

## **Tacitus (c. 55 -117 CE): Nero's Persecution of the Christians**

*Tacitus was a fierce critic of Nero, and modern scholars have questioned the reliability of his account of this notorious Roman Emperor; but the following passage from his Annals is famous because it is one of the first mentions in a non-Christian source of Christianity. In 64 CE Rome underwent a catastrophic fire, which some believed had been set at the orders of the emperor himself. Tacitus claims that Nero tried to shift the blame to the unpopular Christians, though other sources indicate that their persecution may have been unconnected to the fire. It is not clear exactly why many Romans so detested the new believers, though Christians were often confused with Jews, who were accused of being rebellious (with some reason, since the Jews of Judaea more than once created insurrections against the Roman provincial government) and lazy (since they rested on the Sabbath). Scandalous rumors about obscene Christian rituals circulated at an early date, and we know that they were accused of disloyalty because of their refusal to perform the token ritual acknowledging the divine status of the Emperor, viewed by most citizens as little different from a modern flag salute. If Tacitus shows sympathy for them, it is because he detests Nero more. Whatever their exact cause this early persecution and later ones made a profound impact on the Christian Church, and bequeathed a legacy of colorful tales of martyred saints who were celebrated in story, song, and art for the next two millenia, long after the Church had triumphed over its opponents.*

### What were the main accusations brought against the Christians?

Yet no human effort, no princely largess nor offerings to the gods could make that infamous rumor disappear that Nero had somehow ordered the fire. Therefore, in order to abolish that rumor, Nero falsely accused and executed with the most exquisite punishments those people called Christians, who were infamous for their abominations. The originator of the name, Christ, was executed as a criminal by the procurator Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius; and though repressed, this destructive superstition erupted again, not only through Judea, which was the origin of this evil, but also through the city of Rome, to which all that is horrible and shameful floods together and is celebrated. Therefore, first those were seized who admitted their faith, and then, using the information they provided, a vast multitude were convicted, not so much for the crime of burning the city, but for hatred of the human race. And perishing they were additionally made into sports: they were killed by dogs by having the hides of beasts attached to them, or they were nailed to crosses or set aflame, and, when the daylight passed away, they were used as nighttime lamps. Nero gave his own gardens for this spectacle and performed a Circus game, in the habit of a charioteer mixing with the plebs or driving about the race-course. Even though they were clearly guilty and merited being made the most recent example of the consequences of crime, people began to pity these sufferers, because they were consumed not for the public good but on account of the fierceness of one man.

Translated by Richard Hooker

Source:

Tacitus. "Nero's Persecution of the Christians." *Internet History Sourcebooks*,  
<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/tacitus-annals.txt>. Accessed 3 Jan 2022.