

insulae: how the masses lived

Fires

One of the greatest risks of living in the densely populated city of Rome, and particularly in *insulae* was that of fires. Fires broke out easily (due to people cooking on open flames), spread easily (due to buildings being constructed out of wood, and buildings being built so closely together) and were hard to control. Several times large parts of the city went up in flames. It was not unusual for imperial funds to make good losses of impoverished wealthy citizens in the wake of a fire.

Source 1: Herodian *History of the Roman Empire*

In this passage from Herodian riots have broken out in the city of Rome, and soldiers combatting civilians started setting fire to houses.

The soldiers did, however, set fire to houses that had wooden balconies (and there were many of this type in the city). Because a great number of houses were made chiefly of wood, the fire spread very rapidly and without a break throughout most of the city. Many men who lost their vast and magnificent properties, valuable for the large incomes they produced and for their expensive decorations, were reduced from wealth to poverty.

A great many people died in the fire, unable to escape because the exits had been blocked by the flames. All the property of the wealthy was looted when the criminal and worthless elements in the city joined with the soldiers in plundering. And the part of Rome destroyed by fire was greater in extent than the largest intact city in the empire.

Herodian *History of the Roman Empire* 7.12.5-7 (translation E.C. Echolls).

How does the passage emphasise the extent of the damage from fire?

What is the effect of the fire upon the different groups Herodian mentions?

Source 2: Aulus Gellius *Attic Nights*

[Julianus walks home with a group of friends]

as we were on our way up to the Cispian Hill, we saw that an insula, built high with many stories, had caught fire, and that now all the neighbouring buildings were burning in a mighty conflagration. Then one of Julianus' companions said: 'The income from city property is great, but the dangers are far greater. But if some remedy could be devised to prevent houses in Rome from so constantly catching fire, then by Jove I would sell my country property and buy in the city.'

[They then banter about making wood inflammable.]

Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 15.1.1-3 (translation John C. Rolfe)

What worries Julianus' friends about seeing the *insula* on fire?

Source 3: Juvenal *Satire* 3

We inhabit a city held up for the most part by slim props; since that's the way managers stop the buildings falling down; once he's discovered some ancient yawning crack, he tells us to sleep soundly - in a building on the point of collapse. The place to live is far from all these fires, and all these panics in the night. Ucalegon is already shouting for water and moving his knick knacks, and your third floor's already smoking: but you're still unaware, since if the alarm was raised downstairs. The last to burn will be the one who just the roof tiles protect from the rain, up there where gentle doves coo over their eggs. Cordus had a bed, too small for Procula¹, and six little jugs of earthenware to adorn his sideboard and, underneath it, a little Chiron, a Centaur made of that very same 'marble'² and a box somewhat aged now, to hold his Greek library, so the barbarous mice gnawed away at immortal verse³. Cordus had nothing, who could disagree? Yet, poor man, he lost the whole of that nothing. And the ultimate peak of his misery, is that naked and begging for scraps, no one will give him a crust, or a hand, or a roof over his head.

¹ Procula was a dwarf

² Cordus' figurine of the centaur Chiron is made of clay imitating marble

³ Cordus' final possession is a box with Greek texts, which the mice have gotten at.

Juvenal, *Satires* 3.191-211 (translation A.S. Kline, adapted)

How does Juvenal emphasise Cordus' poverty?

What did the fire mean for Ucalegon? And what did it mean for Cordus?

Thinking about all three sources:

How are different groups affected by the collapse of an *insula* in a fire?