

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Great Fire of Rome: Life and Death in the Ancient City*. By JOSEPH J. WALSH. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019. Pp. viii + 174. Paperback, \$19.95. ISBN: 978-1-4214-3371-4.

In his *The Great Fire of Rome: Life and Death in the Ancient City*, Joseph Walsh does not embark upon just a simple retelling of the “greatest of the Great Fires” (1). Alongside the details of the historic blaze, Walsh gives possible stories of those who lived it, explores the difficulties for modern historians in dissecting and interpreting ancient texts, and touches upon the far-reaching impacts of the Fire. In short, Walsh has packed a great many things in a relatively short book. *The Great Fire* is divided into five chapters with a prologue and two appendices, and although only containing 136 pages, it provides an illuminating and entertaining introduction to the Great Fire.

After a prologue that is helpful to both amateur and professional historians in setting the scene for the importance of the Fire, Walsh spends his first chapter on the “perils of Rome.” Briefly covering topics including floods, collapsing buildings, crime, stench, disease and fire, Walsh provides an informative and (at times) humorous summation of everyday life in the ancient city. Walsh’s descriptions of various sights, sounds and smells read like a novel as he explores the diversity of the population in this massive and dangerous preindustrial city. Connections between the lives of people then and now allow Walsh to demonstrate the difficulties for modern historians in discerning ancient attitudes on life and death.

The actual Great Fire is covered in vivid detail in Chapter 2. Drawing connections between the design of the city and the possible paths of the fire, Walsh conveys the difficulties of dealing with sources that do not report all the information we would like. Despite the lack of consensus or details within the sources, Walsh makes reasonable guesses about the Fire’s path, as well as probable actions of the *Vigiles* (Roman firefighters). Intertwined with the colorful details of the Fire, Walsh also explores the legends that have emerged out of it, in particular Nero fiddling while Rome burned. Exploring the legend of Nero’s possible involvement in starting the Fire connects back to Walsh’s overarching thesis that explores how Romans used the past. In addition to navigating the facts of the Fire,

the reader will find much value in recognizing how and why Romans wrote what they wrote.

In Chapter 3, Walsh explores the day after the Fire and the human element of the tragedy is made front and center. Like his description of the fire itself in the previous chapter, he balances the sources against likely realities. The most titillating part of this chapter is the continued investigation into Nero's possible guilt in the involvement with the Fire. Prosecution and defense arguments are presented, and the reader gains a fuller picture of what Romans could be led to believe during such a tragedy, including the drive for finding scapegoats. Chapter 4 delves into the rebuilding efforts, especially an examination of Nero's extravagant Domus Aurea. Again, Walsh creates colorful images of the city and its people. The most important part of the chapter, however, is Walsh's assessment on the use of ancient sources. In one example, while exploring the exaggeration of ancient writers concerning Nero's palace, Walsh asserts that the writers "were not so much concerned with providing an accurate picture as with conveying how the Domus Aurea *seemed* or even *felt* to the people of Rome, and what it *meant*" (109). Emphasizing the complexities of source interpretation proves to be an essential element in examining the Great Fire.

Walsh's final chapter explores some of the lasting impacts of the Great Fire, specifically five long-term effects that have helped create the world in which we now live. Cautioning against remaking Rome in our own image, he is careful in demonstrating how ancient Rome can help us better understand our own time. In this regard, the Colosseum, the Renaissance and St. Peter's Basilica are among some of the "grandchildren" of the Fire that continue to impact how we view the past and present. There are two appendices. One gives a brief account on the ancient sources and their authors and the other is a proposed timeline of the Fire. Although the timeline is speculative, readers will find it quite intriguing.

Only one chapter is dedicated to the actual description of the Fire because, as Walsh demonstrates, the true importance of the Fire is not the graphic detail of that flames but the ramifications of such a blaze. The impacts combined with how Romans told the story are what make the Great Fire so important. Walsh's *The Great Fire of Rome* is a valuable introduction to life in the early Roman Empire and the importance of studying the ancient past.

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