Richard Scully, "Entry on: Doctor Who (Series, Season 2): The Romans (The Slave Traders / All Roads Lead to Rome / Conspiracy / Inferno) by Christopher Barry, Dennis Spooner", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Daniel A. Nkemleke. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/91. Entry version as of November 11, 2026.

Christopher Barry , Dennis Spooner

Doctor Who (Series, Season 2): The Romans (The Slave Traders / All Roads Lead to Rome / Conspiracy / Inferno)

United Kingdom (1965)

TAGS: Great Fire of Rome Nero Roman History





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General information	
Title of the work	Doctor Who (Series, Season 2): The Romans (The Slave Traders / All Roads Lead to Rome / Conspiracy / Inferno)
Studio/Production Company	British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1965
First Edition Details	*Dr Who* (Series 2): *The Slave Traders* (Episode 1): 5:40 pm, January 16, 1965 / *All Roads Lead to Rome* (Episode 2): 5:40pm, January 23, 1965 / *Conspiracy* (Episode 3): 5.40pm, January 30, 1965 / *Inferno* (Episode 4): 5.40pm, February 6, 1965.
Running time	96 min 55 sec (24:14 / 23:14 / 26:18 / 23:09)
Date of the First DVD or VHS	September 5, 1994 (VHS release with 'The Rescue') ; February 23, 2009 (DVD [Region 2]); July 7, 2009 (DVD [Region 1])
Genre	Science fiction, Television series, Time-Slip Fantasy*
Target Audience	Crossover
Author of the Entry	Richard Scully, University of New England, rscully@une.edu.au
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Creators



Christopher Barry (Director)



Dennis Spooner , 1932 - 1986
(Screenwriter, Scriptwriter)

Dennis Spooner Cotton (1932-1986) was an English writer and script editor. He specialised in spy-stories and espionage drama, as well as for children's television. An early contributor to ITV's soap opera *Coronation Street* (1961), he wrote four episodes for *The Avengers* (1961-1968), and one for Tony Hancock's comedy series on ATV (1963). Spooner became closely associated with Gerry Anderson and his successive television series: *Fireball XL5* (writing 9 episodes, 1963); *Stingray* (12 episodes, 1964-5); *Thunderbirds* (6 episodes, 1965-6); and *UFO* (1970). At the same time, he wrote 21 episodes (across five serials) for the BBC series *Doctor Who* (then-starring William Hartnell as the first incarnation of The Doctor), including the historically-themed *The Reign of Terror* (1964) and *The Romans* (1965); the science-fiction/historical mashup *The Time Meddler* (1965); the epic alien-invasion story *The Daleks' Master Plan* (1965–1966); and the iconic *The Power of the Daleks* (1966), which introduced Patrick Troughton as the second actor to play The Doctor. Spooner continued to write prolifically for series such as *The Baron* (1966–1967), *The New Avengers* (9 episodes, 1976–1977), and *The Professionals* (1978); before his career began to tail-off in the 1980s. He wrote three episodes of *Bergerac* for the BBC, and one episode of the American-produced *Remington Steele* (1984). He died following a cardiac arrest on 20 September 1986.

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Bio prepared by Richard Scully, University of New England, rscully@une.edu.au

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Additional information

Casting	William Hartnell – The Doctor, Jacqueline Hill – Barbara Wright, William Russell – Ian Chesterton, Maureen O'Brien – Vicki, Barry Jackson – Ascaris, Dennis Edwards – Centurion, Tony Lambden – Court Messenger, Peter Diamond – Delos, Nicholas Evans – Didius, Gertan Klauber – Galley Master, Ann Tirard – Locusta, Bart Allison – Maximus Pettulian, Derek Francis – Nero, Kay Patrick – Poppaea, Derek Sydney – Sevcheria, Edward Kelsey – Slave Buyer, Michael Peake – Tavius, Brian Proudfoot – Tigilinus, Dorothy-Rose Gribble – Woman Slave.
Sequels, Prequels and Spin-offs	Cotton, Donald, *Doctor Who – The Romans*, London: Target, 1987.

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Summary

'The Romans' is a key example of the early format of *Doctor Who* (1963-1989; 2005-present), which sought to mix science-fiction adventures with historically-themed storylines (as an extension of its intended educational role). A playful comedy, the story sees the crew of the TARDIS (the time/space machine) materialise in the countryside outside Ancient Rome, and take a well-earned holiday at an abandoned Roman villa. Their rest is soon disturbed, however, when Barbara Wright and Ian Chesterton are captured by a pair of slave traders, and the Doctor (an alien 'Time Lord' from the Planet Gallifrey) is mistaken for Maximus Pettulian (a recently-assassinated lyre-player and conspirator against the life of the Emperor Nero). The action is then shifted to Ian's travails aboard – and escape from – a slave galley in the Mediterranean; Barbara being sold to the imperial household as a handmaiden to Empress Poppaea; and the Doctor's sparring with Nero himself. The imperial court is a hive of stereotypical conspiracies and double-crossing; poisoning attempts and lavish banquets; and is characterised by the unbalanced emperor and his pretensions to artistic genius. In accidentally burning Nero's architectural plans for the refurbishment of Rome, the Doctor unwittingly gives the deranged emperor the idea for the Great Fire. The TARDIS crew eventually escape from all the dangers they have faced across four episodes, are reunited, and escape the conflagration, as the Eternal City goes up in flames, to the accompaniment of Nero's lyre-playing.

Analysis

'The Romans' is a notable example of mid-1960s educational television entertainment. Watched by between 10 and 13 million viewers during its broadcast, the serial is a key example of a science fiction intervention into the Classical world/ancient history. The time travelling theme of the program was a handy device for justifying the incursion into Classical Rome. The Doctor and his companions serve as useful avatars for the young audience-members as they are introduced to and familiarised with the Classical/ancient history context of the storyline, or reacquainted with matters with which they were supposed to be familiar (such themes were still central to British elementary-level schooling in the 1960s). The accidental triggering of an important historical event – in this case, the Great Fire of Rome

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	(AD 64) – shares similarities with the narrative of the later 'The Myth Makers' (1965).
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Great Fire of Rome Nero Roman History
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Humour Intertextuality Travel
Further Reading	BBC Online, *Doctor Who – The Classic Series*: 'The Romans' [Archived website], at bbc.co.uk (accessed: August 17, 2018) [comprises analysis and details from: Paul Cornell, Martin Day & Keith Topping, *The Discontinuity Guide*, 1995; David J. Howe & Stephen James Walker, *Doctor Who: The Television Companion*, 2003]. Harmes, Marcus K., *Doctor Who and the Art of Adaptation; Fifty Years of Storytelling*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014, esp. pp. 68 ff. Howe, David J., Mark Stammers & Stephen James Walker, *Doctor Who: The Handbook: The First Doctor*, London: Virgin Publishing, 1994. Howe, David J., Mark Stammers & Stephen James Walker, *Doctor Who: The Sixties*, London: Virgin Publishing, 1992. Keen, Anthony G., "It's about Tempus: Greece and Rome in "Classic" Doctor Who", in David C. Wright, Jr., and Allan W. Austin, eds., *Space and Time: Essays on Visions of History in Science Fiction and Fantasy Television*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010, 100–115. Keen, Anthony G., "Sideways Pompeii! The Use of Historical Period to Question the Doctor's Role in History", in Ross P. Garner, Melissa

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Beattie, and Una McCormack, eds., *Impossible Worlds, Impossible Things: Cultural Perspectives on* Doctor Who, Torchwood, *and* The Sarah Jane Adventures, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010, 94–117.

Addenda

Recorded viewers:

Episode 1: 13 million

Episode 2: 11.5 million

Episode 3: 10 million

Episode 4: 12 million

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