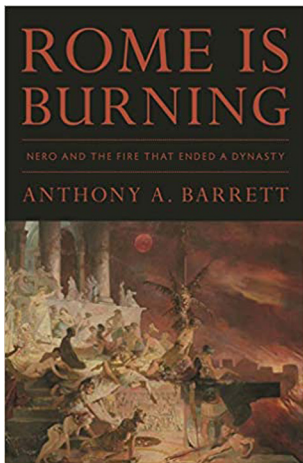


## Rome is Burning: Nero and the Fire that Ended a Dynasty

Barrett (A.A.) Pp. xiv + 347, ills, map. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. Cased, £25, US\$29.95. ISBN: 978-0-691-17231-6.

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In *Rome Is Burning: Nero and the Fire That Ended a Dynasty*, historian Anthony A. Barrett, professor emeritus at the University of British Columbia, navigates through the complex evidence surrounding the Great Fire of 64 CE to show that much of the popular perception of Nero is illusory. He examines not only the historians who wrote about Nero and the fire but also examines what the archaeological evidence can tell us about the time period between 64 to 68 CE. This gives the reader probably the single most important investigation not only of the man,

but also the event that brought a dynasty to an end.

Up until the year 64 CE, Nero had been regarded as the Golden Boy of Rome, considering he had become emperor at the tender age of 16! This is not to say that Nero didn't make some serious errors, and in so doing committed some extreme atrocities too, like the killing of his mother and of his wife. But although these events were extreme, they did not diminish the popularity of the Emperor, even within the ruling classes. The ordinary people still loved him, and even held feasts to celebrate Nero's killing of his wife. This is proof enough that it would take a monumentally destructive event, plus incredibly bad handling of its aftermath, to unseat Nero, the Golden Boy of Rome.

And so when we start to read Professor Barrett's book, we are first forced to face the absolute fear that fire held for an ancient city like Rome. We read of the histories of the fires that preceded the fire of 64 CE: and how those fires almost always destroyed the records of the city, including the records of other destructive fires. Barrett brings to the reader the Billy Joel song *We didn't start the Fire*. In the Roman case this fire was indeed always burning since the Roman world was turning, not just as physical fires of destruction but of political fire that brought about drastic change to all spheres of Roman life from the political to the economic. And it eventually even became the trend or norm in the life of the Empire.

*Rome Is Burning* is therefore an analysis of the causes and broad course of the Great Fire and its political, economic and architectural

consequences, rather than a detailed narrative of events and people. The exception being that one of the greatest atavisms that Prof Barrett shows us is that within the passage of four short years, Nero went from Golden Boy to being declared an enemy by the Senate and resorting to take his own life.

Barrett acknowledges that we have scant evidence concerning the fire's igniferous epicentre in Rome, although most sources place it near the Circus Maximus. The trouble is then compounded. If we wish to know about Nero and the fire, we have to rely on three main sources, those being Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio, all of whom wrote far removed from Nero and the events that occurred, further complicating the situation given the historians' bias penchant against Nero or leaning themselves and their work over to gossip.

Barrett presents to us those classic examples of Nero reciting poetry while the city was burning; which then later morphed into Nero playing the fiddle. Then there was the alleged scapegoating and persecution of the Christians for the start of the fire, which itself comes from a fragment of Tacitus less than 100 words long, the authenticity of which has been greatly debated by scholars as a complete falsehood.

What Barrett makes clear is that the Great Fire created a greater gulf between the Emperor and the Roman elite. Many resented being expected to help pay for Nero's grandiose plans to rebuild Rome, including the construction of his extravagant Domus Aurea (Golden House). The debasing of the currency in the fire's aftermath — the proportion of pure silver in Roman coinage at one stage fell to 80% — also alarmed them. From Barrett's book it is then easier to deduce that the main reason why Nero had to be removed was, ultimately, an economic one. Once the elite had begun to feel him hitting their pockets, his goose was cooked! And he was unseated.

Nero was the last emperor of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. In his demise in the year 68 CE a new trend emerged in Roman politics. The imperial purple would now be something that you could compete for, to the extent of engulfing the empire in countless civil wars in order to establish dynasties and personal dictatorships. Barrett shows this already with the chaos of 'The year of the four Emperors' and that the aftermath of the death of Nero fundamentally changed the Roman world.

Some disagree with this sentiment, pointing rather to Augustus accepting the *Potestas* from the Roman Senate in 27 BCE as a more profound event. But I am inclined to agree with Barrett looking at the year of the four emperors with all its complexities and vying for control of military power, the course for Rome became increasingly set, and it was not just a new dynasty but a new epoch for the Empire.

Whatever the case, *Rome Is Burning* is a lucid analysis of Nero and the Great Fire, enhanced by Barrett's clear, engaging style, his obvious love of his subject, and an extensive selection of maps, schematics and photographs. Any person with even a passing interest in the history of Rome will find this book interesting and illuminating. Barrett demonstrates, with clear effort and ease, how a once-loved dynasty could produce someone like a Nero. And with this the reader gets a clearer psychological picture of him, one that is removed from the traditional sources. This new book in the *Turning Points of History* series by the Princeton University Press will make the reader crave more and create a definite desire for the next book in the series.

doi: 10.1017/S2058631021000519