

**ROMAN EMPIRE (27  
BCE - 476 CE): NERO  
AND THE GREAT FIRE OF  
ROME 64 CE**



# ROMAN EMPIRE (27 BCE - 476 CE): NERO AND THE GREAT FIRE OF ROME 64 CE

## Description

Through an examination of both primary and secondary sources on the subject, including various types of visual media and electronic and written sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio each described the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE and Caesar Nero's possible role or responsibilities in the disaster. Students will also be able to explain how each ancient historian's personal views might have clouded or sharpened his judgments on the subject. Finally, students will use the knowledge gained from this examination to develop an idea as to how to critique all primary sources.

## Subjects

World History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Ancient Roman Ruins, Rome
- Palatine Hill, Rome

## Essential Questions

- What was the Great Fire of 64 CE?
- Who was Nero? What do we know about him as an emperor? Was he responsible for the Great Fire?
- What do the sources from Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio say about Nero and the Great Fire? Do the sources contradict themselves and each other?
- Why are the ancient sources on Nero and the Great Fire problematic? With so many issues, do the sources have any value today?

## Academic Summary

### **Cassius Dio: Nero and the Great Fire 64 CE**

Nero had the wish - or rather it had always been a fixed purpose of his - to make an end of the whole city in his lifetime. Priam he deemed wonderfully happy in that he had seen Troy perish at the same moment his authority over her ended. Accordingly, Nero sent out by different ways men feigning to be drunk, or engaged in some kind of mischief, and at first had a few fires kindled quietly and in different quarters; people, naturally, were thrown into extreme confusion, not being able to find either the cause of the trouble nor to end it; and meantime met with many strange sights and sounds. They ran about as if distracted, and some rushed one way, some another. In the midst of helping their neighbors, men would learn that their own homes were blazing. Others learned, for the first time, that their property was on fire, by being told it was burned down. People would run from their houses into the lanes, with a hope of helping from the outside, or again would rush into the houses from the streets seeming to imagine they could do something from the inside. The shouting and screaming of children, women, men, and gray beards mingled together unceasingly; and betwixt the combined smoke and shouting no one could make out anything.

... This state of things lasted not one day, but several days and nights running. Many houses were destroyed through lack of defenders; and many were actually fired in more places by professed rescuers. For the soldiers (including the night watch) with a keen eye for plunder, instead of quenching the conflagration, kindled it the more. While similar scenes were taking place at various points, a sudden wind caught the fire and swept it over what remained. As a result nobody troubled longer about goods or homes, but all the survivors, from a place of safety, gazed on what appeared to be many islands and cities in flames. No longer was there any grief for private loss, public lamentation swallowed up this---as men reminded each other how once before the bulk of the city had been even thus laid desolate by the Gauls.

While the whole people was in this state of excitement, and many driven mad by calamity were leaping into the blaze, Nero mounted upon the roof of the palace, where almost the whole conflagration was commanded by a sweeping glance, put on the professional harpist's garb, and sang "The Taking of Troy" (so he asserted), although to common minds, it seemed to be "The Taking of Rome."

The disaster which the city then underwent, had no parallel save in the Gallic invasion. The whole Palatine hill, the theater of Taurus, and nearly two thirds of the rest of the city were burned. Countless persons perished. The populace invoked curses upon Nero without intermission, not uttering his name, but simply cursing "those who set the fire"; and this all the more because they were disturbed by the recollection of the oracle recited in Tiberius's time, to this effect,

"After three times three hundred rolling years

In civil strife Rome's Empire disappears."

And when Nero to encourage them declared these verses were nowhere to be discovered, they changed and began to repeat another oracle---alleged to be a genuine one of the Sibyl,

"When the matricide reigns in Rome,

Then ends the race of Aeneas."

And thus it actually turned out, whether this was really revealed in advance by some divination, or whether the populace now for the first time gave it the form of a sacred utterance merely adapted to the circumstances. For Nero was indeed the last of the Julian line, descended from Aeneas.

### **Roman Historian Tacitus from his book Annals**

Therefore, to stop the rumor [that he had set Rome on fire], he [Emperor Nero] falsely charged with guilt, and punished with the most fearful tortures, the persons commonly called Christians, who were [generally] hated for their enormities. Christus, the founder of that name, was put to death as a criminal by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea, in the reign of Tiberius, but the pernicious superstition - repressed for a time, broke out yet again, not only through Judea, - where the mischief originated, but through the city of Rome also, whither all things horrible and disgraceful flow from all quarters, as to a common receptacle, and where they are encouraged. Accordingly first those were arrested who confessed they were Christians; next on their information, a vast multitude were convicted, not so much on the charge of burning the city, as of "hating the human race."

In their very deaths they were made the subjects of sport: for they were covered with the hides of wild beasts, and worried to death by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set fire to, and when the day waned, burned to serve for the evening lights. Nero offered his own garden players for the spectacle, and exhibited a Circensian game, indiscriminately mingling with the common people in the dress of a charioteer, or else standing in his chariot. For this cause a feeling of compassion arose towards the sufferers, though guilty and deserving of exemplary capital punishment, because they seemed not to be cut off for the public good, but were victims of the ferocity of one man.

In the evening hours of 18 July 64 CE (year 817 AUC under the old Roman calendar), fire broke out in Rome, the imperial capital. It raged for about a week, leaving most of the ancient city's wooden structures in ruins. When it was over, speculation over who might have caused the calamity ran wild across the Roman world. Some blamed Caesar Nero, the Roman emperor at the time who supposedly set the fire so could rebuild the city in stone. Others blamed the Christians, a new, secretive and mysterious religious sect. Some reports have the emperor setting the fire and then watching in gleeful folly as the city burned around him. Others say that Nero was not even in the imperial capital when the fire broke out and that he rushed back to Rome only to direct the relief efforts in a vain, but doomed, attempt to save the city.

The problem is that no ancient sources from the time of the fire survive. The earliest source we have today is from Tacitus, a Roman historian. Tacitus was living in Rome

when the fire broke out, but he was only nine years old at the time. His *Annals*, a book that details Roman history from 14-70 CE, was written sometime around 115-116 CE, a full 50 years after the fire. The historian was no Christian, nor was he a fan of what he believed was a false religion based on the teachings of a criminal, but he also appeared to see Nero in a bad light. His descriptions of the fire's aftermath mention Christians being rounded up after the disaster and cruelly executed by Nero. According to Tacitus, the emperor even had some Christians set ablaze to light up his garden parties. Another ancient source comes from Suetonius through his book *The Twelve Caesars*, written around 121 CE. The problem with using this work as a source on Nero's reign comes from the obvious bias the author had against the former emperor. Suetonius described the former emperor as a perverted and sick man who apparently lived to torment everyone around him. *The Twelve Caesars* also contains the first mention of the legend that Nero played a lyre (an ancient stringed instrument) as Rome burned around him. The idea of Nero "fiddling" as the city burned comes directly from this legend.

The most often read source on the Great Fire comes from Cassius Dio, a Roman consul and historian who wrote an extensive history of Rome covering 80 volumes. Dio's work was massive, covering the entire period of Roman history from the city's founding in 753 BCE to the early decades of the 3rd century. The section on Nero and the Great Fire that survives places blame for the disaster on a greedy and self-serving emperor who was determined to rebuild the city in order to establish a great legacy with the people. One of the biggest problems with Dio's work is time. *Roman Histories* was written in the 3rd century. By that point Nero's ancient reputation as a tyrant was secure, and Dio's descriptions of the emperor's behavior played into those sentiments. The other issue is that only fragments of his work survive, some of which contain later additions from medieval scholars and writers trying to "fill in the gaps." Did later devout Christian authors add prejudicial descriptions and untruthful passages about Nero, a pagan emperor believed to have persecuted and executed early Christians (including St. Peter and St. Paul)? No one knows for sure.

Unfortunately, historians and students today may never really know what happened during the Great Roman Fire of 64 CE. Does that mean the sources have no value? Absolutely not. Through an examination of both primary and secondary sources on the subject, including various types of visual media and electronic and written sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio each described the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE and Caesar Nero's possible role or responsibilities in the disaster. Students will also be able to explain how each ancient historian's personal views might have clouded or sharpened his judgments on the subject. Finally, students will use the knowledge gained from this examination to develop an idea as to how to critique all primary sources.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how the selected ancient historians described the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE and Caesar Nero's response to the disaster.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how each of the selected historian's personal views might have influenced his judgments and descriptions on the subject.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how all primary sources must be seen in the light of the author's views.

## Procedure

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What are primary sources? Can primary sources always be trusted? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of documents and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Nero (20 min)
- Video – The Great Fire of Rome (20 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the articles and sources on the Great Fire of Rome, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles and sources before class.
- Suggestion: All students should read the sources from **Tacitus, Suetonius** and **Cassius Dio**.
- Group Activity – Socratic Seminar: Roman Sources on the Great Fire of Rome 64 CE (15 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment / DBQ – Essay: Explain in detail how the ancient Roman historians **Tacitus, Suetonius** and **Cassius Dio** each described both the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE and Caesar Nero's response to the disaster. Students will also be able to explain how each ancient historian's personal views might have clouded or sharpened his judgments on the subject. Finally, students will use the knowledge gained from this examination to develop an idea as to how to critique all primary sources.

## Extension

### On tour: Ancient Ruins of Rome

While on tour in Italy, students will visit the ruins of Ancient Rome in the center of the old Imperial City. Standing in the old forum, students can see for themselves the archaeological remains of the eternal city's glorious past. The forum burned during the Great Fire and was rebuilt by Nero according to his new designs. Archaeologists continue to dig in the city today, unearthing priceless artifacts all the time.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- <http://carrington-arts.com/cliff/Nero.htm>  
Nero's Fire and the Christian Persecution? (primary sources) – from Ken Pennington, Professor of Ecclesiastical and Legal History at the Catholic University of America (Washington, DC)
- <http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/annals.11.xv.html>  
The Annals by Tacitus, Book XV (primary source) – this selection, on the MIT website, contains the section on Nero and the Great Fire. Highly recommended for all students.
- [www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Suetonius6.htm#\\_Toc276122238](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Suetonius6.htm#_Toc276122238)  
Suetonius Book 6: The Great Fire of Rome (primary source)
- [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cassius\\_Dio/62\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cassius_Dio/62*.html)  
Cassius Dio on the Great Fire (primary source) – from the University of Chicago
- [www.pbs.org/wnet/secrets/previous\\_seasons/case\\_rome/index.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/secrets/previous_seasons/case_rome/index.html)  
Secrets of the Dead: Great Fire of Rome (website) – from PBS
- [www.history.com/this-day-in-history/neros-rome-burns](http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/neros-rome-burns)  
Nero's Rome Burns (website) – from the History Channel
- [www.livius.org/cg-cm/christianity/tacitus.html](http://www.livius.org/cg-cm/christianity/tacitus.html)  
Tacitus on the Christians (website)
- [www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/rome.htm](http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/rome.htm)  
The Burning of Rome, 64 AD (website) – contains primary sources and a secondary summary. A good place to start with all students.
- [www.edteck.com/dbq/more/analyzing.htm](http://www.edteck.com/dbq/more/analyzing.htm)  
Analyzing Primary Sources (website) – from Peter Pappas, retired Asst. Superintendent for Instruction from East Irondequoit Central Schools (NY)
- <http://hwilsonhistory.wikispaces.com/file/view/Nero.ppt>  
Nero (PowerPoint) – from Holly Wilson, social studies teacher at Windham High School (ME)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoo of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCV-PrIQu2s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCV-PrIQu2s)  
Secrets of the Dead: The Great Fire of Rome (video). This 55-minute video from PBS is probably too long for most in-class showings, but it is well worth it. Highly recommended as an out-of-class assignment in preparation for this lesson.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=P\\_\\_H1L9I3HM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P__H1L9I3HM)  
BBC Ancient Rome the Rise and Fall of an Empire: Nero (video). This 60-minute video from the BBC depicts how Nero dealt with the Great Fire and his plan for rebuilding the city after the disaster.

### Background Information

- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Fire\\_of\\_Rome](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Fire_of_Rome)  
Great Fire of Rome – Wikipedia article
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cassius\\_Dio](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cassius_Dio)  
Cassius Dio – Wikipedia article

- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tacitus>  
Tacitus – Wikipedia article
- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suetonius>  
Suetonius – Wikipedia article
- [www.passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/italy/rome\\_a\\_special\\_introduction](http://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/rome_a_special_introduction)  
On the Road: Rome: A Special Introduction – from Passports Educational Travel
- [www.passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/italy/rome](http://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/rome)  
On the Road: Rome – from Passports Educational Travel

## Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/ancient-rome-rape-of-the-sabine-women](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/ancient-rome-rape-of-the-sabine-women)  
Ancient Rome – Rape of the Sabine Women
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/ancient-rome-romulus-and-remus](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/ancient-rome-romulus-and-remus)  
Ancient Rome – Romulus and Remus
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/roman-republic-punic-wars](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/roman-republic-punic-wars)  
Roman Republic (509 BCE – 27 BCE) – Punic Wars
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/roman-empire-nero-and-the-great-fire-64CE](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/roman-empire-nero-and-the-great-fire-64CE)  
Roman Empire – Great Fire of Rome 64 CE
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/roman-empire-pompeii-eruption](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/roman-empire-pompeii-eruption)  
Roman Empire – Pompeii and Herculaneum 79 CE
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/roman-empire-pompeii-villa-of-the-mysteries](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/roman-empire-pompeii-villa-of-the-mysteries)  
Roman Empire – Pompeii: Villa of the Mysteries
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/roman-empire-pax-romana](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/roman-empire-pax-romana)  
Roman Empire – Pax Romana
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/roman-britannia](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/roman-britannia)  
Roman Britannia – An Overview
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/roman-britain-hadrians-wall](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/roman-britain-hadrians-wall)  
Roman Britannia – Hadrian's Wall
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/roman-gaul-gallic-wars](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/roman-gaul-gallic-wars)  
Roman Gaul – The Gallic Wars: Caesar's Greatest Triumph
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/spain/hannibal-barca-of-carthage-second-punic-war](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/spain/hannibal-barca-of-carthage-second-punic-war)  
Hannibal of Carthage: Enemy of Rome
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-constantinople](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-constantinople)  
Byzantine Empire – Constantinople: New Rome

## Key Terms

- Cassius Dio
- Lyre
- Nero
- Rome
- Primary Sources
- Secondary Sources
- Suetonius
- Tacitus



