Neronianis Temporibus: the So-Called *Arae Incendii Neroniani* and the Fire of A.D. 64 in Rome's Monumental Landscape

VIRGINIA CLOSS

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the evidence for the Domitianic 'Arae Incendii Neroniani', a presumed set of monumental altars dedicated to Vulcan in fulfilment of a vow dating back to the Neronian Fire of A.D. 64. A close reading of the text of the dedicatory inscription creates a framework for exploring the larger historical and cultural context of these monuments, which offer a significant illustration of Flavian rhetoric concerning Rome's post-Neronian transformation. Reaffirming Julio-Claudian notions of civic identity, collective memory, and the ruler's privileged relationship with the gods, the Arae also constitute a conspicuous form of posthumous reproach to Nero.

Keywords: Nero; Domitian; Great Fire of Rome; *Ara Incendii Neroniani*; *Ara Incendii Neronis*; Volcanalia; Roman monuments; Roman altars

I INTRODUCTION

Physically and politically, post-Neronian Rome was a city of ruins, remainders and survivors. Vespasian and his successors claimed to offer redemption not just from Nero's catastrophic reign, but also from the sequence of civil conflict and successive coups that followed it. Visual cues throughout Flavian Rome reinforced this message: while plots of land destroyed in the Great Fire of A.D. 64 apparently continued to lie in wasted states until well into Vespasian's tenure, deliberately orchestrated reminders of Nero's reign stood in concert with new monuments celebrating Flavian renewal.[1] To offer only the most iconic example: from the footprint of the private lake that had greeted visitors to Nero's Golden House rose the monumental Flavian Amphitheatre. Yet evidence survives of a relatively under-studied set of monuments dedicated by Domitian, which directly name Nero and the 64 Fire as their inspiration. *Ara(e) Incendii Neroniani* is the modern Latinism invented to refer to this presumed set of monumental altars to Vulcan, dedicated by Domitian in fulfilment of a vow made, according to their dedicatory inscription, 'when the city burned for nine days in the time of Nero (*Neronianis temporibus*)'. Hereafter I refer to these monuments as the *Arae* for brevity's sake.[2] There appear to have been multiple altars, although at present only two sites can

---

[1] Suet., *Vesp.* 5.8.
[2] Also known as the '*Arae Incendii Neronis*' (e.g. Platner and Ashby 1929: 30). Haselberger *et al.* (2002: 24) and Purcell (1995: 362) rightly criticize the minting of such neo-Latinisms for topographic entries. In this case, the term also places a misleading focus on the historical moment of the 64 fire rather than crediting Domitian as the actual dedicator and Vulcan as the true object of worship. 'Altars of Vulcan' would be a more accurate and useful title.

be identified with any confidence. The lone surviving architectural example suggests that they were of massive dimensions, and their associated precincts occupied a number of conspicuous urban frontages, inviting the attention of viewers at various points around the city.

In this paper, a close reading brings out the implications of the text of the inscriptions associated with the *Arae*.[3] This reading creates a framework for exploring the larger historical and cultural context in which these monuments are embedded, with particular attention to the function of ritual and collective memory in relation to civic disasters at Rome, and to the rôles therein of the two emperors named by the text: Nero and Domitian. Offered as a religious solution to a specific problem, these monuments deserve greater attention than they have heretofore received as a striking example of the Roman response to disaster. If the *Arae* do indeed go back, as their inscriptions seem to claim, to a vow by Nero, Domitian's decision to fulfil this vow some twenty or more years later is a significant choice — all the more so given the lapse between vow and fulfilment. Dedicating these altars to the god of fires and forges seems to have presented Domitian with an opportunity to stake two rhetorical claims at once. First, Domitian attempts to portray himself as a responsible emperor who fulfils sacred obligations, even those of a reviled predecessor. Second, Domitian aims to consign the catastrophes of Nero's reign (as well as, perhaps, some more recent ones) definitively into the city's past: a past under the rule of a 'bad' emperor.

II THE ALTAR PRECINCTS: LOCATIONS AND LAYOUT

It is unclear how many *Arae* may once have existed. Unmentioned in literary sources, they are known only from the text of an inscription, which seems to have existed in multiple copies. The actual stones from which these examples come are all now lost, and the documentary evidence relating to their respective discoveries is old, discontinuous, and fragmentary. Dedicatory in nature, the text shared by these examples describes an *ara* intended for sacrifices on the day of the Volcanalia, the annual festival of Vulcan on 23 August. The remarkable text of this inscription, even combined with an associated monumental structure surviving *in situ* on the Quirinal Hill, has provoked little scholarly debate, probably due in large part to the fragmentary and challenging nature of the surviving evidence.[4]

The first recorded example of the dedicatory inscription, found in the Vatican Plain, was published by the antiquarian Giacomo Mazzocchi in his 1521 compendium of the ancient inscriptions then visible in Rome. Mazocchi's Latin discussion of the epigraphic text speaks in this instance of an item having been 'brought over' (*oblatum*) for use as building material

---

[4] Apart from the initial publication of the Quirinal findings in the late nineteenth century (Lanciani 1888 and 1889), treatment of the altars until recent years has largely been limited to (at the very most) a paragraph or two within much more wide-ranging surveys of Roman topography, Flavian building, or imperial biographies. See, e.g., Nash 1981: 60–2; Platner and Ashby 1929: 30; Richardson 1992: 21; *LTUR* I, 76–7; Coarelli 1995: 222; Lanciani 1892: 84; Jones 1992: 84; Darwall-Smith 1996: 236; Sablayrolles 1996: 458–9. Flower (2006: 237–40) first notes it as a significant item in the development of memory sanctions. The most enlightening treatment from a religious viewpoint is that of Palmer (1976: 51–2). Cline's dissertation on monumental altars at Rome includes a chapter on these altars (Cline 2013: 198–222). Cline (2009) represents some of these findings, favouring the theory that Domitian alone determined the placement and design of the altars. The arguments advanced here do not necessarily subscribe to Cline's interpretation, although the value of Cline's findings and observations is noted on several key points below.

in the construction of the second Basilica of St Peter. Already at that point this example is very likely to have been removed from its original context, and thus no definitive conclusions may be drawn from it.[5]

The next record of the text, which dates to 1618, is claimed to have been found on the slope of the Aventine Hill near the edge of the Circus Maximus. It was almost certainly copied from Mazocchi's publication.[6] Nevertheless, Hülsen argues for the existence of an Aventine *Ara* on the basis not of this alleged text, but of the surrounding architectural evidence described by its recorder. The source describes in some detail the setting in which this purported epigraphic example was found; the terms are too analogous to features subsequently discovered on the Quirinal to be dismissed as coincidence.[7] Thus, we can tentatively conclude that an altar site once existed on the Aventine (Fig. 1).
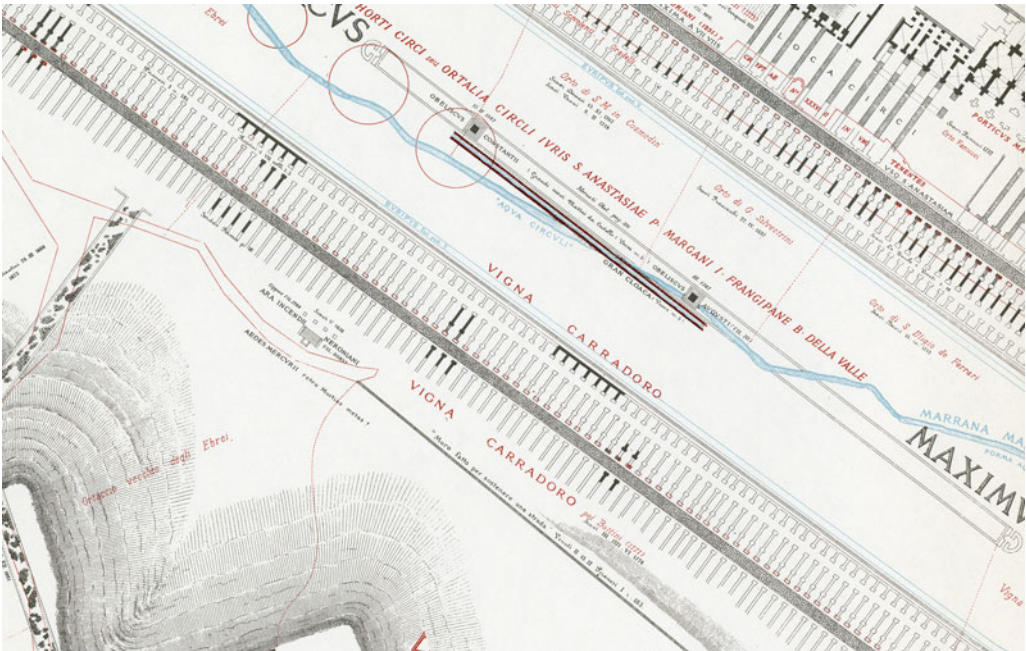

FIG. 1. *Ara Incendii Neroniani*, Aventine. (*Rodolfo Lanciani, Forma Urbis Romae (Quasar, 1988), pl. 35*)

The last and most complete example of the inscription, recorded in 1642, came to light on the Quirinal. Nineteenth-century excavations on the same site uncovered a travertine

---

[5] My own examination of Mazocchi's text in the library of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge suggests that he tends to be extremely specific about where and in what circumstances an inscription is found. Since he specifies that he recorded this example after it was brought to St Peter's, we cannot insist that it was necessarily discovered in that region, or that it comes from a monument distinct from the two otherwise known: *contra* Darwall-Smith 1996: 236; Richardson 1992: 21; Cline 2009.

[6] Hülsen 1894: 95–7. The 1618 recorder(s) may have recognized enough of the text in a newly discovered example on the Aventine to assume they had found an identical inscription, a possibility Hülsen raises *ad CIL* VI.826. Platner and Ashby identify the findspot as space occupied in the nineteenth and early twentieth century by Rome's old Jewish cemetery (now Rome's Municipal Rose Garden).

[7] Hülsen 1894: 95–7. The 1618 source describing the Aventine site, which presumably had no access to the as-yet-undiscovered inscription and altar site on the Quirinal, refers to a series of steps, an altar, and objects described as 'piccole piramidi', a probable reference to obelisk-shaped (i.e. pyramid-topped) cippi.

altar core (Figs 2–6), along with a large part of the associated precinct. This is the only surviving site, and the only one excavated to archaeological standards. The altar core survives today *in situ* (Fig. 3). In antiquity, this precinct was an imposing one: three steps ran some 35 m along the contemporary street edge; these led to travertine paving about a metre below the top step; the final step down was lined with obelisk-shaped cippi, 1.4 m high, set at intervals around the perimeter of the pavement. Within this stretch of sunken paving lay a platform of steps leading up to a structure interpreted as the travertine core of a massive altar, measuring some 6.25 m long by 3.25 m wide, and over 1.5 m high without its posited marble facing or upper cyma (Figs 4–5). The altar structure has additional steps, presumably added to facilitate sacrifices, set against its south and west faces (Figs 4–5).[8] Holes for metal clamps in the travertine suggest a marble cornice to match the marble facing running around the base (still extant in parts along the bottom), as well as marble facing along the sides.[9] Notably peculiar is the unusually large and deep depression, oblong in shape, formed by the surviving travertine slabs that were the core of the altar (Fig. 6).[10] Beyond this, further reconstruction is problematic, as the altar core itself is too exceptional in size and design to find many easy comparanda.[11]

III THE TEXT: *CIL* VI.826 = 30837B = *ILS* 4914 = *AE* 2001, 182

The text offered below is that copied from the inscribed cippus found on the Via del Quirinale around 1646: *CIL* VI.826 = 30837, example (b). It appears to be the most complete of the three, but certain disagreements with the other two texts will be noted and discussed below.

Haec area intra hancce
definitionem cipporum
clausa veribus et ara quae
est inferius dedicata est ab
Imp Caesare Domitiano Aug   5
Germanico ex voto suscepto
quod diu erat neglectum nec
redditum incendiorum
arcendorum causa
quando urbs per novem dies   10
arsit Neronianis temporibus
hac lege dedicata est ne cui
liceat intra hos terminos
aedificium exstruere manere

---

[8] The universal identification in scholarship of the Quirinal monument as an altar, rather than, say, an equestrian statue base, is a valid one in light of such features, which are commonly associated with altars and would serve no purpose on other structures.

[9] Hülsen 1894: 116.

[10] This type of depression stands in marked contrast to the usual shallow, bowl-shaped libation holes that typify the majority of altars found at Rome. It may indicate that a metal grill or plate of some sort was attached to protect the travertine and marble from the sacrificial fires; cf. Bowerman (1913: 129) on an example comparable in shape if not in size to the Quirinal monument. Fires on an altar as large as the Quirinal *Ara* may have reached temperatures necessitating extra precautions: travertine reduces to lime under extreme heat; cf. Sablayrolles 1996: 426.

[11] The partial *pulvinus* found at Piazza Sforza would have measured some 3.80 m, and is considered to indicate the depth of an altar of 'colossal scale' (Boatwright 1985: 487–91 and 492, n. 13.). Nevertheless, the dimensions of the *Arae* may not have been unique in the environment of late republican and early imperial building at Rome.
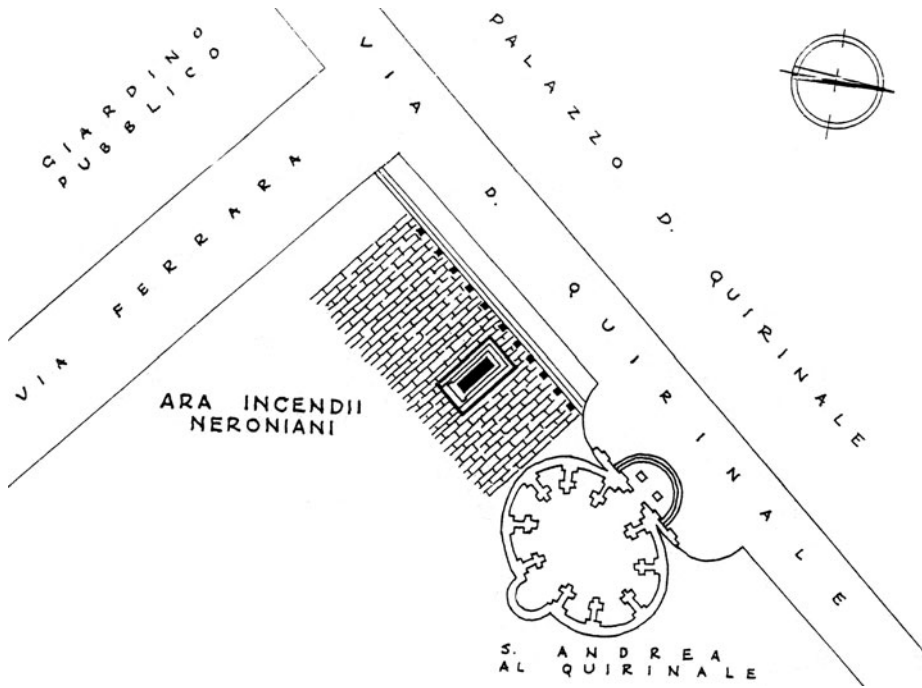
FIG. 2. Plan of the Quirinal *Ara Incendii Neroniani* complex. Note the cippi positioned along the edge of the paving, parallel with the modern Via del Quirinale. (*Source: LTUR*)

FIG. 3. Quirinal *Ara Incendii Neroniani*. Note the stepped platform leading up to the altar core. (*Source: Nash 1981: fig. 52*)

negotiari arborem ponere   15
aliudve quid serere
et ut praetor cui haec regio
sorti obvenerit sacrum faciat
aliusve quis magistratus
Volcanalibus (ante diem) X K Septembres   20
omnibus annis vitulo robeo
et verre r(obeo) fac[tis] precationibus
infra scriptam aedi[---c.3---] K [---c.1---] Sept
ianist [---c.12---]
[---c.5---] dari [---c.6---] quae s   25
quod Imp. Caesar Domitianus
Aug. Germanicus Pont. Max.
constituit q [---c.9---]
[---c.1---]fieri[---c.13---]

[1] This area, within this boundary of cippi enclosed with spikes, and the altar which is below, has been dedicated by [5] the Emperor Caesar Domitian Augustus Germanicus, from a vow undertaken, which was long neglected and not fulfilled, for the sake of repelling fires, [9–10] when the city burned for nine days in the time of Nero. By this law it is dedicated, that it is not allowed within these confines for anyone to build a structure, settle, [15] conduct business, place a tree, or plant anything, and that the praetor to whom this region has come by lot, or some other magistrate, shall make a sacrifice [20] on the Volcanalia, the tenth day before the Kalends of September, every year with a red calf and a (red) hog, along with prayers. Written below [*aedi-*...]Kalends of September [...] [26] be given, which s[...] chief pontiff Emperor Caesar Domitian Augustus has established ... (and which he has ordered that?) (there shall be?) ...

This text contains several significant differences from that of *CIL* VI.826 = 30837 example (a), Mazocchi's find, though their lineations match.[12] First, (a) shows the apparent chiselling out of Domitian's titulature from *ab* (4)...*Germanico* (6). Mazocchi comments that they have been deeply (*celte*) erased: the probable result of memory sanctions enacted against Domitian following his death. After *verre* (line 22), the text of (a) breaks off. Given Mazocchi's efforts elsewhere to record all visible text, this suggests that the stone was either broken or only partially visible when it was recorded. States of completion and small inconsistencies notwithstanding, the three examples are similar enough to accept the text of (b) as representative of what is likely to have been inscribed at each of the dedicated sites.[13] The descriptive nature of the introductory lines is likely to reflect the original language of the vow, which proposed a dedication in specific terms to be fulfilled when the supplicant's wish was granted.[14] The apparent consistency of the design across multiple locations suggests that the altars were intended to send a clear message. Nevertheless, what remains of each inscription makes no reference to any of

---

[12] *CIL* VI.826 =30837 example (c) is the purported Aventine find recorded in 1618; as discussed above, it is in all likelihood not an independent witness, but may nevertheless represent some more fragmentary example of the text.
[13] In line 18, where the text of (b) above reads *sacrum faciat*, Mazocchi's text (a) reads *litaturum se sciat*: '(the praetor or some other magistrate) shall know that he is to make a favourable sacrifice', a line Hülsen (1891 and *ad CIL* VI.826 =30837) rejects as improbable. One of the two readings (probably Mazocchi's) may be the guess of a recorder confronted with a damaged text: [...]rum [...]iat, perhaps. Example (b)'s *Septembres* for Mazocchi's *Sept* and *robeo* instead of the non-standard *robio* suggest further error or invention on Mazocchi's part. These variations could also, however, be an attempt on the part of the recorder of (b) to 'restore' a damaged text, or to correct original Latin 'mistakes' from his own knowledge of more standard Latin. This author's apparently faithful preservation of damaged words in lines 23–5 and 28–9 suggests a disinclination to conjecture, but these lines were perhaps too fragmentary to warrant any guess.
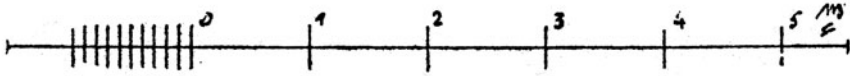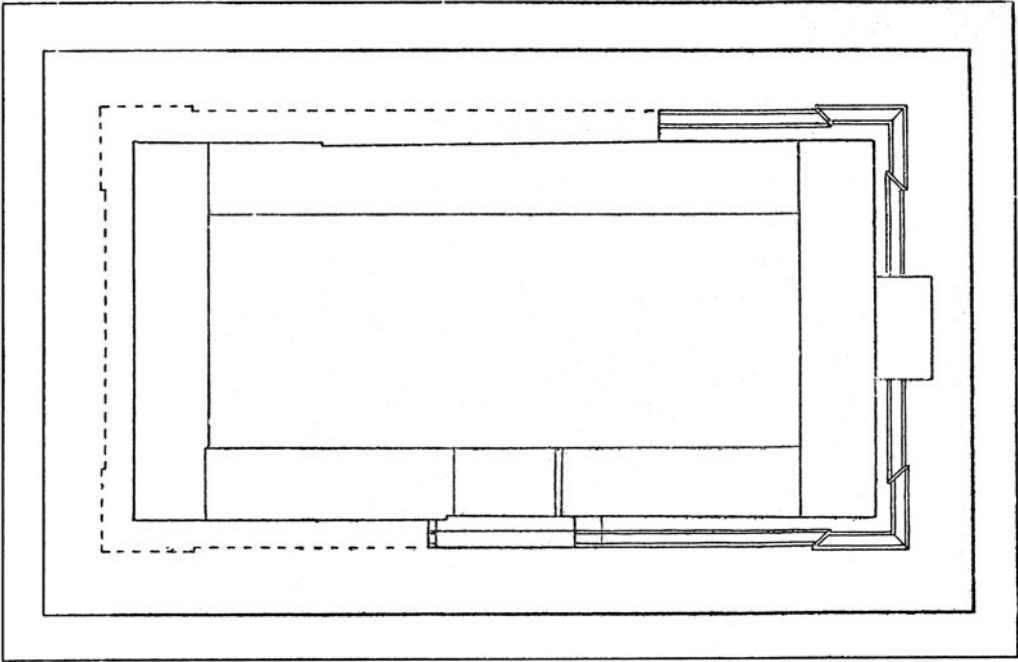[14] cf. Rüpke 2007: 162.

FIG. 4. Plan of Quirinal *Ara Incendii Neroniani*. Note the large interior cavity and additional steps against the altar core's south and west faces. (*Source: Hülsen 1894*)
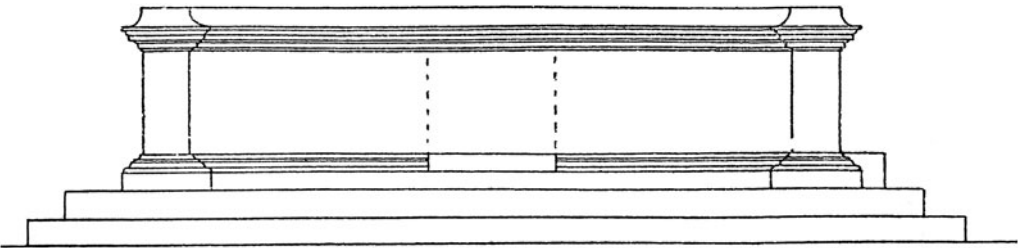
FIG. 5. Reconstruction of Quirinal *Ara Incendii Neroniani* with posited marble facing. (*Source: Hülsen 1894*)

the other sites, which suggests that each monument was expected to function independently within its own setting.[15]

---

[15] By contrast, the text of the so-called *Tabula Siarensis*, found in Spain, mentions additional sister monuments to be erected in Syria and Germany. See Tac., *Ann.* 2.83; Eck *et al.* 1996; Potter and Damon 1999; Sánchez 1999.

FIG. 6. Quirinal *Ara Incendii Neroniani*. Note deep oblong depression set into altar core.
(*Photo: author, July 2005*)

Lines 1–3 (*haec … ara*) open with a definitive marking off of the *area*. The cippi would have been sufficient to mark a ritual boundary (*intra hancce definitionem cipporum*), so the addition of a spiked railing (*veribus*) suggests an elevated concern about keeping the precinct clear. According to the letter that records the text of (b), the cippus bearing the inscription was found in association with steps and the remains of metal spikes set in lead: these spikes were most probably the means by which the site (*area*) was 'enclosed with spikes' (*clausa veribus*).[16]

Lines 3–4 (*et … inferius*) again reflect the apparent design of the surviving site on the Quirinal, with an altar surrounded by a paved area set approximately a metre below contemporary street level. The recorders of the 1618 find on the Aventine also describe steps as part of the complex. Thus, it appears the *inferius* nature of the altar was part of the original proposal of the vow, rather than a feature determined by local setting. The verb in line 4 (*dedicata est*) appears to take both *ara* and *area* as its subjects. The entire precinct, then, is marked off for ritual activity. Many altars in the urban context apparently lacked any defined zone of protection, and might have gone virtually unnoticed by those not involved in whatever cult activity they attracted. Simply referring to an 'altar' may have been insufficient for this new monument, with its sunken paving and fenced precinct. Such a structure may have been unparalleled enough in the

---

[16] *veru/us* usually means a sharpened 'spit', or (in poetry) a 'dart' or javelin; this is the only known instance of the term in the epigraphic record; *OLD* s.v. *verū*; Cline 2009: n. 15.

vocabulary of sacred architecture at Rome that instruction was necessary for the public to understand how to behave around it.

Lines 4–6 (*ab … Germanico*) identify Domitian as the dedicator. Domitian did not assume the title of Germanicus until A.D. 83. Since no more specific date is indicated, such as a year of tribunician power or a consulship (though possibly this information appeared in a now-lost part of the inscription), the altars may have been dedicated in any year ranging from 83 until his death in 96. The text as it stands, however, may flesh out another kind of truth: it focuses not on commemorating a specific year, but on the ritual activity that must take place on the site in perpetuity. The inclusion of only a military distinction ('Conqueror of the Germans'), not of Domitian's filiation or other status markers may likewise point to his self-styling as protector of Rome (and by extension, Romans everywhere) from threats, be they external (invasion) or internal (fire).[17]

Line 6 reinforces the attention to ritual and religion: the claimed fulfilment of a vow (*ex voto suscepto*) confirms that the *Arae* were offered as a response to a specifically religious problem. Something was asked of a deity, and was believed to have been granted. This is straightforward enough, but the picture is immediately complicated by the lines that follow (7–11), 'quod diu erat neglectum nec redditum, incendiorum arcendorum causa, quando urbs per novem dies arsit Neronianis temporibus', '[a vow] which was long neglected and not fulfilled, [undertaken] for the sake of repelling fires, when the city burned for nine days in the time of Nero'. The monuments were not vowed by Domitian, their dedicator, but were promised at the time of the Neronian fire. A *votum* was a solemn commitment made in favour of a divinity: the promissor (and after his death, his heir) was obligated to the divinity at the hazard of further divine punishment.[18] The most logical originator in 'Neronian times' of a sacred obligation that could be passed on to Domitian is presumably his forerunner in the rôle of *Pontifex Maximus*: Nero himself.

Yet the text seems to avoid crediting Nero directly for the origination of the vow, instead couching his notorious name in an adjectival form that encompasses the entire period in question (*Neronianis temporibus*). The inclusion of Nero's name (in any form) on a new monument would have been striking in an urban landscape in which other reminders of his reign had been erased or conspicuously altered.[19] The phrasing seems less concerned with the exact date of the fire than with connecting Nero to the event in general terms. This may be in part because the date was common knowledge, but perhaps also bespeaks an elevated interest in comparing Nero with Domitian as a leader—Domitian's titulature is featured prominently and with embellishments (*Imp. Caesar Domitianus Aug. Germanicus Pont. Max.*), while Nero's cognomen is relegated to an adjectival modifier.[20] The inscription notably lacks any suggestion of Nero's guilt in the fire, a popular accusation amongst Nero's contemporary and posthumous detractors. Nevertheless, the *Arae* were dedicated in an environment that promoted these accusations so actively that it was perhaps unnecessary to make any direct reference to them.[21] The *quando* clause, combined with the perfect tense of *arsit*, suggests that rather

---

[17] On Domitian's standard titulature see Cagnat 1914: 191-2 and Martin 1987.

[18] As defined in Berger 1953, s.v. *votum*. On *vota* and *leges sacrae* more generally, see Wissowa 1912: 380, and 1902: 319–23; Latte 1960: 46–7; Gargola 1995: 22–3. *Suscipere*, in contractual and obligatory relations, is to assume a unilateral obligation — again, one that would pass to one's heirs; Berger 1953, s.v. *suscipere*.

[19] See, e.g., Varner 2000a and 2004; Davies 2000b; Flower (2006: 196–324) argues that Nero's name and image were not an official target for erasure. Nevertheless the decision to inscribe it anew on an official monument is nevertheless remarkable.

[20] Cline 2009: 17.

[21] Martial (*Spect.* 2) makes much of Nero's inappropriate response to the destruction of the city, while Statius (*Silv.* 2.7.60–1) calls the flames that engulfed Rome 'her guilty master's doing'. In the anonymously authored historical drama *Octavia*, Nero develops his plan to burn the city as revenge for popular protest at his repudiation of Octavia. Accusations of arson in the immediate aftermath of the fire: Tac., *Ann.*15.44.

than vowing the altars during the crisis of the fire itself, Nero made the vow in the fire's aftermath to prevent another catastrophe.[22] Nero's extraordinary measures in the wake of the 64 fire, which included numerous special lustrations and supplications, are consistent with the idea of vowing monumental altars: perhaps, of promising them if some period of time passed without significant incendiary activity.[23] Additionally, if Nero met his end before the time at which the vow required fulfilment (i.e. the completion and dedication of the altars), it would help explain how it came to be 'long neglected and not fulfilled'.

The remaining lines of the inscription (12 ff., *hac lege dedicata est …*) all concern the ritual nature of the site. Domitian's additional imprimatur at the conclusion of the text, identifying himself as Pontifex Maximus (27) underscores the religious nature of this dedication.[24] Celebrated on 23 August, the festival of the Volcanalia was an ancient rite of appeasement.[25] Offerings went up to Vulcan, as well as to other gods suggesting security and protection from fires, warfare, and food shortage.[26] The offering at the *Arae* of red animals (*vitulus robeus* and *verres r(obeus)*, 20–2) calls to mind the sacrifice of the *rutilae canes* to protect crops from the heat of the sun, reinforcing the apotropaic nature of Vulcan's worship.[27]

The prohibitive *ne* clause (*ne … serere*, 12–16) makes reference again to the boundaries of the precinct (*intra hos terminos*, 13) first outlined in lines 1–3, forbidding any kind of building, settling, commercial activity or cultivation from taking place there. These kinds of ritual injunctions are very well understood to have applied to any space defined as sacred.[28] It is quite unusual, however, to see them spelled out on the sites themselves, especially in such an emphatic and specific way. As with the addition of a spiked railing (see above, line 3), it seems the boundaries of this type of monument were of greater than usual concern. Vitruvius stresses that the temples of Vulcan, Venus and Mars must be outside the city due not just to the physical risk of conflagration, but also to the psychic disruptions of fire, love and war.[29] The *Arae* may have aimed to channel the potent emotions evoked by Vulcan's cult, while visually enforcing the boundaries around his destructive force. If these injunctions were part of the original language of the Neronian vow, then the prohibitions may also have served at least as an indirect reminder of Nero's other fire-prevention measures (to be discussed further below). Alternatively, Domitian's identification in the text as dedicator at lines 4–6 may signal a shift to language formulated in the Domitianic period, including the laws (*hac lege*, 12 ff.). This perhaps suggests that, given the long lapse between vow and dedication, Nero's original boundaries were in some danger of being disrespected, and the injunctions therefore needed to be emphasized.

The scenario that best explains the injunctions in lines 12–16 (if indeed it is a Domitianic modification) is one in which the altar was vowed, and even partially begun, by Nero, but then lay unfinished after his death for many years as a reminder of a vow 'long neglected and not fulfilled'. In the twenty-odd years between initiation and dedication, local retailers and residents would naturally have encroached upon the unfinished monument; hence the

[22] For this suggestion I thank the anonymous referee.
[23] Tac., *Ann.* 15.44.2.
[24] The final lines of text from 23–5, though too fragmentary to read with confidence, present some points of interest: *infra scriptam* may modify a lost noun such as *precationem*, and *aedi-…* may be the beginning of this prayer.
[25] Varro, *LL* 6.20; Festus 274–6 L.
[26] Also venerated on 23 August: Vulcan's consort Maia in the Comitium; Hora (the spouse of Quirinus) on the Quirinal; the Nymphs; Juturna; Ops: Warde Fowler 1899: 210–11.
[27] Festus 358 (Lindsay); Linderski 1997.
[28] cf. Ulpian, *On the Edict* Bk. 68 frr. 1482–3. See also Ando's remarks on sacred space more generally, in Ando 2003: 247–51.
[29] Vitr. 1.7.2.

express detailing of the newly dedicated boundaries. The text's assertion that the project first began with Nero but fell into neglect may thus simply articulate what had been readily apparent for years.[30]

The issue of the 'long neglected' vow may, in fact, have achieved an additional salience in the years leading up to Domitian's principate. The brief reign of Titus had dealt some significant blows to the Roman urban population's sense of security. In A.D. 80, a major fire burned a significant portion of the city, and was followed by a devastating plague; Titus met his untimely demise shortly thereafter, in A.D. 81. If Nero's unfinished altars, and the vow they represented, had been lying in neglect for all to see, it would have become highly tempting for Domitian to appeal to the memory of Nero and the 64 disaster, thereby diverting attention from more recent misfortunes. Domitian, an emperor noted for his scrupulous attention to religious matters, may well have seen in the unfulfilled vow of the *Arae* an opportunity to advance his own standing in the field of religious leadership: ingeniously, this monument exploits Nero's own prodigious efforts in the wake of 64 to re-cast him as a religious failure.

IV LOCATION AND DATE

Evidence of how many altars once existed, and of exactly what principle guided their placement around the city, is simply lacking. The Quirinal and the Circus Maximus are two of the more archaeologically devastated areas in Rome, making fine-grained topographical analysis of the *Arae* highly problematic. Several theories have been advanced, but all depend on dubious factors. Lanciani suggested at the turn of the last century that there was one altar for each of the fourteen regions, but parallel examples of religious sites distributed according to administrative region are lacking.[31] Coarelli posits that they marked the perimeter of the 64 fire's destruction.[32] Regio VI, however, in which the Quirinal altar was found, is generally agreed to have been unaffected by the fire.[33] So, the monuments were not necessarily placed by means of an easily understood connection to the events of A.D. 64 or the administrative organization of the city. Nevertheless, the Alta Semita, which ran along the Quirinal ridge, and the foot of the Aventine, at the edge of the Circus Maximus, are analogous in several ways. Both zones were highly visible to the public, situated on key routes of access along the perimeter of the urban centre and well furnished with shops and businesses. Both featured unusually long, straight frontages of urban space, very similar to that on which Tacitus blames the rapid spread of the 64 fire, which quickly travelled along the closely built strip of shops at the edge of the Circus at the foot of the Palatine Hill.[34] The location of the Aventine *Ara*, just across the Circus from the fire's origin point, may have been motivated by a desire to remind the public of the constant danger such environments presented.

The broader idea that the specific locations of the *Arae* had apotropaic significance is also worth developing. Certainly, the symbolic protection of the city, and the leader's

---

[30] New information concerning the Quirinal monument may come to light pending the site's re-evaluation (the first in over a century) under the supervision of M. G. Lauro.

[31] Lanciani 1892: 84; followed by Jones 1992: 84.

[32] Coarelli 1995: 222.

[33] Sablayrolles (1996: appendix VII) presents a list of eighty-eight recorded conflagrations in Rome, and moots out various arguments concerning the extent of the 64 destruction. Panella (2011: 83) includes the area around the Quirinal *Ara* in the destruction zone, apparently based solely on Coarelli's interpretation of the *Arae* as marking its borders.

[34] Tac., *Ann.* 15.38.2.

rôle in guaranteeing it, is a major message of the *Arae*.[35] Whether Nero chose the location of the altar on the Quirinal or Domitian did, its proximity to the Temple of Quirinus, a tutelary deity with martial associations (and the deified form of Rome's first king) is a significant choice.[36] A shrine of Hora, Quirinus' consort, received veneration on the Volcanalia.[37] Placing an altar to Vulcan so close to the seat of Rome's symbolic warrior-king forged a link between the leader's ancient rôle as a military protector, and the current emphasis on his ability to maintain the city's security through the related endeavours of urban management, food provision, and fire prevention. Domitian carried out a major religious re-organization of the Quirinal, restoring the Temple of Quirinus and converting his own family's former home into the Temple of the Flavian *Gens*. If (as argued above) one or more of the sites was designated and partially built under Nero, then Domitian could not necessarily be credited with their locations, but would nevertheless have been able to exploit their proximity to sites of significance to the Flavians.[38] As mentioned above, the 64 fire's point of origin is one possible factor in the placement of the Aventine example. Additionally, however, a Flavian monument with strong parallels to the implied message of the *Arae* stood in the Circus itself, close to the Aventine *Ara*.

At the eastern end of the Circus, a triple arch commemorating Titus' triumph after the conquest of Jerusalem replaced an earlier arch demolished by Nero — a memory it implicitly conjured up.[39] Thus, the *Arae* inscription and Titus' triple arch both imply that they are making good Nero's depredations to the city. In the Jerusalem arch inscription, Titus claims to have 'tamed the nation of the Jews, and the city of Jerusalem — which all generals, kings, and nations before him had either assaulted in vain or avoided altogether'.[40] Rather than offering a simple identification of the builder, with titles and dates, both Titus' triple arch and Domitian's *Arae* inscribe a leadership narrative into the landscape. While Titus asserts a success that eluded 'all generals, kings, and nations before him', Domitian repays a vow 'long neglected and not fulfilled', which dates back to when 'the city burned for nine days in the time of Nero'. Both inscriptions are notable for their historicizing *chutzpah*: they play on momentous events, but not just those in the careers of the emperors as individuals.[41] Rather, they lengthen

---

[35] Cline (2009: 16) and (2013: 198–222) suggests that the locations of the *Arae* were determined by Domitian's wish to create a kind of 'virtual *pomerium*' around locations closely associated with his residence and family. This assumes that Domitian determined the location of the sites, and that the example of the *Arae* inscription recorded by Mazocchi on the Vatican plain was observed *in situ*. On the dubious nature of Mazocchi's evidence, see Section II above.

[36] The Quirinal hill is thought to take its name from this temple, which was regarded in the mid-first century A.D. as one of the oldest in Rome (Plin., *NH* 15.120). Romulus became identified with Quirinus, giving rise to the alternate founding legend in which Romulus appeared to Proculus Julius and commanded its construction (Cic., *DRP* 2.20; *Leg.* I.3; Ov., *Fast.* 2.511). Livy's record of a session of the senate held *in aede Quirini* in 435 B.C. (Liv. 4.21.9) is possibly fictitious, but still suggests the enduring political significance of the temple and hill alike, cf. Cline 2013: 204 n. 24. Vulcan too had a martial aspect: Livy (8.10.13) records the burning of enemy spoils as a sacrifice to Vulcan made by commanders who survive a battle.

[37] Richardson 1992: 190; Degrassi 1886: 500–2. On the Volcanal in the Forum as *heroön* of Romulus, see Coarelli 1983: 161–99; Linderski 1997: 539. Forsythe (2012: 145) speculates that Hora was perhaps originally worshipped in the fashion of an imperial genius.

[38] The Quirinal altar's close proximity to the site of the Temple of the Flavian *Gens* might explain why Domitian's name was not erased from its inscription (example b). The neighbourhood surrounding this example of the *Arae* was especially richly endowed with Domitian's investments in its architecture and infrastructure. As such, it can be expected to have been well populated with Flavian loyalists, and erasure of Domitian's name from this example may have been prevented or discouraged in some fashion even after his demise.

[39] *CIL* VI.1994 = *ILS* 264. See den Hollander 2014: 195–7 for discussion, with bibliography.

[40] Translation is Coleman's (2000). On Titus and the memory of Jerusalem in Rome, see Millar 2005.

[41] On the 'blatant falseness' of Titus' claims: den Hollander 2014: 197.

the timescale, lending their dedicators' actions a historical weight as measured against previous leaders and events in the life of Rome itself.

Attempts at assigning a specific date to the dedication of the *Arae* have largely revolved around connecting the text of their inscription with specific terms found in Martial's *Epigrams*. Rodríguez-Almeida identifies the Quirinal *Ara* with Martial's mention of a *pila Tiburtina* on the Quirinal in *Ep.* 5.22, and furthermore sees Martial's mention of the newly respected boundaries of a *pila* in *Ep.* 7.61 as part of the poem's larger celebration of Domitianic legislation to clear street space.[42] Rodríguez-Almeida dates this poem to A.D. 92, and argues for a dedication on the Volcanalia of the same year.[43] Palmer draws a parallel between *Ep.* 5.7, in which Martial appeals to Vulcan to spare Rome from future fires, and the dedication of the *Arae* to Vulcan 'incendiorum arcendorum causa'; he thus proposes dating the dedication to A.D. 88 based on *Ep.* 5.7's possible reference to the secular games of that year.[44] Overall, it seems plausible that Martial is alluding, as he so often does, to the dedication of imperial building projects in one or more of the poems cited above.[45] As a resident of the Quirinal who frequently mentions landmarks there, Martial can credibly be imagined to make reference to known features of the Quirinal *Ara* and its inscription in these lines.

Finally, however, remaining sceptical about the validity of these identifications has no impact on the key interpretive issues of this discussion. Without insisting on a specific date, much less divining (from exceptionally slender evidence) the motivations for the siting or design of the *Arae*, we can nonetheless ask what significance these altars would have attained in Domitian's Rome. The message ultimately sent by the *Arae* appears consistent with Flavian efforts to redeem Nero's purported damages to the fabric of the city, no less than his offences to the gods. Importantly, however, the *Arae* demonstrate that this campaign of monumental rhetoric was waged not only on the massive scale of the Flavian Amphitheatre or the restored Temple of Claudius, but also at street level, on a more localized basis.

V LEADERSHIP, RELIGION, AND CATASTROPHE

The tremendous sense of religious alarm that the 64 fire would have evoked is an often-overlooked aspect of its lasting effect upon Rome.[46] The sheer number of irrecoverable dead, and the impossibility of offering them correct burial, must be imagined as a source of deep distress for a society as invested as the Romans were in death ritual and commemoration.[47] In the aftermath of the destruction, Nero undertook extraordinary divine propitiations, some of which may have partially addressed religious

---

[42] Rodríguez-Almeida 1996 and *LTUR*, s.v. *Ara Incendii Neroniani*. Rodríguez-Almeida, however, seems to take *pila Tiburtina* as unproblematically referring to the completed, freestanding, marble-clad altar dedicated by Domitian. *Pila* refers to a more substantial structural element, e.g. a 'piling' used to support a bridge; or to a funerary structure with a cavity for human remains: *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *pīla*. The *Pila Horatia*, attested as the corner pillar of one of the basilicas in the Roman Forum (Richardson 1992: 291), seems a dubious parallel for the *Arae*. Possibly the travertine altar core on the Quirinal, if it lay unclad for a length of time, may have resembled either an exposed structural element or perhaps (due to its large oblong cavity) a funerary *pila*, thus inviting the epithet; this, however, is highly speculative.

[43] ibid.

[44] Palmer (unpub. notes); for access to this material, I thank Harriet Flower.

[45] See, e.g. Rodríguez-Almeida 2003. For an up-to-date assessment of Martial's relationship with Rome: Roman 2010.

[46] On the 64 fire and Nero as a religious failure in Tacitus: Shannon 2012.

[47] On the religious importance of burial, see Toynbee 1996: 43: 'All Roman funerary practice was influenced by two basic notions — first, that death brought pollution and demanded from the survivors acts of purification and expiation; secondly, that to leave a corpse unburied had unpleasant repercussions on the fate of the departed soul.'

anxiety surrounding the inability to identify or even to remove remains, the failure to perform the requisite rituals, and the absence of a physical site to deposit (and later, to visit) the dead.[48] Moreover, he initiated a radical re-imagining of Rome's urban space, introducing extensive measures designed to prevent subsequent fires from spreading rapidly. Suetonius describes them as follows:

> Formam aedificiorum Urbis novam excogitavit et ut ante insulas ac domos porticus essent, de quarum solariis incendia arcerentur, easque sumptu suo exstruxit …

> … he thought out a new design for the city's buildings, and (specified) that there should be porticoes on the street-facing sides of apartment blocks and private houses from which fires could be fought off, and built them at his own expense. (Suet., *Ner.* 16)

Here the same terms we find in the Domitianic inscription, *incendium* and *arcere*, are clearly used in relation to a physical structure from which the fire could be fought.[49] Tacitus, describing measures decreed by Nero to check fires, uses an analogous gerundival phrase (with a typically Tacitean variation in vocabulary): 'ignibus reprimendis'.[50] In other examples from the epigraphic record, *arcere* bears functional significance: 'to drive off' or 'to keep away' a threat in a literal sense.[51] Later legal texts also employ the phrase *incendia arcenda* for this purpose.[52]

Richardson suggests that the pavements, cleared of any structure or activity as the inscription dictates, might serve as a firebreak.[53] Darwall-Smith rejects this notion, concluding 'one can only see it as a religious gesture, to appease the gods by keeping some areas ritually waste'.[54] Yet while parallels are lacking for maintaining 'ritually waste' zones in Rome's bustling commercial centres, the idea of keeping areas open in order to fight fire is well attested, as the discussion above demonstrates. Tacitus tells us it was in shops on the Palatine side of the Circus Maximus that the Great Fire of 64 first broke out, and it was their closely-built frontages that had in fact allowed the fire to propagate so quickly.[55] Accordingly, the open space of the altar precincts may have been intended to suggest, at least visually, the polar opposite of these conditions, if not to provide a literal firebreak. The notion that a pavement such as that around the Quirinal monument, roughly the same size as a regulation basketball court, might stop a conflagration on the order of the 64 fire is of course absurd. The concept, however, that space left open was believed to have some effect is undeniable, and might have sent a politically useful message.

The monuments could have served less as functional firebreaks than as didactic *exempla*: demonstrating both the means by which the fire might be averted, and the emperor's

---

[48] Champlin (2003: 205–6) sees Tacitus' account of the rituals (*Ann.* 15.44.1) as evidence for supplication of the *mundus*, a vaulted subterranean pit, sacred to both Proserpina and Ceres, which served as a door to the world of the dead (on which, see Coarelli 1983: 199–226).

[49] See also Suet., *Claud.* 25.2.8 on the establishment of *vigiles* at Puteoli and Ostia under Claudius: 'Puteolis et Ostiae singulas cohortes ad arcendos incendiorum casus collocauit.'

[50] Tac., *Ann.* 15.45.

[51] *Arcere* here presumably means 'stopping' fires that have already broken out, much as it is often used in inscriptions discussing measures to contain flooding. Yet it can also have the sense of 'protect from' or 'deliver from', e.g. describing the assignment of troops who are sent out to ward off groups of bandits in the countryside — *arcendis latronibus*. Keeping away thefts and bandits: CIL 13.05010, CIL 13.06211, and RISch-02, 00247 (= AE 1978, 00567). Stopping floods: EE-09, 00579 = ELOstia p. 143 = AE 1909, 00067. See examples listed when the search term 'arcend' is entered into the Clauss-Slaby epigraphic database: http://www.manfredclauss.de/.

[52] *Just. Digest.* 1.15.1.pr.2; 9.2.49.1.3; 43.24.7.4.2 (as tabulated in the Packard Humanities Institute database of Latin texts, http://latin.packhum.org/search?q=%23incend~%23arcend).

[53] Richardson 1992: 21.

[54] Darwall-Smith 1996: 236.

[55] *Ann.* 15.38.2.

commitment to enforcing such measures.[56] Like imperial *ustrina*, the *Arae* had the potential to serve as monumentalized reminders of the emperor's implied regulation of the crowds attending the rites associated with them. The precincts of the *Arae*, with large and spectacular fires set in a focal feature, railed or spiked enclosures, and strict delimitation of space marked by cippi, are highly reminiscent of *ustrina*.[57] The extreme set of precautions and controls necessary to manage incendiary events like cremations or large sacrificial fires safely in the urban environment were in and of themselves a striking assertion of the emperor's control over life and worship in the city.

As originally vowed by Nero, the altars would have served to anchor and stabilize the memory of recent cataclysm within Rome's sacred topography. Equally, the Flavians represented their seizure of the city as a return to order after Nero's death and the succession of emperors engaged in the ugly struggle for control in A.D. 68–9. When Vespasian's forces ultimately prevailed, he made every effort to represent the establishment of his dynasty as a break with the chaos and impiety of the previous era. He lost no time in restoring the sacred areas on the Capitoline Hill, which had burned in A.D. 69 during a clash between his own supporters and those of his predecessor Vitellius.[58] Vespasian also dedicated the massive Temple of Claudius on the Caelian Hill: like the vow of the *Arae*, this project had originated in the Neronian period, but fallen into neglect.[59] These projects, no less than the Flavian Amphitheatre and the Baths of Titus on the site of Nero's Golden House, called attention to Nero's former use (or abuse) of urban space, and reminded the public of the disaster Rome had suffered under his auspices. In redeeming the damage that (as hostile post-Neronian rhetoric would have it) Nero's depravity had wrought upon Rome, they perhaps also hoped to elide the destruction of A.D. 69, in which Vespasian, his sons, and their supporters were deeply implicated.

Yet Rome was never entirely able to leave its dread of apocalyptic collapse in the past. The eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79 again reminded Rome — and urban populations around the Empire — of their vulnerability to disaster.[60] Moreover, the fire of A.D. 80 consumed much of the Campus Martius, the Palatine, and the glorious new Flavian Capitol, only recently restored after the destruction of A.D. 69. The damage was a stark reversal of the message of progress and recovery that Flavian leadership had no doubt hoped to project, and the human toll was soon compounded by an outbreak of plague. After Titus' untimely death in A.D. 81, Domitian thus faced the unenviable task of again restoring Rome and reassuring the people of his dynasty's stability.[61]

A capable administrator, Domitian augmented Rome's finances with aggressive taxation measures, and his ambitious building programme is still apparent today in the city's landscape.[62] Yet he also needed to prove his capacity to provide security from divine threats. He lavishly rebuilt numerous temples lost in A.D. 80, including the Capitoline

---

[56] Gros suggests that the *Arae*, along with the creation of the Forum Transitorium, formed part of Domitian's larger campaign to protect Rome's monumental centre; Gros 2001: 129–40. Nero could, however, have preceded Domitian in some of these efforts.

[57] On evidence for the Julio-Claudian *ustrina*, see Haselberger *et al.* 2012, s.v. *ustrinum* and Rehak 2006: ch. 3. Strabo (5.3.9) describes the site of Augustus' funeral pyre as paved in travertine with a metal enclosure. Boatwright (1985) describes the striking spectacle of imperial cremation and details the major evidence for the imperial *ustrina*, with bibliography.

[58] Tac., *Hist.* 3.71–2. In the zone of the imperial fora, the Flavian Temple of Peace, which notably included peperino walls to protect it against fire, also had a complex and multifaceted ideological significance; Darwall-Smith 1996: 55–68. See Noreña 2003: especially 30–1 for the rôle of Peace in Vespasian's coinage, architecture, and ideology in the years A.D. 69–71.

[59] Suet., *Vesp.* 9.

[60] Vesuvius is now thought not to have erupted on 24 August, but later in the year (possibly October). See Cooley 2004: 43.

[61] Suet., *Tit.* 11.1.; Dio 66.19.

[62] Suetonius (*Dom.* 3.2) accuses Domitian of 'rapacious devices'. On the 'Jewish' tax: Suet., *Dom.* 12.2; Southern

temple to Jupiter Optimus Maximus;[63] radically expanded and redefined the imperial cult, even as he reinstated a number of archaic religious customs;[64] and cultivated a notable personal devotion to Minerva, to whom he dedicated a temple in the Forum Transitorium (which, like the *Arae*, had previous associations with Nero's building programme).[65] Finally, the significance of escaping fire's violence was perhaps a personal issue for Domitian. During the siege and burning of the Capitol in December of 69, the young Domitian had taken shelter in the house of a temple porter. He later dedicated a shrine to Jupiter Custos on the site of this house, and seems to have promoted the tale of his survival as an instance of divine intervention, aligning himself with the tradition of uniquely blessed figures who miraculously escape incendiary threats unscathed.[66] A set of monuments *incendiorum arcendorum causa* would thus remind Rome not only of Nero's signature catastrophe, but also of Domitian's own claims to divine protection from a similar threat.

Ultimately it is in the capacity of Rome's rebuilder, protector, and religious leader that Domitian seems to claim primacy in the inscriptions of the *Arae*. The rôle of the *princeps* as Rome's symbolic protector was crucial to imperial self-fashioning, but early imperial Rome no longer feared foreign invasion of its city boundaries, dreading instead the destructions wrought by civil conflict and conflagration.[67] Veneration of Vulcan offered a vital nexus of the emperor's obligations to Urbs Roma, presenting a divine threat to be warded off with supplications, and failing that, an opportunity to rebuild and provide in a time of crisis. Overall, Domitian made extraordinary efforts not only towards the city's structural renewal after the fire of A.D. 80, but also towards religious revival.[68] Dedicating the *Arae* displayed his commitment to both issues: they ritualized the memory of recent catastrophe through their annual use on the Volcanalia, injecting an element of current concern into a very old Roman festival day. The *Arae* wrote Nero's memory, and that of the 64 fire, into multiple locations in Rome's sacred landscape, as well as into the ritual time of the city's future.

VI MEMORY

The Rome that rose under the Flavians was in all likelihood built according to the regulations Nero had laid out after A.D. 64.[69] Thus, Flavian Rome itself was, in a

---

1997: 114–15. On Domitian's fiscal policy, see Sutherland 1935; Robathan 1942; Settis *et al.* 1988: 10–11; Davies 2000a: ch. 5 n. 64.

[63] For the successive Flavian Capitoline restorations, see Darwall-Smith 1996: 41–7; Wiseman 1978; Wardle 1996. For Domitian's building programme, see MacDonald 1982: 47–74; Jones 1992; Darwall-Smith 1996.

[64] Hekster 2015: 101–2; Darwall-Smith 1996: 97–9 and 153–78.

[65] For Domitian's 'innovative conservatism' in religious matters, see Jones 1992: 70–9. On Domitian and Minerva: D'Ambra 1993: 44–7; Hekster 2015: 153–5.

[66] Siege of the Capitol: Tac., *Hist.* 3.70–5; Suet., *Dom.* 1; Dio 64.17; Wiseman 1978; Jones 1992: 88. On discrepancies between the accounts of the ancient sources, see Southern 1997: 13–23. On Jupiter Conservator/ Custos, see Nash 1981: 518; Platner and Ashby 1929: 292. When Domitian became emperor, he replaced the *sacellum* with a large temple (Suet., *Dom.* 5); Jones 1992: 83. On the altar, Domitian's escape was represented in marble (Tac., *Hist.* 3.74). Literary commemorations of Domitian's escape from the debacle on the Capitol: Mart., *Ep.* 5.5.7 and 9.101.13; Sil., *Pun.* 3.609; Stat., *Theb.* 1.21. Cf. Aeneas' escape from Troy (Verg., *Aen.* 2.682–4); the flaming crown portending Servius Tullius' royal destiny (Liv. 1.39); the statues of Claudia Quinta (Livy 29.10.5; Ov., *Fast.* 4.293–328) and portrait of Tiberius (Tac., *Ann.* 4.54). On Julio-Claudian rhetoric surrounding the escape of Aeneas from Troy, see Hekster 2015: 244–50.

[67] Also relevant to Vulcan is the issue of securing the grain supply, which was highly subject to fire: see Warde-Fowler 1899: 211–12. Capdeville (1995: 7–95, esp. 15–16, and 418) identifies a particular obsession with the god at Rome and Ostia (where most of Rome's grain was stored), which began only in the early Empire.

[68] Jones 1992: 84, 102. On rebuilding temples lost in A.D. 80, see Palmer 1976; Jones 1992: 79–96.

[69] The passage (*Ann.* 15.43) in which Tacitus lays out the changes to the city appears to describe reconstruction

piquant irony, an all-encompassing monument to Nero's new vision for the city. Likewise, the *Arae* were predicated on a plan initiated by Nero in response to the 64 fire. Yet, as built by Domitian, they also evoked the memory of Nero's later history, and Rome's history more generally in the turbulent years that followed the fire. As Flavian Rome developed, sites of large-scale disaster, violent conflict, and considerable loss of life again became homes, businesses, and places of worship. Rebuilding wasted zones may have necessitated some other way of recognizing the impact of Nero and the 64 fire: the *Arae* and their associated inscription have often been described as 'commemorative' of the 64 destruction.[70] This is unsatisfactory, in that they have a stated purpose: they are altars to Vulcan, and they are first and foremost sites of Vulcan's worship. The categories of ritual and commemoration are not mutually exclusive (quite the opposite), but building public monuments commemorating civic disasters seems not to have appealed to Roman sensibilities.[71]

Romans did mark historic losses in their sacred calendar, designating their anniversaries as *nefas*. In fact, the *dies Alliensis*, which commemorated the defeat of Roman forces (and the subsequent sacking and burning of Rome) by the Gauls in 387/6 B.C., became closely identified with the 64 destruction: the fire broke out on or near the anniversary of the Gallic disaster, and numerological diminutions of the calendar allowed for a specious reckoning of the interval between these two conflagrations into equal numbers of years, months, and days.[72] Dedicating the *Arae* for use on the day of the Volcanalia perhaps reflects a new twist on the Julio-Claudian practice of co-opting previously established rites: ancient holidays were paired with recent events in the lives of the imperial family, which by accident or design fell on the same day.[73] Obviously, however, a fire does not fit into the category of a felicitous event for Rome or the emperor, nor did the 64 fire occur on the Volcanalia. Nevertheless, dedicated some twenty to thirty years after the 64 catastrophe, the Domitianic *Arae* may yet have addressed the living memory of some of the fire's survivors. [74]

For those who had lost homes and loved ones in A.D. 64, the altars could become a way of focusing memories of the destruction. They designated a given site as the proper repository for such concerns; the rest of the city was freed to move into the future.[75] Yet between A.D. 64 and 83 (the earliest possible dedication date for the *Arae*), an entire generation would have come of age without direct recollection of the fire. In these inscriptions the *princeps* claims the authority to tell the story, instructing the public on how to remember the events of 64. Within what Assman calls the 'communicative' period, memory is still malleable and mutually negotiated by those who have shared an experience first-hand.[76] At the other end of the spectrum, deep foundational memory, or 'reference to the past' constructs narratives of a semi-mythic past from centuries-old

and development carried out under subsequent emperors, rather than what Nero was able to accomplish between A.D. 64 and his death in 68.

[70] e.g. Richardson 1992: 21; Owen and Gildenhard 2013: 206. Platner and Ashby 1929: 30; Darwall-Smith 1996: 236.

[71] On the Roman disinclination to commemorate war dead: Cooley 2012. The so-called *Tropaeum Traiani* at Adamclissi, a monument to a final victory over the Dacians, perhaps plays upon memories of catastrophic loss, but ultimately commemorates overcoming the enemy. See Stefan 2005: 437–44; Cooley 2012: 67–71; Ibarra 2014: 147–50.

[72] Cornell 1995, 313–18; Oakley 1997: 105–6; Forsythe 2012: 29–32. See also Feeney 2007: 205–6 and n. 222.

[73] cf. Beard 1987; Michels 1967.

[74] e.g. Tacitus, who would have been about ten years old at the time of the fire, writes vividly of it some fifty years later (*Ann.* 15.38–45).

[75] Nora 1989.

[76] Hölkeskamp (2014) provides an overview of debates on 'collective' notions of memory, *mentalité*, 'cultural history', citing, e.g., Hutton 1993; Confino 1997; Olick and Robbins 1998; and Klein 2000. See also Ricoeur 2004; on trauma and memory, Caruth 1996 and 2013. Wiseman (2014) discusses various forms of textual evidence for the Romans' relationship to monuments. See also Assmann 1988a; 1988b.

accounts, creating a sense of timeless continuity. In between these two, however, lies a liminal phase, in which meanings, though still in flux like living memory, are becoming subject to claims and manipulation from groups in power; this intermediary period gives rise to the practices Assman defines as 'memory culture'.[77] Memory culture comprises written narratives and performances representing the events of the past; rituals and ceremonies perpetuating the memory of past events on commemoration days; and *lieux de mémoire* establishing temporal horizons from which viewers and visitors grow ever more remote, even as sites become repositories of the new memories developing around them in the course of everyday life.[78] The *Arae*, in consigning the events of 64 to the realm of 'memory culture', also form a living following of their own, ensuring that the events they represent will continue to get their due and remain a part of civic life for as long as each altar is venerated.

Elsner has argued for such a multifaceted, diachronic function in the rituals associated with the *Ara Pacis*: the past acquires meaning through the repetition of sacred action.[79] As Elsner describes the sacrificial practice: 'Even as sacrifice took place, its participants were surrounded by the *memento mori* of its results — the fruitfulness of life brought at the ritual cost of death.'[80] At the *Arae* on the Volcanalia, this double vision was intensified: the future fires they promised to ward off, as well as the very conflagration that had occasioned their original vow, would have been evoked by the sacrificial fire of the altar itself. The *Arae* thus provided lasting reminders of the dangers from which the emperors claim to provide protection, in sites that evoked the risk of renewed destruction. Though they are not 'commemorative' in the sense often ascribed to them, in the fullest sense of the Latin term, they are *monimenta*: they simultaneously recall and foretell.[81]

VII CONCLUSION

The *Arae* were an architecturally and rhetorically unified programme of monuments dispersed around Rome's cityscape, creating an innovative complex of time, worship, memory, and urban space. The fulfilment of a vow long neglected, the provisions made against the risk of another disastrous fire, and Domitian's monumental efforts in Rome more generally may be seen as the culmination of the Flavian agenda for the city: the symbolic endpoint to a turbulent chapter in Rome's history. Yet the dedication of the *Arae* perhaps also reveals an instance of blowback from the Flavians' generally very successful attempts to portray Nero as a depraved and destructive enemy of the Roman people. Titus, upon hearing the news of the fire ravaging the city in A.D. 80, reportedly said only, 'I am ruined'.[82] This eloquently succinct personalization of civic disaster may also suggest a recognition that the aggressive campaign of post-Neronian propaganda, which asserted Nero's culpability for the fire of 64, could easily circle around now to tarnish any subsequent ruler who faced a similar catastrophe. Having so thoroughly promoted the narrative of Nero's inappropriate response to, if not his personal responsibility for the 64 conflagration, the Flavian propaganda machine was faced with a significant liability in the aftermath of the destruction of A.D. 80: if bad emperors mean bad fires (and vice versa), then Domitian had some explaining to do. Thus the *Arae*, and the convenient narrative of Nero's unredeemed vow, may have constituted an

---

[77] Assmann (1992: 19) defines cultural memory as the 'outer dimension' of human memory, divided into two categories: 'memory culture' (Erinnerungskultur) and 'reference to the past' (Vergangenheitsbezug).
[78] See Connerton 1989; Nora 1989; 1992.
[79] Elsner 1994: ch. 6.
[80] Elsner 1991: 58.
[81] *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*: s.v. *monimentum/monumentum*; Fowler 2000: 193–217.
[82] Suet., *Tit.* 3.4.

artful dodge: they pinned the anxiety created by the recent disaster back onto a vilified figure from Rome's past.[83]

The annual rituals celebrated at the *Arae*, in concert with the ancient citywide veneration of Vulcan, would now perpetually renew the memory of Nero's disgrace and dynastic failure. In time, these monuments also became implicated in the collapse of Rome's second dynasty: although the evidence from the Quirinal site suggests continued use at least into the Antonine period, Domitian's name appears to have been chiselled out of the inscription at other locations, evidently as part of the posthumous attack on his memory. Thus, Nero's name survived on all known *Arae* inscriptions, while Domitian's rôle in their dedication was (in one if not more instances) consigned to conspicuous oblivion. The best-known ritual activity associated with the Volcanalia was the throwing of live fish into a bonfire, an offering which Varro tells us is *pro se* ('in place of oneself' or 'to redeem oneself');[84] 'in place of human souls' Festus says, more precisely.[85] In this striking instantiation of the so-called 'substitution offering', people appeased the god of fire with a victim normally beyond his reach, hoping thereby to ward off his incendiary ire.[86] Domitian, in dedicating the *Arae*, perhaps aimed at similar redemption: effectively, in the *Arae* inscription, Nero becomes the substitute figure for a failed emperor — or at least for the failure to control fire. Testament to the success of these efforts is perhaps simply this: if today's public at large knows one 'fact' about Roman history, it is that 'Nero fiddled while Rome burned'. The veracity of this claim (or the lack thereof) has nothing to do with its appeal. Rather, its evocative linkage of urban disaster and failed leadership calls up the same anxieties and concerns that the *Arae* themselves, and their elaborate inscription, seem designed to address.

University of Massachusetts
closs@umass.edu

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ando, C. (ed.) 2003: *Roman Religion*, Edinburgh
Assmann, J. 1988a: 'Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität', in Assmann and Hölscher 1988, 9–19
Assmann, J. 1988b: 'Stein und Zeit. Das 'monumentale' Gedächtnis der altägyptischen Kultur', in Assmann and Hölscher 1988, 88–114
Assmann, J. 1992: *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, Munich
Assmann, J., and Hölscher, T. (eds) 1988: *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, Frankfurt
Beard, M. 1987: 'A complex of times: No more sheep on Romulus' birthday', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 33, 1–15
Berger, A. 1953: *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Roman Law*, Philadelphia
Boatwright, M. T. 1985: 'The "Ara Ditis-Ustrinum of Hadrian" in the western Campus Martius and other problematic Roman ustrina', *American Journal of Archaeology* 89, 485–97
Bowerman, H. 1913: *Roman Sacrificial Altars. An Archaeological Study of Monuments in Rome*, unpub. PhD diss., Bryn Mawr College
Cagnat, R. 1914: *Cours d'épigraphie latine* (4th edn), Paris, 191–2
Capdeville, G. 1995: *Volcanus: Recherches comparatistes sur les origines du culte de Vulcain*, Rome
Caruth, C. 1996: *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Baltimore
Caruth, C. 2013: *Literature in the Ashes of History*, Baltimore

---

[83] cf. Cooley's analogous argument concerning Trajan's completion/alteration of Domitian's Dacian war monuments at Adamclissi; Cooley 2012.
[84] Varro, *LL* 6.20.
[85] Festus 276, 3.
[86] On the Volcanalia as a substitution rite see Turcan 2000: 77.

Champlin, E. 2003: *Nero*, Cambridge, MA

Cline, L. 2009: 'Rising from the ashes: the Arae incendii Neroniani in New Flavian Rome', *Athanor* 27, 15–24

Cline, L. 2013: *Altars and Empire: Studies in Roman Altars and Divine Kingship (c. 300 B.C.–A.D. 96)*, unpub. PhD diss., The University of Texas at Austin

Coarelli, F. 1983: *Il Foro Romano I*, Rome

Coarelli, F. 1995: *Roma: Guide archeologiche Laterza*, Rome/Bari

Coleman, K. M. 2000: 'Entertaining Rome', in J. Coulston and H. Dodge (eds), *Ancient Rome: The Archaeology of the Eternal City*, Oxford, 205–58

Confino, A. 1997: 'Collective memory and cultural history: problems of method', *American Historical Review* 102.4, 1386–1404

Connerton, P. 1989: *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge

Cooley, A. 2004: *Pompeii: A Sourcebook*, London

Cooley, A. 2012: 'Commemorating the war dead of the Roman world', in P. Low, G. Oliver and P. J. Rhodes (eds), *Cultures of Commemoration: War Memorials, Ancient and Modern*, Oxford, 61–86

Cornell, T. J. 1995: *The Beginnings of Rome: Italy and Rome from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars*, London

D'Ambra, E. 1993: *Private Lives, Imperial Virtues: The Frieze of the Forum Transitorium in Rome*, Princeton

Darwall-Smith, R. 1996: *Emperors and Architecture: A Study of Flavian Rome*, Brussels

Davies, P. J. E. 2000a: *Death and the Emperor*, Cambridge

Davies, P. J. E. 2000b: '"What's worse than Nero, what better than his baths?": *Damnatio memoriae* and Roman architecture', in Varner 2000b, 27–44

Degrassi, A. 1886: *Fasti Anni Numani et Iuliani*, Rome

Degrassi, A. 1957: *Inscriptiones Latinae Liberae Rei Publicae Fasc. I*, Florence

den Hollander, W. 2014: *Josephus, the Emperors, and the City of Rome: From Hostage to Historian*, Leiden

Dessau, H. 1892–1916: *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, 3 vols, Berlin

Eck, W., Caballos, A., and Fernandez, F. 1996: *Das senatus consultum de Cn. Pisone patre*, Munich

Elsner, J. 1991: 'Cult and sculpture: sacrifice in the Ara Pacis Augustae', *Journal of Roman Studies* 81, 50–61

Elsner, J. 1994: 'Constructing decadence: the representation of Nero as imperial builder', in Elsner and Masters 1994, 112–27

Elsner, J., and Masters, J. (eds) 1994: *Reflections of Nero: Culture, History, & Representation*, Chapel Hill

Feeney, D. 2007: *Caesar's Calendar: Ancient Time and the Beginnings of History*, Berkeley

Flower, H. I. 2006: *The Art of Forgetting: Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture*, Chapel Hill

Forsythe, G. A. 2012: *Time in Roman Religion: One Thousand Years of Religious History*, New York/London

Fowler, D. 2000: 'The ruin of time: monuments and survival at Rome', in D. Fowler, *Roman Constructions: Readings in Postmodern Latin*, 193–216

Galinsky, K. (ed.) 2014: *Memoria Romana: Memory in Rome and Rome in Memory*, Ann Arbor

Gargola, D. J. 1995: *Lands, Laws and Gods: Magistrates and Ceremony in the Regulation of Public Lands*, Chapel Hill

Gros, P. 2001: 'Nunc tua cinguntur limina: l'apparence de l'accueil et la réalité du filtrage à l'entrée des Forums impériaux de Rome', in C. Evers and A. Tsingarida (eds), *Rome et ses provinces. Genèse et diffusion d'une image du pouvoir*, Brussels

Haselberger, L., Romano, D. G., and Dumser, E. A. (eds) 2002: *Mapping Augustan Rome*, Portsmouth, RI

Hekster, O. 2015: *Emperors and Ancestors. Roman Rulers and the Constraints of Tradition*, Oxford

Hölkeskamp, K.-J. 2014: 'In defense of concepts, categories, and other abstractions: remarks on a theory of memory (in the making)', in Galinsky 2014, 63–70

Hülsen, C. 1891: *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung*, 116–30

Hülsen, C. 1894: *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung*, 94–7

Hutton, P. 1993: *History as an Art of Memory*, Hanover, NH

Ibarra, A. 2014: 'Roman soliloquies: monumental interventions in the vacant landscape in the Late Republic and Early Empire', in J. F. Osborne (ed.), *Approaching Monumentality in Archaeology*, Albany

Jones, B. W. 1992: *The Emperor Domitian*, London

Klein, K. L. 2000: 'On the emergence of memory in historical discourse', *Representations* 69, 127–50

Lanciani, R. 1888: *Notizie degli scavi di antichità*, 159–60

Lanciani, R. 1889: *Bullettino della Commissione archeologica comunale di Roma*, 331–7

Lanciani, R. 1892: *Pagan and Christian Rome*, Boston

Lanciani, R. 1893: *Forma Urbis Romae*, Rome (Quasar, 1990)

Latte, K. 1960: *Römische Religionsgeschichte*, Munich

Linderski, J. 1997: 'Volcanus: Recherches comparatistes sur les origines du culte de Vulcain (review)', *American Journal of Philology* 118.4, 644–7

MacDonald, W. 1982: *The Architecture of the Roman Empire Vol. 1*, New Haven

Martin, A. 1987: *La Titulature épigraphique de Domitien*, Frankfurt am Main

Michels, A. 1967: *The Calendar of the Roman Republic*, Princeton

Millar, F. 2005: 'Last year in Jerusalem: monuments of the Jewish War in Rome', in J. C. Edmondson, S. Mason and J. B. Rives (eds), *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, Oxford, 101–28

Nash, E. 1981: *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Rome*, New York/London

Nora, P. 1989: 'Between memory and history: les lieux de mémoire' (trans. Marc Roudebush), *Representations* 26, 7–24

Nora, P. 1992: *Les Lieux de mémoire: Les France*, Paris

Noreña, C. 2003: 'Medium and message in Vespasian's Templum Pacis', *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 48, 25–43

Oakley, S. P. 1997: *A Commentary on Livy Books VI–X*, Oxford

Olick, J., and Robbins, J. 1998: 'Social memory studies: from "collective memory" to the historical sociology of mnemonic practices', *Annual Review of Sociology* 24, 105–40

Owen, M., and Gildenhard, I. (eds) 2013: *Tacitus, Annals, 15.20–23, 33–45. Latin Text, Study Aids with Vocabulary, and Commentary*, Cambridge

Palmer, R. E. A. 1976: 'Jupiter Blaze, gods of the hills, and the Roman topography of *CIL* VI 377', *American Journal of Archaeology* 80.1, 43–56

Panella, C. 2011: 'Nerone e il grande incendio del 64 d.C.', in M. A. Tomei and R. Rea (eds), *Nerone*, Milan

Platner, S. B., and Ashby, T. 1929: *A Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome*, London

Potter, D. S., and Damon, C. 1999: 'The Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre', *American Journal of Philology* 120.1, 13–42

Purcell, N. 1995: 'Forum Romanum: imperial period', *LTUR* 2, 336–42

Rehak, P. 2006: *Imperium and Cosmos. Augustus and the Northern Campus Martius*, Madison

Richardson, L.Jr. 1992: *A New Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome*, Baltimore

Ricoeur, P. 2004: *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Chicago.

Robathan, D. M. 1942: 'Domitian's Midas-touch', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 73, 130–44

Rodríguez Almeida, E. 1993: 'Arae incendii Neroniani', in *LTUR* 1, 76–7

Rodríguez Almeida, E. 1996: 'Alcune notule topografiche sul Quirinale di epoca domizianea', *Bullettino della Commissione archeologica comunale di Roma* 91.1, 49–60

Rodríguez Almeida, E. 2003: *Terrarum Dea Gentiumque. Marziale e Roma. Un poeta e sua citta*, Rome

Roman, L. 2010: 'Martial and the city of Rome', *Journal of Roman Studies* 100, 88–117

Rüpke, J. 2007: *Religion of the Romans* (trans. R. Gordon), Cambridge/Malden

Sablayrolles, R. 1996: *Libertinus Miles: les cohortes de vigiles*, Rome

Sánchez-Ostiz, A. 1999: *Tabula Siarensis. Edición, traducción y comentario*, Pamplona

Settis, S., La Regina, A., Agosti, G., and Farinella, V. 1988: *La Colonna Traiana*, Turin

Shannon, K. 2012: 'Memory, religion, and history in Nero's Great Fire: Tacitus *Annals* 15.41–7', *The Classical Quarterly* (New Series) 62.02, 749–65

Southern, P. 1997: *Domitian: Tragic Tyrant*, London

Stefan, A. 2005: *Les Guerres daciques de Domitien et de Trajan: architecture militaire, topographie, images et histoire*, Rome

Steinby, E. M. (ed.) 1993–4: *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae*, Rome

Sutherland, C. H. V. 1935: 'The state of the imperial treasury at the death of Domitian', *Journal of Roman Studies* 25, 150–62

Toynbee, J. M. C. 1996: *Death and Burial in the Roman World*, Baltimore

Turcan, R. 2000: *The Gods of Ancient Rome. Religion in Everyday Life from Archaic to Imperial Times* (trans. A. Neville), New York

Varner, E. R. 2000a: 'Tyranny and the transformation of the Roman visual landscape', in Varner 2000b, 9–26

Varner, E. R. (ed.) 2000b: *From Caligula to Constantine. Tyranny and Transformation in Roman Portraiture*, Atlanta

Varner, E. R. 2004: *Mutilation and Transformation, Damnatio Memoriae and Roman Imperial Portraiture*, Leiden

Warde Fowler, W. 1899: *The Roman Festivals of the Period of the Republic*, London

Wardle, D. 1996: 'Vespasian, Helvidius Priscus and the restoration of the Capitol', *Historia* 45.2, 208–22

Wiseman, T. P. 1978: 'Flavians on the Capitol', *American Journal of Ancient History* 3.2 (1), 163–78

Wiseman, T. P. 2014: 'Popular memory', in Galinsky 2014, 43–62

Wissowa, G. 1902: *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, Munich

Wissowa, G. 1912: *Religion und Kultus der Römer* (2nd edn), Munich