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## RUS IN URBE: THE DOMUS AUREA AND NERONIAN HORTI IN THE CITY OF ROME

### Introduction

Tyrant, monster, prima donna – Nero is one of histories most notorious figures. Renowned as the emperor who ‘*fiddled while Rome burned*’, he built a huge palace and landscaped grounds in the heart of the city. Known as the Golden House, or Domus Aurea, it forced the poor from their homes and took over Rome. This is the view passed down to us from antiquity, recorded in the accounts of Martial, Suetonius and Tacitus. Formulated by Nero’s aristocratic enemies, it is a version that should be treated with caution in the light of history. In this paper it is my intention to investigate the propaganda significance of the Domus Aurea estate. Transferring the ‘countryside into the city’, or *rus in urbe*, it was a ground-breaking venture never before witnessed at Rome. In clarifying its symbolic meaning, this study will assume the following tripartite form. By means of introduction, the term *hortus* will be defined, and the Golden House set in its broader historical context. Next, the issue of precedent will be considered<sup>1</sup>, in particular whether the Augustan Campus Martius provided a physical and conceptual model for Nero’s estate. Finally, I shall set forth the view that the Golden House aimed to surpass the municipal legacy of Augustus and redefine the city of Rome. In so doing, it is my contention the Domus Aurea was conceived as the showpiece of a new ‘Neronian’ Golden Age.

From their humble farming origins in days gone by, a *hortus* can be defined as an urban villa with a park, imitating in many respects the palace complexes of Hellenistic kings. Incorporating fountains, pools and plantations of trees, they were highly ordered, decorative creations. As Varro and Pliny inform us,<sup>2</sup> horticulture was offset by man-made components in the pursuit of panoramic views, notably pavilions, terraces and statuary. Forming a band of greenery on the outskirts of Rome,<sup>3</sup> they fulfilled public and

private functions for their wealthy owners – close enough to city for ease of access, they at the same time provided a sense of privacy from the metropolis beyond. While the Golden House retained the title of *domus* as an imperial residence, it is recognised as the most spectacular set of *horti* ever created (fig.1). Suetonius tells us how it linked the Palatine Hill with the Gardens of Maecenas on the Esquiline Hill.<sup>4</sup> Embracing an area of 40-80 hectares (100-200 acres), its grounds were both lavish and extensive, the equivalent of Hyde Park or Vatican City.<sup>5</sup> Topographically it had the character of a basin, utilizing the hillsides that encircled the would-be Colosseum Valley.<sup>6</sup> From Nero's golden palace and Colossus high on its slopes to the vast lake, or *stagnum*, adorning the valley floor below, viewers would have been enveloped in an eye-catching landscape. While Rome's crowded cityscape had prevented the construction of *horti* within the capital, the Great Fire of Rome in 64 afforded Nero an unprecedented opportunity. Transferring to the centre of the city what had once been daring on its periphery, he left himself open to criticism, in particular the charge of 'imitating nature'.

### Imitation of Nature

Tacitus records in the *Annals* how Severus and Celer, the architects of the Golden House had tried: "*the force of art even against the veto of nature*".<sup>7</sup> The imitation of nature concerned any challenge to the natural world, a trend vehemently opposed by moralists, especially the Stoics, at Rome. From tampering with the sea to altering the physical landscape, legendary attempts to 'create like nature' would have been familiar to the Romans. For example, King Xerxes was known to have conquered the sea by bridging the Hellespont during his march on Greece.<sup>8</sup> More radical still was the proposal of the architect Dinocrates to carve a colossal likeness of Alexander the Great into the side of Mount Athos, a rock face some 30 miles long and 6,500 thousand feet high.<sup>9</sup> Such flamboyant schemes accorded with the renown of the protagonist, and as such the Golden House intended to do the same for Nero. A similar mentality is evident in the creation of *horti* during the late Republic. From the *Horti Luculliani* (163 B.C) to the famed *Horti Sallustiani* (40 B.C) ever more luxurious estates were conceived by Rome's senatorial elite in the quest for political and social advantage. Needless to say, the Domus Aurea signified a radical advancement on these *horti*. Embracing nature on an altogether grander scale, Nero's palatial grounds incorporated the *cultivated* environment and *untamed wild* simultaneously. Housing a multitude of wild and domestic animals, vineyards and tilled lands were offset by the rural seclusion of woods and open ground.<sup>10</sup> As a result, Nero can be seen to have almost paradoxically '*domesticated the wild*' and achieved something wholly unique within the city of Rome.<sup>11</sup>

## Augustine Rome: Horti and the Aureum Saeculum

Ground-breaking as the Domus Aurea was in bringing the countryside to Rome, Nero was certainly influenced by the municipal strategy of Augustus. Imparting an unprecedented physical and conceptual unity on the cityscape, he established an enduring 'Augustan' legacy that pervaded Rome. With improved aqueduct and irrigation systems, Augustus was able to complement architecture with abundant foliage throughout the capital. While many of Rome's foremost estates were seized by the Julio-Claudian emperors, it was Augustus who aimed to surpass them through the creation of 'imperial sponsored' versions. Along with the Gardens of Maecenas on the Esquiline,<sup>12</sup> this was most evident in Rome's northern flood plain, the Campus Martius (fig.2). A relatively unexploited area during the Republic,<sup>13</sup> the lavish grounds of Pompey (*Horti Pompeiani*) set a crucial precedent by permitting freedom-of-access to all civilians. Accordingly, Augustus ensured the Campus Martius was transformed into lush parkland to be shared with the Roman people. Incorporating a lake (*stagnum*) and canal (*euripus*), the Baths of Agrippa provided palatial grounds for recreation and exercise. Similarly, the funerary gardens and adjacent park of the Augustan Mausoleum offered leisurely walks for those going to and from Rome. With the *Horti Agrippae* also adorning the Campus, viewers were free to bask in their surroundings and escape from the hectic city beyond.

Hindered by Rome's Republican cityscape, the Campus Martius was the sole locale to be completely transformed in the Augustan Age. Despite widespread urbanization,<sup>14</sup> the extensive use of greenery and foliage implies that *horti* fulfilled a conscious propaganda function. The *Ludi Saeculares* had marked the advent of the Golden Age, or *aureum saeculum* in 17 B.C. Just as the region's cohesive urban fabric mirrored the order and harmony of Augustan society, so its flourishing *horti* alluded to the prosperity and abundance of the new age. Furthermore, such a fertile backdrop would have accorded with the recreational focus of the Campus. Along with the Baths of Agrippa, the theatres of Balbus, Marcellus and Pompey enabled an unprecedented number of people to be entertained.<sup>15</sup> Set within palatial surroundings, *horti* thus augmented the restful ambience of the Campus and reiterated how leisure could thrive in an 'Augustan' *aureum saeculum*. Intelligible on a variety of sensorial levels, particularly sight, it should be recalled that neighbouring representations of Augustus reminded viewers that *he alone* had attained the Golden Age.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately then, *horti* created an intriguing paradox in the Campus Martius. While retaining its longstanding military associations, the Field of the war god Mars was transformed into a tranquil parkland symbolic of peace.<sup>17</sup>

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### Distinguishing the Domus Aurea

To return to the Golden House then – was Nero attempting to transcend the Augustan Campus Martius? In rebuilding Rome after the Great Fire of 64, it is likely the Domus Aurea was conceived as the focal point of Nero's 'New City' (*urbs nova*). As Tacitus remarks, he benefited from the ruin of his people, since in obliterating Rome's crowded cityscape, the Fire made a previously impossible venture a reality. Ancient critics are united in the view that the Golden House had taken over Rome, Pliny alleging it encircled the capital<sup>18</sup> and Martial commenting how: "*a single house now stood in all the City*".<sup>19</sup> Despite the exaggeration of these assertions, Nero's expansive grounds would have dominated Rome. While the surrounding landscape in *horti* assumed a subordinate role to the central residence,<sup>20</sup> the unprecedented scale and design of the Domus Aurea estate suggests to me that it too was of considerable propaganda value. In displacing commuter routes and commercial districts in the Colosseum Valley, Nero's grounds were surely accessible to city-dwellers.<sup>21</sup> Yet, the fact he selected such a contentious locale, one that would cause maximum disruption, indicates he had a conscious objective in mind. It is therefore my view that Nero located the Golden House in the heart of Rome because he *wanted* the populace to traverse its palatial grounds, so ensuring onlookers were susceptible to the imagery they encountered. Influentially, ancient critics accuse Nero of treating Rome as his house and excluding its populace.<sup>22</sup> As one might expect, this is not consistent with the facts. Yes, Nero treated Rome as his house, that much can be surmised from the extent and overwhelming presence of the Domus Aurea. But restricting civilian access would have been counterproductive – hated by much of the senatorial elite after the Fire, Nero relied on the sustained support of the city's plebeian masses.<sup>23</sup> It was therefore crucial for Nero to actively *embrace* his subjects, not *exclude* them. Ultimately then, Nero may have treated Rome as his house, but it was a house he shared with the Roman people.

### Leisure and the Neronian Aureum Saeculum

Nero's solar ideology has long been a matter of scholarly debate, in particular whether the Golden House was created as a 'Palace of the Sun'.<sup>24</sup> One thing seems certain however - Nero's association with the sun god, Sol-Helios was fundamental to the Neronian Golden Age, or *aureum saeculum*. Proclaimed after the Great Fire, the synchronizing of Rome's reconstruction with a new epoch of peace must have been hugely symbolic, the Domus Aurea its intended showpiece. It has been proposed how the combination of *horti* and recreation in the Campus Martius reiterated the stability of

the Augustan *aureum saeculum*. I would suggest that in propagating the pre-eminence of his version, Nero sought to provide leisure with a new guise. Bringing *horti* to Rome, the Domus Aurea offered a fitting setting in the heart of the city.

A number of recent studies have claimed that in building the Golden House, Nero intended to recreate Baiae, the notorious pleasure capital of Italy, at Rome.<sup>25</sup> Citing the palace's imitation of Campanian seaside villas, they also refer to the wanton excess of the Juvenalia in 59<sup>26</sup> and the famed Banquet of Tigellinus in 64.<sup>27</sup> While both occurred prior to the Great Fire, I suspect they were part of a permanent 'leisure culture' in Neronian Rome. As the accounts of Tacitus and Dio reveal, societal order was thrown into chaos at these festivities, moral inhibition replaced by limitless drinking, gambling and prostitution. While the aforementioned events occurred in the Campus Martius, it is not unreasonable to assume that the Domus Aurea hosted such revelries. Like the Campus, it was blessed with a sizeable body of water, the *Stagnum Neronis*, so providing an alternative venue for Nero's cruises and debauchery<sup>28</sup>. Of course, the Roman elite had tolerated such conduct for a temporary period each year during the *Saturnalia*, masters serving their slaves and the poor acting as judges. Nonetheless, it has been proposed that Nero disposed of this norm and encouraged a year-round *Saturnalia*,<sup>29</sup> so satisfying his eccentric personality and bringing him political advantage. Drawing Nero closer to the plebeian masses by appealing to their base instincts, it would have also undermined his aristocratic enemies.<sup>30</sup> In effect then, the freeing of *Saturnalian* behaviour from its seasonal boundaries would have both *suited* and *benefited* Nero.

While Nero's theatrical tendencies and unstable character contributed to the unrestrained excess of Neronian leisure, there is perhaps a more influential motive to be considered. Julio-Claudian tradition dictated that straightforward imitation of the 'Augustan' *aureum saeculum* was not acceptable - no, Nero had to create something new and unprecedented to surpass the legacy of his illustrious forbear. How though did the Domus Aurea estate correspond with Neronian leisure and propagate a new-styled 'Golden Age'? As stated, the physical order and copious foliage of the Campus Martius had reflected the stability and abundance of the Augustan Age. In contrast, the Golden House brought *horti*, and in particular the uncultivated wild, to Rome. This signified a 'new beginning', one that required validation in other spheres of Roman life. I believe that year-round *Saturnalian* behaviour was such a means, an original trend that concurred with the radical transference of *horti* to the heart of the city. With Rome's physical form and societal behaviour realigned in this way, Nero's *aureum saeculum* would have been characterised as an era of innovation and incessant pleasure. Sharing in its uninhibited excesses, the masses would have been Nero's closest friends,<sup>31</sup> the Golden House a palatial backdrop epitomising the new age.

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## Visual Propaganda: Emperor, City and Empire

The Domus Aurea estate was soon confined to memory on Nero's demise in 68. In their efforts to 'rehabilitate' the city, the Flavian emperors were quick to replace Neronian *horti* with the Colosseum and other publicly orientated structures. While the palace itself survived until the fire of Trajan in 104, Nero's eye-catching 'imitation of nature' could not be allowed to endure.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, it seems highly credible Severus and Celer created the Domus Aurea with visual symbolism and sensorial impact in mind. Formed naturally by the valley and hillsides, it would have enveloped viewers and compelled them to look at the surrounding landscape. Up at the Colossus and Oppian façade, down on the lake and expansive grounds, it was an *amphitheatre*,<sup>33</sup> an enclosed environment propagating the 'Neronian' Golden Age. Nature abounded throughout the region, but as noted, it did so against wild and cultivated backdrops. In contrast to the ordered *horti* of the Augustan Campus Martius, I feel this duality intended to evoke a more *all-encompassing* perception of peace, one that brought stability to the untamed wild *and* the civilised city. Regularly encountered by civilians navigating Rome, one can imagine such an allusion was visually striking and to many highly persuasive.

Emblematic of Nero's 'New City', the Golden House and *Colossus Neronis* cast an imposing shadow from atop Rome's hills. Highly conspicuous throughout the capital, their sheer scale intended to reflect Nero's imperial status<sup>34</sup> - the Colossus 120 Roman feet high, the vestibule within which it was housed adjoined by a mile-long triple colonnade.<sup>35</sup> Working in tandem, I suspect the play on light was hugely symbolic. Radiating the sun from their elevated positions, the bronze Colossus and 'golden' Oppian residence would have recalled Nero's association with Sol-Helios. In addition, the latter's east-west orientation ensured its south-facing façade was bedecked in sunlight throughout the day. An enduring reminder of the Golden Age, it would have appeared quite literally as a 'Palace of the Sun'. While the utilization of material wealth for moral purposes was condemned by contemporaries, notably Seneca,<sup>36</sup> it is not unreasonable to assume that the assimilation of light and fertile *horti* recalled Rome's rejuvenation after the Fire. In this respect, Nero's commanding presence was hugely significant, for akin to Augustus's pervasiveness in the Campus Martius, it confirmed him as founder of a 'New Rome' and the Golden Age it basked in.

Little has been said thus far of the *Stagnum Neronis*, the enormous pool that adorned the centre of the Domus Aurea estate. It was the third such body of water to be constructed at Rome after the *Stagnum Agrippae* and the *Naumachia Augusti* in the Campus Martius. But in contrast to its forerunners, Nero's pool was the first to be

surrounded by permanent structures of great size and number. As Suetonius remarks: “*There was a pond too, like a sea, surrounded with buildings to represent cities*”.<sup>37</sup> It has been stated elsewhere how the Domus Aurea may have imitated Campanian seaside villas. Looking out over a huge urbanized *stagnum*, this seems a highly plausible suggestion. Compared to a ‘sea’ and ‘cities’, it is also possible that the vast pool paralleled the Mediterranean world, a region Rome enjoyed unrivalled ascendancy over. Akin to the duality of *pax* in the Augustan Campus, so Nero’s *stagnum* would have confirmed Roman supremacy in a new era of peace.<sup>38</sup> The straightening of the Sacra Via would have been an important visual ploy in this regard. Encouraging civilians to ascend the Velian Hill to the *Colossus Neronis*, they would have looked down on a microcosm of the known world. An astonishing combination of urban and rural elements, it confirmed Nero as master of Rome, the Empire and architect of the *aureum saeculum* itself.

## Conclusion

In conclusion then, history confirms the Domus Aurea was a project never repeated at Rome. As the estates of Domitian (Alba) and Hadrian (Tivoli) show, the Neronian experiment compelled later emperors to locate their palatial retreats beyond the Eternal City. Nero’s transference of *horti* to the heart of Rome was an act of unprecedented audacity. While his youthful exuberance, philhellenism and desire for the spectacular<sup>39</sup> all assisted the emergence of the Golden House, it should not be viewed solely as the creation of an unstable mind. I have suggested that Nero was subject to an enduring Augustan legacy, one his Julio-Claudian forbears were unable to overcome. Despite its destruction, the Domus Aurea estate dared to challenge this precedent and redefine the city of Rome. A venture of immense propaganda value, it is my view that Nero’s innovation should be praised, not condemned as history would have us believe.

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<sup>1</sup> Elsner. *Constructing decadence: the representation of Nero as imperial builder*. in. Elsner & Masters. *Reflections of Nero*. 119-22

<sup>2</sup> Varro. *Rust.* 2.5-9 , Pliny. *HN.* 9.170

<sup>3</sup> Although unsubstantiated, it is thought this band extended some two-three kilometres beyond Rome.

<sup>4</sup> Suet. *Ner.* 31.1

<sup>5</sup> Extending the Domus Aurea to the summits of Rome's hills, C.C Van Essen proposed the figure of eighty hectares in the 1950's. While this figure has been freely accepted by many influential studies since, it has been challenged by P. Warden who confined the Golden House estate to the slopes and so halved it.

<sup>6</sup> Champlin. *God and Man in the Golden House*. in. La Rocca. *Horti Romani*. 343

<sup>7</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 15.42

<sup>8</sup> Hdt. 7.33-37

<sup>9</sup> Vitruvius. *De Arch.* 2.intro.2

<sup>10</sup> Suet. *Ner.* 31.1, Tac. *Ann.* 15.42

<sup>11</sup> Purcell. *Town in Country and Country in Town*. in. Macdougall. *Ancient Roman Villa Gardens*. 201

<sup>12</sup> Hor. *Sat.* 1.8

<sup>13</sup> While temples and temporary buildings were scattered throughout the district, the theatre-residence of Pompey (*Theatrum Pompei*) represented the single monumental structure to adorn the Campus Martius prior to the advent of the Augustan Age.

<sup>14</sup> Strabo. *Geog.* 5.3.8

<sup>15</sup> These theatres were grouped in close proximity, so reiterating the 'recreational focus' of the Campus.

<sup>16</sup> From his portrayal on the *Ara Pacis Augustae* to his bronze statue atop the *Mausoleum Augusti*, Augustus assumed an explicit presence throughout the Campus and Rome beyond.

<sup>17</sup> With the *Ara Pacis Augustae*, *Horologium Augusti* and *Mausoleum Augusti* located with the Campus, all

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viewers were potently reminded of the both the *aureum saeculum* and the *Pax Augusta*.

<sup>18</sup> Pliny. *HN*. 36.111

<sup>19</sup> Mart. *Spect.* 2.4

<sup>20</sup> Purcell. *Town in Country and Country in Town*. in. Macdougall. *Ancient Roman Villa Gardens*. 194

<sup>21</sup> Morford. *The Distortion of the Domus Aurea Tradition*. in. *ERANOS* 66-67 (1968-69), 161-162

<sup>22</sup> Suetonius. *Nero*. 39 , Tac. *Ann.* 15.37

<sup>23</sup> Griffin. *Nero. The End of a Dynasty*. 104-105

<sup>24</sup> L'Orange's *Sonnenpalast* theory was roundly dismissed by Toynbee, Boethius and later Griffin. More recently it has been given credence by Bergmann, Champlin and Hemsoll.

<sup>25</sup> Notably the studies of Champlin and Zevi.

<sup>26</sup> Cass Dio. 61.20.5 , Tac. *Ann.* 14.15

<sup>27</sup> Cass Dio. 62.15.1-6 , Tac. *Ann.* 15.33-37

<sup>28</sup> Davies. *Death and the Emperor*. 146

<sup>29</sup> Champlin. *God and Man in the Golden House*. in. La Rocca. *Horti Romani*. 340

<sup>30</sup> Griffin. *Nero. The End of a Dynasty*. 113

<sup>31</sup> Champlin. *God and Man in the Golden House*. in. La Rocca. *Horti Romani*. 340

<sup>32</sup> Suetonius (*Ner.* 31.1) states explicitly the Domus Aurea and preceding Domus Transitoria linked the Palatine with the Gardens of Maecenas on the Esquiline, a fact confirmed by archaeological evidence. As the literary diatribes make little reference to the Domus Transitoria, let alone an objection, there is no reason why critics should have objected to a palace fulfilling the same purpose. Resultantly, this points to the Domus Aurea estate.

<sup>33</sup> Champlin. *God and Man in the Golden House*. in. La Rocca. *Horti Romani*. 343

<sup>34</sup> Hemsoll. *The Architecture of Nero's Golden House*.  
in. Henig. *Architecture and Architectural Sculpture in the Roman Empire*. 16

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<sup>35</sup> Suet. *Ner.* 31.1

<sup>36</sup> Sen. *Ep.* 115.12.13

<sup>37</sup> Suet. *Ner.* 31.1

<sup>38</sup> With the untamed wild located just beyond the *stagnum*, allusion was made to how Neronian peace extended to all parts of the known world, irrespective of whether they were urban or rural.

<sup>39</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 15.42

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parts of the Domus Aurea, and commissioned the new Flavian Amphitheater (the Colosseum) where he had drained Nero's vast artificial lake. For the plebs urbana, Nero's lake was a symbol of all the excesses of the Domus Aurea, and of the expansion of the imperial decorative program within the city. The new amphitheater stood in dramatic opposition to Nero's palatial private halls, a deliberate gesture of Rome's return to its citizens.<sup>23</sup> The epigram clearly indicates a perceived change for the better, and spotlights both the Flavian successes and the Neronian failures. Interpreting Architectural Symbolism During the reign of Vespasian, Nero was vilified for his selfish and malicious choices. It is an amazing place to visit in Rome. It is unbelievable what can be found underground in Rome. The visit is completed by virtual reality that shows us how this place was in the time of Nero. Read more. Written February 9, 2020. You can google Coop Culture Domus Aurea and you will find the link. You will still need to pick it up in person from the site 1 hour before your selected entry time. Read all replies. When visiting Rome, a Domus Aurea tour is a must see, it's a fascinating experience as you walk through vast underground corridors admiring the frescoes "still beautiful despite the water damage" that captivated the imaginations of the Renaissance artists. The octagonal room, believed to be the location of Nero's rotating ceiling, has an oculus in the dome, reminiscent of the Pantheon. As you watch the sunlight streaming in through the hole, imagine the young man falling into the Domus Aurea from the hill above, accidentally rediscovering one of the greatest buildings in Roman history. ~by Alexandra Turney~. Fresco detail. Domus Aurea, Rome. View of the cryptoporticus with illusionistic candelabra and figures from the Domus Aurea (Golden House of Nero), Rome (German Archaeological Institute, Rome). The Domus Aurea (Golden House), located between the Esquiline and Palatine Hills, was one of Nero's most extravagant projects. As everybody knows, two-thirds of the city of Rome were destroyed by a great fire in 64 AD. Nero used most of this land as a site for his new complex, which was not so much a palace as a series of buildings scattered over a landscaped "countryside", including an artificial lake. In the late seventeenth century, Pietro Sante Bartoli uncovered other rooms of the Neronian complex and published a series of drawings based on these decorative motifs.