

A Minor Compilation of Readings of Suetonius' Nero 16.2

by Erik Zara, Th.D. (rel. exmpt), © 2011

In an earlier article¹ it was shown that the word Christians (*christianos*) originally was spelled Chrestians (*chrestianos*) in the earliest extant medieval manuscript of the Roman historian Publius Cornelius Tacitus' *Annales* 15:44 (regarding the aftermaths of the Great Fire in Rome in 64 CE). Also in later writings the spelling with an *e* is used.² Early references to Christians, by that name, about the first century, are few.³ Apart from Tacitus, among the Roman authors only Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus refers to Christians in connection to the emperor Nero, who ruled 54–68 CE. In his biography on Nero, in the *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* (c. 120 CE, called *Lives* below), Suetonius writes, in 16.2: *afflicti supplicii Christiani, genus hominum superstitionis novae ac maleficae*. Rolfe (1914) translates this: *Punishments were inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous⁴ superstition.*⁵ The Australian historian Stephen Dando-Collins has recently claimed that this sentence “can almost certainly be dismissed as a later fictitious insertion in Suetonius' original text by a Christian copyist”.⁶

In order to find out whether or not the sentence about Christians is evident in the manuscripts (MSS) of *Lives*, and to see which spelling of the word Christians is used, I checked thirteen MSS held by the Laurentian library in Florence, Italy, and the earliest extant MS of *Lives*, the 9th century *Memmianus* (Parisinus 6115). The ~200 MSS of *Lives* belong to two families, the superior X and the inferior Z, both deriving from a common archetype. I regard the fourteen collected MSS as a fairly representative sample, since the Laurentian collection, except 15th c. MSS, contains the important 12th c. 68.7 and 66.39, from the X family, and the 12th/13th c. 64.8, the 13th/14th c. 20 sin. 3 and the 14th c. 64.9, from the Z family.⁷

All the fourteen MSS contain the passage about Christians being punished by Nero. The most common spelling (ten MSS) is the *nomen sacrum*-abbreviation *xpiani*, often with a line above *pi*.⁸ The *Memmianus* and another MS read *christiani*.⁹ Another MS read *chrystiani* and one read *xani*, with a small *i* above *x*.¹⁰ Thus, none of the collected MSS read *chrestiani*.

¹ Erik Zara, *The Chrestianos Issue in Tacitus Reinvestigated* (2009), available online at <http://www.textexcavation.com/documents/zaratacituschrestianos.pdf>.

² In Papyrus Oxyrhynchus XLII 3035 (256 CE) the spelling *chrésianon* is used. See also Codex Sinaiticus, fol. 306, 315b and 320b (*chrest-* in Acts and 1 Peter), and G. Mendel, *Catalogue des monuments grecs, romains et byzantins du Musée Imperial Ottoman de Brousse*, Bulletin de correspondance hellénique 33 (1909), p. 423.

³ The term Christian is not used by Paul. See Erik Zara, *Chrestians before Christians? An Old Inscription Revisited* (2009), available online at <http://www.textexcavation.com/documents/zarachrestianinscription.pdf>.

⁴ Other translations of *maleficae* have been offered, such as “magical”; see Nathaniel Lardner, *The Works of Nathaniel Lardner in Five Volumes*, vol. 3, Thomas Hamilton, London 1815, p. 619.

⁵ John Carew Rolfe, *Suetonius*, vol. 2, William Heineman Ltd, London (1914) 1959, p. 110f.

⁶ Stephen Dando-Collins, *The Great Fire of Rome: The Fall of the Emperor Nero and His City*, Da Capo Press, Cambridge 2010, p. 6.

⁷ For a description of the manuscripts of *Lives*, and their internal relationships according to Léon Preud'homme, see his *Troisième Étude Sur L'Histoire Du Texte De Suétone De Vita Caesarum: Classification des Manuscrits*, in Mémoires de l'Académie Royale de Belgique 63 (1903–1904), Hayez, Brussels 1904, pp. 63-78.

⁸ MSS with folios within brackets: Laur. 20 sin. 3 (69v), 64.3 (94r), 64.5 (121v; without any line above *pi*), 64.7 (91r), 64.8 (50v), 64.9 (94r; a line above the first *i*), 66.39 (119r), 68.7 (131v), 89inf.8/1 (83v), 89inf.8/2 (77v).

⁹ Parisinus 6115, fol. 86r, and 64.6, fol. 126r (*christianis* in the right hand margin).

¹⁰ 64.4, fol. 115v (cf. *Tyberio* for *Tiberio* in *Annales* 15:44 in the article referenced in n. 1), and 20 sin.4, fol. 92r.