

**Chapter 6 Primary Source Activity**

The Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus (c. A.D. 56–120) was also a public official and orator. He wrote fascinating observations of the people in distant parts of the empire, such as Germany, as well as histories of Rome in the reigns of Augustus and later emperors. Here is Tacitus's description of the fire that swept Rome in A.D. 64, during the reign of Nero, who was probably insane (textbook pages 137–138). ♦ *As you read, think about what everyday life was like in Rome at this period. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

**Nero Sings While Rome Burns**

**B**reaking out in shops selling inflammable goods, and fanned by the wind, the [fire] instantly grew and swept the whole length of the Circus. . . . First, the fire swept violently over the level spaces. Then it climbed the hills—but returned to ravage the lower ground again. . . . The ancient city's narrow winding streets and irregular blocks encouraged its progress.

Terrified, shrieking women, helpless old and young, people intent on their own safety, people unselfishly supporting invalids or waiting for them, fugitives and lingers alike—all heightened the confusion. When people looked back, menacing flames sprang up before them or outflanked them. . . . Finally, with no idea where or what to flee, they crowded on to the country roads, or lay in the fields. Some who had lost everything—even their food for the day—could have escaped but preferred to die. So did others, who had failed to rescue their loved ones. Nobody dared fight the flames. Attempts to do so were prevented by menacing gangs. Torches, too were openly thrown in, by men crying that they acted under orders. Perhaps they had received orders. Or they may just have wanted to plunder unhampered.

“Of Rome’s fourteen districts only four remained intact.”

Nero was at Antium. He returned to the city only when the fire was approaching the mansion he had built. . . . Nevertheless, for the relief of the homeless, fugitive masses he threw open the Field of Mars. . . and even his own Gardens. Nero also constructed emergency accommodation for the destitute multitude. Food was brought from Ostia and neighboring towns, and the price of corn was cut to less than 1 sesterce [a small coin] a pound. Yet these measures, for all their popular character, earned no gratitude. For a rumor had spread that, while the city was burning, Nero had gone on his private stage and, comparing modern calamities with ancient, had sung of the destruction of Troy.

By the sixth day enormous demolitions had confronted the raging flames with bare ground and open sky, and the fire was finally stamped out. . . . Of Rome’s fourteen districts only four remained intact. Three were leveled to the ground. The other seven were reduced to a few scorched and mangled ruins.

Source: *Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. Michael Grant (Penguin, 1971).

**Questions to Think About**

1. What were some reasons that the fire spread so rapidly?
2. How would you describe the effect of the fire on the ordinary people of Rome? On the city as a whole?
3. **Checking Consistency** What actions did Nero take to help the people after the fire? Do these actions seem consistent with the other stories about this emperor?
4. **Activity** Imagine that you are reporting the evening news in Rome on the day that the fire is finally put out. Write an account of the events that reports both the facts and the rumors in an unbiased, objective way.