

## Tacitus and Pliny on Christianity

by PAUL WINTER †

In Roman writings: – as far as they are known to us – Christians and Christianity are first mentioned in Tacitus' *Annals* and in Pliny the Younger's letter to Trajan. Roughly contemporary with each other, Tacitus wrote his *Annales* around the year 115, whereas Pliny's letter dates from a few years earlier. Their references to Christians and Christian beliefs are rather sketchy, but they give us some idea how educated Romans in the beginning of the second century regarded Christianity. Tacitus does not seem to have had close contacts with any members of the new religion. As governor of the province of Asia, he knew of their existence and was vaguely aware of the origin and spread of the alien faith, but apparently he lacked curiosity to interest himself in the customs and the beliefs of its adherents. Echoing popular opinion of his age, Tacitus writes more or less from hearsay. On the other hand Pliny reports after detailed personal enquiry, and thus writes from his own experience. Although Pliny's letter to Trajan was written before Tacitus wrote his historical work, its contents refer to a later time in history and it will therefore be discussed in the second place.

### I

After his account of the fire of Rome, in Nero's reign, Tacitus comments on measures to prevent rumours which might damage the Emperor's reputation.<sup>1</sup> In this connection he refers to the bad name which Christians had among the Romans and briefly mentions Christ, "the founder of the name", who had been executed under Pontius Pilate, adding some comments on the flare-up of Christian activity after the death of the founder.

Tacitus lived and wrote at some distance in time from Nero's age. The account he gives of the great fire and its aftermath is partly based on records, partly on his own surmises. He certainly had at his disposal sources in which both the fire and the ensuing massacre of the Christians in the capital city were mentioned. From his own experience he knew about the disrepute in which Christians were held by the pagan population. He also knew that "the founder of the [Christian] name" had been put to death in Tiberius' reign at the order of Pontius Pilate. The source from which he derived this particular knowledge is not known for certain. His reference to the Christians as a "class of men"

<sup>1</sup> *Annales* XV 44, 1–8; cf. Henry Furneaux, *Cornelii Taciti annalium ab excessu divi Augusti libri*. Oxford 1907. 2, pp. 374–377, 416–427.