EIRENE

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Centre for Classical Studies
Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague

TACITUS AND THE PERSECUTION OF THE CHRISTIANS: AN INVENTION OF TRADITION?

BIRGIT VAN DER LANS - JAN N. BREMMER

Tacitus' description of Nero's punishment of Christians in the year 64 after the Great Fire of Rome (*Annals*, XV,44,2-5) has left a notable imprint on Christian tradition. Not only has it inspired iconic movies like *Quo Vadis* (1951), it also contributed to establishing Nero's reputation as the "first persecutor of Christianity".[1] The historical accuracy of Tacitus' account, however, has recently come under new scrutiny. Earlier critics had already pointed out that the connection between the punishment of Christians and the event of the Great Fire is found only in Tacitus and not in other historiographical accounts of the Fire.[2] Suetonius discusses the Fire (*Nero*, 38,1-3) and a punitive action against *Christiani* (*Nero*, 16,2) in separate chapters, while Cassius Dio has an account of the Fire that does not mention Christians at all. At the same time, the Christian tradition concerning Nero does not associate his actions with the Fire nor engages with the charge of incendiarism.[3] Because of these problems in the source record it has been argued that the Great Fire and Nero's punishment

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[2] Sulpicius Severus, *Chronikon*, II,29 and Orosius, *Historiae adversus paganos*, VII,7,4-10 mention both but depend on Tacitus. A connection between the punishment of Christians and the Fire is made in Letter 11 in the late correspondence between Seneca and Paul, which also includes Jews in the charge.

[3] For these points see already Canfield 1913, 43-69 (with earlier, nineteenth-century bibliography).

of Christians were two separate events that were only connected by Tacitus.[4] Moving beyond these earlier critical readings, Brent Shaw recently denied the persecution altogether. He argues that "an attack on Christians by Nero, either in connection with the Great Fire or otherwise" (91) rests on data that is poor in quantity and quality (74).[5] Instead, he proposes that the notion of a Neronian persecution of Christians is based on "written or oral sources" in which "the figure of Nero had *somehow* (our italics) come to be connected with Christians and then, in turn, Christians were linked to the guilty persons who had had severe punishments inflicted upon them in the aftermath of the Great Fire" (93).

Shaw's provocative article provides an opportunity to reassess the different traditions about Nero's actions against Christians. His contribution illustrates the challenges posed to the (ancient) historian faced with a differentiated body of authors whose interpretations depend on individual rhetorical considerations, and whose sources of information are more often than not irretrievable. After assessing the importance of some of the objections advanced by Shaw and others (§ 1), we pay closer attention to the question as to how the different reports function in their literary and historical contexts in Tacitus (§ 2) and the earliest Christian sources (§ 3), and we conclude with a new analysis of the name "Christian" (Appendix). As we will see, ancient authors articulate what interests them most in light of the specific aims of their writing. If we try to understand these contexts, we may end up with a better understanding of the different surviving interpretations of the Great Fire.[6]

[4] For instance, Saumagne 1962; Koestermann 1967; Keresztes 1984; Schmitt 2011. Moss 2013, 263 n. 4 comes close when writing that "it may not have happened", cf. ibid., 138–39; elsewhere she expresses methodological caution: Moss 2012, 77–8 and 185 n. 3.

[5] Shaw 2015. We refer to this article just with numbers in our text. Shaw could not yet be taken into consideration in the most recent and more traditional studies of Tacitus on the early Christians: Liebs 2015, 20–31; Fiedrowicz 2016, 250–256. In support of his case, Shaw also argues against the traditional connection between the deaths of Peter and Paul and victims of punitive actions after the Great Fire (74–78), dismisses the relevance of other sources, such as Suetonius (80–81) and *1 Clement* (81–82), and, finally, questions the existence of a "sizeable community of persons publicly known as Christians in Rome and Ostia ... as early as the 50s and 60s" (89), who could have been singled out for punishment. These points are also criticized by Jones 2017, but with different arguments.

[6] Van der Lans is mainly responsible for § 1 and 2 and Bremmer for § 3 and the Appendix.

1. Is Tacitus' Account Implausible?

How significant is it that Pliny, Suetonius and Cassius Dio do not refer to Christians when they describe the Fire or mention the event in passing?[7] It is important to take into account that the main interest of these authors is Nero's responsibility for the Fire.[8] Pliny the Elder, for instance, in his discussion of trees, laments the loss of a special type of tree in the Fire, which he refers to as "the Emperor Nero's conflagration" which "hastened the death even of trees" (*Naturalis historia,* XVII,1,5–6). For him Nero's involvement in the Fire is most relevant, and he is under no obligation to mention the punishment of Christians in connection with that event, had he been aware of it.[9] Nero's culpability is also the dominant interpretative framework in the surviving descriptive accounts of the Fire by Suetonius (*Nero*, 38) and the epitome of Cassius Dio (LXII,16–17). While their accounts differ in some details concerning the development of the Fire and the specific actions ascribed to Nero, both emphasise that the devastating effects of the conflagration on the city and its people were the result of the emperor's preconceived plan. Mentioning any other explanations for the Fire that may have been circulating would sit uncomfortably in these narratives, which present Nero's guilt as a given fact.[10]

Suetonius' mention of Nero's punishment of Christians (*Nero*, 16,2) separately from the Fire can be explained by his biographical practice of dividing his material into blameless and commendable acts on the one hand, and shameful and criminal acts on the other.[11] Following this division, the conflagration illustrates Nero's depravity, whereas the anti-Christian actions are briefly mentioned along with several commendable sumptuary measures, actions against the misbehaviour of chariot drivers, and the actors and their supporting factions (*Nero*, 9–19). This categorisation makes it difficult to determine whether Suetonius was disinterested in or unaware of a connection with the Fire. His account raises the possibility that these were in fact unconnected events, or in

[7] This point is emphasised in the literature mentioned in note 3 and 4.

[8] On the question of Nero's guilt, see Griffin 2001, 106–112; Champlin 2003, 182–191.

[9] Cf. Shaw 2015, 82. Pliny may well have mentioned Christians in connection with the Great Fire in his lost *Historiae*, which was composed between 70 and 76 when memory of the Fire must have been still fresh (see Syme 1958, I, 293). Instead of stating with Shaw that "Tacitus is the *only* source that connects Christians, their persecution, and the fire" (80), it is surely more correct to state that he is the *only surviving* source.

[10] Compare Seneca, *Epistulae morales*, 94,61; *Octavia*, 831–833; Statius, *Silvae*, II,7,60–61. For the portraits of Nero in Suetonius and Dio, see respectively Barton 1994; Gowing 1997; Schulz 2014.

[11] Hurley 2014.

any case that for Roman historians other than Tacitus the role of Christians was not an important part of this event. Yet if their punishment in 64 is discarded altogether, it proves difficult to explain how, when and by whom Nero came to be identified as persecutor of Christians.[12]

Does Tacitus' anachronistic use of the term *Chrestiani* for a group that was supposedly not sufficiently distinctive yet to be blamed for the Fire make the persecution historically implausible?[13] Concerning the first argument, an updated survey of the occurrence of the name (see Appendix) confirms that the label "Christian" was indeed a later designation, perhaps invented by the Roman authorities in Antioch, which was taken over by the Christians themselves only gradually. Tacitus' description of the *Chrestiani* as a baleful *superstitio* draws on early second-century perceptions of the new movement, notably on knowledge that may have been exchanged between him and his friend Pliny the Younger (88–89, 91–92).[14] Yet while the use of early second-century terminology and perceptions certainly means that we should be careful to transport this vocabulary back to the first century, it does not disprove that something like the described phenomenon existed at that time. In other words, even if Nero's victims were perhaps not labelled Christians, it does not follow that they were not followers of Christ.[15]

The question is how distinctiveness can be measured and identified. Paul's letter to Rome, composed ca. 56–57, which is only mentioned by Shaw in a footnote (89 n. 78), ascertains that such a group that articulated a bond with

[12] As already noted above, Shaw hypothesizes that Tacitus drew on "written or oral sources" in which "the figure of Nero had *somehow* (our italics) come to be connected with Christians and then, in turn, Christians were linked to the guilty persons who had had severe punishments inflicted upon them in the aftermath of the Great Fire" (93). Shaw describes the formation of these connections as "arbitrary" and "happenstance" (93), although he also suggests a connection with a growing awareness of Christians in elite Roman circles on the one hand, and the development of the Nero myth in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic circles on the other (95). The special place of Nero in Roman cultural memory undoubtedly helped to sustain the negative recollection of this emperor in early Christian tradition, but it does not explain why and how he came to be remembered as a persecutor.

[13] Shaw (89): "Christians, who were probably not called or even known by this name at the time, were hardly a sufficiently distinctive group within the Jewish communities at Rome in the 60s to be noted for their own peculiar identity, much less a well-known group under this name and recognized as such by the ordinary inhabitants of the city." Tacitus' account is often taken as an indication that by 64 Christians had moved away from Jewish circles: Lichtenberger 1993; Lampe 2003, 16; Spence 2004; Trebilco 2012, 276–280.

[14] See, for instance, Wilken 1984, 48–49.

[15] At times Shaw seems to allow for the possibility that Nero acted against Christians who were not known under this name yet, by denying that Nero acted against people "under this name" (p. 89).

Jesus as the central part of their collective identity existed in Rome by the mid-first century.[16] Even though the addressees of the letter would not self-identify as Christian, Paul's designation of them in the letter opening as "called to belong to Jesus Christ our Lord" (κλητοὶ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ: *Romans*, 1,6) implies that they identified themselves with reference to Christ. Throughout the letter, Paul alludes to their shared identity in Christ as an argument to overcome internal divisions and to "live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus" (τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν ἐν ἀλλήλοις κατὰ Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν: *Romans*, 15,5). And while at least some of them also continued to identify as *Ioudaioi* (*Romans*, 2,17), it is also possible for Paul to distinguish his addressees from those "Israelites" who had not accepted Jesus as the Messiah (*Romans*, 9–11).

Whether this group is considered "sufficiently distinctive" (89) to be identified by the authorities or by the *vulgus* as potential arsonists depends on the criteria we employ.[17] If distinctiveness is measured by size, the long list of greetings with which Paul ends his letter, mentioning 25 Roman believers by name as well as an unspecified number of "brothers and sisters" and "saints" who belong to the households of named individuals, should suffice to suggest a sizable community. Paul's letter also suggests a degree of social distinctiveness, for instance when his addressees gathered in houses or tenements for meals, reading, singing and prayer (*Romans*, 14–15).[18] Whether any of their social and ritual practices (abstention from sacrificial meat, abstention from sacrifice, morality) already attracted the same sort of negative attention as in other places and in later times, or whether the possible tendency among some of Paul's addressees to resist the authorities (*Romans*, 13,1–13) made them particularly vulnerable for scapegoating in mid first-century Rome, is more difficult to ascertain.[19] A social group need not be particularly large or well known to be subject of popular rumour and to be singled out for punishment. In situations of social and economic crisis, such as that engendered by the Great Fire, even small and normally inconspicuous groups can become the centre of so-called moral panics, in which there is disproportionate concern over marginal groups that attract

[16] Cf. Jones 2017, 151.

[17] That Christ followers continued to move within Jewish circles does not mean that Roman authorities could only regard them as Jews and not single them out for punishment. It is noteworthy that the earliest pagan observers, with the possible exception of Galen, do not express an awareness of these connections: Barclay 2013 and Baumgarten 2013.

[18] On location, see Lampe 2003, 359–365 and 2015a, 117–122; Adams 2013.

[19] Paul's moral exhortation to "bless those who persecute you" (12,14) and to live peaceably with all, "so far as it depends on you" (12,18) suggests some sense of experienced tension with the environment, but the nature and scope of this tension escapes us.

attention and annoyance.[20] Tacitus' famous *odio generis humani* (*Annals*, XV,44,5), if already valid for Neronian times, would indeed point in that direction.[21]

For these reasons, the arguments adduced by Shaw and others before him do not succeed in disproving Tacitus' account, or in proving Shaw's argument that the Neronian persecution is a myth. The question remains why Tacitus was so interested in the connection between the Great Fire and Nero's punishment of Christians? To answer this question, we need to consider the narrative and rhetorical features of Tacitus' passage.[22]

2. The Place of Tacitus' Report on the Christians in the Narrative of the Great Fire[23]

Tacitus was no mere compiler of historical facts. It has become increasingly accepted to read the *Annals* as a literary historiography that not only describes historical events and figures, but also provides an analysis of the political system of the Principate.[24] These comments and analyses are rarely stated explicitly, but are often made indirectly through narrative structure, by employing motifs that evoke particular connotations and through intertextual references that invite comparison.[25] While this indirectness further complicates extracting Tacitus' opinions, it is clear that rather than accepting certain statements as said, they should be examined for the way in which they are said, and at which point in the narrative.[26] In spite of its fame, sustained literary analyses of our passage in relation to the narrative structure, motifs and intertexts of Tacitus' account of Nero's Principate are relatively recent.[27]

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[20] For the notion of moral panic, see the classic study by Cohen 2002. On the crisis of 64, Newbold 1974.

[21] The phrase has often been discussed; see most recently Piovanelli 2014, reprinted in Piovanelli 2016.

[22] Shaw considers these rhetorical features irrelevant to the "bare historicity of the event" (79).

[23] Unless otherwise specified, the text of Tacitus used throughout is Heubner 1994. Translations are drawn from Woodman 2004.

[24] Syme's efforts to integrate literary and historical analysis were further developed by Timothy P. Wiseman and Anthony J. Woodman. For a concise discussion of the two approaches, see Ash 2012, 8-11; on the *Annals* as political commentary, see Klaassen 2014.

[25] See, for instance, the contributions in Kraus 2010.

[26] On this problem, Luce 2012.

[27] The assumption that Tacitus' description of Christians serves his portrayal of Nero informs several recent studies: Schmitt 2011, with reference to Hanslik 1963; Meier 2012, 427.

For the present argument we focus on the place of the passage concerning Christians in the narrative structure of his account of the Great Fire. This disaster narrative occupies a central position in Tacitus' analysis of Nero's rule, as has repeatedly been observed.[28] The most prominent motif that Tacitus employs to that effect is that of the captured city (*urbs capta*). His description of the destruction of the city, the chaos and confusion, lamentations of women and children, the plunder of temples, contains some of the standard elements that were used to depict the fall of a city to a foreign foe (*Annals*, XV,8,2–7).[29] This imagery is used here to portray Nero as the princeps who wages war on his own people, as is clear from Tacitus' description of the emperor's conduct before and after the Fire.[30] The disaster follows immediately (*sequitur clades*: *Annals*, XV,38,1) on Nero's public banquet in which he treated the city as his own house (XV,37,1).[31] After the Fire, Nero makes use of the ruins of the country to build his own magnificent *Domus aurea* (XV,42,1). He is also said to have laid Italy waste and to have looted the temples in the city (XV,45,1). Seneca supposedly decided to retire at this point to avoid any association with sacrilege (XV,45,3). Besides these characterisations of Nero, the motif of the captured city is further developed by calling to mind memorable destructions of cities in the past. The fall of Troy is mentioned explicitly in XV,39,3,[32] as is the historical event of the Gallic Sack of Rome in 390 BC (XV,41,2; 43,1–5), which is also evoked by means of intertextual allusions to Livy's famous account of this traumatic episode (V,55,5–2).[33] In light of Tacitus' portrayal of Nero as foreign invader and committer of religious transgression, the passage describing his attempt to transfer blame on a group characterised by a *superstitio* imported from Judaea may be read as ironic.[34]

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[28] Keitel 2009, and her publications mentioned in n. 30. Woodman 1988 points out that Tacitus regularly employs disaster narratives to develop his major themes and to comment on the successes and failures of specific emperors.

[29] For general discussion of the motif, see Paul 1982.

[30] Keitel 1984 and 2010.

[31] On Tacitus' characterisation of Rome as a foreign city in this episode, and its foreshadowing of the Great Fire, see Woodman 2012.

[32] On Tacitus' allusion to Vergil, *Aeneis*, II, see Feeney 2007, 107.

[33] On Tacitus' allusions to Livy, see especially Kraus 1994, and, with respect to traditional Roman religion and archaic temples, Shannon 2012. For intertextual references to Livy's description of the Bacchanalian affair in Tacitus' report on Christians, see Cook 2011, 53 (with earlier bibliography).

[34] Tacitus' association of Christians with *odium humani generis* may be another instance of Tacitean irony, if we follow the suggestion of Meier 2012 that the phrase alludes to qualifications of Nero as misanthropic (cf. Pliny, *N.H.* VII,46). For irony in Tacitus, see Köhnken

Most important for the present purposes is the function of this passage in Tacitus' presentation of Nero's handling of the crisis of the Fire and its repercussions for Nero's legitimacy. Compared to other classical authors, Tacitus not only provides the most detailed treatment of the Fire and its aftermath, but he is also distinctly interested in the different attempts by Nero to avert the rumours about his involvement in setting fire to the city, of which his action against Christians is the third and final attempt.[35] In all three cases, the description of Nero's actions is followed by a comment on the public response and the continued circulation of rumours, making clear that Nero's efforts were in vain.[36]

The first step in Nero's crisis management was offering "human help" (*humanis consiliis*; XV,44,1; *ope humana*, XV,44,2) by showing largesse, the generosity that was expected of an emperor when disaster struck. In this case Nero offered shelter, restored damages and provided for food (XV,39, 43). Tacitus describes these investments as "popular yet of no avail", as they were followed by the rumour that Nero sung of the destruction of Troy as Rome burned (XV,39,3).[37] The second eruption of the fire, which destroyed many ancient temples and triumphal monuments, resulted in "ill repute" (*infamia*, XV,40,2; 44,2) and in fresh rumours that Nero sought to replace the old city with a new one named after himself (XV,40,2).[38] Nero's second step consisted of public expiatory ceremonies to appease the gods,[39] which were selected upon consultation of the Sibylline books (XV,44,1).[40] Again, Tacitus comments that it was impossible to put down the *infamia* that the fire had been ordered, and then proceeds to report the prosecution of Christians "to dispel the rumour" (*abolendo rumori*) as the third step (XV,44,2).

1973, repr. in Köhnken 2006; O'Gorman 2000. An ironic reading of Tacitus' excursus on the Jews (*Historiae*, V,5) has been proposed by Gruen 2011, 179–198.

[35] On rumour as a structuring device in Tacitean narrative, see Hardie 2012, 298–300; on its role in political communication, see now Courrier 2017.

[36] Tacitus, *Historiae*, I,89, notes that Nero was dethroned by rumours and not by arms.

[37] Compare Suetonius, *Nero*, 38,3; Dio, LXII,62,18,1.

[38] See also "Neropolis" in Suetonius, *Nero*, 55.

[39] This is a rare case of a description of expiatory ritual. Nero's religious response is not discussed by Suetonius and Dio, but there is epigraphic evidence for a vow to set up an altar to Vulcan: the most complete text is *CIL* VI 30837 (b); cf. *CIL* VI 30837 (a) and (c). See Nash 1962, 60–62.

[40] It has gone unnoticed that this is the only report in imperial historiography of an official consultation of the Sibylline books after a disaster between Augustus' relocation of the books to Apollo's temple in 18 BC and the time of the Emperor Gallus (251–253). Nero perhaps responded to the circulation of popular oracular verses that incriminated him (Dio, LXII,17,3–4), thereby asserting his religious authority.

The main theme that emerges from this three-step narrative structure is Nero's relationship with Rome's urban plebs, which Tacitus here critically evaluates. While this framing informs in the first place about Tacitus' perception of the events, it also draws our attention to an aspect of Nero's performance of his imperial role that is otherwise not self-evidently integrated in analyses of his actions against Christians. Such an approach is in line with scholarly efforts of the last decades to look beyond the hostile depiction of senatorial historiography and to understand aspects of the emperor's idiosyncratic public behaviour more symbolically in light of his attempts to establish legitimacy in communications with the main support groups – senatorial elite, the military and the *plebs urbana*.[41] Thus, whether Nero's artistic and agonistic aspirations are analysed primarily as mythical performances[42] or, as suggested elsewhere, as part of the adoption of a Hellenistic style of rulership,[43] it is clear that these aspects of Nero's public behaviour altered existing modes of communication between the emperor and the people and show his interest in creating intimate bonds with the urban plebs.[44]

This theme seems to have become more central to Nero's public behaviour in the years leading up to the Great Fire.[45] By the time that fire struck in 64, Nero had increasingly come to rely on the support of the urban plebs. The death of Agrippina, Burrus' fatal illness in 62 and Seneca's waning influence meant that his most influential advisors had left the stage while at the same time Nero's initially friendly relationship with the Senate had seriously declined.[46]

At this crucial stage of Nero's imperial career, the Fire of 64 put Nero's relationship with the urban plebs to the test.[47] Disasters such as earthquakes, famine, floods and fires were often important occasions for Roman leaders to demonstrate their care (*cura*) for their subjects and their generosity (*liberalitas*)

[41] For an overview, see Ronning 2011. Foundational for the acceptance model of the Principate is Flaig 1992.

[42] As in Champlin 2003.

[43] Van Overmeire 2012; Bergmann 1994.

[44] On subversion of traditional social structures at Nero's games, see Heinemann 2014.

[45] A development that can also be seen in later Neronian coinage, where a greater emphasis on Nero's care for the *plebs urbana* is observed by Wolters – Ziegert 2014, 64–65. On the relation between Neronian images on coins and in the literary record, see Hekster et al. 2014.

[46] On the turning point of 59–62, see Griffin 2001, 83–99.

[47] Flaig 2014 argues that Nero's loss of popular support started from the moment of Agrippina's death and never recovered, but he seems to distinguish insufficiently between Tacitus' narrative and the actual political process that included positive appraisals of the emperor after his death.

to their local communities. If handled well, disasters could lead to an increase in popularity and fame. But at the same time, disasters potentially undermined confidence in the legitimacy of the emperor when seen as signs of inadequate leadership, or when adversity was interpreted as a sign of divine displeasure.[48]

This crisis of legitimacy explains why Nero took unprecedented steps to regain popular acceptance. Thus the third and final attempt that Nero undertook to counter the challenge that the people's ire posed to his leadership was to transfer the accusation of arson to a group that were called *Chrestiani* by the public (*vulgos Chrestianos appellabat*; see also Appendix) and to execute a number of them in a public spectacle (XV,44,2). It is likely that Tacitus' use of this naming, as well as his explanation of who these Christians were and the legal procedure that followed, reflects the author's early second-century experiences.[49] Narratively, Tacitus uses the opportunity to comment on Nero's perversion of justice, for instance by noting that Nero "supplied defendants" (*subdidit reos*), an expression he uses elsewhere for false accusations.[50] The emperor also did nothing to filter out the false accusations, which multiplied after the first arrests.[51] It suited Tacitus' Nero to convict and punish large numbers. It was a prime occasion for image management, an ultimate effort to renew warm relationships with the people, for which public spectacles formed the most appropriate social setting. Usually, spectacular punishments functioned to elicit support for the regime. By alienating the condemned from their social contexts, the "spectators, regardless of class, were united in a feeling of moral superiority".[52] When the public expressed enthusiasm and assent it sanctioned the authority of the state to enforce rules and exercise justice. The just punishment of deserving victims, as Kathleen Coleman has observed in a classic article, was indeed one of the appeals of such violent spectacles.[53] In this light, Tacitus' conclusion is significant:

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[48] See, for instance, Tacitus, *Annales*, VI,45,1 on Tiberius turning "loss into fame". The *principes* seem to have realised the benefits of catastrophe, as is suggested by a complaint ascribed to Caligula that his rule would sink into oblivion because it lacked "the distinction of any public calamities" (Suetonius, *Caligula*, 31). On the cultural discourse on fire and leadership, see Closs 2013.

[49] It is possible that Tacitus obtained information from his friend Pliny but he may also have been confronted with or heard of similar problems during his governorship in Asia (112–113).

[50] For discussion of this expression, see Beaujeu 1960, 73–74; Jones 2017, 148.

[51] This contrasts with Pliny's self-avowed procedural care: *Epistulae*, X,96,3, compare X,97,2.

[52] Coleman 1990, 47.

[53] Coleman 1990, 58; see Seneca, *Dialogi*, IV,2,4, on watching just punishment; cf. Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, 19,2; Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones*, VI,20,10. Note that Juvenal, *Satirae*, 1,155–158 alludes to people punished by being burnt at the stake, but as an illustration of Tigellinus' cruelty. There is no indication that Juvenal has Christians or the Fire in mind.

> *unde quamquam adversus sontes et novissima exempla meritos miseratio oriebatur, tamquam non utilitate publica, sed in saevitiam unius absumerentur* ("Hence there arose – albeit for culprits who deserved the ultimate exemplary treatment – a feeling of pity, as though it were not in the public interest but for one man's savagery, that they were being eliminated"; *Annals*, XV,44,5).

Even though these culprits deserved punishment, as Tacitus writes, a feeling of pity arose, apparently because it was felt that their chastisement was not being exacted on the right grounds: it was not done with an eye to the public interest (*non utilitate publica*), but to satisfy the needs of a cruel ruler. Tacitus makes clear that even now, in the setting of the theatre that was so popular among the crowd, Nero failed to elicit support, as the public did not accept the legitimacy of the punishment and demonstrated pity, thereby challenging the legitimacy of Nero as enforcer of justice.[54] This compassion, then, resulted in a case of failed scapegoating.[55]

Our discussion, which has focused on the narrative structure of Tacitus' mention of the persecution of the Christians in connection with the Great Fire, aimed to demonstrate that his description represents one step, in his analysis of the decline of Nero's rule as it unfolds in the disaster narrative of the Fire. For Tacitus, this step centres on Nero's loss of acceptance among the urban plebs. In the crisis of the Fire, Nero's demonstrations of generosity and care as well as his attempts to appease the gods failed to produce glory (*fama*) and stop rumours of Nero's responsibility for the Fire. Even the spectacular punishment of a despised group of people did not succeed in eliciting expressions of assent and acceptance. As we have argued, the literary and rhetorical features of Tacitus' passage are far from irrelevant to considerations of the historicity of the event. It is precisely Tacitus' fascination with the demise of Nero's rule that explains why he is so interested in the connection between the punishment of Christians and the Great Fire, whereas other authors, who do not demonstrate a similar interest, did not pay any attention to it.

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[54] As Alexandra Eckert (pers. comment) points out to us, pity for victims could be a motif associated with the excessive cruelty of tyrants: Valerius Maximus, IX,2,1 on Sulla. Unsurprisingly, other instances come from Christian martyrs' accounts: *Acta Pauli*, 4,2 Rordorf et al. (in Bovon – Geoltrain 1997–2005, I,1127–1177, which is based on the forthcoming edition in *CChr.SA = Acta Pauli et Theclae,* 27 [late second century]); *Passio Perpetuae*, 20,2 (AD 203); *Acta Carpi*, A42–47 (Decian persecution: Jones 2012).

[55] Flaig 2010, 285 and 2014, 277–278.

3. Nero's Persecution in Early Christian Literature

Let us now turn to later Christian interpretations and representations of the events of 64. Did the early Christians actually remember the Neronian persecution as reported by Tacitus or did they only construct a tradition in later times, as is argued by Shaw? Looking at the first and second centuries, it is important to pay special attention to those testimonies and allusions that precede Tacitus or are more or less contemporaneous, as they can be considered to be independent evidence and possible corroborations of Tacitus' report. Given that knowledge of Tacitus' work must have taken time to reach the Greek East, if it ever did, this means that we should look at the Christian literature dating from the Flavian dynasty until about AD 150. Evidently, a major problem here is the dating of many early Christian writings. In order not to bias our investigation, we will follow the *Mehrheitsmeinung* as much as possible, but we will also take into account the most recent insights about the various dates.

Our oldest relevant text is the anonymous letter *Hebrews*, which can be associated with Rome, or at least Italy, based on the admittedly ambiguous greetings conveyed on behalf of "those from Italy" (οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας: 13,24), and on its affinities with sources that certainly stem from Rome.[56] The text probably originated as a sermon and is often situated in late Flavian Rome.[57] It mentions external pressures that challenge the current commitment of its addressees (10,36–12,13). The author asks his audience:

> Ἀναμιμνήσκεσθε δὲ τὰς πρότερον ἡμέρας, ἐν αἷς φωτισθέντες πολλὴν ἄθλησιν ὑπεμείνατε παθημάτων, τοῦτο μὲν ὀνειδισμοῖς τε καὶ θλίψεσιν θεατριζόμενοι, τοῦτο δὲ κοινωνοὶ τῶν οὕτως ἀναστρεφομένων γενηθέντες ("But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated"; *Hebrews*, 10,32–33).

The verb θεατρίζω, which is fairly rare but typical of a martyrological context in later periods,[58] underlines the public character of the humiliation and fits in with

[56] The close affinities with *1 Clement* and *1 Peter*, which are well elaborated by Zwierlein 2010, 254, 267, 283 and 300–301 and 2013, 18–19, also suggest a Roman milieu.

[57] For the different arguments regarding date and provenance, see Attridge 1989, 6–9, who is probably too early in his dating, but most recent commentaries date *Hebrews* before 100. For a Flavian date, see also Rüpke 2012, 5–30, updated in Rüpke 2016, 109–132.

[58] Cf. *Mart. Lugdunensium*, 1,47: ἀνῆγεν ἐπὶ τὸ βῆμα θεατρίζων τοὺς μακαρίους καὶ ἐμπομπεύων τοῖς ὄχλοις; *Martyrium Ignatii*, 7,3: οὐκ ἀσχημονεῖν ὑμᾶς ἠνάγκαζον γυμνοὺς θεατρίζοντες. Espe-

the description of the suffering in agonistic terms (ἄθλησις). The recollection of past suffering serves to admonish the hearers to hold on to the endurance they showed in the past, possibly shortly after their conversion, when they "gladly accepted" (μετὰ χαρᾶς προσεδέξασθε: 10,34) the confiscation of their property, knowing that they would eventually be rewarded. This may be a recollection of the events under Nero, but since the text does not provide more specific clues, it remains difficult to relate these forms of suffering to specific historical events. Yet given its probably Roman/Italian origin, it clearly suggests persecution(s) in the past.

The next reference to be considered is more enigmatic. In *Revelation*, which is commonly dated to somewhere around 100 but without a general consensus about either the author or the place of composition, there is a reference to a second beast associated with the number six hundred sixty-six (13,18). Tons of ink has been spilled about this number, but the majority of interpreters have accepted that the number is "(among many other things) the sum of the numerical equivalents for the Hebrew letters which spell the words 'Neron Caesar'".[59] Furthermore, one of the beast's heads is said to have received a seemingly fatal wound of which it had been healed (13,3.12.14). This is probably a reference to the myth of *Nero redituru*s, which would place *Revelation* among Jewish apocalyptic scenarios of Nero's return as eschatological opponent.[60] The exact role of the events of 64 in the author's development of the Nero legend is difficult to pin down. The description of actions taken by the beast against "the saints" remains rather vague, befitting the genre: the beast is said to utter blasphemous words against God and the saints (13,5–6) and to wage war on them (13,7). Interpretations of *Revelation* as a direct response to persecution, whether under Nero or Domitian, have rightly been criticised.[61] At the same time, if there would be no historical basis for any actions against Christians

cially interesting and not yet adduced as a parallel for the *Hebrews* passage is Posidonius fr. 137,10 Theiler (on the Sicilian slave revolt of Eunus): μίμους δὲ ἐξ ἀποστάσεως τοῖς ἔνδον ἐπεδείκνυτο, δι' ὧν οἱ δοῦλοι τὰς <ἀπὸ> τῶν ἰδίων κυρίων ἀποστασίας ἐξεθεάτριζον, ὀνειδίζοντες αὐτῶν τὴν ὑπερηφανίαν καὶ τὴν ὑπερβολὴν τῆς εἰς τὸν ὄλεθρον προαγούσης ὕβρεως.

[59] Champlin 2003, 18; Barnes 2010, 38, cf. Hengel 1993, 411 (by Jörg Frey): "Für die in Apk 13,18 begegnende Rätselzahl des Tieres 666 (v.l. 616) ist nach Auffassung der Mehrzahl der Ausleger nach wie vor die gematrische Deutung auf Nero die wahrscheinlichste."

[60] For recent discussion of *Nero redituru*s in *Rev*, see Klauck 2001; Van Kooten 2007; Frenschkowski 2015; Noak 2016 and 2017.

[61] Although Yarbro Collins 1984, 99–100 makes the important argument that persecution should not be regarded as a catalyst for *Rev*, she treats Nero's actions as a "lingering trauma" and notes that "the trauma of 64 explains Nero's prominence as eschatological adversary in the *Book of Revelation*."

under Nero, his supposed appearance as the eschatological adversary would be difficult to explain. Rather, *Revelation* fits in with the pattern emerging from this survey showing that under specific historical circumstances and for specific rhetorical concerns, allusions to earlier persecutions had persuasive power.

More or less contemporaneous with *Revelation* is the *Ascension of Isaiah*, which was compiled at some point in the period 70–120 in Syria or at least in that broader region.[62] In this challenging apocalypse we find the following passage:

> Now, therefore, Hezekiah and Josab my son, these are the days of the completion of the world. And after it is completed, Beliar will descend, the great ruler, the king of this world, which he has ruled ever since it existed. He will descend from his firmament in the form of a man, a lawless emperor, a matricide – this is the king of this world – and he will persecute the plant which the Twelve Apostles of the Beloved will have planted, and one of the Twelve will be delivered into his hands. This ruler will come in the form of that emperor, and with him will come all the powers of this world and they will obey him in all that he desires (4,1–4).[63]

The reference to the "matricide" strongly suggests that Nero is meant, as has been generally accepted.[64] The "one of the Twelve" is probably Peter.[65] Given the presence of Nero, the place of execution must be Rome, but we are not informed about the manner of Peter's execution.

With *1 Clement*, which Zwierlein has persuasively dated to about 120–125,[66] we arrive at the time of publication of Tacitus' *Annals*. In this letter, the Church of Rome speaks to the Church of Corinth. After a series of ancient examples showing the detrimental effects of jealousy and envy, the vices that troubled the Corinthian church, the author comes to "the noble examples of our generation" (τῆς γενεᾶς ἡμῶν τὰ γενναῖα ὑποδείγματα: 5,1). He mentions as "the greatest and most upright pillars" (οἱ μέγιστοι καὶ δικαιότατοι στῦλοι: 5,2) that were persecuted and executed both Peter and Paul (5,4–7).[67] Given the persis-

[62] Most recently, Knight 2016, 46f.

[63] Transl. Barnes 2015, 93.

[64] Norelli 1994 ("AI 4 e Nerone anticristo") and 1995; Champlin 2003, 17; Dochhorn 2012, 293–315.

[65] For parallels of the expression "one of the Twelve" meaning Peter, see Norelli 1995, 244–247; Ameling 2011, 475; Barnes 2015, 93.

[66] Zwierlein 2010, 245–331 and 2013, 89–104, 276–279, 285f.

[67] Shaw 2015, 85 says that "No specific persons are named, and no place or date is given", but Peter and Paul are clearly mentioned as examples of those "pillars", cf. Ameling 2011, 486.

tent tradition that Peter died in Rome (above and below), this may well be a local reference. To these men (τούτοις τοῖς ἀνδράσιν) "have been added a great multitude of the chosen" (συνηθροίσθη πολὺ πλῆθος ἐκλεκτῶν), who have set a superb example "amongst us" (ἐν ἡμῖν) by their suffering (6,1).[68] The author continues with women, who "were persecuted as Danaids and Dircae because of jealousy" (Διὰ ζῆλος διωχθεῖσαι γυναῖκες Δαναΐδες καὶ Δίρκαι: 6,1–2). The mention of these "Danaids and Dircae" fits the connection with contemporary Rome, as Tassilo Schmitt has well shown.[69] As most of our evidence for such mythological fatal charades clusters under Nero and Titus,[70] the notice is compatible with the Neronian persecution. This is even more likely as we do not hear of persecutions under Titus. If this conclusion is correct, *1 Clement* is the earliest indication that Nero's actions had become part of the Roman churches' local memory.[71] It would be the beginning of a long period in which among the Christians no emperor would have such a bad name as he had.[72]

The end of *1 Peter*, of which recent discussions have noted the proximity to the time of Pliny,[73] also suggests a stay of Peter in Rome. The place of composition of the letter, "Babylon" (5,13), almost certainly refers to Rome, as was usual in many Jewish and Christian writings of the time.[74] The letter thus seems to presuppose knowledge by the congregations in Asia Minor of Peter's connection with Rome, but does not give clues about the circumstances of his death. An early indication for a violent death may be found in chapter 21 of the *Gospel of John*, which is commonly dated somewhere between 90 and 140 and assigned to Syria or Asia Minor.[75] Even if the chapter is not original as has often been argued, it must have been added early as it is not absent from any extant manuscript.[76] In this text Jesus says to Peter that when he has grown old

[68] To deny the local reference of "amongst us", as is done by Zwierlein 2010, 23–27, is a case of special pleading.

[69] For the execution, see, most recently, Champlin 2003, 123–25 and, much more detailed, Schmitt 2012.

[70] As is observed by Coleman 1990, 70.

[71] The fact that a similar case of jealousy is attested by Justin Martyr, *2 Apologia*, 2,2 hardly allows us to call this "a trope", as Shaw 2015, 84 suggests, as the disruption of families by emerging Christianity is well attested, see Bradley 2012, 104–125; Bremmer 2017, 21–23. The mention of women may well have been caused by the great number of women among the early Christians, cf. Bremmer 2010, 56–57 and 2017, 33–41.

[72] Maier 2013.

[73] Zwierlein 2010, 308–315; Horrell 2013, 183–197.

[74] Thus, persuasively, Ameling 2011, 471; Baum 2011 and Durst 2011.

[75] For a good discussion, still see Barrett 1955, 105–114.

[76] Cf. Barclay 1976 for an exposition of the problems.

"you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will gird you and take you where you do not want to go" (ὅταν δὲ γηράσῃς, ἐκτενεῖς τὰς χεῖράς σου, καὶ ἄλλος σε ζώσει καὶ οἴσει ὅπου οὐ θέλεις; 21,18). The author even explains Jesus' words: "he said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would give glory to God" (τοῦτο δὲ εἶπεν σημαίνων ποίῳ θανάτῳ δοξάσει τὸν θεόν; 21,19).[77] It is clear that the author of the chapter knew, or thought he knew, that Peter had died for his faith, but he gives no further information.[78]

We arrive at the earlier second quarter of the second century with the most popular non-canonical early Christian writing, the *Shepherd* of Hermas, which was written in Rome (*Vision*, 1,1,1).[79] It often mentions persecutions and seems to have been written in the conviction to live between two of them. In one of Hermas' apocalyptic visions the woman church, the revelatory agent, lists punishments that have been inflicted on individuals prior to Hermas: "floggings, prisons, great afflictions, crucifixions, and wild beasts for the sake of the name" (μάστιγας, φυλακάς, θλίψεις μεγάλας, σταυρούς, θηρία εἵνεκεν τοῦ ὀνόματος: *Vision*, 3,2,1). As crucifixion and condemnation to the beasts were common modes of punishment for the condemned of a lower status, it is difficult to determine whether the list evokes a local memory of events under Nero. The past experiences of suffering "for the sake of the name" are held up as an example, but there does not seem to be a need to explicate any specific historical or political context in which these occurred. Yet the varied vocabulary connected with persecutions suggests that the Roman Christians already had a long experience with them.[80]

Our final notice derives from the *Apocalypse of Peter*. Most scholars agree that the text dates a decade or so before or after the Bar Kochba revolt, although its precise time and place of composition (Alexandria? Syria?) are still debated.[81] In a Greek fragment we read:

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[77] *John*, 21,18: ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, ὅτε ἦς νεώτερος, ἐζώννυες σεαυτὸν καὶ περιεπάτεις ὅπου ἤθελες· ὅταν δὲ γηράσῃς, ἐκτενεῖς τὰς χεῖράς σου, καὶ ἄλλος σε ζώσει καὶ οἴσει ὅπου οὐ θέλεις. τοῦτο δὲ εἶπεν σημαίνων ποίῳ θανάτῳ δοξάσει τὸν θεόν.

[78] Barnes 2015, 81 suggests that the text refers to the so-called *tunica molesta*, a special tunic interwoven with inflammable materials (see Seneca, *Epistulae morales*, 14,5; Martial, *Spectacula*, IV,86,8; X,25,5; X,86,8; Juvenal, *Satirae*, 1,155–157; 8,235; Tertullian, *Ad nationes*, I,18,10 and *Ad martyras*, 5,1), but the text is too vague to be certain at this point.

[79] For place and date, see Hilhorst 1988 and, especially, Körtner – Leutzsch 1998, 135–137 (by Leutzsch).

[80] Thus Hilhorst 1988, 688–690, who discusses the many references to persecutions.

[81] Most recently Nicklas 2017 (Alexandria after the Egyptian revolt of 115–117); Bremmer 2018 (Alexandria around 150).

> Look Peter, I have manifested to you and expounded all this. And travel to the city that rules over the West and drink the cup that I promised you at the hand of the son of the one who is in Hades, so that his destruction may have a beginning and you will be the receiver of the promise ... (14,4–6).[82]

This *vaticinium ex eventu* clearly locates the martyrdom of Peter in Rome and almost certainly alludes to Nero as "the son of the one who is in Hades". The words "drink the cup" refer to the words of Jesus in Gethsemane that the cup of death be taken from him (*Matthew*, 26,39.42.44; *Mark*, 14,23.36.39; *Luke*, 22,42),[83] and although it is true that these words "are completely compatible with the hypothesis that the writer knew that Peter was burned alive in a posture of crucifixion",[84] it is equally true that the author is not interested in the manner of execution and does not give (or have) any information about it.

Our evidence shows that Roman or Italian Christians started to look back on persecutions in Rome or Italy only a few decades after Nero (*Hebrews*, *Hermas*). Only half a century later, give or take a decade or so, they present Nero as a great enemy of the Christians (*Revelation*, *Ascension of Isaiah*, *Apocalypse of Peter*). Starting around the same time, they also ascribe a martyr's death to Peter (*John*, *1 Peter*) and connect the martyr death of Peter and/or Paul with Rome (*1 Clement*, *Apocalypse of Peter*).[85] It is important to note this chronology, as in the first decades after Nero we can still presuppose an oral tradition of direct or second-generation witnesses to his persecution. Moreover, these notices derive from various parts of the Roman Empire: Rome and Italy (*Hebrews*, *1 Clement*, *1 Peter*, *Hermas*), Asia Minor (?*Revelation*, ?*John*), Syria (?*Ascension of Isaiah*) and Egypt (*Apocalypse of Peter*). Evidently, knowledge of the persecution was widespread in the Christian world. Given the diverse dates and places of origin of our relevant sources, this variety does not support the idea of an invented tradition.

[82] *P.Vindob.* G 39756, fol. 2 r° 8 v° 13: in Kraus – Nicklas 2004, 128.

[83] Cf. Nicklas 2015, 183–200; Bremmer 2017, 379, 465.

[84] Thus Barnes 2015, 95.

[85] For a solid survey of the archaeological evidence connected with Peter, which starts to become apparent after the middle of the second century, see Lampe 2015b.

4. Conclusions: Tacitus, Christians and the Neronian Persecution

Our analysis has shown the importance of integrating historical and literary analysis when interpreting ancient texts. Tacitus' literary aim to depict the decline of Nero's rule through the gradual loss of popular support explains his interest in describing the fate of Christians in the aftermath of the Great Fire, whereas it is absent from other sources which did not share this interest. At the same time, Tacitus provides a window on the political culture of the early Principate and helps to see this first reported coercive action against Christians as closely related to specific political circumstances. Evidently, less than half a century after Nero, the Christians already remembered persecutions and acted as so-called carrier groups who may not have experienced the event themselves, but raised awareness of its social and moral significance.[86] To different degrees, these traditions may be fanciful and exaggerated. Memories of persecution, of opposition by formal authorities and of war are important symbolic ingredients in the narratives with which collectives articulate their identities around a shared and distinct experience.[87] From an early stage onwards, a sense of suffering, references to past experiences of persecution, and opposition to hostile outsiders became part of Christian discourse, and these narrative representations sometimes reach beyond the immediate scope of actual incidents.[88] The sources discussed above reflect how Nero and his persecution were represented and remembered. As we know since the classic study by Maurice Halbwachs, remembering is a creative and social act that involves a construction of the past in the light of present concerns.[89] It is unlikely, however, that Nero made such an impact on the Christian imagination if the link between him and the Christians was the result only of a later incidental association.

[86] The notion of carrier groups is borrowed from the sociologist Alexander 2004.

[87] As emphasised in recent studies of martyrdom as discursive cultural construction: Castelli 2007.

[88] On suffering in early imperial Christian literature, see Perkins 1995.

[89] From the extensive literature about Halbwachs (1877–1945), see, for example, the instructive introduction by Lewis Coser in the English translation of *La mémoire collective* (1950): Halbwachs 1992, 1–40.

APPENDIX

An argument used to challenge Tacitus' account or the historicity of the Neronian persecution itself is that it is improbable, that there could have been a group of people called Christians at the time of the Great Fire.[90] Given the complex origins and development of the name, this appendix presents an up to date bibliography and survey of the sources.

Let us start by asking when the name became popular as an insider designation. Whereas in the third century the name Christian often appears in Latin in Tertullian and Cyprian and in Greek in Clement and Origen, the term first appears in papyri in the earlier third century, becomes more popular only after AD 250 and is still rare as a self-identification in the fourth century.[91] In inscriptions the term first turns up in Phrygia in the first half of the third century,[92] even if in varying spellings, such as *Chreistianos*, *Chrestianos* and *Christianos*.[93] These dates can hardly be separated from the growth of Christianity and the effects of Decius' empire-wide decree of sacrifice. It was only during the persecution following the decree that the term Christian would come to everybody's attention and be adopted by the followers of Jesus in defiance of the Roman government.[94]

Although the term Christian appears in the last decades of the second century in the apocryphal *Acts of Paul* and *Peter*,[95] the term does not appear in the writings of Paul, *1 Clement*, the *Apocalypse of Peter* and Tatian, and is still fairly

[90] Shaw 2015, 86. He notes that "the word was probably first used by persons who were hostile to the Christians as a formal legal-like term that they could use to specify such persons before Roman officials (hence the Latinized form) and which was then adopted by Roman officials as a mode of identifying such accused persons (as, for example, with Pliny later)" (88 n. 71).

[91] Papyri: *SB* XVI 12497, cf. van Minnen 1994, 74–77 (early third century but before AD 256); *P.Oxy* XLII 3035 (256); *P.Oxy* XLIII 3119 (259–260?); *SB* XII 10772 (later third century?); Judge – Pickering 1977, 66–69; Montevecchi 1999, 155–172; Luijendijk 2008, 38–40. Rare: Choat 2006, 47.

[92] Note that Bickerman 1986, I,139–151 dates the appearance of the name too late (from ca. 275).

[93] *SEG* LVIII 1538 (150–250); *TAM* V,3,1840 (229/230); Tabbernee 1997, nos. 9 (*c.* 210, but Gibson 1978, 98, 107 suggests the fourth century), 10 (before 212, though the absence of the *praenomen* Aurelia/us is no absolute guarantee of a pre-212 date), 17 (243), 19 (*c.* 230); for further epigraphical evidence see Tabbernee 1997, *passim*; Guarducci 1967–1978, IV,433–434; Pietri 1997, III,1583–1602. Spelling: Tabbernee 1997, 89 f. For the slow acceptance, see also Destephen 2010, 159–194.

[94] Bremmer 1991, updated in Bremmer 2017, 7–12, which we freely use here.

[95] *Acta Pauli et Theclae*, 14, 16 and *Martyrium Pauli*, 2–3; *Martyrium Petri*, 33.

rare in Irenaeus and Hippolytus.[96] The name Christian is more popular in the *Apology* of Aristides (2,2; 15-17: time of Hadrian), and in Ignatius,[97] but both writers make explicit that Jesus' followers are called Christians, rather than using the name in a self-evident manner.[98] Justin Martyr needs the term in his dialogue with Tryphon to distinguish the Christians from the Jews, but he also lets the latter speak of "the so-called Christians" (λεγομένων Χριστιανῶν; 35,1; see also 80,3) as does Athenagoras (ἡμεῖς δὲ οἱ λεγόμενοι Χριστιανοί: 1,3). In the *Letter* of Diognetus, which probably dates from the earlier second half of the second century,[99] the term occurs often, but given the apologetic genre of the *Letter* this might not come as a surprise. Finally, in *1 Peter* (4,16) the name Christian is connected with suffering and seems to suggest an outsider designation, even if understandable to the readers.[100] In short, the term "Christian" as an insider designation took off slowly and did not become more widely used before the second half of the second century. Its occurrence is especially frequent in works directed to outsiders, rhetorical or not, be they pagans (Aristides, Diognetus and Athenagoras) or Jews (Justin Martyr). Before that time the Christians used other terms to denote themselves, such as "the Way",[101] "the believers", "the saints" or "God's people".[102]

Unfortunately, two early and potentially highly valuable testimonies are beset with problems. As is well known, Josephus (*Antiquities*, XVIII,63-64) concludes his notice about Jesus with: εἰς ἔτι τε νῦν τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἀπὸ τοῦδε ὠνομασμένων οὐκ ἐπέλιπε τὸ φῦλον, "and until now the tribe of the Christians, named after him (i.e. Jesus) has not disappeared". However, the authenticity of the passage has often been called into doubt, even though some recent discussions are more positive in their evaluation of Josephus.[103] If genuine, it would be the first testimony of

[96] Cf. Peterson 1959, 86-87, who discusses its absence or rare occurrence in other early Christian works.

[97] Ignatius, *Ephesians*, 11; *Magnesians*, 10. He also introduces the term "Christianity": *Magnesians*, 10: κατὰ Χριστιανισμὸν ζῆν; *Romans*, 3; *Philippians*, 6.

[98] Aristides, 15 Pouderon: ὅθεν οἱ εἰσέτι διακονοῦντες τῇ δικαιοσύνῃ τοῦ κηρύγματος αὐτῶν καλοῦνται Χριστιανοί; Ignatius, *Magnesians*, 4: Πρέπον οὖν ἐστὶν μὴ μόνον καλεῖσθαι Χριστιανούς, ἀλλὰ καὶ εἶναι; similarly *Romans*, 3: θέλω, ἵνα μὴ μόνον λέγωμαι Χριστιανός, ἀλλὰ καὶ εὑρεθῶ.

[99] Roig Lanzillotta 2010, 447.

[100] Horrell 2013, 164-210, updated from Horrell 2007.

[101] Urciuoli 2011.

[102] Cf. von Harnack 1924, 410-445; Karpp 1954, 1114-1138; Ferrua 1991, 12-25 (on the spelling of *Christianus/-os*, first published in 1933); Luijendijk 2008, 38-40; Trebilco 2012.

[103] Whealey 2003; Carleton Paget 2010, 199-265, although the latter (p. 223) mistakenly states that the phrase εἰς ἔτι τε νῦν nowhere occurs in Eusebius: see his *Generalis elementaria*

the occurrence of the term *Christiani* in Rome itself already in the nineties and apparently considered by Josephus as known to his readers. However, given the many discussions of the *Testimonium Flavianum*, we can do no more than notice it, as is the case with the second problematic example, the possible occurrence of *Christianos* in a Pompeian inscription (*CIL* IV,679), whose disappearance after the discovery makes it hard to use for building a convincing case.[104]

Now the impression of the term *Christiani* being an outsider designation in the beginning is strengthened by our last two examples, the famous notices about the term Christian in the *Acts of the Apostles*, which is commonly dated to about 90, give or take a decade,[105] although its place of composition is unknown. Whereas the first example conforms to what we have already often seen, namely, that the use of the term Χριστιανός is attributed to an outsider, in this case King Agrippa (*Acts*, 26,8), the second example is more informative but also much debated. Here the author tells us: "and it was in Antioch that the disciples were called Christians for the first time" (χρηματίσαι τε πρώτως ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ τοὺς μαθητὰς Χριστιανούς: 11,26).[106] The notice raises two important problems. First, what is the exact meaning of χρηματίσαι and, second, what is the exact meaning of Χριστιανούς?

Regarding the verb, both Peterson and Bickerman, to whom we owe the most detailed discussions of the verse, agree that it has a legal meaning, but they differ in their translation. Whereas Peterson translates with "(in Antioch) bekamen die Jünger erstmalig die (offizielle) Benennung Χριστιανοί", Bickerman has "in Antioch the disciples started to take on the style of Christians" (i.e. gave themselves the name),[107] and his translation is accepted by Shaw (80) and Barnes.[108]

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introductio (= *Eclogae propheticae*), p. 168,15 Gaisford: εἰς ἔτι τε νῦν παρ' ὅλῳ τῷ ἔθνει προφήτας γεγονέναι τοῦ Θεοῦ πιστεύεσθαι; Olson 2013 (more sceptical).

[104] Although the two nineteenth-century facsimile drawings of the graffito, when it was still visible, seem to support its authenticity, see Wayment – Grey 2015.

[105] See also Shaw 2015, 95 n. 106.

[106] For πρώτως, see Robert 1949, 211: "πρώτως signifie 'pour la première fois', comme πρώτον dont il est une forme hellénistique".

[107] Peterson 1959, 69 ("Christianus"); Bickerman 1986, 142–143.

[108] Cf. Shaw 2015, 88: "The first use of the name *Christianos* as a mode of self-identification is claimed by the historian of Luke-Acts to have occurred in the community in Antioch", but on the same page he writes in n. 71: "My interpretation is interstitial between these two polarities: that the word was probably used first by persons who were hostile to the Christians as a formal legal-like term that they could use to specify such persons before Roman officials (hence the Latinized form) and which was then adopted by the Roman officials as a mode of identifying such accused persons (as, for example, with Pliny, later)"; Barnes 2010, 2: "His (Jesus) followers, who first called themselves Christians in Antioch."

Now both Peterson and Bickerman wrote these lines more than sixty years ago, and since then many more papyri and inscriptions have been published. These new discoveries have given rise to two new studies of the verb, and they both support Peterson. Somewhat improving upon his translation, they have established that the verb means "a person carries a particular name, title, ethnic officially and in public".[109] Thus the passage in Acts tells us that in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians in public. Peterson's hypothesis that Jesus' followers received their designation from the Roman authorities at least explains the fact that the Jewish-Hellenistic followers of Christ eventually adopted a Roman word-formation.[110] Indeed, it would have been hard to understand why it would have taken so long for the name Christian to become the accepted self-designation of the early followers of Christ, if the followers themselves had coined the term at such an early stage in the movement.

Having looked at its first mention, let us now turn to the mention of the word "Christian" in the famous passages of Pliny, Tacitus and Suetonius. As these authors wrote more or less contemporaneously, we will discuss their data in the narrated chronological order. When listing various regulatory measures by Nero, Suetonius writes that he punished the *Christiani* (*Nero*, 16,2), and this spelling is confirmed by a recent palaeographical investigation.[111] As we mentioned above (§ 1), Suetonius' tendency to categorise material explains why Nero's (commendable) punishment of Christians and the events surrounding the Great Fire (illustrating Nero's depravity) are treated separately. Apparently, his characterisation of the *Christiani* as *genus hominum superstitionis novae ac maleficae* sufficed as an explanation, whereas in one of the next measures mentioned, the banishment of pantomime actors, no reason is given at all. The absence of the Fire therefore cannot be adduced as a reason against knowledge of the term Christian in the 60s.

It is unclear whether Suetonius himself saw a connection between those punished under Nero and the Chrestus mentioned in his *Life of Claudius*. Here he notes that, possibly in 49,[112] the emperor expelled the Jews from Rome since they constantly caused disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, *impulsore Chresto*.[113] The reading *Chresto* is certain, as recent investigations have confirmed.[114]

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[109] Jones 2002, 108–116; Broux et al. 2010, 64 (quotation).

[110] Peterson 1959, 75; Judge 2008.

[111] Zara 2011.

[112] The date of the expulsion has often been discussed, see Botermann 1996, 54–57; Lampe 2003, 11–16.

[113] Suetonius, *Claudius*, 25,4: *Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit*. For this much debated expulsion, see van der Lans 2015, 67–71; differently, Wendt 2015, 97–126.

[114] Botermann 1996, 72–87; Boman 2011, 355–376.

Now the name Χρῆστος is surprisingly modern at the time, as we can see from the splendid website of the *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*. In fact, there are no certain examples from the period BC.[115] Moreover, we can also see that the name must have become quickly popular in Italy as we have various examples of Chrestus from Pompeii.[116] It is thus not surprising that Suetonius' source wrote *Chrestus* instead of the wholly unfamiliar *Christus*, if he had the latter in mind, not to mention the interchange of η and ι which happened frequently throughout the Roman and Byzantine periods.[117] As nothing further is known about Suetonius' source, we can only speculate about the event and the reasons for the Jewish unrest.[118] Perhaps his source had referred to followers of Christ as *Acts of the Apostles* regularly mentions the preaching of Paul in synagogues, which sometimes led to disturbances.[119]

Pliny also wrote *Christiani* in his famous letter to Trajan (X,96), and the plausibly Roman *1 Peter* equally has Χριστιανός. On the other hand, Tacitus' famous notice in the *Annales* tells us: *ergo abolendo rumori Nero subdidit reos et quaesitissimis poenis adfecit quos per flagitia invisos vulgus Chrestianos appellabat.*[120] *Auctor nominis eius Christus* (15,44),[121] and there can be no doubt that the scribe originally wrote *Chrestianos* instead of *Christianos*, as, again, recent palaeographical research has established,[122] whereas the reading *Christus* is similarly assured.[123] The fact that three more or less contemporaneous authors spell the name as *Christiani* seems to suggest that Tacitus derived his *Chrestiani* from an older source, perhaps Pliny's *Historiae* (§ 1), the more so as *Chrestus* is already mentioned during the rule of Claudius.

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[115] Fraser et al. 1987–2013; website: http://clas-lgpn2.classics.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/lgpn_search.cgi.

[116] *CIL* IV 2457, 3987, 5023. Cook 2011, 16 notes more than 500 examples of the name.

[117] Blass 1895, 465–470; Gignac 1976, 235–239 (extensive evidence from papyri); Edwards 1991, 232–235; Shandruk 2010, 205–219. Peter van Minnen (personal communication) points to a nice example of this interchange in *P.Lond*. VI,1919,16–17 (ca. 330–340): ... τοῦτο δὲ ποιοῦντες Χρηστιανοὶ κληθή[σο]μεν ἐν Χ(ριστ)ῷ.

[118] See Botermann 1996; Cook 2011, 14–28.

[119] *Acts*, 9,20, 13,5 and 14–41, 14,1–2, 17,1 and 17, 18,4 and 19, 19,8.

[120] Note again that *Chrestianos* is an outsider designation: *vulgus appellabat*. Ruurd Nauta (personal communication) attractively suggests that a pun might be intended by Tacitus: *per flagitia inuisos Chrestianos* (Χρῆστος – χρηστός).

[121] The authenticity of this sentence has been called into question by Carrier 2014.

[122] For the spelling, see Zara 2011; see further Fuchs 1950. Note that the spelling is also confirmed by the quotation in Tertullian, *Apol*. 3,5: *perperam Chrestianus pronuntiatur a vobis*, and *Nat*. I,3,9: *corrupte Chrestiani pronuntiamur a vobis*.

[123] We should resist attempts to change *Christus* into *Chrestus* because of *Chrestianos*: consistency is a modern, not an ancient requirement. *Contra* Renehan 1968; Shaw 2015, 80–81.

From this survey it can be concluded that the name Christian was a designation invented by the Roman authorities, which only gradually was taken over by the Christians themselves. Shaw is of course right when he points out that the first surviving attestations of the term Christian are relatively late. It is also undoubtedly true that the way in which Tacitus, Suetonius and Pliny characterise Christians reflects early second century "public discourse" (89) and can therefore not summarily be projected back onto mid-first century perception. While these points may warrant the conclusion that Nero' victims were perhaps not *labelled Christians*, although Tacitus' *Chrestiani* seems to suggest otherwise (above), it does not necessarily follow that they were not *followers of Christ*.

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Summary

Tacitus' description of Nero's punishment of Christians for the Great Fire of Rome in AD 64 has made a great impact on later understandings of Christian history. However, several questions have been raised concerning the accuracy of this account, and recently the historicity of a persecution of Christians under Nero has been denied altogether by Brent Shaw. This article discusses the most important objections and tries to achieve a better understanding of the events by combining an analysis of the narrative functions of this persecution in Tacitus with a new consideration of the earliest Christian reports. The article ends with an Appendix containing an updated analysis of the emergence of the name "Christian".

Keywords: Nero; persecution; Christians; Tacitus; Great Fire; narrative

BIRGIT VAN DER LANS
University of Bergen
Postboks 7805
N-5020 Bergen
Norway
Birgit.van.der.Lans@uib.no.

JAN N. BREMMER
University of Groningen
Oude Boteringestraat 38
9712 GK Groningen
Netherlans
J.N.Bremmer@rug.nl.

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