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Joseph J. Walsh, *The Great Fire of Rome: Life and Death in the Ancient City*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019. P. 192. Paper (ISBN 978-1-4214-3371-4) \$19.95.

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practiced these days, in part because of the obvious hyper-specialized nature of our work today. The present republication of her work, some seventy years later, is testament to her scholarly contribution in classics. She spent most of her career, however, in the medieval world. A true archivist, she resurrected several sources, including those published in her *School Masters of the Tenth Century* (1977). Furthermore, she uncovered previously un-read work on Bede and wrote a still-valuable article on the liberal arts in Remigius (1956). Paul Oskar Kristeller reviewed more than one of Lutz’s publications. John Marenbon credited her for “bravely stepp[ing] forward to explain obscure and neglected subjects in terms comprehensible to non-specialists.” The “text” of this volume is, of course, a collection based primarily on Stobaeus, who flourished in the fifth century. That is fitting: He was an archivist *par excellence*. Both he and Musonius might have appreciated Lutz’s work.

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Joseph J. Walsh, *The Great Fire of Rome: Life and Death in the Ancient City*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019. P. 192. Paper (ISBN 978-1-4214-3371-4) \$19.95.

Walsh, a professor of classics and history at Loyola University Maryland perhaps best known for his work on Early Christianity, here offers a survey of the fire that destroyed much of Rome under Nero in 64 CE. Like other books in the “Witness to Ancient History” series, it seems aimed at a general audience.

After a brief Prologue, Chapter 1, “Perils of Life in Rome,” Walsh describes the myriad dangers of ancient urban living in general by way of contextualizing the fire. Floods, building collapse, crime, pollution, and disease make an appearance—as well as, of course, fire, including the equipment and tactics used by the *vigiles* to fight fire, which are interestingly compared with modern techniques. Using largely literary rather than archaeological evidence, Walsh keeps the focus on how the residents of the city might have been affected both physically and psychologically by the dangers he describes. Noteworthy for his near absence is Augustus, whose large program of urban renewal is largely consigned to one footnote (138 n. 11) and one paragraph on his division of Rome into *regiones* and *vici* (40). Still, the chapter is an engaging description of the perils and discomforts of life in Rome, and could be assigned on its own as a reading on everyday life in ancient Rome for a high school or college class, where material on such perennially fascinating topics as Roman public latrines will enthrall young readers.

Chapter 2, “Inferno,” discusses the fire itself and how ordinary Romans might have experienced the destruction, and is based largely on Tacitus’ account. Walsh provides

two maps showing a possible reconstruction of the fire's course through Rome, which will usefully orient readers. He postulates that the *vigiles*, whom neither Tacitus nor Suetonius mentions, defended the Palatine and Capitoline hills. Such reasonable speculations are not *per se* out of place in a book like this, but it may make readers uneasy when Walsh begins to speak of his hypotheses as if they were historical fact: "The most reasonable explanation is that some units of the *Vigiles* [sic]... scored a few significant victories against the fire" (51) all too quickly becomes "As the *vigiles* made their heroic stands..." (55). Walsh similarly asserts that the *vigiles* would also have taken special care to protect the Campus Martius because it was the site of many theaters and would have been motivated to do so by Nero's affinity for dramatic performance. The shift from subjunctive to indicative is again disconcerting: the statement that the firefighters "*would* know that among Nero's priorities *would be* saving the theaters [in the Campus Martius], and so that *is* what they did" (54; italics mine), followed a page later by "Therefore the firefighting resources in the area *were* dedicated to the theaters, precious to the emperor" (55; italics mine), gives the impression that this is definitely what happened and that the reasons for it are securely known. Non-specialist readers can easily be given the wrong impression by statements like these. But the chapter finishes on a much stronger note with a discussion of the fire's destruction: where modern expectations would require statistics on monetary and human losses, Walsh notes, Tacitus instead emphasizes Rome's cultural loss by discussing historic and religious landmarks destroyed in the flames (65-72).

Chapter 3, "The Day After," opens with an engaging description of the work of cleaning up after the fire (73-78) and a good discussion of the issues involved in assessing the veracity of ancient authors' claims that Nero himself started the fire (78-85). Here Walsh is more consistent in keeping things hypothetical, concluding the section with the observation that "no judgment can be made" about Nero's involvement based on the available evidence (85). The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to discussion of Tacitus' description of how Nero attempted to blame Christians for setting the fire. Walsh's account again papers over some of the difficulties involved and at times presents hypothetical as established fact. Nero's punishment of Christians is referred to from the start as a "persecution" (87) although application of that term as early as the 60s CE is actually controversial, as demonstrated by Brent Shaw's important 2015 *JRS* article "The Myth of the Neronian Persecution." Walsh tells us in a footnote (148-9 n. 37) that he "do[es] not share [Shaw's] doubts," but does not tell us why; the arguments of Shaw and others deserve to be engaged with more seriously. Walsh's assertion that the punishment Tacitus describes is crucifixion (90-1) has also been much debated by scholars and is far from a given, as is his claim that the martyrdoms described by Clement of Rome find their "only plausible context" in "Nero's notorious scapegoating executions" (92). These are extraordinarily fraught topics, to be sure, and a book for a general audience is not necessarily the place

to get into the weeds; nevertheless, one feels Walsh may have missed an opportunity to introduce even a non-specialist reader to some of the controversies involved here.

The book finishes on a strong note with discussions of the longer-term impact of the fire. Chapter 4, “Neropolis,” is an interesting description of ancient authors’ negative reactions to the Domus Aurea built by Nero on the land opened up by the fire. Chapter 5, “Legacy,” discusses elements of the fire’s *Nachleben*, including its impact on the reception of the figure of Nero (112-6) and how the Flavians repurposed the area of the Domus Aurea for their Colosseum (116-8). Walsh also discusses at length the fire’s significance within Rome’s Christian communities: reports of Nero’s victims became tales of martyrdom that helped cement Christian group identity, and the story of the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul (which Walsh rightly emphasizes cannot be proven to have had any actual connection to the fire) became the *aition* for the founding of St. Peter’s Basilica on the Vatican Hill.

Among the book’s best points is its focus on ancient Romans’ lived experience of the fire, frequently brought home by comparing it to modern disasters like Hurricane Katrina (66, 77) or 9/11 (147 n. 6) that will be much closer to readers’ own experiences. The book is written in an engaging style that sometimes verges on the colloquial, as one would expect in a volume written for a general audience. Walsh is to be commended for incorporating scholarship in German, French, and Italian that are inaccessible to most general readers. There are, however, a few bibliographical omissions that might have enriched Walsh’s analyses at various points; for example, no discussion of Nero and theater (59-64) can be complete without reference to Shadi Bartsch’s *Actors in the Audience* (1996).

If the reservations above do not give one pause, the book could be usefully assigned to students studying ancient civilizations or Roman history, or even to a Latin class reading Tacitus *Annals* 15. The issues Walsh treats in this book are extraordinarily complex and at times controversial; imposing meaning and structure on the sometimes heated scholarly debates involved in a way that can be presented comprehensibly to a general or student reader is a Herculean task. If Walsh has not always made the same choices that one would make oneself, he is nevertheless to be commended for meeting the challenge head on.

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