* 5: 13 and *1 Clem.* 5–6 shed no light whatever on the supposed residence of Peter in Rome; from this point onward, as he demonstrates, the later evidence becomes only more fragile and questionable; he has fortified the same arguments in Zwierlein 2011.

both things to be true.⁶ They wanted Peter, like Paul, to be a victim of a Neronian persecution and they wanted his death, also like that of Paul, to be connected with the Great Fire. They wished the two deaths be seen as typological replays of the executions of John the Baptist (by beheading) and of Jesus of Nazareth (by crucifixion). The assertion that Peter was crucified is found as early as the African exegete Tertullian who was writing around 200 C.E., but he says nothing about when the execution took place or in what fashion.⁷ Much later, Eusebius is the first to state that Peter, at the end of his apostolic travels, came to Rome where he was ‘crucified head downwards as he himself had requested to suffer’. Oddly enough, Eusebius does not say when this happened. In this same passage, however, he mentions the martyrdom of Paul under Nero, claiming Origen’s (lost) commentary on Genesis as his source. But even he does not connect Peter with the fire.⁸

The story that Peter died by being crucified head downwards at his own request is also found in the apocryphal *Martyrdom of Peter* that is part of the larger *Acts of Peter*. It is rather difficult to date this late antique confection. The collection of which it is a part is like a novelette featuring Peter’s various stand-offs with Simon the Magician. The driving themes of the virginity of women, the refusal of wives to have sexual relations with their husbands, and the raft of invented and fictitious characters and exaggerated scenes of confrontation are redolent of later fourth- and fifth-century fabrications like the *Acts of Paul and Thekla*.⁹ The whole of this later tradition appears, in part, to be a way of configuring Peter’s death so as to make it fulfill prognostications found in the evangelist John. The prophetic announcement was one in which Jesus states that when his disciples grow old they will ‘stretch out their hands’ and that someone will put a ‘belt’ around them and take them where they would rather not go. The writer of John interprets these words as Jesus indicating the kind of death by which Peter will give glory to God.¹⁰ The later dramatic accounts of Peter’s death were manifestly shaped so that his execution would be an *ex post facto* fulfilment of the prophecy.¹¹ There are truly remote possibilities that Peter could have died in the 60s and perhaps even at Rome, but there is no sound evidence to sustain the claim that he was crucified or crucified upside down. Nothing about Peter’s death in these later fictions has any connection with a general attack on Christians in the 60s much less with the great fire of 64, for which claims there are no supporting data at all.¹² Quite the opposite.

⁶ See ‘Petri Kreuzigung’, ch. B4.3 in Zwierlein 2009: 92–107; for another attack on this same problem; apparently done independently of Zwierlein, but reaching much the same conclusions, see Goulder 2004: 377–96.

⁷ Tert., *Praescript. Haeret.* 36.3 (CCL 1: 216–17): ‘Ista quam felix ecclesia cui totam doctrinam apostoli cum sanguine suo profuderunt, ubi Petrus passioni dominicae adaequatur, ubi Paulus Iohannis exitu coronatur, ubi apostolus Iohannes posteaquam in oleum igneum demersus nihil passus est, in insulam relegatur ...’; Barnes 1985: 54–6, dates the treatise to 203 C.E.

⁸ All of this is in Euseb., *HE* 3.1.2–3 (evidence, he claims, found ‘word for word in the third book of Origen’s Commentary on Genesis’); cf. *HE* 2.25.5–6, where he mentions that Peter was crucified under Nero who was the ‘first to be announced/declared especially as the fighter against God’. On the whole tradition, see Bauckham 1992, albeit sustaining a rather conventional point of view.

⁹ *Mart. Petr.* 37.8–39.10 = 8.3–4.1 Zwierlein = as part of the *Acta Petri* in Lipsius 1891: 78–102 (‘The Martyrdom of Peter’) at 92–7; translation by Elliott 1993: 424–6; see Schneemelcher, ‘The Acts of Peter’, in Schneemelcher and Hennecke 1992: 271–321, who estimates the date of the Acts (p. 283) to the decade between 180 and 190 C.E.; on these same sources, see Barnes 2010: 5–6.

¹⁰ Joh. 21: 18.

¹¹ For what might have been meant by the words in John, especially the significant verb ζώνυμι, see Barnes 2010: 5–8; I cannot, however, accept from the more correct reading that it necessarily follows that Peter was burned in one of the executions staged by Nero after the fire (ibid.: 8–9): see, further, Zwierlein, ‘Joh 21,18–19 und Tac. ann. 15,44,4 nach der Deutung T. Barnes’, in Zwierlein 2011: 445–7.

¹² The whole problem of the use of crucifixion as one of the death penalties meted out to Christians needs a revised study. For a beginning, see Barnes, ‘Were early Christians crucified?’, appendix 1 in Barnes 2010: 331–42, with the conclusion stated earlier at p. 5: ‘... there is no reliable evidence that Christians were ever crucified for being Christians, except in the last paroxysm of pagan violence and sadism at the very end of the “Great

Compelling, if not definitive, arguments have been made that there is no good evidence to demonstrate that Peter was ever in Rome. It seems more probable that he died, perhaps even peacefully in bed, in Judaea in the mid-50s.¹³

The case of Paul is equally irrelevant. The violent outbursts, even riotous ones, that were caused by his presence in the Temple at Jerusalem, probably around the year 58 (but perhaps even a year or two earlier) drew his presence to the attention of the Roman authorities in the city. When he was arrested by the tribune in command of the cohort in the city, along with some of his centurions, (so it is claimed) the words exchanged between Paul and the tribune make clear that the latter thought that Paul was none other than the dangerous ‘Egyptian’ who had recently caused riots in the city and who had led 4,000 rebels and *sicarii*, ‘knife men’, into the desert.¹⁴ The tribune was almost certainly referring to an incident in the governorship of the procurator Felix reported in some detail by Josephus. A millenarian prophet had acquired a large and dangerous crowd of followers who were only repressed by the use of violent force by the Roman garrison.¹⁵ Manifestly, there were suspicions, no doubt excited by those who were hostile to Paul, that he was somehow connected with followers of the insurrectionist ‘Egyptian’ who were labelled ‘knife men’ and bandits. Following an apparently futile attempt by Paul to explain his presence and to defend himself against the imprecations of the hostile crowd near the Temple, he was taken to the barracks of the cohort in the city. There he was bound in preparation to be flogged in a corporal mode of inquiry. It was at this point that Paul asserted to the centurion who was in charge of the impending physical torture that he possessed Roman citizenship. It was on this basis that Paul questioned whether it was legal physically to assault the body of a Roman citizen who had not been charged and found guilty.¹⁶ Declaration of his possession of the citizenship was a tactic, we are told, that Paul had employed several times previously and with success.

Faced with the fact of Paul’s Roman citizenship, and mounting threats of a situation getting out of control, the tribune, Claudius Lysias, had Paul taken under guard to Caesarea Maritima for a hearing before the Roman governor of Judaea, the procurator Marcus Antonius Felix, most probably on charges having to do with seditious behaviour.¹⁷ This was certainly the intent of those making accusations against Paul who

Persecution”. The cases are indeed surprisingly rare, surprisingly I say because one would not expect that a political culture that was much devoted to the device of mimicry in its fatal charades would have so assiduously avoided a penalty that was especially appropriate to the execution of Christians. The reliably attested instances are very few, especially if one rejects (as I do) that the *crucis* of the Tacitean account in the *Annales* have anything to do with Christians and crosses. There are, it is true, some general sweeping references to such executions, but very few (if any) dependable cases that are attested before the Great Persecution under Diocletian. And even these few seem doubtful. Cook 2014: 191 and 201, accepts the executions in 64 C.E. as those of Christians and as crucifixions (both of which I reject, the latter in agreement with Barnes); he also (p. 192) accepts the crucifixion of Peter as historical (which I do not). The only ones between Jesus of Nazareth and Constantine for Christians are some cases that Eusebius claims were inflicted in Egypt in 312–13 C.E. during the Great Persecution: Euseb., *HE* 8.8.1; *Laus Const.* 7.7; *V.Const.* 1.58.2. All the other instances seem to be fictional, see Barnes 2010: 341–2. Since the supposedly firmly attested Eusebian cases are so unusual some caution must be shown even in accepting them.

¹³ Zwierlein 2009, *passim*, whose arguments seem, to me, conclusive on this question; Goulder 2004: 378–83 makes a convincing circumstantial argument for a death by natural causes (‘in his bed’) at Jerusalem about the year 55.

¹⁴ Acts 21: 27–39: Paul tried to make clear to the tribune that he was not the ‘Egyptian’, but a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia. The arresting tribune is called a *chiliarchos*; the centurions under his command *hekatontarchai*.

¹⁵ Jos., *AJ* 20.8.6 (169–72): the governor’s forces killed 400 and captured another 200 of the prophet’s followers, but he himself escaped; *BJ* 2.13.5 (261–3), where the historian gives the number of his followers as three myriads.

¹⁶ Acts 21: 40–23: 24.

¹⁷ At Acts 24.1–8, the *rhētor* or professional advocate Tertullus, representing the Jewish factionaries who opposed the apostle, accuses Paul before the governor of being an agitator of rioting (κινούντα στάσεις) in Jewish communities everywhere in the Empire and the leader of the sect of the Nazoreans: πρωστάτην τε τῆς τῶν Ναζωραίων αἰρέσεως. On the procedures before Felix, and later Festus, see Sherwin-White, ‘Paul before

labelled him a 'plague', a *loimos*, stirring up trouble throughout the entire world, the *oikoumenê*.¹⁸ They were echoing the words of the emperor Claudius in his strict cautions delivered to the Jewish community in Alexandria when he accused the Jews of being a plague, a *nosos*, stirring up trouble throughout the whole world, the *oikoumenê*.¹⁹ The purpose was to impute a kind of insurrectionary behaviour against which a Roman governor might be moved to act. Given the kinds of accusations levelled against him, Paul was careful to state that he had been in the Temple 'without any mobs or disturbances' and to deny having committed any wrong 'against Caesar'.²⁰ After an initial hearing, Felix decided to keep Paul in detention and whether wilfully (i.e. he did not wish to handle a case that was potentially disruptive of the peace and order of his term) or as a matter of course (i.e. it was not that important a case, and it dropped down the list of urgent issues to be dealt with), he left the matter to be dealt with by his successor. About the year 58/59 (the precise year is in doubt) his successor, the procurator Porcius Festus, finally did decide to deal with the matter.²¹ Once again, Paul asserted his status as a Roman citizen, this time making a 'call out to [be heard by] Caesar'.²² This seems not to have been an appeal against a sentence given, but rather an assertion that Paul, as a Roman citizen facing a capital charge, had the right to be heard by a Roman court of his preference (although, it should be noted, only if the governor so assented). Since the alternative presented itself, no doubt Festus felt it was in his self interest not to hear such a contentious case in Judaea. In consequence, he dispatched Paul to Rome for a final and inappellable hearing.²³

Paul spent some further years at Rome awaiting his final hearing (about two, according to the historian of Acts-Luke), most likely, it seems, under a form of limited custody amounting to a type of house arrest.²⁴ In this final step, in theory the emperor, but much more likely some lesser official delegated with the requisite powers in such matters upheld the validity of the serious charges against Paul. He was then executed, by beheading if the later sources have any merit.²⁵ The year in which this happened is

Felix and Festus', ch. 3 in 1963: 48–70, who confirmed the view, clearly expressed well over a century ago by Theodor Mommsen, that the procedures followed were normal for criminal hearings before governors in the provinces: see Mommsen 1899: 469, n. 1, and Mommsen 1901: 81–96 = 1907: 431–6.

¹⁸ Acts 24: 5: εὐρόντες γὰρ τὸν ἄνδρα τοῦτον λοιμὸν καὶ κινουῦντα στάσεις πᾶσιν Ἰουδαίοις τοῖς κατὰ τὴν οἰκουμένην; see 'The body politic', ch. 5 in Brock 2013: 69–70, on *nosos* and related terms as indicating a threat to the state, either conspiratorial or insurrectionary.

¹⁹ Claud., *Ep. ad Alex.* (10 Nov. 41) = *P. Lond.* 1912 = Smallwood 1967: no. 370, 99–102 = col. 5, ll. 99–100: καθάπερ κοινήν τείνα [sic] τῆς οἰκουμένης νόσον ἐξεγείροντας.

²⁰ See Acts 24: 18 and 24: 27–25: 12; at Acts 25: 8, Paul specifically denies having done any wrong against the emperor (οὔτε εἰς Καίσαρά τι ἤμαρτον). On Felix's procuratorship of Judaea, see Schürer-Vermes-Millar 1973: 460–5, with a discussion of the chronology at pp. 465–6, n. 42.

²¹ On the procuratorship of Festus, see Schürer-Vermes-Millar 1973: 467–8; a revised chronology based on the procuratorial coinages has been proposed by Kokkinos 1998: 385–6, in which the first year of the governorship of Porcius Festus is set in 58–59 C.E., is advantageous to the argument here, but not necessary to it.

²² Acts 25: 1–12: the 'appeal to the emperor' is at 25: 12.

²³ Acts 25: 12; 27: 1f (the intervening story about Paul and King Agrippa at 26: 1–32 is manifestly a later myth). I accept the conclusion of Peter Garnsey that appeal was usually to a judgement already given: see Garnsey 1966: 167–89. In dealing specifically with the case of Paul (pp. 182–5), however, he points out that what Paul was doing was not appealing to a sentence given (an appeal as more formally understood), but rather asserting his right to be heard by a different court, that of the emperor.

²⁴ Unfortunately for our arguments, the historian of Luke-Acts ends his account with Paul's arrival in Rome. For the events between this time and his death we are largely dependent on the tradition recapitulated in Eusebius, *HE* 2.21, who seems to confuse a first and a second hearing, probably because of a misunderstanding of comments in Paul's writings, so at times he has Paul wandering free in Rome 'preaching the word'. He also reports a tradition that Paul went on another missionary journey and then returned to Rome, only to suffer martyrdom after his return. The testimonies of other later witnesses on Paul's stay in Rome are variable and even contradictory: see 'Paul's legal situation in the close of Acts', ch. 2 in Tajra 1994: 33–72.

²⁵ See Tajra 1994: 23–4; the first such references are in Tertullian, *Praescript. Haer.* 36.1–3, and in the later *Martyrium Pauli*, the final part of the *Acta Pauli*.

uncertain. A likely year seems to be 60–61 C.E.; almost certainly it was not much later.²⁶ Whatever the precise date of the execution, two simple matters relevant to our inquiry are manifest. No matter how it was seen and interpreted by later Christian sources, Paul's hearings and his execution were subject to normal Roman judicial procedures. He was not executed on the charge of being a Christian, but as a man who had been found guilty of creating unlawful and seditious disturbances in the province of Judaea. And there are no specific links of Paul with Nero (other than the formal appeal made to whoever happened to be 'Caesar' at the time) and even less with a fire in the city of Rome. There were no contemporary connections made between these various elements, nor should we expect there to be. Paul was not in Rome because of any imperial persecution. He was there because he himself had asked to be sent to Rome, and because of the fortuitous decision of the Roman governor of Judaea who had him sent to Rome rather than executing him on the spot. Naturally, these events could later be seen and interpreted as somehow connected, linking Paul (and Peter) with Nero and, subsequently, with the idea that emerged later that this evil emperor was a persecutor of Christians, indeed their first persecutor. Certainly by the time of Eusebius, traditions had arisen that directly connected Paul with Nero. A series of statements by Paul about being rescued 'from the lion's mouth' were now being interpreted as referring to the emperor Nero as a great beast like a lion, a wild beast that symbolized Satan. These interpretations were attached to a biographical tradition that had grown up around Nero having had an initial 'good' part of his reign as opposed to a later 'bad' phase into which he degenerated — namely, the mid- to late 60s when he persecuted Christians. 'Probably at the beginning', Eusebius muses, 'Nero's disposition was more receptive to the exposition of his [i.e. Paul's] views, but as he [the emperor] advanced to more reckless criminal acts, the apostles were attacked along with the others'.²⁷ The whole thing is pendant on later historical interpretations of the successive modes and phases of Nero's reign.

THE GREAT CONFLAGRATION

What the later Pauline narratives show is that at some point in time there had emerged a triangulation between the apostles Peter and Paul, the emperor Nero, and the construal of the individual events in which they were involved as part of a general persecution of Christians (under this name).²⁸ This inventive narrative then produced a new Christian image of some power and authority: Nero as the first persecutor of the Christians. As we shall see, all these points were then connected with the catastrophe that struck the city of Rome in midsummer of 64 C.E. when a great fire raged for nine days between 19 and 27 July, devastating large parts of the imperial metropolis.²⁹ The most reliable and detailed account of the conflagration is found in Tacitus. He begins his account by noting the extent of the destruction.³⁰

²⁶ Tajra 1994: 199 agrees that any possible scenario must place Paul's execution before the fire and holds that the temporal and causal linkage of it with the execution of Peter is a later fabrication. I agree save for the date of 63 C.E. which surely must be earlier.

²⁷ Euseb., *HE* 2.22 fin.

²⁸ For an analysis of the later Christian sources that put together these combinations, see 'Neros Christenverfolgung', ch. B4.5 in Zwierlein 2009: 113–27.

²⁹ Suet., *Nero* 38.2 indicates six days and seven nights, but *CIL* 6.826 = 30837b = *ILS* 4914 (Rome, in a year later than 83 C.E. in Domitian's reign) specifies nine days: '... quando urbs per novem dies / arsit Neronianis temporibus'; see also *CIL* 6.30837 a & c for cippi with the same texts (see n. 83 below).

³⁰ Tac., *Ann.* 15.38–44; see Champlin 2003: 178–200, who offers good critical coverage of the existing studies.

A disaster followed. Whether it happened by chance or by a malicious act of the emperor is uncertain. Some authors offer the one version, some the other. There now began a more destructive and savage fire than Rome had ever experienced ... At the time a rumour had been running about that while the city was burning Nero had mounted his household stage and, in likening the present evils to disasters experienced in distant antiquity, he had sung about the destruction of Troy ... Of Rome's fourteen districts only four remained untouched. Three were burned to the ground. The few remnants of houses in the other seven were reduced to stripped and half-burned ruins. Just to count the grand houses, the apartment blocks, and the temples that had been destroyed would be very difficult.

It is in this lengthy narrative about the Great Fire that Tacitus embedded his statements about the first persecution of the Christians. The difficult question that must be answered is, quite simply: did Nero's execution of Christians as the real or pretended culprits happen or did it not? Very frequently, pure speculation, ancient and modern, on other connections between Nero, Christians, and the fire has only added fiction and confusion.³¹ Nor are the sometimes marvellously complex and artful explications of Tacitus' rhetorical skills relevant to the problem of the bare historicity of the event.³² Nor does claiming that this first attack on Christians by Nero in the aftermath of the fire in 64 C.E. was not a persecution *im engeren Sinn* allow us to escape facing the basic problem.³³ Were Christians as Tacitus states — although he carefully suggests that he believes that they were not to blame — punished by Nero as the culprits responsible for the Great Fire or were they not? The problem as it is configured in many of the modern responses is more than just one of belief. It is, rather, an attitude marked by a fundamental refusal to face the questionable quality of the primary sources.³⁴

There is every good reason for historians to have grave doubts about the story of an attack on Christians by Nero that emerged decades after the fire itself. They should be sceptical to the point of dismissing the commonly accepted idea of Nero as a persecutor, indeed the first great persecutor of Christians, specifically in connection with the conflagration that raged through Rome in July of 64. What seems to make the idea so compelling and impossible to dismiss is that it is based on a high quality historical source of apparently unimpeachable fidelity, the *Annales* of the historian Tacitus. The historian's qualities of veracity and accuracy, within the tolerable limits of the sources available to him, are not generally open to serious question.³⁵ Arguments have been ventilated, from time to time, that the passage, in whole or in part, was a later interpolation into the text of the *Annales*. The possibility has been frequently suspected

³¹ Lampe 1989: 26–37 = 2003: 37–50, especially p. 47, for example, speculates, that *if* Christians were concentrated in the Trastevere region of Rome and *if* this was one of the four districts spared from the fire, then this led to their accusation as the responsible parties (accepted as fact, for example, by Moss 2012: 77); in detail see his 'Nachrichten im Zusammenhang der Neroverfolgung', ch. 3.3 in Lampe 1989: 65–8 = 'Information in conjunction with the persecution by Nero', ch. 7 in Lampe 2003: 82–4.

³² See the recent analysis by Meier 2012: 425–36, who refers to most of the earlier studies of the historian's rhetoric.

³³ Even if Eder 2008: 28, uses these words to hone a rather restricted sense of significance, he still accepts the specific historicity of the event (in my sense of the word), including Nero's punishments of persons called Christians.

³⁴ Finley 1986: 17: 'It was in an era of literacy that ... Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio Cassius, all of whom had access to contemporary writing, confused the account of the great fire in Rome in AD 64 so effectively that no one has been able to unscramble it satisfactorily.' These remarks are embedded in an analysis of how much historians of that time were still mentally in a framework of oral sourcing of evidence and relatively less likely to use documentary sources. The case at hand could serve as an exemplum of the type.

³⁵ The historian is well defended on this score by the modern historian who knew him best: see 'The accuracy of Tacitus', in Syme 1967: 378–96 (and elsewhere in this same study). Of course, Tacitus was as susceptible as any other historian of the time to the use of rhetorical and other devices to colour and to bias his narrative. He is an acknowledged master of fashioning the reader's optics. The propensity is important to our inquiry and we shall deal with it where relevant, but this is entirely different from literally inventing or creating outright fictions.

and continues to hail forth a fair number of detailed studies. Half a century ago a commentator on the passage was already able humorously to note that the investigators who had devoted themselves to the interpolation problem themselves constituted a *multitudo ingens*.³⁶ I am mostly convinced that all of the passage on the fire is genuine Tacitus, and that no easy answer to the problem is available by way of that route.³⁷ Even if only to provide the strongest possible case for a Neronian persecution of the Christians in the 60s, however, and as a tactic of criticism I shall provisionally accept that the words are indeed those of the historian. In this light, it is important to understand that Tacitus is the *only* source for the involvement of Christians with the fire and their persecution in its aftermath. Given its critical significance in deciding the strict historicity of this event — i.e. quite simply, were Christians selected by Nero for punishment in the year 64? — it is perhaps best first to provide the whole text from the fifteenth book of the *Annales* that makes specific reference to their involvement with the Great Fire and to their consequent punishment. The relevant passage follows immediately on the end of Tacitus' description of the fire.³⁸

Et haec quidem humanis consiliis providebantur. Mox petita dis piacula aditque Sibyllae libri, ex quibus supplicatum Vulcano et Cereri Proserpinaeque, ac propitiata Iuno per matronas, primum in Capitolio, deinde apud proximum mare, unde hausta aqua templum et simulacrum deae perspersum est; et sellisternia ac pervigilia celebravere feminae quibus
 5 mariti erant. Sed non ope humana, non largitionibus principis aut deum placamentis decedebat infamia, quin iussum incendium crederetur. Ergo abolendo rumori Nero subdidit reos et quaesitissimis poenis adfecit, quos per flagitia invisos vulgus Chrestianos appellabat. Auctor nominis eius Christus Tiberio imperitante per procuratorem Pontium Pilatum supplicio affectus erat; repressaque in praesens exitiabilis superstitio rursus erumpebat, non
 10 modo per Iudaeam, originem eius mali, sed per urbem etiam, quo cuncta undique atrociam aut pudenda confluunt celebranturque. Igitur primum correpti qui fatebantur, deinde indicio eorum multitudo ingens haud proinde in crimine incendii quam odio humani generis convicti sunt. Et pereuntibus addita ludibria, ut ferarum tergis contacti laniatu canum interirent, aut crucibus adfixi [aut flammandi atque], ubi defecisset dies in usu<m> nocturni
 15 luminis urerentur. Hortos suos ei spectaculo Nero obtulerat et circense ludicrum edebat, habitu aurigae permixtus plebi vel curriculo insistens. Unde quamquam adversus fontes et novissima exempla meritos miseratio oriebatur, tamquam non utilitate publica sed in saevitiam unius absumerentur.³⁹

Note the following concerning the text:

1. *dis*: Gronovius' correction of the second Medicean's (henceforth M2) *a diis*.
7. *Chrestianos* is the correct reading of M2 reported by the Teubner text rather than the frequently 'corrected' reading of *Christianos* as found, e.g., in the Oxford Classical Text.
8. I believe that the *Christus* of M2 has similarly been corrected (as one hand had already tried to correct the *Chrestiani* to *Christiani*) from *Chrestus*. Such alterations were rife, as when, from Orosius in the fifth century to William of Malmesbury in the twelfth, the reading of *Chrestus* in

³⁶ The comment on the massive bibliography was made by Getty 1966: 285. In his Teubner edition of the *Annales*, Wellesley 1986 brackets the words from *auctor nominis eius* to *confluunt celebranturque* as if they were an actual set-aside excursus in the text (although not, I think, suggesting that they were an interpolation). For a recent foray in support of interpolation, see Carrier 2014: 264–83, who cites many of the earlier studies.

³⁷ For advice and discussion on the problem of the Tacitean Latinity and authorship of the passage, I am especially grateful to A. J. Woodman, Denis Feeney, and Robert Kaster.

³⁸ Tac., *Ann.* 15.44; for a convenient review of the existing scholarship, see Cook, 'Tacitus' text', ch. 2.1.3 in 2010: 39–82.

³⁹ The text is that of Heubner 1994; the editions of Wellesley 1986 and Wuilleumier 1978 were also consulted. Those who wish to inspect a photographic reproduction of the passage in the *Codex Mediceus* 68.II, fol. 38 r, can consult the illustration prefixed to Fuchs 1950.

Suet., *Claud.* 25.4 was ‘corrected’ to *Christus*. And it makes the most logical sense for Tacitus to say that *Chrestianus* would come from *Chrestus*. Nevertheless, I have maintained the reading of *Christus* found in M2.

8. Reads *Tyberio* in M2 for which I have printed the standard *Tiberio*.

9. M2 reads *affectus* rather than *adfectus*.

11. Getty 1966: 286–8, has argued that *correpti quidam fatebantur* ought to be read for *correpti qui fatebantur*, on the basis that it was illogical for people to have confessed before they were arrested, but I have kept the text as in M2: in the circumstances following the trauma of the fire, no one could guarantee punctilious due process.

13. As with Heubner, I prefer the *convicti* of the *recentiores* to the *coniuncti* of M2.

14. The clause following *crucibus adfixi* is especially troublesome. Of all the suggested fixes, I prefer that supported by Barnes 2010: 333–4, going back to Georg Andresen, who simply excised the *aut flammandi atque*; but neither this nor any of the other many proposals (such as the suggestion by Lund 2008 that *aut flammandi* should be *ad flammam dati, ut ...*) materially affect the arguments being made here. For a list of the numerous editorial fixes proposed for the words in M2, see Wellesley 1986: 157–8.

These were the measures devised by human planning [i.e. Nero’s new building code changes after the fire]. Next sacrifices were made to the gods and the books of the Sybil were consulted, according to which supplications were made to Vulcan, Ceres, and Proserpina. And Juno was propitiated by Roman matrons, first on the Capitol and then at the nearby seashore from which water was drawn and sprinkled on the temple and the image of the goddess. And then the women who had husbands celebrated ritual banquets and nightly vigils. Not by any human resources, not by the benefactions of the emperor, and not by any placating of the gods did the sinister rumour fade by which it was believed that the fire had been ordered. To get rid of the rumour, Nero found and provided the defendants, and he afflicted with the most refined punishments those persons whom, hated for their shameful acts, the common people were accustomed to call *Chrestiani*. The originator of this name, Christus [Chrestus?], suffered (capital) punishment in the reign of Tiberius through the agency of the procurator Pontius Pilatus. At the time, the lethal *superstitio* was repressed, but it burst out again not only throughout Judaea, the origin of this evil (sickness), but through the City (of Rome) to which everything that is savage and shameful flows from all directions and is actually celebrated. At first (only) those persons who confessed were arrested, but then because they were pointed out (denounced) by those (i.e. who had already confessed) a very large number were convicted, less on the charge of having set the fire than because of their hatred of humankind. And to those who were dying mockeries were added. Covered with the hides of wild animals they perished by being torn to pieces by dogs or, fixed to stakes (or, crosses) they were set afire in the darkening evening as a form of night lighting. Nero had reserved his own gardens for the spectacle. He also presented a circus entertainment and in the dress of a charioteer he either mixed with the crowd or stood in his own chariot. Even if it was for guilty persons who deserved to suffer extreme and exemplary public punishments, there arose a feeling of pity because it was not for the public good but to satisfy one man’s savagery that they were being liquidated.

When was Tacitus composing these words? One set of arguments, made by his most perceptive and sympathetic modern student, places the composition in the late ’teens or the early 20s of the second century.⁴⁰ It is a view not accepted by everyone. Others argue for a date in the mid-teens. But dates close to Syme’s estimate must be near the

⁴⁰ Syme, ‘The date of the *Annales*’, ch. 35 in 1967: 465–80, with appendixes nos 71–4, for a complex, if not entirely compelling, argument in favour of a date as late as the early years of Hadrian. Reviewing all the evidence, Birley 2000: 241–7, admits (p. 244): ‘It has to be confessed that univocal, unequivocal evidence to date the *Annals* cannot be found.’ But as Syme intuited, I am sure, their publication must date to some time

truth, and anything within this time range is sufficient for our purpose. And what sources might Tacitus have had? Of the written sources, which need not be the determinate ones in this case, Cluvius Rufus, Fabius Rusticus, and the elder Pliny are obvious candidates.⁴¹ For our arguments, the detailed history of the elder Pliny should provide a reasonably good test since it was surely consulted by the historian.⁴² If any history of the period covering the year 64 would have specified the fire and those punished for it, it would have been the elder Pliny's detailed narrative. Alas, nothing survives of it that can help us. The elder Pliny's only explicit statement regarding the fire of 64 holds Nero to blame for it and, in consequence, for the destruction of an important rare species of tree.⁴³ But nowhere in the more than 20,000 facts collected from 2,000 books and 100 different authors in his *Natural History* does Pliny so much as refer to any people called Christians or *Chrestiani*, much less does he make any connection of them with the fire that destroyed large parts of the imperial metropolis.⁴⁴ In short, there is no known sign in any of the lost sources for histories that covered the reign of Nero to indicate where Tacitus would have found the facts about Christians that are retailed in our passage, or anything to controvert the observed fact that the first mentions of the Christians by this name in Latin sources are those made by the younger Pliny and Tacitus. There is no need, as Syme noted, to fret too much. The historian could simply have consulted the *acta senatus*, as we know that he frequently did.⁴⁵ And Tacitus also had at his disposal, and used, oral sources, and in this case items of information being conveyed in conversation by his contemporaries might well have been among the most significant.

OTHER WITNESSES

If Tacitus is the *only* source that connects Christians, their persecution, and the fire, we might usefully ask: what do other sources say about this same matter? Cassius Dio, whose sources differed in important ways from those used by Tacitus, provided a rhetorically exaggerated narrative of the Great Fire, but he says nothing at all about Christians, nor anything about their connection with the fire or about Nero's punishment of them as the guilty parties.⁴⁶ His silence in this connection, however, might well be more a matter of the historian's attitude to things Christian.⁴⁷ The question here is not with the existence of the fire of 64 C.E., which we accept as fact, but rather with the involvement of Christians with it as the persons whom the emperor blamed and whom he had executed in large numbers, so initiating the Roman state's

well after 110/111 C.E., the date for the completion of the *Histories*, and probably no earlier than the late 'teens of the second century.

⁴¹ Syme 1967: 289–91, is not to be surpassed for its sane judgements on these matters; see Syme 1967: 293–4 on Fabius Rusticus and Cluvius Rufus, noting that the former was named as a legate, along with Pliny the Younger and Tacitus, in a will composed in the summer of 108 C.E.

⁴² See Syme 1967: 291–3, on the elder Pliny's historical work, composed in the first quinquennium of the 70s, not that long after the Great Fire.

⁴³ Pliny, *NH* 17.1.5.

⁴⁴ Pliny appears not to have kept his counts up to date: the actual total number of facts that he catalogues is 33,707; but he omits fact counts for some books, so something close to 35,000 must be nearer to the actual number.

⁴⁵ Syme 1967: 278–83, in an initial discussion of the sources used for the first books of the *Annales*.

⁴⁶ Dio 62.16–18 (*Epit. Xiph.* 166.17–169); on his sources, see Millar 1964: 34–8: his oral sources seem to have been different, and he shows no sign, for example, of having used the *acta senatus*; *contra*, see de Blois 1991: 359–74, who assumes that they were using the same sources.

⁴⁷ Part of what one historian has rightly noted as the 'curious' absence of Christians as such in his history: Millar 1964: 179, cf. p. 108: Dio appears to condemn their activities, although he forebears from actually naming them.

persecution of Christians. Later sources are useless for deciding the matter. They might seem compelling but, like Sulpicius Severus, they are wholly dependent on Tacitus.⁴⁸

... quin et novae mortes excogitatae, ut ferarum tergis contacti, laniatu canum interirent, multi crucibus adfixi aut flammis usti, plerique in id reservati, ut, cum defecisset dies, in usum nocturni luminis urerentur.

The precise diction, if nothing else, shows that Sulpicius was ultimately borrowing from, indeed almost copying Tacitus. He offers a summary of what Tacitus has to say in almost the same words that were used by the historian himself. Like all other later Christian writers, Sulpicius is not an independent witness to what actually happened in July of 64.

The one other source contemporary with Tacitus that contains an explicit statement relevant to this matter is the biographer Suetonius. In his life of Nero, he notes that the emperor inflicted certain ‘punishments’ on Christians. Importantly, however, Suetonius does *not* connect these coercive measures with the fire at Rome, despite the fact that he provides one of the very few full narratives of the conflagration.⁴⁹ In a single brief clause in a section having no connection with the fire, Suetonius notes the measures taken by Nero against Christians as one example, among several, of actions that the emperor took to constrain various unacceptable behaviours at Rome. Since Suetonius is frequently taken as a second independent witness to Nero’s persecution of Christians, we might consider his words in some detail.⁵⁰

... affecti supplicii Christiani, genus hominum superstitionis novae ac maleficae ...

... Christians were afflicted with punishments, a type of men of a new and evil *superstitio* ...

What was Suetonius saying and what is the value of his words as independent testimony? First of all, the context for this statement is a series of brief notices on general coercive measures taken by Nero. Limits were placed on luxury expenditures, public banquets were limited to those funded as *sportulae*, taverns were limited to cooking pulses or vegetables as foods for sale, the free-wheeling playfulness of charioteers in which they had been accustomed to rampage down the narrow streets of the city was now forbidden, and pantomimes and their supporters were banished from the city.⁵¹ The brief notice about the Christians is stuck in the middle of this legal potpourri. All the other notices refer to measures that were regulatory in nature which suggests that the measures taken against the Christians were of a similar type. We might first note that the clause attached to the main statement is almost certainly a contemporary observation, a gloss written by Suetonius for his readers that reflects a knowledge about Christians which was shared by his contemporaries, including the younger Pliny. The fact that he adds this gloss about ‘who they are’ to the main statement is in itself

⁴⁸ Sulpic. Sev., *Chron.* 2.29; Oros., *Hist. adv. pagan.* 7.7.4–10, is another instance.

⁴⁹ Suet., *Vita Ner.* 38.1–3: in which Nero alone is explicitly blamed for deliberately setting the fire: ‘Nam quasi offensus [sc. Nero] deformitate veterum aedificiorum et angustiis flexurisque vicorum, incendit urbem tam palam ut ...’

⁵⁰ Suet., *Vita Ner.* 16.2: in a section on various constraining actions taken by Nero against sundry groups of miscreants. For the reading of *affecti* rather than *afflicti*, see Bradley 1972: 9–10, confirmed by Kaster *per litt.* It might be noted that Tacitus uses the same form — ‘supplicio affectus erat’ — in the passage above.

⁵¹ Suet., *Vita Ner.* 16.2: ‘Multa sub eo et animadversa severe et coercita nec minus instituta: adhibitus sumptibus modus; publicae cenae ad sportulas redactae; interdictum ne quid in popinis cocti praeter legumina aut holera veniret, cum antea nullum non obsonii genus proponeretur; afflicti supplicii Christiani, genus superstitionis novae ac maleficae; vetiti quadrigariorum lusus, quibus inveterata licentia passim vagantibus fallere ac furari per iocum ius erat; pantomimorum factiones cum ipsis simul relegatae ... etc.’ As such, the item on the Christians looks like a rather odd item in this list.

significant, but the words add little to an understanding of what did or did not happen under Nero. Second, whoever the people were who were ‘broken by punishments’ under Nero, it is most improbable that they were called ‘Christians’ in the 50 s and 60 s. Last of all, given the fact that Suetonius does describe the fire in some detail but nowhere connects the Christians with it, it is reasonably certain that whatever coercive measures were taken — actions surely conceived as comparable to the other minor policing measures described in the passage — they did not include savage punishments of the kind vented on those who were found guilty of having set the fire in 64 C.E.

There are good reasons, therefore, to suspect that Suetonius placed a new and recent label on the persons concerned who in the 60s were then seen as sectarians who shared in one of the occasional banishments of Jews from the city of Rome. This was something that had happened, for example, under the emperor Claudius, in an incident also noted by Suetonius who says that the disturbances in the city of Rome had been incited by a certain Chrestus.⁵² The significance of the incident is rather difficult to unpack, but it seems to be linked with measures taken against certain Jewish elements in the city.⁵³ The problem in interpreting what Suetonius was writing in the 110s and 120s is that the people identified as ‘followers of Chrestus’ or *Chrestiani* (as they were now seen in Suetonius’ own time) were a group who embodied a *new* and evil *superstitio*. The words closely echo an opinion of the Christians that had been formed by his acquaintance and coeval, the younger Pliny. So it is not without significance that Tacitus used the spelling *Chrestiani* for the group concerned.⁵⁴ What seems to have happened under Claudius and then again under Nero is the temporary banishment of some Jewish sectarians from the city of Rome, but not, in any event, persons who would logically have been labelled *at the time* as ‘a *new* and evil *superstitio*’, words which were used only much later by Roman officials to label Christians.⁵⁵ At the time, and indeed up to the decades after 100 C.E., among Roman writers, including Tacitus, it was the Jews rather than the Christians whose beliefs and practices were being labelled a *superstitio*, albeit not a novel one.⁵⁶

The only other source that has sometimes been taken to link Christians with the punishments that followed the Great Fire is a passage in the Pseudo-Clement’s *Letter to the Corinthians*. It mentions certain women who were spectacularly executed, dressed up as Danaids and Dircae. They had been denounced as Christians by their jealous husbands.⁵⁷ The trope of the jealous spouse delating his wife to Roman authorities in

⁵² Suet., *Vita Claud.* 25.4: ‘Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit.’ The variants are considered in detail by Boman 2011: 355–76, who demonstrates that the best ‘original’ reading that we have is indeed ‘Chresto’.

⁵³ As, for example, an incident noted by Dio 60.6.6, probably to be dated to spring or summer of 41 C.E.; Orosius, *Hist. adv. pagan.* 7.6.15, states that Josephus dated a similar event to the ninth year of Claudius’ reign (i.e. to the year 49), despite the fact that no such statement appears in our texts of Josephus (and, in any event, Orosius himself tends to discount it).

⁵⁴ See ‘The identity of Chrestus’, ch. 1.3 in Cook 2010: 15–21.

⁵⁵ The finding reached by Botermann 1996. She notes (pp. 44–9) the well-known case of Aquila and Priscilla whom Paul met at Corinth and who had been caught up in one of the expulsions of Jews from Rome ordered by Claudius (Acts 18: 2).

⁵⁶ First among Roman writers in Latin is Quintilian who speaks of Moses as the ‘primus Iudaicae superstitionis auctor’ (*Inst. Or.* 3.7.21) and then Tacitus (*Hist.* 5.13.1) who states that as a *gens* the Jews are ‘superstitio obnoxia, religionibus adversa’; for some comments, see Barclay 2014: 314–18. The connection supposedly made by the elder Pliny (*NH* 31.44.95) between Jews and *superstitio*, although it would be a happy thing for our case, seems questionable; I likewise doubt a similar attribution to Seneca in Augustine’s *Civ. Dei* 6.11 (*CCL* 47: 183) where Jewish *superstitio* is mentioned — the words are probably Augustine’s and not those of Seneca (who is indeed quoted later in the same passage).

⁵⁷ Ps.-Clem., 1 *Ep. ad Corinth.* 5.2 (struggle to the point of death); 1.5.5–7 (on Paul, but with no mention either of Nero or the fire); 1.6.1–2 (masses who suffered, including women punished as Danaids and Dirkaï, for reasons of jealousy, explained in 1.6.3 as denunciations by husbands but, again, with no indication of date except that it seems to happen after Paul in sequence). See Champlin 2003: 123–4, however, who takes the references to have

the city of Rome is also found in the writings of Justin Martyr who was probably writing in the mid-second century.⁵⁸ The two narrative lines look too similar to be independent of one another. Before coming to this episode, Clement says that some early Christians at Rome who were ‘most righteous pillars of the church’ were persecuted ‘through jealousy and envy’, but that they resisted to the point of death. No specific persons are named, and no place or date is given. The words seem to be linked with the notice that follows in Clement concerning the death of Paul which, however, is not connected in any way with Nero or with the fire. The problems here are almost overwhelming. No specifically identifiable author can be fixed for these letters. The third or fourth bishop of Rome has been proposed, but there are numerous pseudepigraphical texts attached to his name and no certain provenience or date can be established for the text. It is *possible* that a Christian writer of second-century date intended this passage to refer to events connected with Nero and the fire. Presuming this much to be true, one might then further speculate about what was happening to the women concerned. But between such hypotheses and the text there are considerable unfillable gaps in the evidence.⁵⁹ Therefore, unless one simply presumes, in a complete void of supporting data, that the words in the pseudo-Clement *must* have some relationship to the fire in 64 C.E., there is nothing in the text that would lead any reasonably critical reader to connect the two events. It is best dismissed from serious consideration of this problem as yet another one of the parasitic texts that have come to be attached to the fire and the first persecution under Nero in the assiduous hunt for any possible evidence that might strengthen the general argument.

TACITUS AND CONTEXT

We are therefore left with the Tacitean account. It is the absolutely apical and focal account on which all others depend. All later sources of any consequence that connect the Christians, Nero, and the fire, including Christian writers from Tertullian to Eusebius, depend on his words. They are not independent witnesses to anything that happened in Nero’s reign.⁶⁰ To a point halfway through the passage quoted above, there are no real problems. The narrative follows Tacitus’ detailed description of the fire and his claim that rumours had arisen among the people of the city that the emperor himself was in some fashion responsible for setting the fire and arranging for its spread. This is where the account assumes real relevance to our inquiry. At this juncture, Tacitus claims that to deflect blame from himself, Nero rounded up the necessary defendants, presumably on charges of having set the fire. Finding them guilty, he subjected them to the most refined of punishments. Then comes the clause most centrally at issue. The historian glosses precisely who the guilty parties were: ‘persons whom, hated for their indecent and shameful acts, the common people called/were accustomed to call *Chrestiani*.’

genuine historical value in their reference to connections between the punishments of Christians and the fire. Zwielerin, ‘Der “Clemensbrief” als Zeugnis der frühen Epoche Hadrians’, ch. D4 in Zwielerin 2009: 316–31, rather persuasively argues for a date in the mid-120s; see also, ‘Der erste Clemensbrief’, in Zwielerin 2011: 453–8.

⁵⁸ Justin, *Apol.* 2.2.7–12 (ed. A. Wartelle 1987: 198) in a text which must date to the mid-second century; for comment, see Lampe 2003: 237–40.

⁵⁹ Champlin 2003: 123–6, ties this notice to the fire and to Nero’s propensities as a dramaturge, an argument also made at considerable length by Schmitt 2012: 487–515. He accepts the punishments specifically as those inflicted on Christians, however, a specific claim for which I can find little probative evidence.

⁶⁰ In his *Apologeticum*, Tertullian almost certainly refers to Tacitus as his source, namely the *commentarii vestri*: Tert., *Apol.* 5.3; and Eusebius, in turn, depended on a Greek translation (see CCL 1: 95 *infra*) of this same work of Tertullian’s: Euseb., *HE* 2.25.4; cf. 2.2.4–6; see Barnes 2010: 4.

The verb tense is important because the claim is that people in the city of Rome in the early 60s knew about and called a specific group of persons ‘Chrestians’ *at that time*.⁶¹ To begin with, taken in these precise terms the statement seems improbable. There will be more later about the problem of names, but for the moment it is sufficient to note that the lines that follow are basically an epexegetical excursus appended to the main clause. They explain to the reader who these people were and why they merited the suspicion and hatred of the Roman people. Tacitus states that the originator of the name ‘Chrestian’ was one Christus who was punished with the death penalty under the reign of Tiberius through the agency of his procurator Pontius Pilatus.

All of this is very interesting, but it is not directly relevant to any connection of Christians either with the fire at Rome or with the executions of the supposed guilty parties in its aftermath. What it does demonstrate is that when Tacitus was composing the Neronian books of the *Annales* he had in his possession a kind of ‘factual knowledge’ that he could use to compose an historical gloss on who the people were whom Nero had had punished. In this sense, his words are structurally parallel to the near contemporary sentence found in Suetonius: (a) a certain people were punished who were Christians, and (b) this is who these people were: a distinctive kind of people who embodied a *new* and evil *superstitio* (meaning, basically, a bad or unacceptable religion). The sort of information to which Tacitus had access and might have had in mind can be seen not just in the language of this passage but also in what Suetonius has to say about expulsions from Rome and what Tacitus himself has to say elsewhere about analogous matters. All of it, significantly, relates to Jews and Judaea. Although initially repressed in its homeland of Judaea, Tacitus says, the deadly *superstitio* burst out again not only in Judaea, its place of origin, but even in the city of Rome where, as the historian remarks in a satiric vein, ‘all savage and shameful things flow from all directions and are actually celebrated’. I need not dilate on the obvious echoes about eastern pollutions found in his contemporary Juvenal. As has already been perceptively remarked, in this regard Tacitus and Juvenal can be considered ‘parallel and coeval phenomena. Style, tone, and sentiments are comparable’.⁶² The fears were ones of the time. It was Tacitus’ friend, the younger Pliny, who similarly described Christians not just as a *superstitio*, but as a disease, *contagio*, that was spreading throughout the countryside of his province.⁶³ Tacitus then circles back to the narrative relating to events at the time of Nero. He says that at first only those were arrested who confessed but that when other culprits were denounced a much larger number of persons were convicted less on the charge of having set the fire than because of their ‘hatred of human kind’. We need not tarry too long on the *odium generis humani* that was the supposed basis of the popular dislike, if not hatred, of the persons who were accused of setting the fire. Up to the point of its use in this passage by Tacitus, as a condemnation of an ethnic group, the phrase had only been used to designate a perceived peculiarity of the Jews.⁶⁴

Tacitus composed this passage approximately at the end of the second decade of the second century, perhaps assembling notes and other research earlier in the years after 110 C.E. when he had completed his *Histories*. It betrays some modernizing or up-dating of the facts, among them calling Pontius Pilatus, the governor of Judaea, a *procurator*. The rank was true of Tacitus’ own time, but not of Pilatus’ own when *praefectus* was the title held by the governor of Judaea. The historian certainly knew the difference

⁶¹ A point that is remarked upon by Koestermann 1967: 461, who notes that the verb suggests that they had conventionally been doing so as a matter of habit for some time.

⁶² Syme 1967: 500.

⁶³ Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96.9: ‘Neque civitates tantum, sed vicus etiam atque agros superstitionis istius contagio pervagata est ...’

⁶⁴ For the history of the *odium generis humani* and in particular its long-term service in accusations against Jews, see Cook 2010: 62–5, with references to the earlier bibliography.

between governors who were *praefecti* and those who were *procuratores*, and elsewhere he notes the distinction.⁶⁵ Such modest modernizings occur outside of this particular passage, however, and so are typical of the writer. For example, when Tacitus says that there arose a distaste towards Nero for his executions because they were perceived to be a concession to the emperor's bestiality and not a contribution to the *utilitas publica* of the state, he is surely echoing a dominant ideology not of the 60s but of his own age. Another move of this kind, as we have just noted, is the transfer of the 'hatred of humankind' label to Christians, probably made in parallel with the use of the specific name of *Chrestiani* for them. Other new ideas shared by his contemporaries are apparent in the language and the specifics of the 'new data' known by Tacitus. Prime among these links are those with Tacitus' friend, the younger Pliny. Pliny certainly knew about Christians. Along with Tacitus, he was the first Roman writer in Latin who has anything to say about them. The difference is that Pliny's evidence is a contemporary report and not a reference in an historical narrative or an interpretation set in the distant past. And there are possible echoes in diction. Tacitus labels Christian beliefs an *exitiabilis superstitio*. His friend Pliny reports that, on interviewing Christians about their ideas and practices, he found nothing other than a *superstitio prava et immodica*.⁶⁶ The historian made the label more powerful and deadly.

The tendency to bring the description up to date surely includes another obvious item. Tacitus knows to call the people Christians. It is a manifest anachronism. It is difficult to know when the Christians were first called Christians, when they began calling themselves Christians or, much more important for our purposes, when Roman figures of authority like governors and emperors identified them as such. The claim by the historian of Luke-Acts that the Roman governor of Judaea, Antonius Felix, 'happened to be well informed about *the way*' is manifestly a later assertion that is difficult to decipher, but in no way does even this statement have him recognizing anything like 'the Christians'.⁶⁷ We do know that up to the end of the apostle Paul's life, approximately to the mid-60s, the term was not used. When Paul was accused before the Roman authorities, he was called a Nazorean not a Christian. About the year 60, the High Priest Ananias appeared with his advocate Tertullus before Felix the Roman governor of Judaea to make the case against Paul. Paul is charged with raising riots in Jerusalem and 'being a ringleader of the sect of the Nazoreans'.⁶⁸ As for the term Christian, some aspects of its origins and use are reasonably certain. First, it was a Latinism in Greek where the '(i)amus' suffix was used to indicate that someone was the fictive son or daughter of another person, as frequently, for example, in the Roman practice of naming in adoption. Metaphorically speaking, such persons were seen as the children or the followers of a particular person, in this case of Christ.⁶⁹ The logical context that suggests itself is the need for a formal Latin-form term in Greek that would be useful in an official context, and the one that logically suggests itself is for use in designating 'bad persons' before the tribunals of Roman governors.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Tac., *Hist.* 2.74: governor of Egypt as a *praefectus*; *Hist.* 2.82: he knows the distinction; *Ann.* 15.25 (cf. 15.50): makes the distinction; for another instance of such 'modernizing' see Schmitt 2011: 521, n. 23.

⁶⁶ Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96.

⁶⁷ Acts 24: 22.

⁶⁸ Acts 24: 1–8; and the tradition continued: as late as about 200 C.E., Tertullian, *Contra Marc.* 4.8 (CCL 1: 556) in North Africa, could declare: 'the Jews call each of us a Nazarene'; 'Unde et ipso nomine [sc. Nazareus] nos Iudaei Nazarenos appellant per eum'. The problems here, apart from the name and identification, are very complex and so they will not be ventilated in detail here: see Luomanen 2008: 282–3.

⁶⁹ Schmitt 2011: 523–4, who thinks that the designation was so negative that 'er [i.e. der Name Christiani] bezeichnete politische Verbrecher oder Terroristen, die sich auf einen *Christ* beriefen'. While not going as far as designating 'terrorists' in this case, 'the name' had certainly come to designate persons who were regarded as an inherent threat to the social order.

⁷⁰ The remarks by Schmitt 2011: 522–3 on possible uses of the verb *appellare* in the Tacitus passage might well have some current resonances (although, I think, not to the specific situation in 64 C.E.).

The relevant question is not to ask when Christians came to be called Christians by people who did not like them, or to ask when they themselves, like Lutherans and Methodists, adopted an initially disapproving term as a type of self-identification. The important question, rather, is to ask when secular Roman writers of high social rank like Tacitus, Pliny, and Suetonius became aware of the term. The first use of the name *Christianos* as a mode of self-identification is claimed by the historian of Luke-Acts to have occurred in the community in Antioch. But writing, perhaps, as late as the 90s, it is difficult to control the precise *mise-en-scène*. Even if the students of Jesus began to call themselves *Christianoi* at some point in the 40s and 50s in an eastern city of the Empire, it is difficult to know what sort of general purchase this naming had in the high social and political ranks with which we are concerned.⁷¹ And even if the contemporaneity of the reference could be guaranteed, which it cannot, the use of the term still appears to be highly localized and internal to the community itself. The only other explicit case is found in a letter attributed to the apostle Peter in which the name 'Christian' is specifically attached to a concatenated sequence of accusation, conviction, and punishment: 'Yet if anyone suffers as a *Christianos*, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. For it is the time for judgement to begin in the household of God.'⁷² As the introduction to these words indicates, they are explicitly connected with judicial attacks on members of this community: 'Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you ... If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed ... But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or a bandit.'⁷³ But when was this happening? The critical dating of the letter is taken to belong to some time between the late 90s and the 110s. The manifest context of persecution and martyrdom behind the words points directly to years when these had become real threats.

Among Christian writers, Ignatius of Antioch is the first person who consistently and repeatedly uses the appellation Christian as a probative type of self-identification in a context where a large alien public and figures of authority such as governors recognized and used the term. The letters, in the form that we have them, probably date to the 150s to 160s, or even later.⁷⁴ The chronological and geographic dispersal of these first uses points to the eastern origins of a Latin-type word that was used to label the followers of a well-known person, a term that was initially used in a negative context.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Acts 11: 26. I take the bit of banter between King Agrippa and Paul in which the former is reputed to have said, 'In a short time you would persuade me to be a Christian?' (Acts 26: 28) to be a later fiction of some type. The bibliography on this one matter is rather overwhelming. Out of the very large number of items, I select Bickerman 1949: 109–24 = 2007: 794–808, who takes the designation to be self-ascribed and to date to about 40 C.E. (at Antioch); and the useful re-evaluation by Taylor 1994: 75–94: the precise opposite of Bickerman: it was a term first used by Roman officials at Antioch. My interpretation is interstitial between these two polarities: that the word was probably used first by persons who were hostile to the Christians as a formal legal-like term that they could use to specify such persons before Roman officials (hence the Latinized form) and which was then adopted by the Roman officials as a mode of identifying such accused persons (as, for example, with Pliny, later).

⁷² 1 Peter 4: 12–13; see Zwierlein, 'Die Schlußgruß des Ersten Petrusbriefes: 1 Petr 5, 13', in Zwierlein 2011: 448–53.

⁷³ 1 Peter 4: 12–17 (ESV trans.).

⁷⁴ Ignatius of Antioch, *Ep. ad Eph.* 11.2; *Ep. ad Magn.* 4; *Ep. ad Rom.* 3.2; *Ep. ad Polycarp.* 7.3 (also as an adjective: *Ep. ad Trall.* 6.1): for dating, see Barnes 2010: 17–19; and Zwierlein 2009: 31–3, who would like to place them even later, in the 170s to 180s. Also originating in Antioch, it is thought, is the reference in the *Didache* 12.4, but the dating of this work is another conundrum: some currently tend to a date around 100 C.E., but others much later. Furthermore, its uses are internal to the community and so do not answer our question of when it was that Roman authority figures began to recognize the term and the group.

⁷⁵ The run of the data, with comment, is conveniently laid out in the still valuable survey by Karpp 1954: cols 1114–38, especially at II, 'Eigentliche Namen', cols 1131–8. That it is a Latin 'loan word' found first in the East was pointed out long ago by Schwyzler 1939: 490, following A. Meillet; the most compelling analysis of this aspect is still Bickerman 1949. There is another instance in Josephus (*AJ* 18.64) that might as well be mentioned here in order to set it aside. This reference to 'Christians' is contained in the highly contentious and much debated *Testimonium Flavianum*, the glossing and explication of which here would consume more time

The circumstances that would have prompted such a use would be ones that encouraged the identification of ‘bad persons’, i.e. known followers of a *Christos*, before a Roman magistrate. ‘This person is one of them’, using *Christianos* to designate the followers or adherents of a man whom the Roman state had executed for reasons of threatening the public order. This usage of the word, however, was rather late and was certainly preceded by different ones, like Nazorean, which also seem to be negative in origin. Every piece of evidence that can be assembled therefore suggests a specific time period, years focused on the 110s, when the extant data first clearly indicate persons who were being charged and executed for bearing the name of Christian. That is, the age when Pliny, Tacitus, and Suetonius were writing about Christians and were using the term.⁷⁶ The connections and the similarity of sources, ideas, and diction are surely not accidental. Relations of close mutual friendships, of formal *amicitiae*, linked the three men. They provided information for each others’ works, they read one another’s compositions, and they were alert to the new public discourses of the time.⁷⁷

It, therefore, seems improbable that the persons who were executed by Nero were a specific social group whom the mass of the common people of Rome knew well enough to call Christians or *Chrestianoī*, persons who were hated or despised because of their disgraceful or shameful deeds. The most detailed analysis of the available data is not able to proffer any substantial proof or preponderance of evidence that would lead one to believe that there was a sizeable community of persons publicly known as Christians in Rome and Ostia, or, indeed, more widely in Latium, as early as the 50s and 60s.⁷⁸ Christians, who were probably not called or even known by this name at the time, were hardly a sufficiently distinctive group within the Jewish communities at Rome in the 60s to be noted for their own peculiar identity, much less a well-known group under *this* name and recognized as such by the ordinary inhabitants of the city. Moreover the words *per flagitia* in this precise form, meaning ‘because of’ or ‘for their shameful/disgusting acts’, are used by only two prose authors in the whole corpus of Latin

than necessary for our argument. In any event, this text, too, was composed at some time in the late 90s and so, even if fully genuine, would fall more in line with the Pliny-Tacitus-Suetonius linkages discussed in this paper.

⁷⁶ There is the supposed appearance of the word ‘Christiani’ or ‘Christianos’ in a graffito found scrawled on a wall at Pompeii (*CIL* 4. 679) and therefore dating to before 79 C.E., to which a whole book has been devoted: Berry 1995. Lampe 2003: 8, states that ‘the text obviously speaks of Christians’, despite the fact that the text of the graffito and its relationship to the surrounding graffiti remain very uncertain. In the face of no other supporting evidence, I remain rather sceptical. ‘Lectio inscriptionis, quam omnes viderunt evanidam, incerta est’, the editors of *CIL* wisely remarked. It is (rightly I think) rejected as having anything to do with Christians: see Boman 2011: 355, n. 3.

⁷⁷ The Pliny-Tacitus friendship is too well known to need further documentation: see the guidance offered by Gibson and Morello, ‘Tacitus and Pliny’, ch. 26 in 2012: 304–5. The friendship of Suetonius with Pliny is perhaps less immediately known, but the *amicitia* between the two men is attested routinely in the letters of Pliny: see Wallace-Hadrill 1983: 4–5 for some of the details and, once again, Gibson and Morello, ‘Suetonius and Pliny’, in 2012: 304; see Pliny, *Ep.* 1.24 (explicit on their ‘friendship’); cf. *Epp.* 3.8, 5.10, 9.34 (friendship and reading each other’s works); 10.94 (letter to emperor Trajan on his behalf). Based on a famous inscription found at Hippo Regius (modern Annāba) in Algeria (*AE* 1953, 73), Suetonius is sometimes claimed to be an African (even Syme was tempted: ‘may be his home town’, although he accepted Pisaurum in Italy as the probable family home). I am dubious. He seems rather to be one of a narrow coterie of friends who were part of Pliny’s northern Italian network. In this matter, I assume some knowledge shared between Suetonius and Tacitus, but I do not assume any dependence based on the one reading the other’s works (in agreement with Power 2014).

⁷⁸ Lampe 2003: 7–10, 69–81, assembles almost every possible scrap of the available evidence, the only substantial pieces being Paul’s communications to ‘the Romans’. Lampe’s only evidence that Roman authorities *at the time* made the distinction between Jews and ‘Christians’ is our passage from Tacitus. He does note (p. 7) that Tertullian claimed that there were no Christian communities in Campania at this time — a statement that he (rightly) dismisses as ‘rhetorical exaggeration’: Tert., *Apol.* 40.8 (*CCL* 1: 154): ‘Sed nec Tusciam iam atque Campaniam de Christianis querebantur, cum Vulsinios de caelo, Pompeios de suo monte perfudit ignis’ (cf. *Ad Nat.* 1.9.7 = *CCL* 1: 23).

literature: Tacitus and Pliny.⁷⁹ It seems hardly accidental that the *flagitia* that attached to the Christian name were one of the main things that concerned Pliny when, as special governor of Bithynia-Pontus in the years between 110 and 113 C.E., he was staging judicial hearings of Christians who had been delated to him.⁸⁰ This draws attention to the relationships between the two senators, and their friends and acquaintances, in the first decades of the second century as being relevant to the problem of the connection of ‘Christians’ with the great fire at Rome in 64 C.E.

The attested personal relations between Pliny, Suetonius, and Tacitus, and their texts, are, I believe, directly relevant to sorting out this problem. The knowledge fields that these men shared about any given social group like ‘the Christians’ can, I think, be assumed to be modestly similar. And yet the one thing that we know about Pliny’s knowledge of Christians is that when, as governor of Bithynia-Pontus, he interrogated some of the accused he knew rather little about them.⁸¹ Pliny was unsure of what to do when certain locals filed accusations before his tribunal against Christians. He had to make detailed inquiries of the persons themselves, with the use of torture in some cases, to find out who they were, what they believed, and what they actually did. He freely admits that he had never been party to any judicial hearings in which such persons had been involved, that he knew nothing about any existing governmental decisions concerning them, and, a fact important to our argument, that he knew nothing about how they had been punished.⁸² Even if some of this lack of knowledge was rhetorically fashioned, it is still a remarkable level of professed ignorance. Pliny was about as highly educated a member of the Roman élite of the time as one could be. He certainly knew about his Roman past. If persons known as Christians had been responsible for setting the fire that almost destroyed the metropolis of the Empire — or who, at the very least, were firmly believed to have been the culprits — and had been punished for this act of monumental criminality, that Pliny knew nothing about these matters or about Christians is simply not credible.

The absence of this specific connection in Pliny’s mind is all the more striking since we know that in the reign of Domitian, when both Pliny and Tacitus were serving as junior senators and holding magisterial posts at Rome, the terrible damage done by the fire was being remembered on public boundary markers that established and confirmed a fire-clearance zone where building and other activities were forbidden under a law to be enforced by praetors.⁸³ The two men must have been aware of the still-existing damage

⁷⁹ Tac., *Ann.* 6.7 and 15.44 (our passage); Pliny, *Ep.* 2.20; approximate analogues are found earlier: Livy 27.31: ‘per haec flagitia’; Sen., *Nat. Quaest.* 16.4: ‘per quae flagitia sua’.

⁸⁰ Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96.1 (for the text, see n. 82 below); for general background on his governorship, see Talbert 1980: 412–35.

⁸¹ On these aspects of Pliny’s governorship, see Syme, ‘Pliny in Bithynia’, appendix 20 in Syme 1967: 659–60; it could be as early as 109–11 C.E.: see the discussion in Sherwin-White 1966: 81; but it could easily have run as late as 112–13 C.E. That his special governorship overlapped with Tacitus’ governorship of Asia seems a reasonable possibility, but the precise connection is hardly necessary to an exchange of information between them on these matters, either directly or through mutual acquaintances.

⁸² Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96.1: ‘Cognitionibus de Christianis interfui numquam: ideo nescio quid et quatenus aut puniri solet aut quaeri. Nec mediocriter haesitavi, sitne aliquod discrimen aetatum, an quamlibet teneri mihi a robustioribus differant; detur paenitentiae venia, an ei, qui omnino Christianus fuit, desisse non prosit; nomen ipsum, si flagitiis careat, an flagitia cohaerentia nomini puniantur’. And so on. The phrase with which he begins this statement — ‘cognitionibus de Christianis interfui numquam’ — is frequently taken to mean that he knew of such earlier hearings but had just not been present at them (so Sherwin-White 1966: 694), although this is hardly a necessary interpretation. Prosecution for ‘the name’ is mentioned at 1 *Pet.* 4: 16; and this is clearly the basis on which such persons were delated to Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96.2: ‘... iis qui ad me *tamquam* Christiani deferebantur ...’, the *tamquam* meaning (as very frequently in his friend Tacitus) ‘on the averred grounds that’.

⁸³ *CIL* 6.30387a; 30387b = *ILS* 4914; 30387c (all from Rome, in zones abutting on the Palatine): the cippi established and delimited a fire-clearance zone where no buildings, plantings, settlements, or conduct of business were to be permitted, enforcement being under the praetor who was allotted this region of the city.

and the threat posed by a possible recurrence of the fire. But there is not so much as a reference to Nero or his punishment of Christians in the aftermath of the fire in 64 in the exchange of letters between Pliny and Trajan. The gaps are striking lacunae in the knowledge of a senator from Italy, frequently resident in or near the imperial capital, who was well informed on these matters, *if* in fact Christians had been found guilty of a monstrous crime against the Roman state in the mid-60s. Furthermore, the routine fashion in which Pliny phrases his ignorance presumes that the emperor himself did not expect Pliny or any other high-ranking Roman to possess such obvious knowledge of the Christians. If it was not based on any knowledge of the past, then how was new information about Christians circulating among members of the governing élite of the time? One possible mode was through personal transfers of information. We know that they communicated on a range of other matters, and in this case proximity of official duties might well have helped.⁸⁴ Even if it was on some other occasion not related to their mutual administrative assignments, it seems probable that Pliny and Tacitus, like other Roman officials of the time, informally exchanged information on an unusual sectarian group then becoming known as ‘Christians’ who presented a perceived threat to the social order.

A terrible fire did in fact destroy large parts of Rome. And most probably there were rumours floating about that Nero was responsible for it. Emperors were conventionally held liable for keeping the people of Rome safe and fed. Dereliction in these duties was a serious, even a dangerous matter, especially in circumstances in which a majority of the city’s people were traumatized by losing the lives of persons close to them and their own lifetime’s possessions.⁸⁵ Nor is it unbelievable that large numbers of people were arrested and found guilty of having caused the fire. Fires often provoked responses of conspiratorial accusations in which subaltern persons were held to be responsible for creating a dangerous and uncontrollable public danger.⁸⁶ Popular demands no doubt held that *someone* had to be found who would bear the responsibility.⁸⁷ The punishments of the guilty were also normal. They were a species of what have evocatively been called ‘fatal charades’. That is to say, persons guilty of incendiarism would themselves be set on fire, in this way embodying the specific nature of their guilt.⁸⁸ The rococo-like elaborations of punishment, survaluations that turned them into entertainments, were precisely the elements of mockery that were added, the *addita ludibria* referred to by Tacitus. But it is most unlikely that Christians were specifically targeted as such. Not only the production of human torches, but also the first of the

⁸⁴ Tacitus’ governorship of Asia is set, with some certainty, in 112–13 C.E.: Syme, ‘Tacitus’ proconsulate of Asia’, appendix 23 in Syme 1967: 664–5; see Birley 2000: 235–6: based on AE 1890, 110 = OGIS 487 (Mylasa). Pliny could still have been in his special provincial command over Bithynia as late as 112–13 C.E. That neighbouring governors communicated with each other on such matters is logical. There is good evidence for analogous situations, like Cicero’s exchange of letters during his governorship of Cilicia with Minucius Thermus, the governor of Asia: Cic., *ad Fam.* 13.53–7 (S-B, 129–33).

⁸⁵ Johnstone 1992: 62.

⁸⁶ For example, the fire that burned down core parts of the city of Rome in 31 B.C.E. provoked accusations that freedmen had been responsible for setting it: Dio 50.10.3–6; and the fire in 7 B.C.E. that burned large areas around the Forum accusations that it had been purposefully set by debtors: Dio 55.8.5–6. Large urban fires of unknown origin were rich sources of the conspiratorial accusation of out-groups: see Johnstone 1992 *passim* on such subaltern blame, including the Catilinarians; and see pp. 63–8 on Nero.

⁸⁷ Dio 62.18.3, albeit much later (and on what basis?) claims that ‘there was no curse that the people did not utter against Nero, not mentioning him by name but otherwise calling down curses on those who had set the city on fire’.

⁸⁸ Dig. 47.9.9 (Gaius): persons who *deliberately* set fire to a house or a heap of grain are to be bound, whipped, and put to death by fire: ‘Qui aedes acerrumve frumenti iuxta domum positum conbusserit, vinctus verberatus igni necari iubetur, si modo sciens prudensque id commiserit’; and 47.9.12.1 (Ulpian): ‘Qui data opera in civitate incendium fecerint, si humiliore loco sint, bestiis obici solent ...’: ‘Those who deliberately start a fire in a city, if they are of more humble status, are usually thrown to the beasts ...’.

'humorous insults' that Tacitus mentions, the setting of wild dogs on the guilty to tear them to pieces, were not specifically mocking anything particularly Christian. What the punishments signified is difficult to say, but no Christian connections suggest themselves. For the savage dogs, the most obvious tale that would suggest itself to the onlookers would have been the story of the death of Actaeon.⁸⁹ Nothing, even in the symbolic nature of the executions, suggests any anti-Christian persecution connected with the Great Fire and so any Christian martyrdoms. They were punishments that mimicked the firing of the city and not crosses that evoked the execution of Jesus at Jerusalem at some time in the 30s. The correct translation of the final phrases of the account must be more or less along the following lines: such persons 'were burned fixed to crossed pieces of wood for use as nocturnal illumination in the dwindling daylight of the evening'.⁹⁰ The guilty were torched in imitation of the fire itself.

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED

What did happen? I accept that Tacitus was an historian of high calibre not given to outright invention. He surely felt that he had good evidence in his hands as of the later 110s and early 120s indicating that a new people known as Christians had been accused of having set and helped spread the fire of 64 C.E., and that they were severely punished by Nero to deflect hostile rumours from himself and to erase his supposed responsibility for setting the fire. The historian composed his narrative accordingly and, as has been frequently noted, he did it with a consummate art and skill that wove together themes of impending disaster, a final conflagration, and a tyrannical emperor. And this evidence, focusing its special emphasis on the Christians and the execution of their leader under Pontius Pilatus in the reign of Tiberius, appears to have come to his attention after he wrote the *Histories*. Even given that the surviving part of the *Histories* under consideration was setting up the subsequent war and was a set-apart programmatic ethnography of the Jews in Judaea, two things are striking.⁹¹ In the *Annales*, Tacitus lays stress on the execution of Jesus by Pontius Pilatus under Tiberius. The origins of a terrible affliction that was to erupt again later and to threaten the Empire are located by him in Judaea and in the reign of Tiberius. Yet in the *Histories* he had nothing to say about any of this. His sole remark, in just three words, is that everything in Judaea was just fine under Tiberius: 'sub Tiberio quies'.⁹² Despite the historian's different agenda in the *Histories*, that silence, I would argue, suggests that a different kind of information had come to the historian's attention in the years after he wrote the *Histories*.⁹³

Given the weight of all of the surviving evidence and the known historical trajectory of development of the Christian movement, the burden of proof must be placed on those who

⁸⁹ The most attractive solution that I have seen is one that connects a frequently suggested mythic re-enactment — the dreadful canine death of Actaeon (for gazing on the naked Diana as she bathed) and Diana the moon goddess — with the destruction of the Temple of Luna in the fire: see Champlin 2003: 122–3; however, the passage in *Dig.* 47.9.12 (see note preceding) should be taken into consideration since in it Ulpian specifically refers to those responsible for setting a fire in a city.

⁹⁰ The crossed pieces of wood could function just like stakes: so Tert., *Apol.* 12.3: '... crucibus et stipitibus impositis Christianos. Quod simulacrum non prius argilla deformat crici et stipiti superstructa?' (*CCL* 1: 110). See Barnes 2010: 331–5, who surely has sorted out this passage along the right lines (p. 335): 'not a modified form of crucifixion, but a modified form of burning at the stake.' The crossed pieces of wood could function not only as a primary mode of execution, but much like a stake on which to hold and to elevate the body of the person who is to be punished: see *crux, crucis* *TLL* 4: 1255–6.

⁹¹ Tac., *Hist.* 5.1–13 is the whole of the passage.

⁹² Tac., *Hist.* 5.9.

⁹³ See also Koesteremann 1967: 462–3, for other concerns about the difference in the historian's knowledge between the *Histories* and the *Annales* on this score.

would use a few phrases in a single passage in Tacitus' *Annales* as sure evidence for a Neronian persecution of Christians. Manifestly, there were two developments that took place before Tacitus wrote. The figure of Nero had somehow come to be connected with Christians and then, in turn, Christians were linked to the guilty persons who had had severe punishments inflicted upon them in the aftermath of the Great Fire. The connections were happenstance. They were not necessary, but a matter of choice. Just how arbitrary they were is shown by the lines of Christian writing in Latin that made none of the required connections. The Christian rhetor Lactantius, for example, in his *De mortibus persecutorum* went out of his way carefully to detail the wrongs committed by tyrannical rulers against the Christians and to give the reasons why they persecuted his fellow believers. But he says nothing at all about a fire under Nero. Nothing. Instead, he connects Nero's attack on the Christians, and the killings of Peter and Paul, with the fact that people were abandoning traditional cult. That is to say, he pinpoints the very kinds of problems reported by the younger Pliny for the region of Bithynia-Pontus some two centuries earlier.⁹⁴ It is hard to believe that Lactantius was wholly unaware of Tacitus.⁹⁵ He nevertheless does not subscribe to the historian's account of Nero's reign. The entirety of his focus in condemning Nero concentrates on the preaching of Peter and Paul at Rome and the effects of their ideas in the city. The absence is doubly striking since it was precisely a fire at Nicomedia (two of them, in fact) that caused Galerius and Diocletian to turn on the Christians in the Great Persecution of 303 C.E.⁹⁶ Deliberately to overlook and to ignore such a parallel with an earlier known tyrant whom Lactantius himself accepts persecuted Christians, and thereby to miss the opportunity to tie together the first and the last of the persecutors, is almost inexplicable unless he was unaware of the connection or had discounted it for some reason. The lack of connection is all the more striking since Lactantius was well aware of the tradition that Nero was a persecutor of Christians and of the rumours that Nero was going to return to earth, in some form, to renew the persecution.⁹⁷

Accepting a lower but perhaps more pragmatic standard of the preponderance of the evidence, I would argue that the following conclusions seem reasonably certain.

(i) Paul was likely executed at Rome, probably at some time in the early 60s. But his execution had nothing to do with any anti-Christian moves by the emperor Nero. The emperor's officials were simply hearing and deciding, on appeal, the original charge against Paul that had been sustained by the governors of Judaea in the mid- to late 50s. That initial charge manifestly had nothing to do with his being a Christian. It was based, rather, on accusations that Paul was provoking violent disturbances or was dangerously threatening the public order: in sum, that he was engaged in seditious behaviour of some sort. Decisions regarding such matters normally fell under the coercive powers of a governor. Paul's arrest and subsequent execution had nothing to do with the Great Fire at Rome or with a persecution of Christians. Both had proceeded correctly according to proper legal form in a matter that was of concern to the Roman governors of Judaea at the time.

⁹⁴ Lact., *De mort. pers.* 2.5–9 (J. Moreau (ed.), SC 39.1: 80–1); that is to say, Lactantius provides a conventional unified picture of a first persecution of Christians by Nero, including Peter and Paul among his victims, by an emperor whom, he says, some identify as the forerunner of the Antichrist.

⁹⁵ Although, as Rougé 1974: 434, n. 9, notes, Lactantius nowhere explicitly refers to or cites the historian in any of his works.

⁹⁶ Rougé 1974: 433–4 on Peter and Paul. He also notes the parallels with Tacitus' account of the fire of 64 C.E. I very much doubt, as Rougé argues, that they are evidence of Lactantius actually 're-doing' Tacitus, as it were. If true, however, it would only be more surprising that Lactantius went far out of his way *not* to connect Nero with the fire and the persecution of the Christians in 64 C.E.

⁹⁷ See Champlin 2003: 20.

(ii) What happened to Peter is very uncertain indeed. It has been suggested that he might have died in the reign of Nero and perhaps at Rome. But everything about him in these contexts is radically uncertain and unclear. On the balance of the available evidence, it seems more probable that he never even made it to the imperial metropolis. It is almost certain that he was not crucified, upside down or otherwise. Nor did his death have anything to do with the charge of being a Christian. Such an identity would have had no meaning to secular Roman officials as early as the 60s. It is difficult to imagine the charge on which he might have been executed (if indeed he was) unless it was something akin to what happened to Paul. Perhaps some persons had successfully charged him with dangerously disturbing the public peace. But such hypotheticals only serve to add more pure speculation to an already obscure history. The data, such as they are, indicate that Peter died a natural death in Jerusalem at some point in the mid-50s.

(iii) There is no objective contemporary evidence that would definitely indicate an attack on Christians by Nero, either in connection with the Great Fire or otherwise. It seems probable that certain persons were denounced by the common people of Rome in the aftermath of the conflagration as responsible for setting the fire and for aiding and abetting its destructive spread. Nero seized on this development to exculpate himself from the blame that was being heaped upon him. Even if this was not true, he at least advanced to the punishment of persons who were popularly held to be responsible for the fire in order to be seen as holding *someone* accountable for the terrible damage and destruction. As emperor, Nero had to show that he had discovered the culpable parties and that he had punished them.⁹⁸ The explanation for the kinds of refined punishments that were vented on these persons is that they were a mimicry of deserved rewards. As a spectacle of punishment staged at dusk, some were tied to stakes and set on fire as living torches, while others were exposed to wild beasts in a manner that was deemed appropriate to the nature of their crime.⁹⁹

(iv) The specific connection of Christians with the fire in Rome as the persons who were punished for the conflagration somehow developed later. Most surviving sources point to the decades on either side of 100 C.E. as the time when this was happening. This conclusion suggests at least two developments that contributed to the linkage. One was the growing awareness of high-ranking Roman officials, especially those who were confronting Christians in the circumstances of judicial hearings, that there were people denounced to them as Christians — *Chrestiani* or *Christiani* — whose ideas and behaviours were perceived to be a subversive threat to local order, primarily because they so upset the sensibilities of provincial communities. They could now be identified as dangerous persons as such (i.e. under this name) and were therefore punished for the name. The second development was the growth of a powerful popular mythology that focused on the emperor Nero. This popular fascination began hailing Nero forth as a figure who was either especially beneficial or who was especially malicious to different types of subject peoples in the Empire. The emergence of a series of ‘false Neros’ beginning in the late 60s and early 70s is but one sign of this powerful obsession with the deceased emperor as a living presence who was closely linked with strong popular desires.¹⁰⁰ The Jewish fascination with Nero as a figure was obviously connected with the fact that it was in the last years of his reign that the Roman war against the Jewish community in Judaea was launched. It is not surprising that there developed a literature

⁹⁸ This more secular scenario *might* be reflected in the words of the ‘Senecan’ *Octavia* ll. 820–43, where the firing of the city and the results, presumably including the punishments, are imputed to irresponsible elements in the urban populace.

⁹⁹ For the more specific mythic and cultic associations of the executions, see Champlin 2003: 122–3; note that there is no specific Christian aspect to them. The punishments are connected to quite traditional myths, themes, and cultic places; they would have worked perfectly well for non-Christians.

¹⁰⁰ See Tuplin 1989: 364–404.

in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple, perhaps beginning as early as the 70s and 80s, in which Nero became identified as a bestial and destructive figure. The oddly bifurcated attitude towards Nero, however, had its analogues even within Jewish lines of thinking. In some strands of thought and image, admittedly later in date and more remote in origin, Nero was to become a convert to Jewish beliefs and was actually to assist in keeping divine anger at bay.¹⁰¹

All of these recorded responses occurred in the eastern Mediterranean where, it seems, Nero was gradually being adopted into what might very broadly be called the flourishing apocalyptic literatures of the time.¹⁰² Christian writings came to latch on to Nero in connection with the known execution of Paul at Rome in Nero's reign and the claimed execution of Peter under the same emperor, also in the imperial city. These strands coalesced in writings that were producing a high-profile figure of Nero as the First Persecutor of the Christians.¹⁰³ Among these is a confection known as the *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah*, which in its Christian form seems to date to the 90s or slightly later. In it Nero, the criminal matricide, is portrayed as a terrible avatar signalling the end of the world. He is explicitly identified with the figure of the Antichrist. The other influential Christian shaping of the legendary Nero, and perhaps the one that is most directly relevant to the argument here, is found in the Book of the Revelation.¹⁰⁴ Here Nero is portrayed as a figure who has come to assume the rôle of the second Beast of the Apocalypse. 'Let anyone with understanding', says the prophet, 'calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person; its number is 666'.¹⁰⁵ But when was this happening? Almost all estimates (and they are that) about the date of composition of the Book of Revelation point to the mid- to late 90s or the early 100s.¹⁰⁶ In these Christian accounts, Nero was not seen, as one popular strand of perception had it, as a benign figure who was the great benefactor of ordinary people, a millenarian avatar bearing their hopes and yearnings, but rather as a transcendently evil and threatening figure, a bestial monster. Senatorial historiography and imperial biography, if nothing else, provided Christians with the appropriate imagery with which they could work. We know that these popular millenarian views of Nero, no doubt shared by both Jews and early Christians, were working their way into élite historiography. Tacitus himself is one of our main sources for the eastern phenomenon of the false Neros, writing one of the striking instances into his *Histories*.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ Maier 2013: 385–8; the latter, happier, version of Nero, appears first in the second century in the Babylonian Talmud.

¹⁰² See Champlin 2003: 17–18.

¹⁰³ So in Lact., *De Mort. Pers.* 2; Oros., *Adv. pagan.* 7.7; Euseb., *HE* 2.25.1–8: Nero is the first to persecute the Christians, but tied mainly to the death of Paul and, above all, the death of Peter — the main cause being defections from the traditional Roman cult; cf. Maier 2013: 391–2.

¹⁰⁴ Champlin 2003: 18–19.

¹⁰⁵ Rev. 13: 9–18, the quotation is specifically 13: 18; see the detailed comments by Aune 1997–98, vol. 2: 730–71.

¹⁰⁶ The date of Revelation or Apocalypse in the form that we have it has been the object of some intense debate, with some favouring a Neronian date and others a date late in the reign of Domitian (largely because ancient sources indicate these dates): see Aune, 'Date', Introduction § 2 in Aune 1997–98, vol. 1: lvi–lxx, for an introduction to the problem and the evidence. Aune himself prefers both dates according to various redactions. I cannot, however, accept the evidence for a Neronian date; in my view, this reposes on a view of Nero that developed only some time after the emperor's death, something that Aune himself, 1997–98: lxix–lxx, explicitly recognizes. For a different view, see Barnes 2010: 39, who prefers a date in the late 60s (in the late autumn of 68 C.E.). The placing of the text in the reign of Domitian by Irenaeus is subject to the same basic objection that a persecution under Domitian is a later fiction created by Christian writers calqued on the Roman secular categorization of Roman emperors as good or tyrannical (so, rightly, Barnes). Aune has sighted the interesting fact that the mention of 'the twelve apostles' as a named group does not occur before the writing of Matthew and so probably places the Apocalypse some time after it was written. I would agree, and think that a time soon after 100 C.E. is probable.

¹⁰⁷ Tac., *Hist.* 2.8–9; for comment, see Tuplin 1989: 364–71.

(v) I should make it very clear that in proffering this argument I am most emphatically not suggesting that Tacitus was consciously creating fictions or that he was in any way behaving in a mendacious manner. Far from it. When he wrote these words, he firmly believed (I believe) that there was good evidence that linked these events in a single coherent narrative. The connections were such that Tacitus had at his disposal, in either written or oral sources, what he believed to be credible and compelling grounds to accept the stories that linked the Christians, Nero, and the fire at Rome as elements of a true narrative. Parts came from written records about the fire, and oral recollections; others came from contemporary cognizance of imperial administrators about such an identifiable and threatening group, and still others were further contemporary sources that linked the Christians with Nero. His beliefs in these matters, however, were tempered in ways that compel one to speculate.¹⁰⁸ But whatever the nuances, he wove this subversive history into his *Annales*. He was not alone. His contemporaries — but, noticeably, not a single writer before them — men like Pliny and Suetonius, were also reproducing various strands in these new developments as contemporary reports, as analogous happenings in the past, and as true history. Once the event was retailed in an authoritative Roman history of the Empire in its imperial language, there was nothing to prevent subsequent writers from readily accepting the matter as fact and elaborating the theme. In the terms and modes of the writers of Christian history, the event was logically interpreted as the deliberate persecution of their forebears, and it provoked the tendency to lump Peter and Paul into a general Neronian persecution. Certainly by the late second century, the whole story was accepted by Christians themselves: ‘Consult your own records’, says Tertullian, ‘there you will find that Nero was the first to have raged with the Caesarian [sc. Imperial] sword against this sect of ours as it was beginning to rise at Rome.’¹⁰⁹ Whatever historical value this statement has other than the idea of Nero as the first persecutor is difficult to specify. It is probably of an historical piece with the immediately preceding notice in this same passage in Tertullian in which he states that Tiberius received personal confirmation of the Christ’s divinity from Syria Palaestina.¹¹⁰

PATTERNS OF PERSECUTION

The conclusions are simple. There are no sound probative reasons to accept the mirage, however appealing it might be, that Christians were attacked by the Roman state as a special group and were martyred under Nero, and no good evidence, contemporary or even later, that links them with the Great Fire in 64 C.E. There is even less good evidence to sustain the Christian fiction of Nero as ‘the first persecutor’. There is no evidence — I mean none at all — to indicate that the emperor would have been capable of forming such a conception or that he would ever have executed such an imperial policy.¹¹¹ It is completely anachronistic. The whole incident and its surrounding

¹⁰⁸ That is to say, Tacitus somehow knew that ‘the guilty’ had been falsely procured. Why? Those who favour a rhetorical construction of history might say that the historian suggested this deliberately to blacken the reputation of the emperor, whereas those who favour a more investigative aspect might be tempted to suggest that the historian found no evidence in the record that ‘Christians’, named as such, were actually responsible.

¹⁰⁹ Tert., *Apol.* 5.3 (CCL 1: 95): ‘Consulite commentarios vestros, illic reperietis primum Neronem in hanc sectam cum maxime Romae orientem Caesariano gladio ferocisse.’

¹¹⁰ Tert., *Apol.* 5.2 (CCL 1: 94–5): ‘Tiberius ergo, cuius tempore nomen Christianum in saeculum intravit, annuntiata sibi ex Syria Palaestina, quae illic veritatem istius divinitatis revelaverant, detulit ad senatum cum praerogativa suffragii sui.’

¹¹¹ In his analysis of the terminology, Barclay 2014: 313 rightly notes that there is ‘no Roman [i.e. Latin or secular] text referring to “Christians” before the year 100 CE’.

'historical' addenda should be excised from histories of the early Church, and the sooner the better. The consequences are significant, not the least for the long-term history of Christianity and Christian martyrdom. There was no 'first' in 64 C.E. There never was any *Institutum Neronianum* or any general covering law or *senatus consultum* or any such official anti-Christian measure concocted in connection with (or in the aftermath of) the Great Fire. But such an idea, as we know, had become entrenched, at least among Christians in the West, as early as Tertullian who, in the late 190s, specified this 'established practice' of Nero's as the only one that survived the general condemnation of all of his other acts.¹¹² Whatever forces gradually encouraged this story to coalesce and to come into focus happened rather later, at some point around the turn of the century. This observation draws our attention back to the decades in which Tacitus and Pliny were writing and to their sense of *contemporary* events. The first decades of the second century were the watershed in which religious identity and history were beginning to be reshaped in new ways that had not been previously witnessed.

The larger longer-term consequences that follow, I suggest, are very important. If the fictitious Neronian persecution is removed from the record, as surely it must be, then what follows about confrontations between the Roman state and the Christians *as Christians*? The plain answer seems to be almost nothing until the years focused on the coterie of texts that include Ignatius, the writers of the *Prophecies of Isaiah* and the *Book of the Apocalypse*, Pliny, Tacitus, Suetonius, Juvenal, and others: that is to say, in the decades following the early 100s.¹¹³ Everything points to this temporal synapse when there emerged an official consciousness in the Roman ruling élite of a distinctive group of people named Christians. By retrojecting this new information and filling out various parts of the known past, they shared in creating some of the past history of the Christians. Most persons of the time were willing to accept and to believe the new construction because it was both convenient and useful to their current view of the world. But if this first persecution never actually happened, a wholly unusual and anomalous large spike-like intrusion is removed from the story, and a far more probable and logical chronology of development presents itself. The relationship between the Roman state and Christians did not begin with such an enormous bang and then relapse into a strange and inexplicable amnesia of action and concept over the next five to six decades. Instead of 64 C.E. being a sudden violent confrontation and a dramatic turning point, not much of anything that can be firmly demonstrated happened until the first two decades of the second century. The larger and more concatenated events that locked some Christian communities in conflict with local agents of the Roman state happened first in eastern venues of the Empire — in the rich, culturally eminent, and intensely networked cities of Asia Minor — and not in the metropolis of the Empire itself. Only later did these local outbursts spread to the western Empire and then, notably, first to urban centres in Gaul that had demonstrable networking contacts with the Christian communities in the major urban centres of Asia Minor. As far as the available evidence indicates, before the empire-wide assault launched on them by a decree of the emperor Decius in 250 C.E., general persecutions of Christians as a defined religious group *never* happened at Rome, the *caput imperii*. In the imperial metropolis only individual

¹¹² Tert., *Ad nat.* 1.7.9 (CCL 1: 18): 'Et tamen permansit erasis omnibus hoc solum institutum Neronianum ... etc.'

¹¹³ That there is any reliable evidence to support the frequently asserted claims of a persecution under the emperor Domitian is summarily dismissed (and rightly so) by Barnes 2010: 37; for the details see 'Domitian and the Christians', ch. 3 in Cook 2010: 112–37. Also noting the contemporaneity of these sources, including *I Clem.* and *1 Peter*, see 'Christenverfolgung bei Plinius d. J., Tacitus, Sueton und die Chronologie von 1 Petr und 1 Clem', ch. D3 in Zwierlein 2009: 308–15.

executions are attested and then only rarely. As for the rest of the Empire, local persecutions — that is, specific knowing actions involving officials of the Roman state — were at first fitful and much later in date than the 60s, only gaining their first real traction in official eyes (and in official action) in the transitional years of Trajan's reign.¹¹⁴

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¹¹⁴ Depending on its reliability — Eusebius declares Hegesippos as his source — the execution by crucifixion of Symeon son of Clôpas, the second bishop of Jerusalem, in the reign of Trajan might also be relevant to these connections: Eus., *HE*, 3.32.1–4 (in his *Chronicon* he dates the event to 106/7 C.E.); for comment, see Barnes 2010: 11–12. If one discounts the spurious 'persecutions' under Nero and Domitian, it is then of interest that Eusebius states (*HE* 3.34.1) that it was under Trajan that measures were taken against Christians only in some cities here and there, and sporadically, as the result of popular émeutes — which looks to me like an adequate description of the first known instances of these outbreaks.

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