Big Screen Rome

*For Bart*

Warrior, Mentor, Hero

# BIG SCREEN ROME

*Monica Silveira Cyrino*

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# Acknowledgments

This book is the result of merging two of my greatest loves: classics and cinema. As a kid growing up in Los Angeles, I loved going to the movies and ran off to the cineplex every chance I could. I always assumed I would work in the industry some day, maybe as a screenwriter or costume designer. So it was with great surprise that I found myself, some years later, a professor of classics at a large research university. The idea for this volume came from a course I developed in spring 2000 at the University of New Mexico, called "Big Screen Rome." This popular course started as a survey of my favorite films about Roman antiquity, both serious and comic. Since then, the integration of classics and popular culture, especially film, has become a regular feature of school curricula all across the academic spectrum, but there was still a dearth of suitable materials to use in the classroom to accompany the viewing of these spectacular films. This book is intended to contribute to the continuing enterprise of merging classics and cinema, not only to facilitate teaching and scholarly research in the field, but also to enhance the viewing pleasure of the individual spectator.

I am indebted to Al Bertrand, commissioning editor at Blackwell, who saw the potential in my chatty, professorial notes to create a solid book. Angela Cohen deserves my gratitude for her patience and persistence in bringing the project to fulfillment. My thanks also go to Leanda Shrimpton for her help with the picture research which resulted in the exceptional cover design using such an iconic scene of Roman epic films, and to Brigitte Lee, who offered graceful and timely suggestions to polish the finished manuscript. All the staff members at Blackwell who worked on this book merit my thanks and praise for their diligence. I am grateful to Ayzha Wolf of The Picture Desk/The Kobal Collection in New York, for her help in acquiring the film stills reproduced in this volume. Photo

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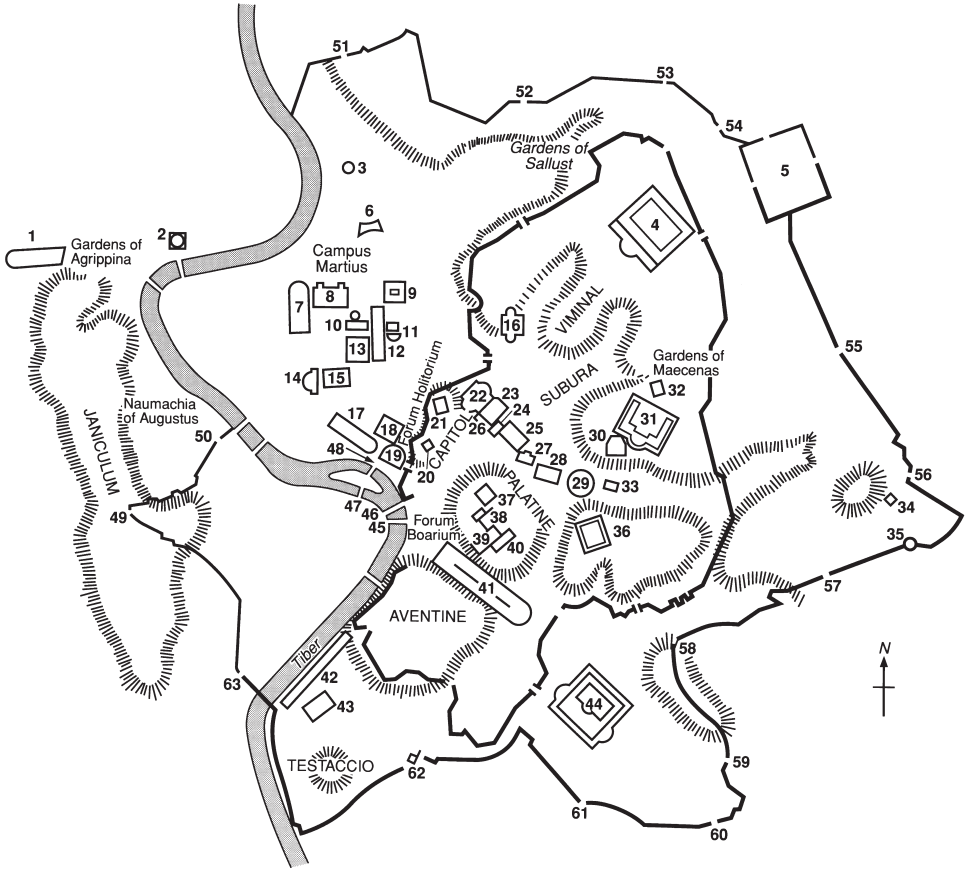
# Maps




Map 1 The city of Rome in the imperial period.

1 Circus of Caligula 2 Mausoleum of Hadrian 3 Mausoleum of Augustus 4 Baths of Diocletian 5 Camp of the Praetorians 6 Horologium of Augustus 7 Stadium of Domitian 8 Baths of Nero 9 Temple of the Divine Hadrian 10 Pantheon 11 Temple of Isis 12 Saepta Iulia 13 Baths of Agrippa 14 Theater of Pompey 15 Portico of Pompey 16 Baths of Constantine 17 Circus Flaminius 18 Portico of Octavia 19 Theater of Marcellus 20 Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus 21 Arx 22 Forum of Trajan 23 Forum of Augustus 24 Forum of Nerva 25 Forum of Peace 26 Forum of Caesar 27 Basilica of Constantine 28 Temple of Venus and Rome 29 Flavian amphitheater (Colosseum) 30 Baths of Titus 31 Baths of Trajan 32 Portico of Livia 33 Ludus Magnus 34 Baths of Helena 35 Amphitheater Castrense 36 Temple of the Divine Claudius 37 Palace of Tiberius 38 Palace of the Flavians 39 Palace of Augustus 40 Stadium 41 Circus Maximus 42 Portico of Aemilia 43 Warehouses of Galba 44 Baths of Caracalla 45 Sublician bridge 46 Aemilian bridge 47 Cestian bridge 48 Fabrician bridge 49 Porta Aurelia 50 Porta Septimiana 51 Porta Flaminia 52 Porta Pinciana 53 Porta Salaria 54 Porta Nomentana 55 Porta Tiburtina 56 Porta Praenestina 57 Porta Asinaria 58 Porta Metronia 59 Porta Latina 60 Porta Appia 61 Porta Ardeatina 62 Porta Ostiensis 63 Porta Portuensis


Map 2 The Roman Empire at the end of the second century AD.


Volga
Ural
Don
SARMATIANS
Dnieper
GOTHS
Bug
Dniester
CASPIAN SEA
BOSPHORUS
DACIA
Sarmizegetusa
Chersonese
Caucasus
COLCHIS
IBERIA
PONTUS EUXINUS
Danube
MOESIA
Naissus
Serdica
LWR.
Marcianopolis
Artaxata
Philippopolis
THRACE
Byzantium
Chalcedon
Nicomedia
PAPHLA-
GONIA
BYTHYNIA
PONTUS
LITTLE
ARMENIA
ARMENIA
Adrianople
MACEDONIA
Thessalonica
Nicaea
Ancyra
Amida
Tigranocerta
GALATIA
Caesarea
CAPPADOCIA
MESOPOTAMIA
ADIABENE
Nisibis
EPIRUS
ACHAEA
Smyrna
Ephesus
Athenae
PISIDIA
Aphrodisias
LYCAONIA
ISAURIA
PAMPHYLIA
CILICIA
Tarsus
Issos
COMMAGENE
Edessa
Carrhae
OSRHOENE
Hatra
Dura-
Europos
PERSIANS
ANTIOCH
Laodicea
LYCIA
SYRIA-COELE
CTESIPHON
Tigris
Seleucia
Babylon
Euphrates
Rhodes
Cyprus
Crete
Emesa
Palmyra
SYRIA
PHOENICIA
Heliopolis
Damascus
Tyre
Caesarea
Bostra
Gerasa
Jerusalem
PALESTINE
SEA
Cyrene
CYRENAICA
ALEXANDRIA
Petra
ARABIA
EGYPT
Nile
RED SEA
BLEMMYES
Syene

# Introduction

"What else has two thousand years' advance publicity?" Cecil B. DeMille once made this cheerful link between the ancient and modern worlds, just before the release of his magnificent biblical epic *The Ten Commandments* (1956), starring Charlton Heston (Elley, 26). The famous American filmmaker would be pleased but not surprised to know that his blockbuster epic remains one of the most well-known and beloved films today, especially during Holy Week, when it is still televised every spring in all its Technicolor glory. DeMille was certain contemporary audiences would find many aspects of the ancient world familiar, inspiring, and entertaining as they viewed the reconstructed past onscreen, and both the immediate success and enduring appeal of his epic films have affirmed his belief. Today more than ever, popular images and stories projected onto movie, television, and computer screens invite us to experience, understand, and connect to the ancient world. Films about antiquity bridge the gap between the past and the present by offering spectacular and compelling interpretations of history, literature, and mythology that are relevant and educational for contemporary viewers.

Of all the cinematic depictions of antiquity, the image of ancient Rome on the big screen has long been the most popular and ubiquitous, as well as the most impressive and meaningful. The idea of ancient Rome, city of power, intrigue, beauty, brutality, and lust, has always attracted and entertained modern film audiences. Films about the ancient Roman world have been wildly popular and immensely profitable throughout the first century of the history of cinema, and the genre continues to show signs of strength. Since the release of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000), with its massive critical and commercial success, such films are currently experiencing a popular renaissance. Contemporary audiences readily relate to and even define themselves by the onscreen portrayal of the ancient Romans, whose

provocative combination of dignity and decadence both fascinates and disturbs. As one recent study notes: "Imperial Rome provides a screen onto which concerns about contemporary international relations, domestic politics, and cultural and social tensions can be projected" (Joshel, Malamud, and Wyke, 6). The very vastness of the Roman world guarantees its appeal to a wide array of viewers, since Rome exists wherever there are Romans: Italy, Egypt, Greece, Africa, Syria, Palestine, Judaea, Germany, Spain, and Britain. The ever-expanding Roman Empire continues to serve as a popular analogue for modern society, allowing filmmakers to use this distant and often romanticized past to comment on the present day.

Classicists and film historians are beginning to analyze how and why films appropriate and recreate the ancient Roman world onscreen. In so doing, it is important to ask what these films say about our relationship to and our comprehension of the ancient world, and how these cinematic images influence our contact with "real" artifacts from the ancient past, whether archaeological, historical, or literary. As teachers and students, we realize films about the ancient world let us engage with the ongoing and changing definition of "the Classical Tradition." By their very success, these films influence our teaching of the classics because of their enormous popularity and easy accessibility to appreciative viewers everywhere. But several questions arise in conjunction with this project. Can films set in antiquity help us in our teaching? Can they expand our knowledge of the ancient world? Can they help resolve the opposition between scholarly research and popular culture? Most importantly, can films about the past elucidate our own society's present desires, concerns, and fears?

As a professional classicist, film buff, and ardent traveler, I have always been instinctively aware of the concurrent existence of these past and present worlds. For me, Rome resonates on many chronological and cultural levels. As an ancient culture, it is the object of academic study because of its dominant history, powerful literature, and unique influence on the Western world. As a sophisticated modern city, it is the glamorous and visually stunning location of several significant films in the history of twentieth-century American and Italian cinema. And, perhaps due to the first two reasons, it is my absolute favorite travel destination. Whenever I travel somewhere else, I always ask myself: "Why am I not going to Rome?" One evening in May a few years ago, in a café at the bottom of the Via Veneto near the Piazza Barberini, as I was enjoying the multi-layered experience of Roman history and culture, and the sheer thrill of a successful shopping expedition, I sketched out on a napkin the table of contents for this book. *Big Screen Rome* explores how the image of ancient Rome is

excavated and reconstructed for modern audiences eager to experience a familiar cinematic entertainment, yet one that is still exciting and new. In particular, this book investigates what these historical-themed films say about contemporary social and political issues at the time the films were released. As one film historian remarks: "The main advantage of history is that it allows people to describe the present time in a free, imaginary way" (Sorlin, 209). My aim in this study is to make a felicitous connection between antiquity and modernity through the prism of film.

Cinema enthusiasts are notoriously fanatic about their favorite films, and the selection of films offered in this book unapologetically represents my own group of favorites. Also, these films have been successfully "road-tested" in my university courses on classics and cinema. While there are many more films set in the ancient world worthy of study and appropriate for inclusion in such a course, my selection presents films that elicit the most positive, robust, and thoughtful responses from students. The films are arranged in chronological order, where each chapter builds on the previous ones, and the sequence can easily be broken up into smaller groups with similar thematic interests.

The first three chapters consider three religious-themed American epics from the 1950s, *Quo Vadis* (1951), *The Robe* (1953), and *Ben-Hur* (1959). As "Roman" films produced after World War II, they both inherit and originate particular cinematic mythologies and ideologies about ancient Rome. These chapters examine how the films propose a complicated relationship between the audience and the Romans depicted on the screen. One of the major themes shared by these three films is the tension between the pious plot narratives that condemn the moral corruption of the Romans and the films' simultaneous presentation of an enticing visual spectacle of Roman luxury, glamour, and eroticism. These chapters also situate the films within the social and cultural environment of 1950s America and the tense political atmosphere of the Cold War.

The next two chapters examine two American films in the secular mode of the early 1960s, *Spartacus* (1960) and *Cleopatra* (1963). These chapters consider how the familiar cinematic image of an opulent and powerful Rome created by earlier epics is adopted and utilized by this next generation of films. As the changing American political climate in this period influenced these films, their narratives display an emergent political and social consciousness displaced onto the comfortable cinematic image of Rome. These films move away from the depiction of religious conflicts found in earlier epics, focusing instead on the secular, yet often more violent, struggle between personal freedom and traditional authority. These

chapters examine how both films use a Roman context to explore social and political issues relevant to contemporary American audiences in the early decade of the 1960s, such as the civil rights movement and the sexual revolution. These two films help us to understand the essentially political nature of our relationship with the image of the ancient Roman past in its symbolic link to modern society.

The following three chapters take a unique look at three comedies set in the ancient Roman world, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966), *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979), and the Roman Empire sequence from *History of the World, Part I* (1981). Although these comedies were produced in different historical decades, their mutual enterprise is the comic vivisection of the generic conventions of the Roman epic film. These chapters consider how the comedies take the familiar images of Rome constructed by earlier epics, and proceed to deconstruct them for an amused audience, who are thus challenged to reexamine their secure belief in an identifiable cinematic antiquity. The comic films exploit the slick, visually stylized reality of "serious" epic films by presenting their images with a rough, gritty texture. Stock epic scenes, such as chariot races, banquets, and parades, are lampooned in these comic films in order to expose the overt sexuality and brutality lurking behind the proper conventions of the supposedly noble Roman epic film. Each film is considered within its own social and political milieu with its appropriate jokes and sight gags, yet the shared goal of the comic genre is to interrogate, dissolve, and strip away those conventional epic fictions. The comedies ask us to evaluate our knowledge of the ancient Roman world as it is traditionally presented in film.

The final chapter considers the colossal success of the recent film *Gladiator* and examines the rebirth of the Roman epic film at the turn of the twenty-first century. This chapter discusses the relationship of *Gladiator* to earlier epic films about the ancient Roman world and places it in the long tradition of epic cinema. Like earlier epic films, *Gladiator* reinvents the onscreen image of ancient Rome and uses it as background for an exploration of contemporary issues and concerns. This chapter looks at how *Gladiator* refers to and improves upon earlier epics with its refined dramatic narrative, technical sophistication, and evocative social commentary. As an allegory of contemporary politics, *Gladiator* offers a meditation on the status of American power in a post-Cold War world, while concurrently illustrating the pressures of a Roman Empire on the brink of collapse. *Gladiator* explores the community's alienation from patriotic ideals and the dissolution of the concept of honor, and asks modern viewers to

consider the place of heroes in ancient Roman society as well as in our own time.

Each chapter treats a single film and provides specific information about the production of the film, such as director, writers, and cast. First there is a complete plot outline of the film, intended for those who do not have time to view the film in its entirety or simply wish to have an overview of the story. The plot outline can also guide instructors and students to the placement of important scenes for selected study and clear up questions about the narrative. Next comes a synopsis of the film's ancient background, detailing the real historical context suggested by the narrative of the film. In the case of the dramatic, and thus imaginary, framework of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (chapter 6), this section describes the history and generic conventions of ancient Roman comedy. There follows a discussion of the more recent background to the film, with an examination of other appropriations, literary or figurative, of the story or its major characters since antiquity, and in particular the use of the story or characters in other media such as novels, stage plays, and earlier cinematic versions. This section also describes how the project came into the hands of the film's director, and provides a brief summary of the director's career.

The next section on making the movie investigates the actual production of the film, including the development of the screenplay, directorial decisions about shooting locations and casting of actors, the film's artistic design, musical score, exceptional set-piece scenes, special effects, and new cinematic technologies. In this section, the main characters of the film are examined in terms of their significance to the plot, and relevant highlights of the actors' careers are provided. This section also places the film's use of narrative and visual story-telling conventions within the context of the epic cinematic tradition, and indicates any references, adaptations, and innovations present in the film.

In the final section on themes and interpretations, the film's critical and commercial successes are noted, followed by an examination of the film's position within its own social, political, and cultural context at the time of its production and release. This section offers a detailed interpretation of important themes in the film, especially how issues of politics, religion, and sexuality are portrayed onscreen. Each chapter ends with a list of the core issues represented in the film that are suitable for discussion or further exploration.

A few years before he directed *Ben-Hur*, William Wyler directed the film *Roman Holiday* (1953), a bittersweet story about the conflict between

duty and desire set against the monuments of the ancient city of Rome. The main character is Princess Ann, played with wide-eyed incandescence by Audrey Hepburn, who arrives on a state visit to Rome from an unnamed country. The Princess longs to break free from the constraints of royal duty, so she escapes from her country's luxurious embassy on the Via Veneto to enjoy a night of freedom. Heading down to the center of the ancient city, Princess Ann falls asleep on a bench near the Roman Forum. There she is found by a dispirited but decent American journalist, Joe Bradley, played by Gregory Peck, an actor whose handsomeness betrays an edge of melancholy. Joe tries to send her home in a cab, but ends up putting her to bed chastely in his tiny apartment on the bohemian Via Margutta near the Piazza del Popolo, where the main gate of the ancient city once stood.

Although Joe soon recognizes the sleeping girl's royal identity, and knows he could write the "runaway princess" story, he appreciates her desire for freedom, and decides to keep her secret. Joe and Ann spend a wonderful day around the ancient city – sharing a drink at a café near the Pantheon, going to a party at the Castel Sant' Angelo, and taking a thrilling Vespa ride around the Colosseum. By the time Joe takes her back to the embassy late that night, the two are deeply in love. The next morning, in the last scene of the film, Princess Ann speaks at a press conference to bid goodbye to the city of Rome, as well as to Joe, who is among the press corps assembled in the great hall of the embassy. Her advisors remind her to make the proper diplomatic comments about her travels through Europe. But when asked about her favorite stop along her tour, instead of a tactful, evasive reply, the Princess answers with unmitigated passion: "Rome, by all means Rome . . . I will cherish my visit here in memory as long as I live."

# *Chapter 1*

# *Quo Vadis* (1951)

*The splendor and savagery of the world's wickedest empire!*

| | |
|---|---|
| Director: | Mervyn LeRoy |
| Screenplay: | John Lee Mahin, S. N. Behrman, Sonya Levien<br>Henryk Sienkiewicz (novel) |
| Produced by: | Sam Zimbalist for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) |
| Running Time: | 170 minutes |

**Cast**

| | |
|---|---|
| Marcus Vinicius | Robert Taylor |
| Lygia | Deborah Kerr |
| Nero | Peter Ustinov |
| Petronius | Leo Genn |
| Poppaea | Patricia Laffan |
| Tigellinus | Ralph Truman |
| Aulus Plautius | Felix Aylmer |
| Pomponia | Nora Swinburne |
| Eunice | Marina Berti |
| Peter | Finlay Currie |
| Paul | Abraham Sofaer |
| Acte | Rosalie Crutchley |
| Ursus | Buddy Baer |
| Fabius Nerva | Norman Wooland |

## Plot Outline

It is the summer of AD 64, and the Roman military commander Marcus Vinicius has just returned to Rome after spending three years suppressing a revolt in Britannia. With him is his loyal lieutenant, the tribune Fabius Nerva, and the soldiers of the 14th Legion. On their way into the city, they are stopped by a unit of the Praetorian Guard, with an imperial order to camp outside the city walls. Furious at the insult, Marcus rides straight to the palace of Emperor Nero and demands an audience. With Nero are his courtiers, including the author Petronius and the philosopher Seneca. When Marcus criticizes the order as bad for military morale, he is rebuked by Tigellinus, the ruthless prefect of the Praetorian Guard and Nero's chief protector. Nero informs Marcus that he is to wait until the next day, when he and his victorious soldiers will ride into the city in triumph, because "the people want spectacle." As he departs, Marcus shares a private word about the state of the empire with his uncle Petronius, who sends him to pass the night at the house of Aulus Plautius, a retired Roman general, and his wife Pomponia. There Marcus meets the beautiful Lygia, a royal hostage and the adopted daughter of the general, and immediately falls in love with her. Lygia is protected by a giant manservant, Ursus. At dinner that night, Marcus recounts stories of his bloody campaigns, when a new guest, Paul of Tarsus, arrives and is warmly welcomed. After Marcus and Nerva leave to inspect the troops, the family, now revealed to be Christians, discuss with Paul the impending arrival of Peter in Rome. Later that night, Marcus and Lygia meet in the garden, and although they are obviously drawn to each other, they quarrel about his role as a Roman officer.

The next morning, Marcus and his legions enter Rome in a spectacular triumph, and as Lygia watches from the crowd, Nero and his new empress, Poppaea, survey the scene from the palace balcony. At the house of Petronius, Marcus asks his astute uncle about the law of hostages, then decides to ask Nero to make Lygia his reward for services rendered. Petronius tries to give his nephew a lovely Spanish slave, Eunice, but the girl, who is secretly in love with Petronius, balks at the order, and Marcus allows her to stay. Lygia is seized from her home and taken to Nero's palace, where she meets Acte, Nero's ex-mistress and supervisor of the imperial women's quarters, who shares with Lygia the Christian sign of the fish. That evening at the victory banquet, Nero entertains his guests with a song he pretends is extemporaneous, while Petronius admonishes him to devote more energy to his art. Marcus attempts to romance Lygia, but she is appalled by his use of force and resists his advances. Poppaea

reveals her interest in Marcus, and is jealous of his attentions to the hostage girl. Marcus sends Lygia back to his quarters under heavy guard, but she is rescued by Ursus and runs off into hiding with the Christians. With help from the Greek sage Chilo, Marcus goes in secret to one of the Christians' underground nocturnal rites, where he watches Paul baptize members of the sect and listens intently to a speech by Peter about the teachings of Christ. After the meeting, Marcus tries to follow Lygia, but he is beaten unconscious by Ursus. In remorse for his violence, Ursus carries Marcus back to the humble house where Lygia is in hiding, and she tenderly nurses his wound. When Marcus awakes the next morning, he frees Lygia from her bondage to him, and as he starts to leave, she surrenders to him, and they join in a passionate kiss. He asks her to marry him, saying he'll honor her god in the pagan Roman way, but she wants him to accept Christ into his heart as she has. Paul arrives, and explains to Marcus that he can demonstrate his love for Lygia by freeing his slaves and putting down his sword. Marcus is aggravated at their foolish devotion to such a feeble deity, and demands that Lygia choose between him and her god. Lygia signals her choice by her silence, and as Marcus angrily departs, she is consoled in her grief by Paul.

The court moves to the summer palace at Antium, where, in the company of the amorous pair, Petronius and Eunice, Marcus sulks over his separation from Lygia. When the empress summons him to her pavilion to seduce him, he goes willingly and joins her on her sumptuous couch. Meanwhile, Nero is anxious over his plans to raze Rome to the ground and build a new city. In a rage he spurns the loving kindness of Acte, and cruelly banishes her from his sight forever. Calling his court together, he unveils the model of the new city he is creating, "Neropolis," just as Tigellinus rushes in to announce that the city is consumed in flames. When Marcus rushes back to Rome to save Lygia, he is pursued by a contingent of Praetorians sent by the jealous Poppaea. In the burning city, Marcus finds a surging mass of terrified, screaming people, and he guides them into the sewers to safety. Amid the chaos, he is reunited with Lygia. Marcus commands the Praetorians guarding the Palatine to give way, and the mob charges towards the imperial palace. On the roof, basking in the fire's glow, Nero asks for a lyre and sings the fall of the great cities of Troy and Rome. When he sees the crowd advancing, crying "Incendiary!" he flees inside the palace and commands his courtiers to remedy the disaster. Poppaea suggests giving the angry mob a victim, by blaming the unpopular, anti-social Christian sect for the fiery devastation. Over the fierce protestations of Petronius, Nero signs an executive order assigning official

Plate 1 *Quo Vadis*. Petronius (Leo Genn) and the imperial courtiers stare in horror as Nero (Peter Ustinov) plays the lyre during the Great Fire of Rome. Courtesy of MGM/The Kobal Collection.

guilt for the fire to the Christians, whose "punishment will be a warning – a spectacle of terror."

After the fire, Marcus tells Lygia he will work to see Nero removed from power. Marcus visits Petronius to seek his support of General Galba as

emperor, and his uncle warns him that Nero is about to persecute the Christians for the burning of Rome. When Marcus discovers that Plautius and his wife have been arrested, he rushes to the prison, and is captured and jailed by Tigellinus. Meanwhile, on his way out of the city, Peter is stopped on the Via Appia by the voice of Christ, who urges him to go back to Rome and take care of his followers. Petronius now realizes he is also in danger from the crazed Nero: "I love Rome, and I am not eager to survive it." At a dinner party of all his friends, he bids them farewell, frees Eunice and grants her the estate, then calls upon a physician to open his veins. Eunice seizes the knife and cuts her own wrist, and as they die together, Petronius dictates a final letter to Nero, denouncing him as a tyrant, a murderer, and a bad artist.

In the stands of the arena the next day, the Roman people call for Christian blood. Nero and his court appear in the imperial box, and the games begin. Imprisoned together beneath the arena, Marcus, Lygia, and Plautius watch as Pomponia is sent forth with a group of Christians into the arena. When Peter appears in the stands and claims Rome for Christ, he is immediately seized and thrown in jail. Inspired by his words, the Christian martyrs begin to sing as they are mauled and eaten by scores of lions. Nero is annoyed by their beatific singing and the smiles on their faces as they die. That night in the prison, Lygia tells Marcus she wants to be his wife before she dies, and asks Peter to join them in marriage. Later, Peter is remanded to Vatican Hill, where he is crucified upside down.

Back at the arena the next evening, Plautius is among the Christians tied to crucifixes and burned, but before he dies, the general addresses the crowd, identifying himself and telling them Nero is lying about who set fire to Rome. Fabius Nerva is in the stands, and he notes the crowd becoming restless. In the imperial box, Seneca and the poet Lucan are disgusted by the injustice they are witnessing, and express their envy for Petronius' suicide. On the final day of spectacle, Poppaea unveils a special show to please the emperor and satisfy her hatred. Marcus is chained in the imperial box, while Lygia is tied to a stake in the arena, with only Ursus to protect her from a savage black bull sent to gore her. In tremendous pain at the sight, Marcus prays to Christ to help Ursus defend Lygia, and the giant slays the bull. Marcus breaks his bonds and leaps into the arena to rescue Lygia, but they are surrounded by the Praetorian Guard. The crowd roars for the emperor to spare them, but Nero gives the thumb's down signal. Nerva leads his soldiers into the arena and they beat back the Praetorians. Marcus addresses the crowd, censuring Nero as a madman and proclaiming Galba the new emperor of Rome. In the imperial box,

a soldier kills Tigellinus, calling the blow "a sword from Plautius." Nero escapes to the palace, where he encounters Poppaea, and strangles her to death. Running to his study, he is surprised to find Acte, who urges him to commit suicide before the raging mob attacks him. Nero, too cowardly to do the deed, asks for Acte's help, so she drives the dagger in his heart, and holds him as he dies. Now Galba enters Rome to assume power, while Marcus and Nerva express their hope for better days to come. Finally, Marcus and Lygia ride out of Rome along the Via Appia, past the spot where Peter heard the voice of Christ.

## Ancient Background

The action of the film *Quo Vadis* is set in and around the city of Rome in the summer of AD 64, during the last part of the rule of Nero, one of the most infamous Roman emperors (Grant, 283–5). Among the most complete ancient sources on the life and reign of Nero are the Roman historian Tacitus (ca. AD 55–120) in his work the *Annales*, Books 12–16, and the *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* by the Roman historian Suetonius (ca. AD 69–140), where the sixth book examines Nero's life. Nero Claudius Caesar (AD 37–68) became emperor of Rome in AD 54, when he was just 17 years old, the last of the Julio-Claudian dynasty begun by Augustus in 27 BC. Nero was the adopted son of the previous emperor, Claudius, who ruled from AD 41 to 54, and whose suspicious death from an undetermined cause is often blamed on his wife, Nero's mother, Agrippina the Younger. By all accounts, Nero was immature for his age and unusually studious, more interested in composing poetry and music than in ruling Rome. His tutor was the notable Stoic philosopher and dramatist Lucius Annaeus Seneca (ca. 4 BC–AD 65), born in Spain and educated in Rome, who helped guide Nero through the relatively calm early years of his reign. During those first five years under Seneca's supervision, according to Tacitus, Nero's government maintained peace and won military victories throughout the empire, encouraged affluence among the Roman people by cutting taxes, and restored the privileges of the Senate (*Annales* 12). By the end of this period, however, Nero began to lose interest in government affairs, and turned his attention to the pursuit of his own personal pleasure, in the form of extravagant games, lavish parties, and outrageous sexual relationships.

Among Nero's many mistresses was a freedwoman called Acte, a liaison that enraged his mother. Agrippina, who had essentially engineered her

son's succession and tried to control his every move, began to exasperate Nero with her overbearing manipulation, so Nero had her murdered in AD 59. Soon after, in AD 62, he appointed Gaius Ofonius Tigellinus, a ruthless and ambitious man, as prefect of the Praetorian Guard, and he effectively became the emperor's chief advisor, indulging Nero in all his bad habits. When Seneca saw the direction Nero's administration was taking, he requested and received permission to retire from public life. With no restraining influences on his behavior, Nero divorced and exiled his first wife, Octavia, daughter of Claudius, who afterwards remained so popular with the people that Nero had her executed on false charges. Nero then married his long-time mistress, the notoriously dissolute Poppaea Sabina, who was at the time the wife of a Roman officer, Marcus Salvius Otho, and was rumored to be an ex-prostitute.

After AD 62, the palace of Nero became saturated with intrigue, scandal, violence, and murder. To finance his ever more opulent imperial lifestyle and pay for the excessive public entertainments intended to appease the plebeian crowd, Nero, under the provocation of both Poppaea and Tigellinus, began to persecute wealthy Roman citizens on trumped-up charges of treason so he could seize their assets. Also, anyone remotely related to the Julio-Claudian line found his or her imperial blood spilled to satisfy Nero's insane jealousy and anxiety about the security of his throne. So while the wealthy and noble of the Roman upper classes began to despise and fear the depredations of the increasingly maniacal emperor, the common people of Rome were regaled with handouts of food and wine, and entertained by spectacles of chariot races and musical competitions. By this time Nero was so out of control that he violated one of the key tenets of the Roman aristocratic code by appearing in an onstage public performance, thereby inviting the shock and disgust of the senatorial class, who had traditionally looked down upon those engaged in the theater.

During the reign of Nero, Christianity was just one of what the Romans considered were the many bizarre and criminally subversive cults to be found among the diverse populations of the Roman Empire, according to Suetonius, who lists the punishment of the Christian sect as one of Nero's greater benefactions, along with public grain distribution and the expulsion of mimes from the city (*Life of Nero* 16). In the eyes of their pagan Roman neighbors, the unpopular Christians were especially problematic and troublesome. Because the Christians were strict monotheists who believed in the divinity of Jesus Christ alone, they rejected all other deities and religious cults, and refused to participate in public ceremonies to propitiate the gods the Romans believed would protect and fortify the city

of Rome. Their obstinate refusal to join community activities offended the average patriotic Roman and generated extensive public hostility towards the Christians. Moreover, their rigid repudiation of the state religion was actually considered a crime because it endangered the intricate system of reciprocity between Rome and its inhabitants and the famously irritable Olympian gods. Antisocial, secretive, and fanatical, Christians made themselves easy targets, and thus were constantly being blamed for people's personal misfortunes and held responsible for any collective disasters, like the so-called "witches" of medieval villages.

Nero's persecution of the Christians is described in detail by only one contemporary source. According to Tacitus, Nero's decision to single out the Christian sect and persecute them directly was prompted by his desire to counter allegations that he was guilty of arson in setting the Great Fire of Rome that burned through the city in the summer of AD 64. On the night of July 18, this devastating fire broke out near the Circus Maximus between the Palatine and Caelian hills, blazing for nine days before it was fully extinguished. More than half the city, including ten of Rome's fourteen districts and Nero's own palace, were wiped out or severely damaged, while many people were killed and thousands left homeless. Rumors that Nero planned the conflagration with the intention of clearing the way for his vast and gaudy new palace, the *Domus Aurea*, "Golden House," and that he played the lyre and sang of the Fall of Troy while watching the flames, arose almost immediately. So to ward off the people's angry suspicions against him, he chose the fairly new cult of Christianity as a scapegoat for deflecting popular displeasure. Tacitus notes that although the Christians deserved to be punished, subjected as they were to widespread and justifiable prejudice, there were those in Rome who felt sympathy for the victims and saw this act of persecution as another fiendish sign of the emperor's relentless cruelty and the oppressive policies of his despotic regime (*Annales* 15.44):

> But neither human resources, nor imperial munificence, nor appeasement of the gods, eliminated sinister suspicions that the fire had been instigated. To suppress this rumor, Nero fabricated scapegoats – and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians (as they were popularly called). Their originator, Christ, had been executed in Tiberius' reign by the governor of Judaea, Pontius Pilatus. But in spite of this temporary setback the deadly superstition had broken out afresh, not only in Judaea (where the mischief had started) but even in Rome. All degraded and shameful practices collect and flourish in the capital. First, Nero had self-acknowledged Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large

> numbers of others were condemned – not so much for incendiarism as for their antisocial tendencies. Their deaths were made farcical. Dressed in wild animals' skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight. Nero provided his Gardens for the spectacle, and exhibited displays in the Circus, at which he mingled with the crowd – or stood in a chariot, dressed as a charioteer. Despite their guilt as Christians, and the ruthless punishment it deserved, the victims were pitied. For it was felt that they were being sacrificed to one man's brutality rather than to the national interest.

In the aftermath of the fire, according to early Christian tradition, Nero also ordered the executions of the two most famous Christians martyred at Rome. The apostle Peter is about to leave Rome, yet turns around on the Via Appia and returns to the city after hearing the voice of Christ urging him to tend to the Christian flock suffering under Nero's persecutions, an exchange alluded to in the Gospel of John (13:36). Upon his return, Peter himself is arrested and crucified upside down on Vatican Hill, the future site of the Basilica di San Pietro. The apostle Paul, from the Greek city of Tarsus in southeast Asia Minor, also arrived in Rome during this period, whereupon he was imprisoned and then put to death, traditionally by decapitation, either during the sweep of AD 64 or shortly thereafter. Having spent several years spreading the message of the Christian faith throughout the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, Paul is often credited with setting the course of Christianity to become the dominant world religion (Grant, 342–8).

After AD 65, Nero's tyrannical behavior and increasing brutality led to the development of several significant political plots against him. In the final years of his reign, a number of mainly patrician conspirators, as well as those Republican-minded senators and victorious generals who happened to incur Nero's jealous antagonism, suffered fatal reprisals. Among the emperor's many casualties were three of the most important literary figures of the post-Augustan era (Grant, 326–8). The philosopher Seneca, Nero's former minister, had returned to private life in AD 62, but did not get to enjoy his retirement for very long. In AD 65 Seneca was accused of being involved with Gaius Calpurnius Piso in a Stoic plot against the emperor, and was ordered to commit suicide. His young nephew, the poet Marcus Annaeus Lucan (AD 39–65), had come to Rome from Spain as a boy to study with his uncle. Lucan was the author of the epic poem *De Bello Civile*, a story of the civil war between Caesar and Pompey that somewhat injudiciously displayed a partiality for Republican principles. Predictably, when Lucan was suspected of complicity in Piso's conspiracy,