5.1 CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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Introduction

In his philosophical treatise, ‘On Providence’, the Neronian philosopher and statesman Seneca the Younger asks, ‘Why do so many bad things happen to good people?’ (Dialogues 1.2.1). This enduring question has two equally discomfiting answers. Either good people are subject to the fickle, capricious, unstable forces of fate, or they are victims of evil plots. Such is the irresistible ‘temptation of conspiracy theory’, in the seminal formulation of Dieter Groh (1987). Although there is no word for ‘conspiracy theory’ in the Latin language, the ancient Romans proposed explanations for historical events in which conspiracy played a significant causal role. Furthermore, sometimes proposed explanations conflicted with official explanations of the same historical events.

Definition and method

Building on the pioneering work of Brian Keeley (1999), David Coady provides a three-part definition of conspiracy theory:

A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of an historical event, in which conspiracy (i.e., agents acting secretly in concert) has a significant causal role. Furthermore, the conspiracy postulated by the proposed explanation must be a conspiracy to bring about the historical event which it purports to explain. Finally, the proposed explanation must conflict with an ‘official’ explanation of the same historical event.

(Coady 2006: 117)

It is controversial, perhaps, to apply the term ‘conspiracy theory’, when no such word or phrase exists in extant Latin literature. Surely the historical conditions are far too different to make the juxtaposition of ancient and modern worthwhile. Patent objections are obvious: Contemporary conspiracy theory thrives in mass social media that did not exist in antiquity. The Internet encourages the distribution and sharing of information and provides a platform for the proliferation of powerful visual presentations like the documentary Loose Change, which questions the events surrounding the 9/11 attacks. Furthermore, contemporary conspiracy theory is understood to be a
populist phenomenon, a frequent and dangerous cry and expression of rage from the fringes of society. ‘Conspiracy theory is populist in its evocation of an unwitting and unwilling populace in thrall to secret machinations of power’ (Fenster 2008: 83–84).

Moreover, as the study of classical antiquity is bound by sources that were produced and consumed by elite male audiences, so the study of conspiracy theory is further bound by the dilemma that any secretive events were never intended for public record in the first place. Consequently, the conspiracy theories that we can detect emanate from the centre of power as the prerogative of the ruling class and especially the emperor, who was subject and object of both conspiracies and conspiracy theories. Of course, ancient historians regularly used rumours to discredit the Roman populace and to portray them as an irrational crowd. However, Cyril Courrier demonstrates that, even though historians may invent or distort rumours, nevertheless they are a mechanism by which the common people could interpret or comment on political events. Rumours thus ‘inform us about the collective action of expressed feelings’, allowing us ‘to identify definite links between political conversations and collective actions’ (Courrier 2017: 154). Rumour is as close as we can come to understanding populist sentiment in antiquity (a fair amount of graffiti also survives, but not directly connected to conspiracies).

Thus, the methodological concerns presented by our sources are not unmanageable, and conspiracy theory is now recognised as a fruitful avenue of inquiry for understanding the promotion and reinforcement of values in the ancient Mediterranean world. Joseph Roisman (2006) was the first to analyse the rhetoric of conspiracy in ancient Athens. He mined the corpus of Attic orators for evidence of a conspiratorial mindset and examined how such a worldview contributed to the maintenance of the Athenian democracy in the late fifth and early fourth centuries. His book begins with the rhetoric of conspiracy as evidenced in cases of homicide and inheritance and in cases in which litigants attempted to entrap their opponents. He then moves to the rhetoric of conspiracy in the public sphere, with chapters devoted to the charges of conspiracy in speeches that deal with the internal politics of Athens, especially in the wake of the violent regime known as the Thirty Tyrants, a pro-Spartan oligarchy that ruled for eight months after the Athenians lost the Peloponnesian War. The last two chapters take up the rhetoric of conspiracy as it is employed in instances of foreign and international policy.

According to Roisman, the rhetoric of conspiracy is dynamic and fluid, a strategy useful in a wide variety of forensic and deliberative situations. Adapted by prosecutors and defendants, the rhetoric of conspiracy is deployed always to strengthen the litigant’s case and to discredit his opponent. In disputes over inheritance, the rhetoric of conspiracy compensates for a weak argument (Roisman 2006: 35). When a litigant claims entrapment, the rhetoric of conspiracy reminds jurors of the opponent’s attempt to divert them from their obligation to justice (Roisman 2006: 64). Speakers who claim that the democracy is the target of conspiracy sustain democratic ideology. By virtue of its ‘elasticity’ (Roisman 2006: 141), the rhetoric of conspiracy can also apply to foreign policy. The ubiquity of the rhetoric of conspiracy therefore points to the receptiveness of the audience to this kind of thinking. Its prevalence derives from its efficacy.

From the rhetoric of conspiracy, Roisman draws conclusions about a conspiratorial mindset in ancient Athens. Amply attested across the board, the rhetoric of conspiracy was produced and consumed by the masses as well as the elite, and it suggests an Athenian anxiety about conspiracy. With a suspicious worldview, the conspiracy ‘spoiler’ (Roisman 2006: 154) had the ability to police Athenian society; in this sense, the rhetoric of conspiracy reminded fellow Athenians of the fundamental value of accountability: Their behaviour was always under scrutiny and their attempts at conspiracy were detectable. Finally, Roisman collates the similarities between ancient and modern conspiracy theory. Both design for themselves a perfect logic born of fantastic tales.
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that explain hidden agendas. Both are born of a state of crisis in which scapegoats are blamed for the misfortune of others.

In similar respects, the pages of Roman history are filled with conspiracy theories. From Cicero’s prosecution of the corrupt governor of Sicily in 70 B.C.E. to the suspicious circumstances and secret assassinations surrounding the accession of Emperor Hadrian in the year 117 C.E. in Syria, Roman politics were driven by fear, suspicion and mistrust that easily mushroomed into conspiracy theory (Pagán 2012). Even so, the good fortune of the Roman people sometimes did prevail over threatening dangers. For example, historian Livy records that, in the year 419 B.C.E., slaves conspired to burn the city as a distraction from their attempt to take up arms and seize the capitol. ‘Jupiter averted the unthinkable plans, and the guilty, arrested on the information of two, were executed’ (Livy 4.45.2). The prominence in the narrative of the good fortune of the Roman people deflects attention from the facts that contributed to the outcome: Namely, the betrayal of two slaves. Luck overshadows disloyalty. Historian Tacitus also tells a story of a thwarted slave conspiracy: ‘Luck checked the seeds of a slave revolt’ (Annals 4.27), as, once again, fortune keeps a conspiracy from gaining ground. The best defence against conspiracies, it would seem from both Livy and Tacitus, is fortune, an irrefutable force impervious to contradiction. Yet, it is hollow comfort to concede that the powder keg of contingency is doused by something so intractable as luck. When our Roman sources are unable to claim a world free from conspiracies, such crafted apprehension is a cautionary tale that aims to govern the shadowy territory between the insecurity of a world vulnerable to absurdism and the reassurance of a world governed by the invisible and therefore undeniable (if unprovable) forces of conspiracy.

The death of Germanicus

For example, in the year 17, Emperor Tiberius sent his adopted son and heir apparent, Germanicus, to the Roman province of Syria, with military command to settle affairs in that region of the empire. According to Tacitus, Tiberius did so on the pretence of distinction, when in fact he was determined to dislodge Germanicus from public life (Annals 2.42.1). Creticus Silanus, the father-in-law of Germanicus’ eldest son, was governor of Syria, but Tiberius replaced him with Piso, a man with a violent temperament and innate defiance (Annals 2.43.2). When Piso arrived in Syria, he interfered with the troops. Germanicus, on the other hand, made a point of being friendly and even rescued Piso from a potential shipwreck. When Piso and Germanicus finally met in Armenia, they parted in open enmity (Annals 2.57.3). Germanicus returned to Syria to find his orders reversed and his troops in disarray. Piso departed Syria for Seleucia. Suddenly, Germanicus fell gravely ill. Elements of voodoo were found in the camp (remains of human bodies, spells and curses, and the name ‘Germanicus’ etched on lead tablets) and poison was suspected. Furthermore, Piso was said to have sent slaves back to Syria to bring him updates in Seleucia about the state of Germanicus’ declining health (Annals 2.69.3). Germanicus’ condition worsened. On his deathbed, he blamed Piso and his overweening wife, Plancina (Annals 2.71), but in private, to his own wife Agrippina the Elder, Germanicus said that he feared Tiberius was behind his death.

Once Germanicus was out of the way, Piso’s friends urged him to grab Syria, on the grounds that he had the emperor’s favour, even if unexpressed (Annals 2.77). Here was his chance to obtain power. But, Piso equivocated and was eventually convinced to return to Rome. Germanicus was cremated at Antioch and his widow, Agrippina the Elder, transported his ashes back to Rome to be interred in the mausoleum of Augustus with other members of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. When her ship encountered Piso’s vessels on the coast of Anatolia, hostilities flared up but quickly subsided.

According to Tacitus, when Agrippina the Elder arrived in Rome with the ashes of Germanicus, the general populace knew and perceived Tiberius’ guilt (Annals 3.2, 3.3). Meanwhile, Piso hoped to find an ally in Germanicus’ adoptive brother Drusus, who, with Germanicus dead, advanced in the line of succession. Drusus let it be known publicly that, in spite of the rumours of poison and Piso’s involvement, he preferred to believe that no one was to blame for the untimely death of his brother. Drusus attributed the death of Germanicus to fate; however, according to Tacitus, ‘there was no doubt that the words had been prescribed for him by Tiberius’ (Annals 3.8.2); such is the temptation of conspiracy theory, to posit an evil plot rather than accede to an absurdist explanation of the world. Thus, Tacitus insinuates that Tiberius was complicit in the death of Germanicus; that the general public was aware of his complicity; and that Tiberius therefore needed to control public perception. Indeed, throughout the trial against Piso for treason and murder, rumours against the emperor were rampant: ‘At no other time did a more attentive people give itself greater permission for concealed utterances against the princeps’ (Annals 3.11). According to Courrier, such rumours ‘acted as an indicator of opinions, values, and attitudes. It was a kind of political speech in a public space, which revealed Tiberius’ unpopularity as much as Germanicus’ popularity’ (Courrier 2017: 157).

The prosecution presented its case; Piso was found guilty of treason but the charge of murder was unprovable. Piso’s wife Plancina, implicated in the crime, deserted her husband in pursuit of her own immunity from prosecution (Annals 3.15.1). The next day, Piso attempted to continue his defence but was publicly assailed by the senators and utterly rebuffed by Tiberius. That night he wrote a few words, handed them to his freedman and ordered his bedroom door closed. In the morning, he was found with his throat slit, a sword lying nearby. Tacitus remembers hearing from elder statesmen that Piso had often been seen with a letter from Tiberius with instructions to attack Germanicus. This suggests that Piso was murdered before he could implicate Tiberius; the suicide was staged to protect the emperor (Annals 3.16).

Tacitus leaves us with two bodies and no transparent explanations for their deaths. Tacitus hints but does not assert that Germanicus and Piso died under suspicious circumstances, to the advantage of Tiberius, who perhaps ordered their deaths. In the absence of certainty and factual evidence, explanations for these mysterious deaths gained ground. However, we are fortunate to be able to check Tacitus’ narrative against an external source. Between 1987 and 1990, near Seville, clandestine searches using metal detectors revealed fragments of six copies of a decree of the Roman senate inscribed on bronze tablets. This ‘Decree of the Senate concerning Gnaeus Piso the Father’ (senatus consultum de Gn. Pisone patre, abbreviated S.C.P.P.), ratified on 10 December in the year 20 c.e., records the punishments imposed on Piso, his son and his accomplices. As a piece of contemporary evidence, the inscription represents an official version of events. This is not to say it records events more faithfully or with more factual basis than our historian; rather, it is evidence of a senatorial version of events. Obviously, the senate could not fabricate information that could be refuted by living witnesses any more than the historian, but it could mould and shape, not only its own account of events, but also public perception, in the interest of promoting an imperial ideology and political culture that protected their interests and especially the interests of the imperial family (Rowe 2002: 41–66). As Miriam Griffin points out, at the very least, ‘the document establishes that Tacitus did not exaggerate the importance of the events surrounding the death of Germanicus, which clearly convulsed Rome … evoking the possibility of civil war’ (Griffin 2009: 178). Yet, we do well to remain sceptical of official versions, especially those published by totalitarian regimes (Griffin 2009: 180).

Germanicus was convinced he was poisoned by Piso, but our historian is ambiguous. Tacitus does not provide any details about the administering of poison, as he does elsewhere (for example, poison is explicitly mentioned in the death of Britannicus, Annals 13.15–6). Instead,
he offers an obfuscated scene of gruesome magic (Annals 2.69.3). When the corpse was exposed to public view before cremation, only those looking for evidence of poison found any (Annals 2.73.4). In the 176-line inscription (one of the longest Latin inscriptions to survive), there is not one mention of poison. Instead, it records only that ‘the dying Germanicus’ declared Piso ‘to have been the cause of his death’ (S.C.P.P., lines 27–8). In fact, the inscription records no interest in the cause of Germanicus’ death. Instead, the senate focuses on Piso’s insubordination. The inscription records thanks to the gods because Piso failed to stir up civil war, not because Germanicus’ death, whatever the cause, was avenged. As for the death of Piso, the first clause of the inscription specifies suicide. Tiberius refers to the senate for deliberation ‘whether he seemed to have taken his life with due cause’ (S.C.P.P., line 6). Officially, then, Piso committed suicide; anything else is speculative (for a comparison of Tacitus’ account and the inscription, see Damon 1999).

In the story of the death of Germanicus, there are haunting parallels to one of the most notorious conspiracy theories of modern times. A young man of military experience, beloved by the populace and marked for political greatness, dies in a city far from the capitol. His grieving widow travels back with his remains. Business comes to a halt as the people grieve openly. The cause of his death is unclear; foul play is suspected. A murderer with motive is identified, but he dies soon after indictment under equally suspicious circumstances and before any verdict can be rendered. The senate produces an exceptionally lengthy version of events and orders it to be published, not only in Rome, but ‘in the most frequented city of every province and in the most frequented place of that city’ and in the winter quarters of every legion in the empire (S.C.P.P., lines 170–2). Only Diocletian’s edict fixing maximum prices in the year 301 is preserved in more copies and, while this may be an accident of circumstance, it also suggests a strong desire on the part of the Tiberian senate to control the narrative. And, yet, other versions of the story circulated; conjectures and rumours found their way into the historical record. In the end, doubt prevails. Think then of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas; Jacqueline Kennedy accompanying the body back to Washington, D.C.; the national outpouring of grief; the arrest of Lee Harvey Oswald, who insisted he was just being used; Oswald’s unexplained murder by Jack Ruby; the hefty Warren Commission Report; the endless scepticism.

Lest we get carried away, let us remember that Germanicus may have died of disease or illness, at the mercy of fate, not a victim of an orchestrated assassination or malicious plot. His death may have been due to contingencies beyond his or anyone’s control. Yet, however misguided conspiratorial explanations for his death may be, still they offer ‘the comfort of knowing that while tragic events occur, they at least occur for a reason’ (Keeley 1999: 124). Conspiracy theories – whether ancient or modern – arise in part from the desire for a rational accounting that ascribes misfortunes to human control.

The Great Fire of 64 C.E.

Natural disasters and catastrophic events beyond human control beg the question, why do bad things happen to good people, and thereby tempt conspiracy theory. The great fire that consumed most of the city of Rome in the year 64 was blamed on the tyrannical emperor, Nero, who then deflected guilt onto a newly formed religious sect known as Christians. Tacitus begins his account of the fire with the alternative between fate and a conspiracy theory: ‘Next came a calamity, whether by accident or by the emperor’s treachery is uncertain’ (Annals 15.38.1; translations from Woodman 2005). When Tacitus gives two reasons for a statement, the second is usually meant to be considered more seriously than the first (Develin 1983: 85). Thus, from the start, Tacitus guides the reader towards a conspiracy theory.
On the night between 18 and 19 July in the year 64, a fire broke out amid the crowded shops near the Circus Maximus that blazed for five days. Tacitus adds another loaded alternative:

Nor did anyone dare to fight back the fire, given the frequency of threats from the numbers who prevented quenching it, and because others openly threw torches and shouted that they had authorization—whether to conduct their looting more licentiously or by order.

(Annals 15.38.7)

Since no agent for the order is specified, the reader is free to infer that Nero gave the orders, even though he was not in Rome and did not return until the fire approached his palace complex. Although he provided relief for the victims of the fire, the rumour still circulated that he fiddled while Rome burned (Annals 15.39.3). On the sixth day, when the fire was all but extinguished, it rekindled, thus worsening public opinion of Nero who was suspected of using the fire as an opportunity to acquire land for his ‘Golden House’, a vast megalomaniacal complex in the centre of the city. He was even rumoured to have burned Rome to make way for the founding of a new city named after himself. Once again, as Courrier shows, ‘rumour serves to make sense of an unexplained event, at a time when not enough information is available’ (2017: 149).

No matter how much Nero tried to help, he could not control the rumours:

But despite the human help, despite the princeps’s lavishments and the appeasements of the gods, there was no getting away from the infamous belief that the conflagration had been ordered.

(Annals 15.44.2)

The rumour conveys a negative perception of Nero. Yet, because rumour is a form of discourse that serves as a ‘collective laboratory in which opinion [is] cautiously shaped’ (Courrier 2017: 154), the negative perception is also malleable. Thus, Nero is able to capitalise on fundamental fears in order to redirect popular hatred:

Therefore, to dispel the rumour, Nero supplied defendants and inflicted the choicest punishments on those, resented for their outrages, whom the public called Chrestiani. (The source of the name was Christus, on whom, during the command of Tiberius, reprisal had been inflicted by the procurator Pontius Pilatus; and, though the baleful superstition had been stifled for the moment, there was now another outbreak, not only across Judaea, the origin of the malignancy, but also across the City, where everything frightful or shameful, of whatever provenance, converges and is celebrated.)

(Annals 15.44.2–3)

This is the earliest mention of Christians in classical literature, and it has stirred a robust scholarly debate that demonstrates the accretion of conspiracy theory over time.

According to Richard Carrier, the sentence, ‘The source of the name was Christus, on whom, during the command of Tiberius, reprisal had been inflicted by the procurator Pontius Pilatus’, was added to the original manuscript of Tacitus by a late antique Christian copyist. No contemporary or classical evidence attests to the implication of the Christians in the fire. Given the enormity of the tragedy that Tacitus describes, it is unlikely that no one would have heard of, mentioned or used Christian involvement for his own rhetorical purposes (Carrier 2014).
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For Brent Shaw, on the other hand, the passage is Tacitean, but with two telling anachronisms that undermine the credibility that the Christians were the cause of the fire. First, under the reign of Tiberius, the governor of Judaea was a ‘prefect’, not a ‘procurator’; this is a distinction that Tacitus observes elsewhere. Second, the appellation ‘Christians’ was not a Neronian term. Peter and Paul were routinely referred to as ‘Nazoreans’, not ‘Christians’ (Shaw 2015: 87). According to Shaw, Tacitus was not deliberately mendacious; rather, he forged a link between the fire and the Christians that was plausible but not probable and in fact not even possible: Nero simply did not persecute Christians. The connection between the fire and the Christians developed later because Roman officials became aware that local communities were upset by Christian activity and because of the growing negative populist mythology about Nero.

In response, Christopher Jones defends Tacitus, arguing that there was in fact a group already identifiable as followers of Jesus in Rome as early as the Neronian period, and that Nero blamed them for the fire (Jones 2017). Jones’s critique prompted Shaw to clarify his position: There is no evidence that, in the year 64, in the city of Rome, a group of individuals known as Christians was consciously targeted and deliberately persecuted for their identity as Christians. That is to say, yes, people were scapegoated for starting the fire, but whether they were actual Christians is not proven to Shaw’s satisfaction (Shaw 2018).

Finally, independent of the Shaw–Jones debate, John Pollini argues that we ought to take Tacitus at his word (Pollini 2017: 232). Later writers do not mention persecution of Christians under Nero because it was not systematic. Any mention of such an ad hoc persecution would detract from the fact that later Christians were systematically punished specifically for identifying as Christians. Pollini goes so far as to suggest that later writers do not mention the Neronian persecution because the Christians may have actually started the fire; at least Christian involvement is not out of the question.

Whether regarded as spurious, anachronistic or accurate, the passage manifests the scapegoating of Christians over time and, regardless of its empirical status, the accusation of Christians for arson conveys habits of mind inconspicuously. So, rather than sort out genuine Tacitus from late antique interpolation, or the correct from the erroneous, it is more useful to see this episode as illustrative of the potency of conspiracy theory in Roman political discourse.

Tacitus is our only source for the persecution of Christians in 64, and therefore our only source for the earliest state persecution of Christians. Of course, he may have inserted into his narrative an ideological position that was consonant with the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian, under whom he was writing. Or, someone else altogether may have inserted into the narrative an ideological position that was consonant with the late antique times in which he was copying the text. Yet, this unresolvable textual impasse is actually a useful heuristic device, for the effectiveness of sentence Annals 15.44.3 lies squarely in the malleability of conspiracy theory that allows for the easy replacement of historical specificity with utilitarian generality. Conspiracy theory operates by replacement and substitution that can lift Christians from one historical context and drop them into another. Such historical relocation imparts a sense of alarming timelessness and also ubiquity, seen for example in the coordinating conjunction ‘not only across Judaea, the origin of the malignancy, but also across the City, where everything frightful or shameful, of whatever provenance, converges and is celebrated’ (Annals 15.44.3). Through evocations of the Christians, Tacitus can ground the morality of the case against Nero in a complex set of temporal reverberations: What happened in the past (the fire of 64) carries into his present (Rome in the time of Trajan), signalling a constellation of conspiratorial themes that link continually to other times and other places across the empire.

The substitution of general for specific contexts renders conspiracy a-temporal, omnipresent and all the more worrisome. Each changing context (Neronian, Trajanic, late antique), however,
involves its own historical specificity and erodes any original sense of the conspiracy, including the questionable culpability of the Christians for the fire. The reference to the Christians in Tacitus is valuable for its potential to bury the traces of a particular situation (the fire of 64) under a self-evident and unquestionable verity (Christians were eventually persecuted). The result is an effortless slip into a timeless and believable, if unproven or unprovable, indictment of Christians as conspirators.

In the end, the Romans who were looking for an explanation for the devastation of the city, the loss of life and the damage to so much property were not interested in, or possibly not even capable of, evaluating the underlying socio-economic disparities that produced such a disaster: Crowded slums, a disregard for safety or building codes, a dysfunctional senate bound by fear. Conspiracy theory thus serves as a replacement for genuine political engagement.

According to Steve Clarke, the conspiracy theorist is a victim of cognitive failure who is unusually prone to committing what social psychologists call the ‘fundamental attribution error’ (Clarke 2002: 133–4). Humans systematically make the mistake of severely overestimating the importance of dispositional factors, while simultaneously underestimating the importance of situational factors (Clarke 2002: 144). Rome was crowded; it was a hot July; the wind was blowing. These situational factors explain why the fire was so devastating, but are perceived as insufficient. Furthermore, if Nero were really grabbing land for his Golden House, then why did he start the fire near the Circus Maximus? According to Pollini, the fire consumed much of what was already annexed (Pollini 2017: 241–2; for a step-by-step heat map of the progress of the fire, see Panella 2011). Instead, more importance is placed on Nero’s profligacy, greed and extravagant building program as an explanation for the disaster. At first, it was just a rumour that Nero fiddled while Rome burned: ‘a rumour had spread that at the very time of the City’s blaze he had actually mounted his domestic stage and sung of the extirpation of Troy, assimilating present calamities to olden disasters’ (Annals 15.39.3). But, eventually, the rumour became an etiology: ‘there was no getting away from the infamous belief that the conflagration had been ordered’ (Annals 15.44.2) And, even though the perpetrators of the fire deserved their grisly punishment, they aroused pity ‘as though it were not in the public interest, but for one man’s savagery’ (Annals 15.44.5) that they perished. In spite of the copious supply of fuel, heat and oxygen necessary to ignite a fire, it was believable that Nero started it for his own purposes. Rather than admit a frightening truth, that Rome was vulnerable, it was easier to accept that Nero instigated the fire. It was easier to fear tyranny than contingency.

Into this narrative is inserted (whether by Tacitus or a later Christian copyist) a second layer of conspiracy theory, by which once again a dispositional explanation is favoured over a situational. The situation in Rome in 64 was as follows: Nero was tyrannising the senate. His murder of his mother, Agrippina the Younger, resulted in political upheaval. He had poisoned his stepbrother Britannicus, divorced and killed his wife, Octavia and married the sinister and scheming Poppaea. His advisor, Seneca the Younger (quoted at the beginning of this essay), had retired and the trusted praetorian prefect, Afranius Burrus, died under suspicious circumstances, replaced by the notoriously cruel and violent Tigellinus. Nero was spending money well beyond his means on costly leisure pursuits. He ransacked the provinces for works of art and squeezed every penny he could to cover the costs of warfare in the eastern part of the empire that had lasted from 54 to 63, during which time the Britons put up a fierce revolt that precipitated further army costs and interrupted revenue from the island. Yet, over these situational factors that ought to explain sufficiently why Nero would burn the city, or why, given the behaviour of the emperor, the gods would be so displeased as to abandon protection, a dispositional explanation gained ground.

Obviously, Nero had to deflect blame; but, I would argue that senators also gained from the deflection of blame onto the Christians, since did they not contribute to Nero’s tyranny, with
their self-serving sycophancy or at least with their blind eyes toward his crimes? Tacitus concludes his encomiastic biography of his father-in-law, Julius Agricola, with an indictment of his fellow senators for their behaviour under the tyrannical emperor, Domitian: ‘Soon our hands dragged Helvidius to prison; we were afflicted by the sight of Mauricus and Rusticus, Senecio splattered us with his innocent blood’ (Agricola 45.1, my translation). Similarly, many of the senators of Nero’s day stood by idly – the outspoken Thrasea Paetus notwithstanding (Strunk 2017: 104–21). To accept Nero as arsonist meant accepting a degree of complicity in the construction and maintenance of a tyrannical regime (see Haynes 2012, especially pp. 299–300 on the ‘politics of acquiescence’, and Osgood 2017: 60–1 on the senators’ eagerness to maintain ties with Nero, even after the murder of his mother, Agrippina the Younger). Therefore, it is understandable to overestimate the dispositional explanation that the Christians were responsible for the fire. The Romans of the time would have believed that either the Christians were guilty of arson or that they were indirectly responsible for the fire because of a lack of piety toward the gods, who let Rome burn. Their involvement was perceived not only as possible but probable. As blaming Nero was easier than admitting the vulnerability of contingency, so blaming the Christians was easier than admitting complicity in tyranny.

Finally, conspiracy theories have the virtue of attempting to preserve a rationale for disasters that can be understood in human terms. Otherwise, we are left with absurdism, a world in which absolutely nobody is in control (Keeley 1999: 124) – not even Nero. This observation returns us to Tacitus’ opening statement, which offers either chaos or conspiracy theory: ‘Next came a calamity, whether by accident or by the emperor’s treachery is uncertain’ (Annals 15.38.1). Conspiracy theory is thus an irresistible temptation for those who need to believe that the world is governed by perceivable causes and effects.

Whether Nero or the Christians, a conspiracy theory that explains the cause of the fire seduces because it is a radical counter-thesis to chance as an epistemic artefact of causality. It works because it explains (slightly) better than what Denis Feeney calls the ‘portentous arithmetic’ (Feeney 2007: 106) that Tacitus holds in disdain:

> There were those who noted that the start of this conflagration arose on the fourteenth day before the Kalends of Sextilis, on which the Senones too ignited and captured the City; others have gone to such trouble as to total the same number of years, months and days between each of these conflagrations.

(Annals 15.41.2)

Note that Tacitus refers to the month of August by its Republican name, Sextilis, evidence of his careful observation of differences between past and present, between the Republican history he is narrating and the imperial present in which he is writing, a detail that lends some weight to the argument that ‘procurator’ is an interpolation. Between the infamous sack of Rome in 390 B.C.E. by the Senones and the fire of 64 C.E., there had passed 418 years, 418 months and 418 days. Such a metaphysical explanation appeals because it allows the Romans to project evil on the conspirators without direct interaction that would result in moral contamination. The seemingly objective mathematical facts confine the evil and prevent good citizens from being directly allied with the conspirators (on ‘metaphysical’ conspiracy theories, see Butter 2014: 55).

Mark Fenster describes the appeal of eschatology and millennialism, the theological belief in the end of human history and the return of Christ that inaugurates a glorious age lasting 1000 years (Fenster 2008: 197). Such a belief appeals because it is an accessible narrative frame that explains the past, present and future, and this kind of thinking is a form of historiography that
articulates and circulates a method of historical interpretation, a general theory of historical agency and an underlying conceptual structure that makes human history intelligible. It is an actively resistant cultural practice that challenges explanations of historical actions, agents and forces. In such an interpretive system, even the most negligible detail can signify consequences of great import.

In much the same way, a numerological explanation for the great fire displaces the possibility for recognising and enacting affirmative social and political change for current and past problems in favour of an abiding belief in a metaphysical solution (Fenster 2008: 199, 230, 231). Yet, Tacitus is categorically dismissive of such vapid observations of the commoners, who are overly impressed with nothing more than luck. When one form of reasoning is dismissed, another rushes in. The conspiracy theory of the Christians is all the more potent because numerology is so easily rejected. Each sentence, each word of Tacitus conveys the ongoing struggle to represent and understand the past and to assert control over the forces of history.

In the end, the scapegoating of Christians in the narrative of Tacitus is so logically coherent with later hermeneutic patterns that it almost does not matter whether they started the fire or not: The core of the conspiracy theory resides in the collective ethos of its Roman producers and consumers across time. Conspiracy theory gains momentum and force in part by replacement, by means of an effortless slip from fact into fiction, from provable to unprovable. This is evident in Tacitus’ Annals, in which the scapegoats who were blamed for starting the fire and who served to deflect blame from Nero are easily replaced with the Christians. The conspiracy theories surrounding the fire derive in part from the fundamental attribution error, which allowed Romans to create their own comforting realities: Easier to fear tyranny than contingency; easier to blame Christians than admit complicity in tyranny. The punishment of Christians for the fire obfuscated the suspicions held against Nero, but only after suspicions against Nero weakened the ever-resilient forces of contingency. Conspiracy theory is most virulent when it promises to dismantle the forces of chaos and pointlessness in the world, and in this we may have more in common with the ancient Romans than we may wish to acknowledge.

References
Conspiracy theories in the Roman Empire


