

insulae: how the masses lived

Life in the city & the emperor

With fires, riots, hunger, disease and poor sanitation being the order of the day for the poor of the city of Rome, the emperor often played a personal role in safeguarding the people who lived in the city.

Source 1: *vigiles* (the fire brigade)

In 6 AD the emperor Augustus set up a new tax and used the proceeds to start a new force: the fire brigade, the *vigiles urbani* (literally: watchmen of the city). They were known commonly by their nickname of *spartoli*; little bucket-carriers. Their duties were varied: they fought fires, enforced fire prevention methods, acted as a police force, and even had medical doctors in each cohort.



Bronze water pump, used by *vigiles*, called a siphon. British Museum.

Source 2: Pliny writes to the emperor for help

In this letter Pliny, the governor of Bithynia (modern northern Turkey) writes to the emperor Trajan describing the outbreak of a fire and asking for the emperor's assistance.

Pliny *Letters* 10.33

est autem latius sparsum, primum violentia venti, deinde inertia hominum quos satis constat otiosos et immobilestanti mali spectatores perstitisse; et alioqui nullus usquam in publico sipo, nulla hama, nullum denique instrumentum ad incendia compescenda.

It spread more widely at first because of the force of the wind, then because of the sluggishness of the people who, it is clear, stood around as lazy and immobile spectators of such a great calamity. Furthermore there was no fire-engine or water-bucket anywhere for public use, or in fact any instrument for extinguishing fires.

Pliny then requested to form a cohort of 150 men to act as a fire brigade, like in Rome. Other cities in the empire slowly did start to get *vigiles* and fire brigades, but in this case Pliny's request was denied. Trajan was worried as creating organised groups could be risky; when people band together they can become trouble-makers.

How does Pliny's letter make the need for a fire brigade clear?

Why do you think he felt the need to write to the emperor, rather than to organise something himself?

What does Trajan's refusal suggest about his priorities?

Source 3: building regulations

The collapse of shoddily-constructed *insulae* was a great danger to those living in them and people making their way through streets. The emperor Augustus wrote legislation to ensure that buildings could not stand than 20 metres high. The emperor Trajan reduced t his maximum height again to 18 metres. After the devastation wrought by the Great Fire of Rome, the emperor Nero put several restrictions in place to prevent future fires and make buildings safer.

Tacitus *Annals* 15.43 (translation Bill Thayer, adapted)

... the districts [...] were rebuilt [...] in measured lines of streets, with broad thoroughfares, buildings of restricted height, and open spaces, while colonnades were added as a protection to the front of the insulae. These colonnades Nero offered to erect at his own expense, and he also offered to hand over the building-sites cleared of rubbish, to the owners. [...] The buildings themselves, to an extent definitely specified, were to be solid, untimbered structures of Sabine or Alban stone, as that particular stone was proof against fire.

Why do you think it was necessary to legislate for safe building regulations?
Why would this not have been done by the builders already?

Can you think of any other reasons Augustus and Trajan might have liked to keep buildings low? (*these restrictions did not apply to the building of temples etc*)

For what reasons do you think the emperor was keen to make buildings safer?

Source 4: Augustus's firewall

When the emperor Augustus constructed his Forum of Augustus, he enclosed it at the rear with a huge 36 metre high wall, made from fireproof volcanic rock, and constructed with wooden dowels wedging the blocks in rather than mortar. The design was so robust that it still survives today, despite many earthquakes and fires in the city. It divided the forum from the Subura behind it, a poor neighbourhood where riots and fires were common.



Firewall, Forum of Augustus

What do you think the purposes of Augustus' wall might have been?

Source 5: aqueducts

The water supply to the city was crucial. It not only provided people with drinking, cooking and washing water, but also supplied the means of fighting fires. They were usually built and controlled by the emperor.



Part of the Roman aqueduct in Segovia (Spain) running through the modern city.

Thinking about all the sources:

What do you think the implications were of the public welfare being so closely controlled by the emperor?

Who is responsible for the safety, needs and welfare of the population, and particularly of the poor, in our society today?

Further reading:

On the fire brigade's duties: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vigiles>

On the Great Fire of Rome:

- <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/rome.htm>
- http://www.mariamilani.com/ancient_rome/great%20fire%20of%20Rome.htm (includes a comparison with the recent London riots in 2011)