

The Prospect of a Christian Interpolation in Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44

Richard Carrier

Independent scholar

www.richardcarrier.info

Abstract

Some scholars have argued that Tacitus' reference to Christ in connection with the burning of Rome under Nero is a 4th century (or later) interpolation. It is here argued that their arguments can be met with no strong rebuttal, and therefore the key sentence in Tacitus referring to Christ should be considered suspect.

Keywords

Tacitus – Chrestus – Christ – Christians – interpolation

Throughout the years a few scholars have argued that some or all of Tacitus' report about Christians in connection with the burning of Rome under Nero is a 4th century (or later) interpolation and not original to Tacitus.¹ Building on their arguments, I find that an interpolation of a single key line in this passage

1 For surveys see Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 42-43; and Herbert W. Benario, "Recent Work on Tacitus (1964-1968)," *The Classical World* 63.8 (April 1970), pp. 253-66 [see pp. 264-65] and "Recent Work on Tacitus (1974-1983)," *The Classical World* 80.2 (Nov.-Dec. 1986)], pp. 73-147 [see p. 139]. The two most recent (and most important) examples are Jean Rougé, "L'incendie de Rome en 64 et l'incendie de Nicomédie en 303," *Mélanges d'histoire ancienne offerts à William Seston* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1974), pp. 433-41; and Earl Doherty, *Jesus: Neither God nor Man: The Case for a Mythical Jesus* (Ottawa: Age of Reason Publications, 2009), pp. 596-630.

is reasonably likely, and therefore that line should be considered suspect. Though we can't be certain, the evidence suggests it probably is an interpolation, and Tacitus did not refer to Christ. That suspect line is *auctor nominis eius Christus Tiberio imperitante per procuratorem Pontium Pilatum supplicio adfectus erat*, "The author of this name, Christ, was executed by the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius."² With this line included, I shall call the whole account of the persecution of "Christians" in Tacitus the "Testimonium Taciteum" (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44).

The Base Rate of Interpolation in Christian-Controlled Literature

Spanning the first three centuries the number of non-Christian references to Jesus numbers fewer than 10 and the number of interpolations among them numbers at least 1, for a base rate of interpolation equal to more than 1 in 10. The apparent rate is actually an astonishing 1 in 3, but I will assume that this evident rate is highly biased by the small sample size, and conclude instead that the highest rate of fabrication reasonably possible was 1 out of every 10 references to Jesus in non-Christian sources.³ We could err even more on the side of caution and say that that rate may have been twenty times lower, and thus as low as 1 in 200 (meaning one out of every two hundred non-Christian references to Jesus would be an interpolation). From the evidence we have I believe it would be implausible to conclude the rate was any lower than that.

2 Translations are my own where not otherwise noted.

3 Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, pp. 19-134 adduces only nine, and two of those are not certain to contain mentions of Jesus (Suetonius and Mara bar Serapion), one is non-existent (Thallus; we almost certainly have a direct quotation of his original words, from which we can confirm Thallus did not mention Jesus: see Richard Carrier, "Thallus and the Darkness at Christ's Death," *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 8 [2011-2012]: 185-91), and two are certain to have suffered some degree of interpolation (Josephus: the longer passage in whole or in part: Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, pp. 81-103 and James Carleton Paget, "Some Observations on Josephus and Christianity," *Journal of Theological Studies* 52 [2001]: 539-624; and the shorter passage, in relevant part: see Richard Carrier, "Origen, Eusebius, and the Accidental Interpolation in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.200," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20.4 [Winter 2012]: 489-514). That leaves only six passages, two of which have suffered interpolations, for an apparent base rate of interpolation equal to 1 in every 3 passages. The survey of non-Christian references to Jesus in the first three centuries in Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), pp. 63-124, does not expand on the list in Van Voorst.

Consider the rate of interpolation in Christian books, for example. Even counting just one instance per book (even though there are often more), the New Testament contains at least five known interpolations in all its 27 books, for a base rate of interpolation of no less than 1 in 5 ($5/27 = 1/5.4$), if we measure by book. But we should measure by verse, not book, and count all interpolations, not just one per book. There are close to 8,000 verses in the New Testament, of which at least 20 are known interpolations (and that's counting only the most unquestionable cases in standard textual apparatuses; there are actually many more), for a base rate of 1 in 400.⁴ The rate could appear much higher in non-Christian sources due to the fact that the New Testament already extensively favors what Christians want to have been said, and thus there was less need of inventing witnesses to Jesus there, whereas the temptation to or interest in finding witnesses in non-Christian authors was more compelling and thus would have been more frequent. If it was even just twice as frequent, we would have a rate of interpolation of 1 in 200, my minimum estimated rate; while my maximum estimated rate is 1 in 10, based on observation. So the suggestion of an interpolation in Tacitus is not out of bounds, but within the range of plausible events known to happen.

Evaluating the Evidence: Pliny the Younger

For context it is important to note that Pliny the Younger attests to a pervasive ignorance of Christians and Christian beliefs among even the most informed Roman elite at the time of Tacitus (between 110-120 A.D.).⁵ Notably, Pliny was not only a contemporary of Tacitus but his good friend and regular

4 Mk. 7:16, 9:44, 9:46, 11:26, 16:9-20; Mt. 12:47, 17:21, 18:10, 21:44, 27:49b; Lk. 17:36, 22:43-44, 23:17, 23:34a; Jn. 5:4, 7:53-8:11; Acts 8:37, 15:34, 28:29; Rom. 16:24. And this list is a definite undercount (especially for Luke-Acts, and especially considering known interpolations often not included in standard textual apparatuses). So the actual rate was certainly higher than 1 in 400 and arguably nearer 1 in 200 (if for every example listed here we can add one other) or even 1 in 100 (if for every example here listed we can find *three* others that probably should be listed as well).

5 Pliny, *Letters* 10.96. See Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, pp. 23-29; Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, pp. 79-83; and Bradley Peper and Mark DelCogliano, "The Pliny and Trajan Correspondence," in Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison, Jr., and John Dominic Crossan, eds., *The Historical Jesus in Context* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 366-71.

correspondent.⁶ Pliny the Younger tells us he had never attended a trial of Christians and knew nothing of what they believed or what crimes they were guilty of. To redress his ignorance, Pliny's procedure involved no independent fact-checking (beyond an interrogation of local Christians), and from his behavior and attitude we can conclude that this would have been typical, and thus Tacitus is unlikely to have done more.

Pliny had been governing Bithynia for over a year already, before even learning there were any Christians in his province, and before that he held the post of consul (the highest office in the Roman Empire, short of being Emperor). He had also been a lawyer in Roman courts for several decades, then served in Rome as Praetor (the ancient equivalent of both chief of police and attorney general), and then served as one of Trajan's top legal advisors for several years, before he was appointed to govern Bithynia.⁷ And yet, he tells us, after all that, he still knew next to nothing about Christians and had never witnessed a trial of them. This verifies that Christians were extremely obscure, and their beliefs and origins entirely unknown to the highest and most experienced Roman legal authorities. Tacitus is not likely to have been any better informed, indeed insofar as he was informed at all it would most likely have been through his

6 Pliny and Tacitus exchanged many letters (not just the ones in which Tacitus asks for information to add to his history in Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 6.16; also 6.20, note this was a quite personal question, and 7.33), had worked side-by-side in the Senate (*Letters* 2.11.2), and on political campaigns in which they were on intimate terms (*Letters* 6.9); they had several intimate friends in common (*Letters* 1.6, 4.15.1, and 7.20.6); Pliny admired Tacitus's oratorical skills (*Letters* 2.1.6) and writing (*Letters* 9.23.2) and talked them up to everyone; Pliny indicates he often visited with Tacitus, was always keen to be informed of his well-being, and trusted him with personal favors that he normally discussed with him "in person" and which he surely would never ask some distant acquaintance (*Letters* 4.13); Pliny wrote Tacitus letters about events in his personal life and gave him advice (*Letters* 1.6) and seeks and trusts his advice in turn (*Letters* 1.20); Pliny also sent intimate but admiring letters to him (e.g., *Letters* 9.14); they shared and discussed each other's poetry (*Letters* 9.10); and Tacitus asked Pliny to read advanced drafts of his histories and mark them up with advice and criticism, while Pliny asked the same of Tacitus (*Letters* 7.20 and 8.7); finally, Pliny outright calls Tacitus his friend (*Letters* 6.16.22) and says "the tale will everywhere be told of the harmony, frankness, and loyalty of our lifelong friendship" (*Letters* 7.20.2) and "our love should be still the warmer" because of all their friends and work in common (*Letters* 7.20.7).

7 For summary and bibliography: A.N. Sherwin-White and Simon Price, "Pliny (2) the Younger," in Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, eds., *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 1198.

very friend and correspondent, Pliny.⁸ Otherwise, from having completed a similar career, Tacitus would likely know only as much as Pliny did before his interrogations—which is only that Christians existed and were in some vague fashion criminals.

Evaluating the Evidence: Pliny the Elder

There were several eyewitness historical accounts written about Nero's reign that have become lost. Cluvius Rufus, Nero's herald, is known to have written an eyewitness account of Nero's reign sometime in the 70's A.D. As did Fabius Rusticus, an author we know Tacitus used.⁹ But the most extensive account was that of Pliny the Elder (killed during the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 A.D.), who had written a monumental 31 volume history beginning in the 30s, dedicating an entire volume to each year, including every year of Nero's reign, and this Tacitus also employed as a source.¹⁰

Pliny's history would certainly have included his own account of the burning of Rome in 64 A.D. and subsequent events. Most likely a resident of Rome at the time, his information would have been first hand. He would surely have recorded how it degenerated into the execution of scores if not hundreds of Christians for the crime of burning the city of Rome, surely the single most famous event of that or any adjacent year. If that in fact happened. And such an account would surely have included any necessary digressions on the origins of Christianity. We know, for example, Pliny believed Nero had started the fire deliberately, lamenting in his *Natural History* that it destroyed ancient trees invaluable to botanical science.¹¹

However, it is unlikely Pliny mentioned Christians in his account of the fire. Because his nephew and adopted son Pliny the Younger was an avid admirer and reader of his uncle's works and thus would surely have read his account of the burning of Rome, and therefore would surely have known everything about

8 Tacitus was even governing the neighboring province of Asia when Pliny interrogated Christians in Bithynia (and we know Tacitus consulted with Pliny on information to include in his histories: see earlier note), making communication between them on the Christian matter very likely: see "Tacitus (1)," in Simon and Spawforth, *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, pp. 1469-71; and Stephen Benko, "Pagan Criticism of Christianity During the First Two Centuries A.D.," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt II* 23.2 (1980), p. 1063.

9 Tacitus, *Annals* 13.20, 15.61; *Agricola* 10.3.

10 Tacitus, *Annals* 1.69, 13.20, 15.53; *Histories* 3.29; Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 6.16.

11 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 17.1.5.

Christians that Pliny the Elder recorded. Yet in his correspondence with Trajan, Pliny indicates a complete lack of knowledge, making no mention of his uncle having said anything about them, or about their connection in any way to the burning of Rome (and yet, whether believed to be a false charge or not, that would surely be pertinent to Pliny's inquest, in many respects). Corroborating this conclusion is the fact that no one else ever mentions, cites, or quotes Pliny the Elder providing any testimony to Christ or Christians (as likely Christians or their critics would have done, if such an invaluable early reference existed). Indeed, his history would likely have been preserved had that been the case (since mentions of Christ seem to have been a motive for preserving texts in general: the works of Josephus and Tacitus may have survived the Middle Ages for precisely that reason).

And if Pliny the Elder, of all people, did not mention Christians in connection with the fire, no other historian is likely to have. Which conclusion is corroborated again by the fact that no one ever mentions, cites, or quotes any of *them* providing any testimony to Christ or Christians, either (as likely Christians or their critics would have done, if any such existed).

Evaluating the Evidence: Suetonius

Suetonius attests to a persecution of Christians under Nero, but is evidently unaware of this having any connection to the burning of Rome.¹² Among a list of various, briefly-mentioned legal crackdowns during the reign of Nero, Suetonius includes the remark that *afflicti supplicii Christiani, genus hominum superstitionis novae ac maleficae*, "punishments were inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and wicked superstition," but not, apparently, for the crime of arson, legitimate or contrived, much less the atrocity of burning down Rome.¹³

One could conjecture that this line originally read *Chrestiani* (later 'corrected' in transmission), and thus referred to the Jewish rioters that (as we shall see) Suetonius reported had begun to make trouble under Claudius. It's also possible that this line was an accidental interpolation of a marginal note summarizing the Testimonium Taciteum.¹⁴ But I shall not explore either possibility

12 See Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, pp. 29-39; Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, pp. 83-85.

13 Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2.

14 Argued by Stephen Dando-Collins, *The Great Fire of Rome: The Fall of the Emperor Nero and His City* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2010), p. 6; and Doherty, *Jesus: Neither God nor*

here. I will simply assume the passage is authentic as we have it. As such, it confirms that Suetonius, a prominent and erudite Latin author and imperial librarian, knew nothing of any connection between Christians and the burning of Rome. He knew only that Nero had executed some Christians in Rome, possibly for sorcery (*malefica superstitio*), as part of his overall plan to enforce a stricter moral order in the city (which is the overall context of the remark).

Elsewhere, Suetonius says of the emperor Claudius that *Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit*, “since Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome,” in a section listing various brief examples of how Claudius treated foreigners.¹⁵ Such an expulsion of all Jews from Rome would have been a near impossibility. There would have been tens of thousands of Jews in Rome at the time, complete with extensive real estate, synagogues, businesses, as well as countless Jewish slaves in both private and public hands that would have been indispensable to the urban economy, not to mention an enormous challenge to locate and drive out.¹⁶ In fact, we learn from Cassius Dio that “as for the Jews, who had again increased so greatly that by reason of their multitude it would have been hard without raising a tumult to bar them from the city, Claudius did not drive them out, but ordered them, while continuing their traditional mode of life, not to hold meetings,” which is a far more plausible report.¹⁷ It’s

Man, pp. 616-18. The language of the line as we have it is certainly not in Suetonian style and reflects a Latin idiom that arose after his time: see K. R. Bradley, “Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2: ‘*afflicti supplicis Christiani*,’” *The Classical Review* 22.1 (March 1972): 9-10. Although Bradley argues that this means the text was corrupted and should be restored to align with a paraphrase of Orosius and the known style of Suetonius, an interpolation would explain the same evidence. And if we must emend this passage, as Bradley says, to guarantee its authenticity, we could just as soon emend Christians to Chrestians as well.

15 Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.4. See commentary in J. Mottershead, *Claudius / Suetonius* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1986), pp. 149-57 (Appendix 2).

16 Various estimates of the Jewish population of Rome are made in E. Mary Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule: From Pompey to Diocletian* (Leiden: Brill, 1976) and Harry Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome*, updated edition (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995).

17 Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 60.6.6 (translation by Earnest Cary, Loeb Classics edition). The fifth century Orosius, in *A History against the Pagans* 7.6.15-16, claims Josephus reported this expulsion, but there is no mention of this in Josephus’ extant works (Orosius is probably confusing this with an expulsion incident under Tiberius, which is mentioned by Josephus); see Leonard Victor Rutgers, “Roman Policy towards the Jews: Expulsions from the City of Rome during the First Century C.E.,” *Classical Antiquity* 13.1 (April 1994): 56-74. Orosius also produces *Christus* instead of *Chrestus* in his quotation of Suetonius here, and thus assumes Suetonius was speaking of riots over Christianity.

still possible some select Jews were expelled (or left of their own accord), as Suetonius does not actually say *all* Jews were expelled, but only that “Jews” were. But a total expulsion cannot really be believed.¹⁸

Neither Suetonius nor Dio show any knowledge of this decree (or the riot inspiring it) being in any way connected to Christians; nor, apparently, did Tacitus—since if the *Testimonium Taciteum* is authentic, it was clearly the first reference Tacitus had made to Christians, therefore he cannot have mentioned Christ or Christians in connection with this riot or decree under Claudius. In fact not even Acts (cf. 18:2) shows any awareness of this expulsion being connected to Christians, yet the author of Acts would certainly have made use of the fact that the Jews were making trouble for Christians in Rome and were duly punished for it by the emperor, so we can be fairly certain no such thing occurred (and thus no such rhetorical coup was available to the author of Acts). Suetonius clearly wrote that the riots were instigated by Chrestus himself (*impulsore Chresto* means “because of the *impulsor* Chrestus,” an *impulsor* being a man who instigates something, not the reason for instigating it), and so it cannot plausibly be argued that this meant *Jesus*, who was neither alive nor in Rome at any time under Claudius.¹⁹ Note, also, that Acts 28:22-24 depicts Jews at Rome knowing little about Christianity (and nothing bad, other than that people spoke against it), which hardly makes sense (even as an authorial invention) if it was known the whole Jewish population of Rome had rioted over it just a decade before. Likewise that Paul saw no need to address this in his letter to the Romans further suggests no such thing had occurred.

Moreover, if the other passage in Suetonius has been soundly transmitted (documenting the Neronian persecution), then Suetonius knew the difference between Christians and Jews, and would have commented on the fact had Christians (much less Christ) been in any way the cause of these riots. Many scholars nevertheless try to press this evidence in that direction, but from the parallel passage in Dio, and the reports of Acts and the silence of Romans (and the evident silence of Tacitus), it’s simply not likely. This incident was more

18 Acts 18:2 is alone in saying “all the Jews” were expelled, but its reliability on this point is doubtful: see Richard Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), pp. 446-47.

19 The use of “Chresto” in place of “Christo,” though a linguistic possibility (as well as a possible corruption in transmission), is nevertheless not a necessary conjecture, as Chrestus was a common name. See Stephen Benko, “The Edict of Claudius of A.D. 49 and the Instigator Chrestus,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 25 (1969): 407-408; and Dixon Slingerland, “Chrestus: Christus?” in A.J. Avery-Peck, ed., *New Perspectives on Ancient Judaism*, Vol. 4: *The Literature of Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Lanham, MD: 1989), pp. 133-44.

likely city-wide violence ginned up by a Jewish demagogue named Chrestus (a common name in Rome at the time), as many scholars agree. And that was likely a man well known to Suetonius and his peers, thus explaining why he did not digress to explain who he was. This is significant because it informs the possible meaning of the passage in Tacitus, to which we now turn.

Evaluating the Evidence: Tacitus

In our present text of the *Annals* of Tacitus, we learn that Nero scapegoated the Christians for burning down most of the city of Rome in 64 A.D.²⁰ The text now reads:

Nero found culprits and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on those hated for their abominations, whom the people called Chrestians [*sic*]. The author of this name, Christ, was executed by the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius, and the most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the source of this evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous or shameful flow in from every part of the world and become popular.

Accordingly, arrests were first made of those who confessed; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much for the crime of burning the city as because of the hatred of mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their death. . . . [*Tacitus then describes their torments*] . . . Hence, even for criminals who deserved the most extreme punishments, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it no longer appeared that they were being destroyed for the public good, but rather to satisfy the cruelty of one man.

The key line here is “the author of this name, Christ, was executed by the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius.” This is the first clear reference to a historical Jesus outside the New Testament, dating to around 116 A.D.²¹

20 Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44. See Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, pp. 39-53; and Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, pp. 79-83.

21 On the date: in Tacitus, *Annals* 2.61 and 4.4-5 allusions are made to Trajan's annexation of Parthian territories in 116 A.D. but not their loss a year or two later. On this being the earliest reference to Jesus: the two references to Jesus in Josephus would be earlier (dating to just after the year 93 A.D.), if they were authentic, but that is doubtful (see Carrier, “Origen, Eusebius”).

If that key line is authentic. The first clue it might not be is that our one manuscript containing this passage had originally spelled the persecuted group as the “Chrestians,” not the Christians, and this was subsequently corrected by erasure.²² To explain this, it is more likely that Tacitus originally wrote *chrestianos*, “Chrestians,” than that this was produced by subsequent error from “Christians” and then corrected back again.²³ And if that’s the case, it’s not believable that Tacitus would have explained the name “Chrestians” using the name “Christus.” Instead, obviously, he would use “Chrestus.” Which may also have been the original reading here, corrected earlier in the text’s transmission history.²⁴ I think it’s more likely that Tacitus had already explained who the Chrestians were in his account of the Chrestus riots (those also recorded by Suetonius), which would have appeared in his section of the *Annals* for the early years of the reign of Claudius, now lost.²⁵ If that is the case, then what would become the Testimonium Taciteum was originally about the sect of Jewish rebels first suppressed under Claudius, who were at that time led by their namesake Chrestus and were thereafter named for him (whether he was still alive or not). Several scholars have suggested this possibility.²⁶

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- 22 This was most extensively demonstrated in Harald Fuchs, “Tacitus über die Christen,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 4.2 (April 1950): 65-93 (who also brings up other stylistic difficulties with the passage, to no certain conclusion); see also Heinz Heubner, “Zu Tac. *Ann.* 15, 44, 4,” *Hermes* 87.2 (August 1959): 223-30. I had my own doubts until they were met by Erik Zara, whose personal report on the condition of the manuscript in question, “The Chrestianos Issue in Tacitus Reinvestigated” (2009), can be accessed at <http://www.text-excavation.com/documents/zaratacituschrestianos.pdf>.
- 23 This is also the opinion of leading experts on the matter: see Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, pp. 43-46.
- 24 Robert Renehan, “Christus or Chrestus in Tacitus?” *La Parola del Passato* 122 (1968): 368-70.
- 25 Dio dates the associated decree to the year 41 A.D. A date of 49 has alternately been suggested, based on an unreliable report in Orosius, but Tacitus makes no mention of such an incident in his treatment of that year (which we have), yet surely he would have, so it more likely appeared in his treatment of the year 41, which is lost.
- 26 See Erich Koestermann, “Ein folgenschwerer Irrtum des Tacitus (*Ann.* 15, 44, 2ff.)?” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 16.4 (September 1967): 456-69; Josef Ceska, “Tacitovi Chrestiani a apokalyptické císlu,” *Listy Filologické* 92.3 (Sept. 1969): 239-49; and Charles Saumagne, “Tacite et saint Paul,” *Revue Historique* 232.1 (1964), pp. 67-110 and “Les Incendiaires de Rome (ann. 64 p. C.) et les lois pénales des Romains (Tacite, *Annales*, XV, 44),” *Revue Historique* 227.2 (1962), pp. 337-360. Saumagne argues that the line about Christ being crucified under Tiberius was later transferred here from a now-lost section of the *Histories* of Tacitus that, he proposes, actually *was* about Christians, which passage Saumagne presumes to have been the source for a later account found in Sulpicius

In that event, Tacitus originally wrote that Nero put the blame on *quos per flagitia invisos vulgus Chrestianos appellabat repressaque in praesens exitiabilis superstitio rursum erumpebat, non modo per Iudaeam, originem eius mali, sed per urbem etiam*, “those whom the people called the Chrestians, who were [*i.e. already*] despised for their shameful deeds; and though this despicable superstition had been suppressed for a time, it had erupted again, not only in Judea, the origin of this evil, but also in the city.” The entire line in between (“the author of this name, Christ, was executed by the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius”) would then be a later Christian interpolation, attempting to convert this passage about the Chrestians into a Neronian persecution of Christians. This, too, has been proposed before.²⁷ And there are good arguments in its favor.

First, the text flows logically and well with the line removed. Second, the notion that there was “a huge multitude” (*multitudo ingens*) of Christians in Rome to persecute, though not impossible, is somewhat suspect; whereas, by contrast, Jews were present by the tens of thousands, and there were already enough Chrestus-followers under Claudius to result in a city-wide action against them. Third, it is not clear why Tacitus, much less the general public (as he implies), would regard the Christians as “criminals who deserved the most extreme punishments” merely for being in thrall to a vulgar superstition (which was actually not even a *crime*, much less a capital one).²⁸ But if these were the

Severus (*Chronicle* 2.30.6-7), on which possibility see, more recently, Eric Laupot, “Tacitus’ Fragment 2: The Anti-Roman Movement of the ‘Christiani’ and the Nazoreans,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 54.3 (2000): 233-47. Although I believe the material in Severus more likely derives from another source shared by Orosius (*History against the Pagans* 7.9.4-6), not Tacitus (Orosius concluded his history twenty years after Severus, yet clearly drew the same information Severus employs from a source unfamiliar with the account in either Severus or Tacitus). Although if at all Tacitean, it is possible the original passage referred to the *Chrestiani*, and Severus has again only assumed Tacitus meant Christians (see earlier note).

- 27 Most convincingly by Jean Rougé, “L’incendie de Rome,” and in a different respect by Saumagne (see previous note). Earl Doherty, an undergraduate in classics, also details a respectable argument to the same conclusion, in line with Rougé (see first note). A similar case for interpolation, suggesting it may have begun as a marginal gloss later inserted accidentally, has also been made online by Roger Viklund, “Tacitus as a Witness to Jesus—An Illustration of What the Original Might Have Looked Like,” *Jesus Granskad* (2 October 2010) at <http://rogerviklund.wordpress.com/2010/10/02/>. On accidental interpolation as a general phenomenon see Carrier, “Origen, Eusebius,” pp. 490-91.
- 28 Christians came to later be policed for violating general laws against illegal assembly and, ultimately, treasonously refusing to bless the emperor’s guardian spirit (the Roman equiv-

Chrestians who were already hated for their previous urban violence (which Tacitus would have recounted in an earlier book, when he treated the Chrestus riots also mentioned by Suetonius), their deserving of extreme punishments would be a more intelligible sentiment. Fourth, Tacitus says the people “called” them Chrestians, *vulgus Chrestianos appellabat*, notably the past tense.²⁹ Why would he not use the *present* tense if he believed the group was still extant, as Christians were? In fact, Tacitus makes no explicit mention of this group still being extant in his own day (notably unlike the *Testimonium Flavianum*, which does).³⁰ So it would appear this was a group that Tacitus believed no

alent of a Pledge of Allegiance), as reported in Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.96-97 (compare 10.34). See also: W.H.C. Frend, “Martyrdom and Political Oppression,” in Philip Esler, ed., *The Early Christian World*, vol. 1 (2000): pp. 815-39; Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold, *Roman Civilization: Selected Readings*, 3rd ed., vol. 2 (1990): § 51-52 (see also § 169 and n. 37 in § 68); and Timothy Barnes, “Legislation Against the Christians,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 58 (1968): pp. 32-50. Even then there is no reliable evidence they were ever prosecuted for such crimes in the first century (the book of Acts, for example, evinces the contrary, never depicting Romans prosecuting Christians at all and even rejecting their prosecution, e.g. Acts 18:12-17, 23:26-35, 26:24-32, although that could be a fabrication), and Tacitus does not mention either as being their crimes in this case. The only crime the victims in this account are charged with is arson; Tacitus indicates they were *also* widely believed to have been guilty of crimes deserving of the worst possible punishments, which would have to be crimes more severe than mere illegal assembly or want of allegiance.

- 29 It’s also not credible that Christians would be so well known then that “the people” (*vulgus*) would already have named them and formed popular beliefs about them; whereas if Tacitus was referring to present beliefs, he would use the present tense. Christianity was surely far too obscure in 64 for the *vulgus* even to know of them (we must remember that the population of Rome at the time approached a million people), much less have named them or known anything about them, given that it was barely any less obscure to Pliny the Younger almost *half a century later*, as we previously saw. If Pliny knew nothing about Christians, neither would “the people” in Rome a whole lifetime before him (see Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* [New York: HarperOne, 2013], pp. 138-39). This conclusion is not mitigated by the legend recounted in Acts 11:26 (on the origination of the name “Christian” in Antioch), even if that legend is true (Pervo is skeptical: *Acts: A Commentary*, pp. 294-95), because it does not refer to the people of Rome (or any population near Rome), nor does it say the appellation was used by the general populace, or even widely known, in Antioch or anywhere else (only that it was then coined).
- 30 The *Testimonium Flavianum* is the longer passage in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.63-64, which is almost certainly an interpolation (see earlier note), but in any event concludes “and even until now the tribe of Christians, so named from this man, has not gone extinct.”

longer existed (probably having been expunged or disbanded since the Jewish War, if not already decisively ended by Nero's mass executions).³¹

But fifth, and most convincingly, there is no evidence that this event happened. The burning of Rome itself is well attested, by both literary and physical evidence.³² But no one seems to have ever known Christians were in any way connected with it, until late in the 4th century. The *Letters of Seneca and Paul* (a late 4th century forgery), epistle 12, is the first mention of the event in such a connection, claiming *Christiani et Iudaei quasi machinatores incendii—pro!—supplicio adfecti, quod fieri solet*, "Oh! Christians and Jews have even been executed as contrivers of the fire, like usual!" This account does not align with Tacitus in any other specifics, beyond common tropes and lore, so its source is uncertain. As a forgery this text could simply be reflecting a circulating legend of the time, and embellishing freely. But it is also possible that this is the origination of the legend, which then inspired the interpolation in Tacitus at a later date. That this remark assumes it was already "usual" to blame Christians for such things confirms its late date (as it presumes a centuries long history of persecution), and also suggests a precedent for inventing it.³³

The first *direct* attestation to the Testimonium Taciteum is usually said to be the 5th century text of Sulpicius Severus, *Chronicle* 2.29-30, which certainly

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- 31 I do not credit the argument, however, though sometimes made, that calling Pilate a "procurator" is evidence of Christian authorship. There is abundant evidence that Pilate was *both* a procurator *and* a prefect (that in fact most equestrian governors were), and Tacitus would have a sufficient rhetorical reason to prefer the former (it was more embarrassing to be executed by a mere business manager). Though this is inessential to my argument here, for anyone who wishes to know more, summaries of the evidence and scholarship supporting it is available in two online briefs: Richard Carrier, "On the Dual Office of Procurator and Prefect" (2012) (<http://www.richardcarrier.info/TheProvincialProcurator.pdf>) and Richard Carrier, "Herod the Procurator: Was Herod the Great a Roman Governor of Syria?" (2011), pp. 34-36 (<http://www.richardcarrier.info/HerodSyrianGovernor.pdf>).
- 32 Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 62.16-18 recounts the event of the fire but omits any mention of who was punished or blamed (other than Nero); Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 17.1.5 mentions Nero burning the city and assumes he was to blame for it. For other evidence (including epigraphic and archaeological) see: Edward Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 122, 125, 178-200, with corresponding endnotes.
- 33 For example, Paul's threat to Nero in *Acts of Paul* 11:3 (a late second century text that was predominately fictional) that God would burn the world with fire, resulting in Nero burning Paul's companions instead, is a possible inspiration. Knowledge that in fact Jews (the Christians) were burned for burning Rome would then explain the insertion of Christian victims among them.

draws on this passage from Tacitus, but notably it does not attest the suspect line. So it is possible Sulpicius simply assumed “Chrestians” meant Christians (just as Orosius assumed the Chrestus of Suetonius was Christ), and thus he might not even have been looking at an interpolated manuscript. Before these two texts, there is no evidence anyone had ever heard of Nero persecuting Christians in connection with the burning of Rome. And that is extraordinarily peculiar.

Evaluating the Evidence: Unlikely Silence

We are faced with only three possibilities: (1) no such persecution happened and Tacitus invented it (perhaps by deliberately conflating a separate persecution with his account of the fire, to further darken the reputation of Nero), or (2) no such persecution happened and Tacitus never connected Christians with the fire, but only the Jewish sectarians inspired by Chrestus, in the manner I just proposed (which might explain why the *Letters of Seneca and Paul* say Nero punished Christians *and* Jews for the fire), or (3) the persecution happened, in connection with the fire, and Tacitus recorded it (even if exaggerating).

The third of these possibilities can be ruled out on the grounds that there would very likely have been a strong and widely-referenced Christian tradition deriving from it, widely enough in fact to be evident in extant literature. But no such Christian tradition exists. It is wholly unheard of in all extant Christian memory, until the later 4th century, and there only in a patent forgery (and we shall explore this argument from silence in a moment). The first possibility can be ruled improbable on the same grounds. Although ignorance of a fabricated tale in Tacitus might be more likely than ignorance of a genuine event, it's still unlikely. Such a thesis would have an even lower probability because it requires the *ad hoc* supposition of specifically deceptive behavior from Tacitus. These considerations together would render it no more or less likely than the third option, so I will treat the first and third options as two versions of the same one thesis: the Testimonium Taciteum was actually written by Tacitus as we have it.³⁴

34 A fourth possibility, a modification of the third, is that the story was invented by Christians and simply “bought” by a gullible Tacitus. This can be discounted on the grounds that the story would then be more widely evidenced throughout extant Christian literature (since such a tale so widely disseminated among Christians that even Tacitus would have heard of it, and even believe it, could not fail to appear *somewhere* in extant Christian literature

Refuting the third option (that the event happened), we have elaborate Christian accounts of Nero's persecution of Christians, resulting in the deaths of Peter and Paul, as related in the *Acts of Paul* and the *Acts of Peter*.³⁵ Even though those are certainly fabrications (their narratives are wildly implausible in almost every conceivable detail), surely even a fabricator would use the existing memory of the monstrous false persecution for arson that the present text of Tacitus describes, and thus the story of the fire and subsequent scapegoating would feature prominently in their tales, a ripe context for condemning Nero and wallowing in its horrific details, as Christian martyrologies regularly enjoyed doing. But instead, neither the *Acts of Peter* nor the *Acts of Paul* show any knowledge of the fire or its connection to either the Christians, the deaths of Peter and Paul, or Nero's persecution of Christians generally. How is that possible? It is not believable that Tacitus would know of such an enormous persecution event, but all subsequent Christians have no knowledge of it for over two hundred years.

That makes the third option too improbable to credit. The more so when we consider the whole of Christian literature up to the 4th century. In all such literature surviving, the only persecutions known under Nero are always those of Peter and Paul (and some of their companions), as relayed in their respective *Acts*; never any connection to the burning of Rome, or any kind of elaborate, mass-scale event like that described in the extant text of Tacitus. And from this evidence we can rule out the first option, too (that Tacitus invented it). For example, Tertullian, a Latin author we know was familiar with the works of Tacitus, says only to "consult your histories: you will there find that Nero was the first who assailed with the imperial sword the Christian sect, beginning especially at Rome," and "at last it was Nero's savagery that sowed the seed of Christian blood at Rome," in both cases in a context referencing the fates of Peter and Paul (Paul having been beheaded, Peter crucified upside down, but neither in any mass persecution).³⁶ In asking why Christians are still persecuted, Tertullian says that "under Nero [Christianity] came to be condemned," yet, he says, this policy is continued even though every other policy of Nero's

before the late 4th century). It is therefore at least as improbable as the first and third options.

35 Peter: Oscar Cullmann, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr*, new ed. (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2011), pp. 71-157; Paul: Dennis MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).

36 Tertullian, *Apology* 5.3 and 21.25. That Tertullian knew the works of Tacitus is demonstrated in Tertullian, *Apology* 16 and *Ad Nationes* 1.11 and 2.12.

has itself been condemned.³⁷ Tertullian gives no details. But it's strange that he makes no mention of the unjust charges it was then based on: arson, a charge that could no longer be applied to Christians of Tertullian's day, a point he obviously would have made, had he known such a thing (and as a reader of Tacitus, he would have—unless he did not see any mention of Christians in his copy of the *Annals*).

Tertullian also gives us more detail elsewhere:

We read the Lives of the Caesars: at Rome Nero was the first to stain the rising faith with blood. That's when Peter is girded by another, when he is fastened to the cross. That's when Paul, the Roman citizen, gets his nativity, when there he is born again by the nobility of martyrdom.³⁸

Here it is clear his only real source is the martyrdom tales of Peter and Paul—and perhaps the line about Nero persecuting Christians in the *Lives of the Caesars* of Suetonius, if such was present in his copy. But as we saw, that, too, fails to show any apparent knowledge that this persecution was linked with the burning of Rome, even though Suetonius also covered that fire in some detail (although he does not mention *any* scapegoats, Chrestians or Christians). Not only would Tertullian (and as we shall see, Lactantius; and we must add to this *all* Christian authors in Latin, extant and not) have remarked upon and made use of any such tale told or invented by Tacitus, he (no less than they) would have publicized its existence among the Christian community generally—hence such a valuable Christian gem of a passage would almost certainly be more widely known than only among the usual readers of Tacitus. It would have entered Christian lore and joined and influenced its growing body of martyrdom literature. Yet it didn't.

In Greek, we have Eusebius, who surveys all the persecutions he knew the church had suffered, and he says he is aware of many treatises refuting the false accusations of such persecutors as Nero. So he very likely would have known of the arson charge, had it existed, as well as the whole tradition of the Neronian persecution in connection with the fire, yet he never mentions either. Even when he relates the persecutions under Nero, this never comes up.³⁹ He is completely ignorant of the event. Like Tertullian, Eusebius only knows of the

37 Tertullian, *Ad Nationes* 1.7.8.

38 Tertullian, *Antidote for the Scorpion's Sting* 15.

39 Eusebius, *History of the Church* 2.25 (where he cites Tertullian as a source); cf. also 2.22, 3.1, and 4.26 (for Eusebius' knowledge of other sources).

martyrdoms under Nero of Peter and Paul (and with them, at most, a few of their colleagues).

Then there is the famous professor of Latin literature, learned Christian and tutor to Constantine, Lactantius, who surely cannot have been ignorant of the works of Tacitus (that would be impossible for any 4th century professor of Latin). He wrote an entire book on the emperors who persecuted Christians, and their fates, in which he details, again, the persecutions under Nero, yet shows, again, no knowledge of the burning of Rome being involved with it, or anything at all resembling what our text of Tacitus reports.⁴⁰ Yet again, he only knows of the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul (and some Christians attending them). This is all but impossible—unless at that time the text of Tacitus did not say Christians were the scapegoats for the fire, and the suspect line about Christ's execution under Pilate was not yet present.

This becomes all the more certain a conclusion when we look at what Lactantius says regarding the persecution by Galerius (his contemporary), in the late 3rd century:

Galerius . . . sought in another way to gain on the emperor. That he might urge him to excess of cruelty in persecution, he employed private emissaries to set the palace [in Nicomedia] on fire; and some part of it having been burnt, the blame was laid on the Christians as public enemies; and the very appellation of Christian grew odious on account of that fire. It was said that the Christians, in concert with the eunuchs, had plotted to destroy the emperors; and that both of the emperors had nearly been burnt alive in their own palace.

Diocletian, shrewd and intelligent as he always chose to appear, suspected nothing of the contrivance, but, inflamed with anger, immediately commanded that all his own domestics should be tortured to force a confession of the plot. He sat on his tribunal, and saw innocent men tormented by fire to make discovery. All magistrates, and all who had superintendency in the imperial palace, obtained special commissions to administer the torture; and they strove with each other who should be first in bringing to light the conspiracy. . . . Presbyters and other officers of the Church were seized, without evidence by witnesses or confession, condemned, and together with their families led to execution. In burning alive, no distinction of sex or age was regarded; and because of their great multitude, they were not burnt one after another, but a herd of them were encircled with the same fire; and servants, having millstones tied about

40 Lactantius, *On the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died* 3.

their necks, were cast into the sea . . . tortures, hitherto unheard of, were invented.⁴¹

For this passage, Rougé enumerates numerous parallels with the account of the Neronian fire in Tacitus, and rightly concludes literary dependence is certain. The coincidences would otherwise be too improbable. Lactantius' account of the burning of Nicomedia employs Tacitus' account of the burning of Rome as a model. For example, both accounts mention agents being tasked with starting the fire, and their attempts to start additional fires. Lactantius likewise adapted the theme of rounding up scapegoats for the fire, and the barbaric and innovative tortures applied to them, and the immense number of victims, and the notion of a prejudicial hatred being attached to the "name" of Christian, all features of Tacitus' account.

This makes it likely that Tacitus wrote his account as we have it (and Lactantius knew it well), but without any mention of Christ or Christians. Otherwise, Lactantius would have certainly used that fact in his account earlier in this same book of the persecution under Nero, and might even have drawn explicit parallels to it when developing his account of Galerius. Instead, it appears that Lactantius only knew of a narrative in which Tacitus related the scapegoating of the Christians, a belligerent band of Jews, and then used this as a model to *invent* (or embellish) a scapegoating of *Christians* under Galerius. Eusebius also relates the same tale of the Nicomedian fire, and he may have been adapting Lactantius as a source, though he shows no specific knowledge of the Neronian story or any similarities to it.⁴²

In similar fashion, no other Christian literature before the late 4th century shows any knowledge of the Neronian persecution being as exaggeratedly elaborate as Tacitus describes, or being in any way connected with the burning of Rome, even when discussing Nero's treatment of Christians.⁴³ The book of

41 Lactantius, *On the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died* 14-15 (translation by William Fletcher, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* edition).

42 Eusebius, *History of the Church* 8.6.

43 References to it are absent also from the Acts of the NT (despite that being written most likely in the late first or early second century: Richard Pervo, *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* [Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2006] and *Acts: A Commentary* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009]). Nor is there any mention of it in 1 Clement, despite that traditionally being written from Rome itself within decades of the supposed event. 1 Clement chs. 5-6 discuss martyrdoms or persecutions only vaguely, naming only Peter and Paul, mentioning various unnamed others, and giving no specifics that confirm knowledge of the event described in the Testimonium Taciteum or even any particular involvement of Nero. 1 Clem. 1:1 mentions a plurality of misfortunes and setbacks delaying

Revelation also appears to have no knowledge of this. Nero's burning of Rome is almost certainly alluded to throughout Rev. 18, complete with the belief that he tasked agents with starting the fire on purpose (Rev. 17:16).⁴⁴ Though this narrative says Rome will remain desolate forever, that didn't happen, so that is either a metaphor, or an adapting of the known event to fantasize about Rome's expected apocalyptic future. But either way, the text shows no knowledge of Christians being persecuted for it, or after it. To the contrary, it depicts the burning of Rome as a punishment by God for Nero's *previous* persecution of Christians (Rev. 19:1-4; 17:12-14). Such an interpretation would be wholly exploded if that fire were known to have been followed by Rome redounding its wrath back upon Christians—without some apologetic or apocalyptic interpretation being added to it. That none was, means no such event was known to the author of Revelation, yet that author knew well the event of the fire and lived not long after it.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, given the immensity of the persecution Tacitus describes, its scale in terms of the number of victims, its barbarity, and the injustice of it being based on a false accusation of arson to cover up Nero's own crimes, what are the odds that no Christian would ever have heard of it or made use of it or

the letter, but being in the plural and without details we cannot connect that with any particular event such as we now find in the *Testimonium Taciteum*. Nor is there any specific mention of it in the Christian redaction of the *Sibylline Oracles*, despite their summary of Nero's crimes in 5.140-46. The Christian redaction of the *Ascension of Isaiah* 3:13-4:22 also refers to Nero executing some of the apostles and persecuting Christianity in general, but once again makes no specific mention of the atrocity in the *Testimonium Taciteum*.

- 44 That Nero is the target of Rev. 17-19: Elaine Pagels, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Viking, 2012), pp. 31-34. Rev. 17:10-11 says there were five dead emperors, one living, and one to come who will stay awhile, and then one of the five dead will return as an eighth (meaning Nero resurrected, as we know from later legend). The five dead would most likely be Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, Nero, and Vespasian; Titus would then be the one "now living," and Domitian the next to come "and rule for a while." As typical for apocalypses, this would be written as if predicting what in fact had already occurred, which dates this text to the reign of Domitian, hence 80-96 A.D. Corroborating that conclusion is the fact that the eruption of Vesuvius, which occurred in 79 A.D., is probably the basis for Rev. 8 (see Pagels, *Revelations*, pp. 20-21); and the fact that Irenaeus, in *Against Heresies* 5.30.3, says that Revelation was written in the reign of Domitian.

any reference to it for over three hundred years? By any reasonable estimate, quite low. Not even prolific and erudite professors of Latin like Tertullian or Lactantius? Lower still. That for nearly three centuries no Christian martyr tradition would develop from either the event or Tacitus' account of it? Lower still. That no known legends, martyrologies, or tales would adapt or employ it as a motif in any way, not even in the various stories and legends of the persecutions and martyrdoms under Nero that we know did develop and circulate? Lower still. And on top of all that is the additional unlikelihood that all other pagan critics of Christianity (like Suetonius and Pliny the Younger, but even such critics as Celsus) would also somehow not have heard of the event or never make any mention of it.

Lowering the probability further is the way Tacitus describes the event. Tacitus treats the persecuted group as unusually large, and no longer existing, and at the time widely and inexplicably regarded as composed of the most vile criminals, who could credibly have committed arson—three features that do not fit “Christians” that well, but would have fit followers of the instigator Chrestus. It is certainly *less likely* that Tacitus would say these three things about the Christians in Rome in the year 64 than that he would say them of the Chrestians.

For all these reasons in combination I believe we should conclude the suspect line was probably not written by Tacitus, and was most likely interpolated into its present position sometime after the middle of the 4th century A.D. More likely Tacitus was originally speaking of the Chrestians, a violent group of Jews first suppressed under Claudius, and not the Christians, and accordingly did not mention Christ. We should so conclude because alternative explanations of the evidence require embracing a long series of increasingly improbable assumptions. So the line should be rejected as spurious, or at least held in reasonable suspicion. And this conclusion should now be taken into account when assessing the evidence for Christ and Christianity, and also when translating and interpreting Tacitus and the events following the burning of Rome under Nero. The whole passage in *Annals* 15.44 should instead be considered as possible evidence supplementing Suetonius on the matter of “Chrestus the instigator” and Jewish unrest at Rome.