

WHILE ROME BURNED

FIRE, LEADERSHIP, AND URBAN DISASTER IN THE ROMAN CULTURAL IMAGINATION

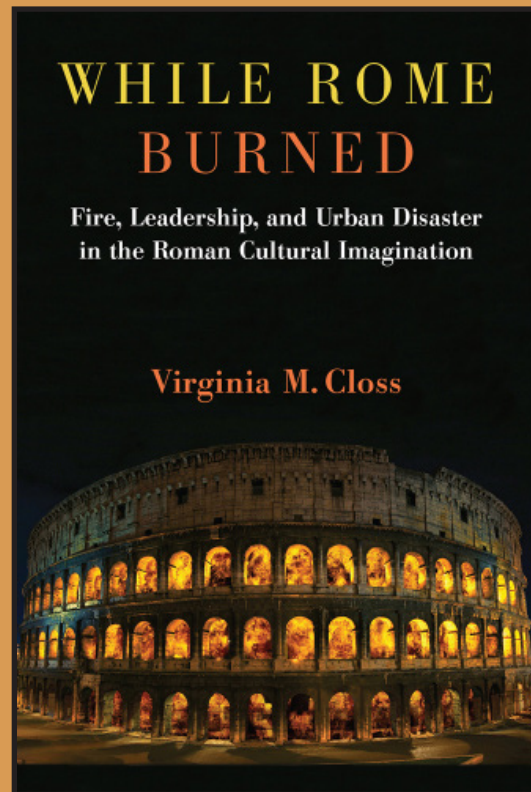
VIRGINIA M. CLOSS

While Rome Burned attends to the intersection of fire, city, and emperor in ancient Rome, tracing the critical role that urban conflagration played as both reality and metaphor in the politics and literature of the early imperial period. Urban fires presented a consistent problem for emperors from Augustus to Hadrian, especially given the expectation that the princes be both a protector and provider for Rome's population. The problem manifested itself differently for each leader, and each sought to address it in distinctive ways. This history can be traced most precisely in Roman literature, as authors addressed successive moments of political crisis through dialectical engagement with prior incendiary catastrophes in Rome's historical past and cultural repertoire.

Working in the increasingly repressive environment of the early principate, Roman authors frequently employed "figured" speech and mythopoetic narratives to address politically risky topics. In response to shifting political and social realities, the literature of the early imperial period reimagines and reanimates not just historical fires, but also archetypal and mythic representations of conflagration. Throughout, the author engages critically with the growing subfield of disaster studies, as well as with theoretical approaches to language, allusion, and cultural memory.

The book is a study in politics and poetics, attending to the intersection of fire, city, and ruler in the first century and a half of Rome's imperial era, with implications for other premodern cities, all of which experienced the terror of urban fire.

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