

THE DOMUS AUREA  
AND THE ROMAN  
ARCHITECTURAL  
REVOLUTION

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# CONTENTS



The Table of Contents has been deliberately made very detailed to serve as a primary reference system for all key rooms, suites, phases and masonry types. Details of a lesser nature are in the index. Given the complexity of the masonry and its chronology in the Esquiline Wing, specific features, phases and masonry types must be cited repeatedly throughout the text, but overall the text is organized so that each major topic has one primary location where its main discussion is concentrated, while the myriad other references to it are ancillary to other topics. Accordingly, the Table of Contents has a specific entry for each one of these primary discussion locations, which accounts for its complexity. Throughout the text, then, the names of all masonry types, rooms, suites and larger named portions of the building are capitalized, which indicates that that feature has at least one of these primary discussion locations that is specifically cited in the Table of Contents.

<i>Illustrations</i>	page ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii

<b>ONE ▀ An Introduction to the Esquiline Wing of Nero's Domus Aurea</b>	I
1. A Historical and Topographical Overview of the Domus Aurea	I
2. The Key Features of the Esquiline Wing	8

3. The Main Masonry Types in the Esquiline Wing	15
4. A Survey of the Decoration in the Esquiline Wing	19
5. Roman Concrete and the Design of the Esquiline Wing	24
<b>TWO ▀ Distantly Pre-Neronian Phases</b>	28
1. The West End Group (Rooms 8–17) and the North Corridor Group (Rooms 18–19)	28
The Type A Phase in the West End Group (Rooms 8–17)	28
The Type A Phase in the North Corridor Group	31
The Second Pre-Neronian Phase in Corridor 19	32
2. The Type D Phase and Associated Pre-Neronian Remains	35
3. Type D North of the Pentagonal Court	37
4. Other Distantly Pre-Neronian Walls Apparently Related to Type D	41
<b>THREE ▀ The Pentagonal Court</b>	44
1. Pre-Neronian Type X and Related Masonry (Rooms 65–80)	44
Rooms 65–68 and 71–80	48
Rooms 69 and 70	52
2. The South Party Wall	54
3. Pre-Neronian Type C	62
Type C as It Relates to Type X in Room 65A	66
Type C as It Relates to Types X and E in Room 52	68
Type C as It Relates to the South Party Wall and the Neronian Nymphaeum Suite	69
Type C as It Relates to Neronian Phase 1 in Room 36	71
Type C as It Relates to Corridors 92, 93, 141 and 142	74
Corridor 92, phase 1	75
Corridor 92, phase 2	76
Corridor 92, phase 3	77
Type C as It Relates to Neronian Phase 2 in Room 91, Corridor 96 and Rooms 116–119	79
4. The Neronian Phase of the Pentagonal Court	86
Neronian Masonry in the Northeast Group (Rooms 87–91)	88
Neronian Masonry in the North Group (Rooms 80–83)	92
Late Revisions in the Pentagonal Court	94

<b>FOUR</b>	<b>■ The West Block in Neronian Phases 1 and 2</b>	95
1.	Overview of the Neronian West Block and the West Court	95
	The West Court in Neronian Phase 1	98
	The West Court Colonnade and the Transition to Neronian Phase 2	98
2.	The West Suite (Rooms 22–36)	108
	The Masonry Evidence	113
	Corridor 22	116
	Group 1 (Rooms 23, 23A and 24) and Group 7 (Rooms 35 and 36)	118
	Group 2 (Rooms 25 and 26) and Group 6 (Rooms 33 and 34)	120
	Group 3 (Rooms 27–28), Group 4 (Rooms 29–30) and Group 5 (Rooms 31–32)	122
3.	The Nymphaeum Suite (Rooms 37–55) and the Neronian South Party Wall	133
	Room 38, the Grand Staircase	139
	Rooms 39–43	143
	The South Nymphaeum Suite (Rooms 37, 47–50 and 53–55)	146
	A Chronological Overview of Rooms 44, 45 and 51	150
	Room 44: Neronian Phase 1 Type E	153
	Room 44: Neronian Phase 2 Type F	157
	Room 44: Phase 3 (Type L) and Phase 4 (Type M)	166
	Overview of Rooms 45, 46, 51 and 52	170
	Room 46	171
	Room 45	172
	Room 51	183
	The Pre-Neronian Remnants in Room 51	185
	Room 51 in Neronian Phase 1	187
	Room 51 in Neronian Phase 2	195
	Room 51: Later Modifications	198
	Room 52	199
<b>FIVE</b>	<b>■ The East Block in Neronian Phase 2</b>	200
1.	Neronian Phase 2 Masonry in Rooms 93–144	200
	The Northwest Quarter (Rooms 93–95 and 97–101)	201

The Northeast Quarter (Rooms 103–115)	202
The Southeast Quarter (Rooms 129–134)	203
The East Façade (Rooms 133–144)	205
The Octagon Suite (Rooms 121–128)	207
<b>SIX ▀ Synthesis: Three Interpretive Essays</b>	219
1. Masonry Implications for the Design of the Octagon Suite	219
2. The Octagon Suite Groin Vaults and the Genesis of the Imperial Bath Type	229
The Early Rotunda at Baia	230
The Baths of Agrippa	232
The Baths of Nero	238
The Baths of Titus	249
Later Imperial Baths in Rome: The Baths of Trajan, Caracalla and Diocletian	254
3. The Personae of Severus and Celer and the History of Roman Concrete Design	258
<i>Notes</i>	277
<i>Bibliography</i>	303
<i>Index</i>	309

# ONE



## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ESQUILINE WING OF NERO'S DOMUS AUREA



### 1. A HISTORICAL AND TOPOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW OF THE DOMUS AUREA

Whatever else can be said of Nero's reign, it must have been interesting. Never before nor since has an autocrat been so wholly devoted to the arts, regardless of cost and generally to the exclusion of all else. This phenomenon is well documented, both in ancient literary sources and in the artistic record, not only in terms of Nero's effusive patronage of the arts in all media, but also in terms of the high quality and often audaciously experimental nature of the works executed under his auspices.<sup>1</sup> As was commonly the fate of emperors whose damnation was important to the subsequent dynasty, much Neronian art was systematically destroyed or reworked, leaving only a specter of its original grandeur for modern scholars. This is as true for Nero's architecture as for any art form – a tragedy in the face of a substantial literary record specifically focused on his building projects. In any case, and not surprisingly, the ancient literary tradition focuses especially on Nero's most personal building project – his palace, the Domus Aurea. That Nero would construct a building suitable for his grandiose notion of himself is perhaps predictable and, as far as we can tell, it was a project to which he was devoted from the earliest possible moment in his reign.

The earliest phases of the project, including the actual date and circumstances of its commencement, are mysterious. Presumably it began ca. A.D. 60, that is, shortly

after the murder of Agrippina the year before. The practical need for a new palace was apparently nil, because Nero had inherited a splendid residence, the so-called Domus Tiberiana, built mostly by Tiberius and Caligula, covering at least the western half of the Palatine and looking down into both the Roman Forum and the Circus Maximus. Few details are known of the Domus Tiberiana, however.

The name for Nero's palace, Domus Aurea ("golden house"), is of ancient origin, the most famous reference being Suetonius: "There was nothing however in which [Nero] was more ruinously prodigal than in building. He made a palace extending all the way from the Palatine to the Esquiline, which at first he called the House of Passage [Domus Transitoria], but when it was burned shortly after its completion and rebuilt, the Golden House [Domus Aurea]."<sup>2</sup> These names are problematic both chronologically and topographically. Nero was working on a palace project throughout most of his reign. He never intended that there would be two specific phases or that one design should replace another, and he probably never intended to stop working on and improving the building. Throughout his reign, Nero did whatever was possible, within whatever limitations he faced at any given stage. It is the nature of those limitations that changed over time, most dramatically as a result of the great fire of A.D. 64. Chronologically the distinction between Domus Transitoria and Domus Aurea is as simple as Suetonius's text indicates: the Domus Transitoria was the first project, from its inception in ca. A.D. 60 until the fire. After the fire came the Domus Aurea, from A.D. 64 to the end of Nero's reign in A.D. 68. All ancient literary sources that name both buildings maintain this chronological distinction.

The topographical and aesthetic distinctions are more problematic, not least because the Domus Transitoria is poorly represented both in archaeological remains and in the literary record. We do know a few key facts about the Domus Transitoria, however. Although it was certainly an ambitious project, it was also much more limited than the Domus Aurea, constrained by the standing architecture in the commercial district in the valley between the Velia and the Caelian and Esquiline hills.<sup>3</sup> Nero's plan was simple. He already owned the grand Domus Tiberiana on the Palatine, and he already owned the gardens of Maecenas, a substantial holding covering much of the crown of the Esquiline hill a mile or two away.<sup>4</sup> The Domus Transitoria, then, was a series of relatively minor constructions inserted between these larger holdings so that Nero could travel back and forth between them in palatial comfort, rarely leaving his own property. Most of the design of the Domus Transitoria is unknown, both because no feature is mentioned in the literary sources and because it was largely swept away, first by the great fire and then by the Domus Aurea. The Domus Transitoria appears to have been more than just a series



of narrow corridors and colonnades inserted opportunistically between existing buildings, however. Instead, Nero apparently obtained and razed large commercial properties, through fair means or foul, so that he could construct a sequence of fairly substantial palatial units to link the Palatine and the Esquiline. The evidence from the Esquiline Wing of the Domus Aurea, the subject of this monograph, confirms this, but also Suetonius says so explicitly: “while some granaries [*horrea*] near the Golden House, whose room he particularly desired, were demolished by engines of war and then set on fire, because their walls were of stone.”<sup>5</sup> In this passage Suetonius is actually describing events under the rubric of the great fire and the abuses associated with building the Domus Aurea in its aftermath, specifically trying to damn Nero for avaricious seizure of the areas damaged by the fire. I think he is mistaken, however, in that the reference to siege engines is much more likely to concern the Domus Transitoria project. In particular, in the aftermath of the fire this was not a contemptible activity at all; it would make perfect sense to use siege engines to help raze and clear the ruins. Doing so would not have been remarkable, and certainly not an exploitative act as Suetonius intends. For the use of siege engines to be an outrageous activity Nero would have had to direct them against intact buildings belonging to someone else – the situation that existed during the Domus Transitoria phase and not the Domus Aurea. In that case, then, it would make perfect sense for a Neronian period chronicler to record that Nero had done an awful deed, which, when read decades later by Suetonius, would transfer easily, if erroneously, into his catalogue of abuses after the great fire. Equally important, from the literary record it is by no means certain that any of the pre-Neronian buildings in the area would have been reused by Nero as part of his Domus Transitoria project, but the archaeological evidence from the Esquiline Wing demonstrates that this, too, was part of Nero's *modus operandi*. We know little else about the Domus Transitoria, especially in the Esquiline area.

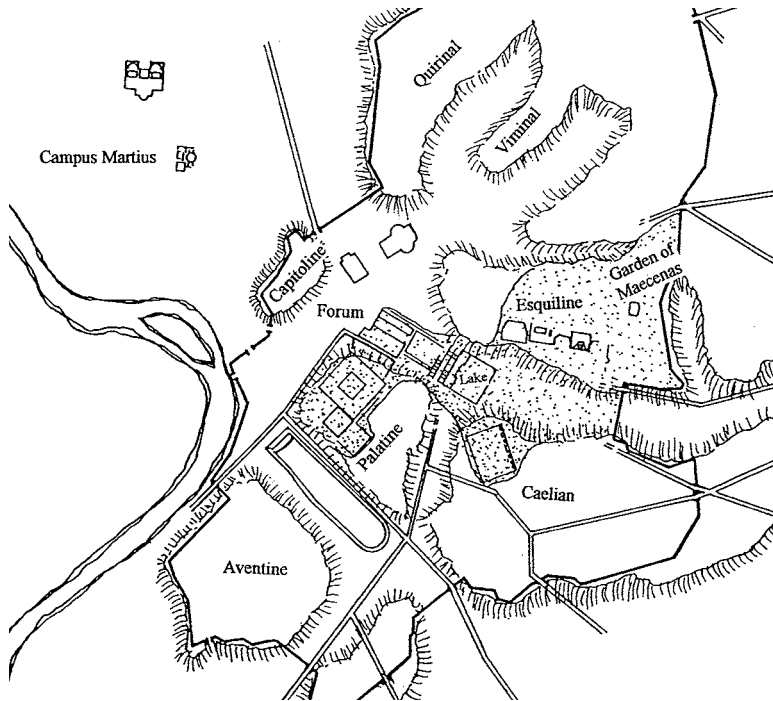
The great fire completely changed the project, however. From Nero's point of view there were two main factors. First, the Domus Transitoria project was damaged in the fire, so that it had to be repaired – and possibly improved in the process. The literary sources and the remains of the Esquiline Wing agree on this. Given the widely spread-out nature of the Domus Transitoria, the degree of destruction probably varied considerably from one part to the next, depending on where the fire was most severe; the Esquiline area was certainly affected by the fire, the Palatine less certainly so. Second, and much more important, the vast acreage of smoking rubble left by the fire gave Nero and his architects a free hand to build a much grander design, unconstrained by any earlier architecture. The Domus Aurea, therefore, would be not only much larger than the Domus Transitoria,

but also, most likely, much fancier and more complex. At this point Nero was completely unconstrained; parts of the Domus Transitoria that no longer pleased him could be modified or replaced.

As ancient literary sources make clear, the Domus Aurea was not just the imperial residence on the Palatine, but also a huge artificial parkland covering the Caelian and Esquiline hills and the valley between them, the area now occupied by the Colosseum (Fig. 1).<sup>6</sup> Apparently, and predictably, the largest architectural component was on the Palatine, where the Julio-Claudian dynasty had lived for decades, convenient to the forum. In addition, there was an artificial lake in the valley, unknown construction in the area of the Caelian and a rural luxury villa set into the parklands on the south slopes of the Esquiline. This villa is the Esquiline Wing, the only well-preserved fragment of the Domus Aurea and the principal subject of this monograph. There was also a fine vestibule near the Velia, including a notorious statue of Nero more than 100 feet tall.<sup>7</sup> There were also various lesser structures terraced into the sides of the Palatine and Esquiline facing into the central parkland,<sup>8</sup> and garden follies in the parklands and around the artificial lake to improve the vista from the major buildings around the perimeter.<sup>9</sup>

Figure 1 is my estimation of the perimeter of the whole Domus Aurea, based on Van Essen,<sup>10</sup> who defines the perimeter generously, and Warden, who defines a more limited park.<sup>11</sup> Because the size of the gardens of Maecenas is not known, this is the area of greatest controversy, but the position of the Esquiline Wing on the Oppian ridge of the Esquiline hill and its small size compared with the whole park are certain. Panella clarifies much of the center of the complex in the area of Nero's *stagnum* southwest of the Esquiline Wing.<sup>12</sup> Fabbrini's excavations<sup>13</sup> demonstrate that the Esquiline Wing had an upper story (*piano nobile*) and that it faced not only to the parklands to the south, but faced also to the north. The latter indicates that the Domus Aurea extended farther to the north than the Esquiline Wing's terrace retaining wall, most likely up to the crest of the Esquiline hill. The Domus Aurea perimeter defined in Figure 1 consists of everything that I know had to be accommodated, plus a few features that are likely but unproven (e.g., the entire terrace for the sanctuary of the deified Claudius on the Caelian<sup>14</sup>), but excluding anything that is merely possible but not demonstrated (the southeast half of the Palatine, beyond the known remains of the Domus Transitoria there, and the southwest slope of the Palatine down to the Circus Maximus). With further excavation the perimeter of the Domus Aurea may extend beyond Figure 1, but not by much.

Undoubtedly the Palatine remained the core of the Domus Aurea, the area where Nero attended to his official duties and spent most of his time. The Palatine



1. Rome: Schematic map in Neronian times, with the Domus Aurea area stippled.

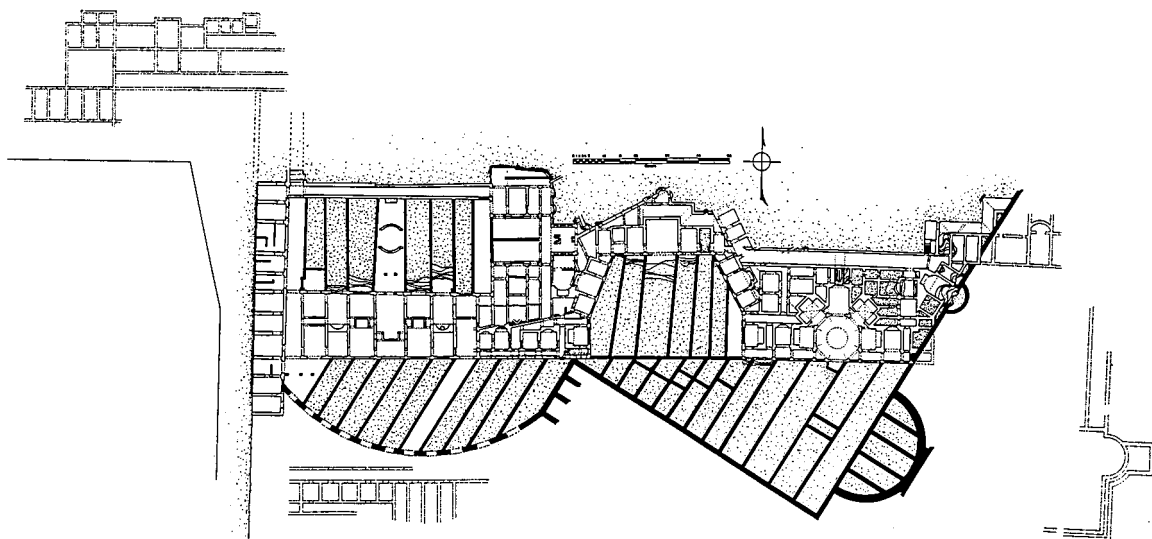
portion of the Domus Aurea is not the subject of this monograph, but what little evidence can be derived from it might have some value for interpreting the Esquiline Wing. It is unclear whether the Domus Aurea reused elements from either the Domus Tiberiana or the Domus Transitoria in this area. A detailed study of the pre-Flavian Palatine might be useful, but the remains in the northwest half of the Palatine, under the Farnese gardens, are likely to be problematic. Our knowledge of those remains is not modern, but comes from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with little published since Lanciani's *Formam Urbis Romae* (FUR) of 1871. More important, because the walls on Lanciani's FUR correspond exactly with what is visible today, we can be confident that Lanciani was reasonably accurate. More troubling, because Lanciani's walls consist exclusively of substructures and *cryptoportici*, it appears that the actual design was destroyed down to foundation level. Two facts are worth emphasizing. First, the remains do have a suggestive design. They vaguely bespeak a Hellenistic palace, resembling the great Macedonian palace at Vergina with a large, square central courtyard, probably colonnaded, and all the surrounding rooms opening into it. The evidence for this design is minimal, however. The features that bespeak a Hellenistic palace consist exclusively of

the square shape of the large platform with a smaller, more-or-less square shape in the center defined on just three sides by *cryptoportici* below platform level. No preserved walls exist in between these two squares at the main floor level of the platform. So, on the one hand, the evidence for a Hellenistic palace motif on the Palatine is extremely tenuous, while, on the other hand, what little evidence there is resembles no other kind of ancient building. More important, the Hellenistic palace motif would be appropriate here, for any phase from Tiberius on, because this was the governmental seat and the urban residence of the Julio-Claudian emperors. Given their unique status in Rome, the Hellenistic palace was the only extant Greco-Roman building type suitable for them. So, regardless of who built the platform and *cryptoportici*, a familiarly palatial motif makes good sense here. It is reasonable to presume that Nero thought in those terms too.

Second, the actual remains appear to be Neronian, not earlier. This does not include much, just the *cryptoporticus* northwest of the Domus Flavia and the barrel vaulted substructures under the southwest edge of the terrace, behind the temple of Cybele.<sup>15</sup> So, tentatively, the Hellenistic motif, if such it is, appears to have been Nero's own intention, apparently completely replacing whatever the Domus Tiberiana, and perhaps the Domus Transitoria, had had in this location.

Relative to the Palatine, the Esquiline Wing is in a fairly peripheral location, and Nero probably perceived it that way. Later I argue that the Esquiline Wing was designed as a suburban villa rather than an urban house, a fact obvious from both the architectural design and the extravagant lengths to which Nero went to provide an artificial rustic setting for it. It is also important to note the contrast between this design and the (putative) Hellenistic palace on the Palatine. Both aesthetically and physically the parklands were closely related to the Esquiline Wing, whereas the Palatine was in an urban setting between the forum and the densely built-up valley around the Circus Maximus, well separated from the park. This contrast suggests that Nero treated the Palatine as his town house, as it had always been, whereas the Esquiline Wing and its parklands were his villa, used in the same way all Roman patricians used their villas. As Tacitus specifies, architecturally the Domus Aurea was not necessarily superior to the villas of the other great aristocrats, in either scale or decoration.<sup>16</sup> Where Nero beat them all was in convenience.

Most ancient sources speak only in general terms about the Domus Aurea, specifying few individual features and neither identifying their locations nor describing them in detail. The Esquiline Wing is not specifically mentioned at all, at least not that we can recognize. From the Latin commentators' point of view, this cursory level of detail was entirely adequate,<sup>17</sup> but my work is much more detailed, necessarily focused on the Esquiline Wing because that is the only good architectural



2. Esquiline Wing: State plan with Trajanic foundations and related walls outside the accessible areas (after de Romanis, Fabbrini and MacDonald).

sample we have. Obviously considerable caution is appropriate here, but not despair; the Esquiline Wing in isolation is also extremely interesting and informative, telling us a lot about Neronian architectural tastes and the history of Roman architecture, even if its relationship to ancient literature is tenuous. More important, although ancient literary sources tell us nothing specific about the Esquiline Wing, they do give us a solid sense of the pre-Neronian architectural chronology of this whole area, plus the major phases of Nero's palace projects and at least some later activity related to the Domus Aurea. In addition, the Esquiline Wing is a large sample, retaining some 150 rooms for study, buried in the substructures of Trajan's Baths on the Esquiline (Fig. 2).<sup>18</sup> In a remnant this significant, we might well expect to find evidence for the overall chronology of Nero's palace projects, including what came before and after. In the event, this is exactly what we find.

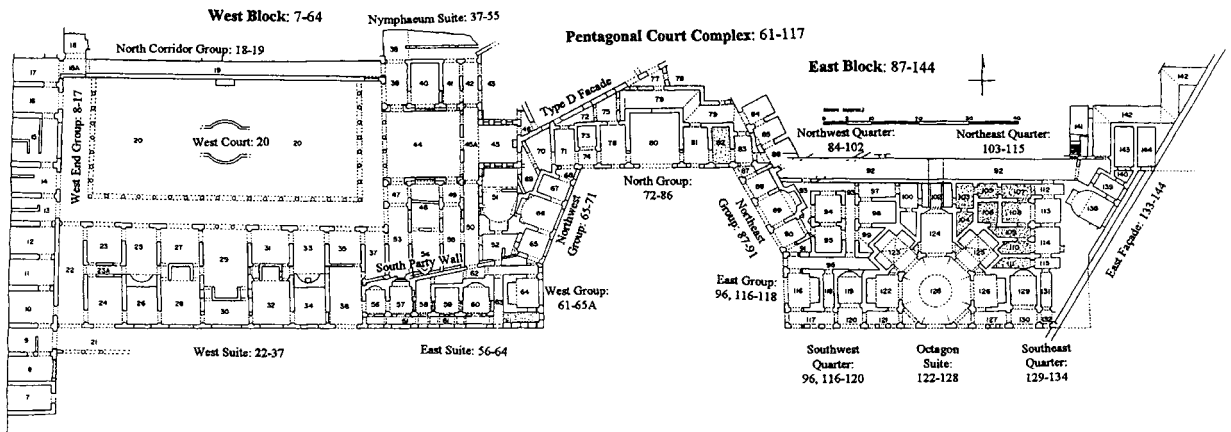
The ancient literary sources are just as vague about Nero's architects. Tacitus names them for us: Severus and Celer.<sup>19</sup> His ambiguous wording can be interpreted as suggesting a division of labor between the two, one being the architect (designer) and the other the engineer, or else both could have served both functions. It has become conventional to refer to Severus as the designer of the Esquiline Wing, but in fact this is speculative. Study of the masonry in the Esquiline Wing adds no new information that would help us sort out this issue, with just one exception: there is only one 'persona' involved in the design and construction of

the Esquiline Wing, consistently expressed in all Neronian parts of the building in both Neronian phases. The complexities in the masonry are not the result of two separate designers working on different tasks or independently designing separate areas. Indeed, detailed study of the masonry sheds some light on issues of architectural creativity, or revolution, and especially on the steps by which Nero's architects arrived at their novel ideas. The evidence for this is voluminous, as indicated in Chapters 2–5 and its implications are discussed in Chapter 6.3. For now, the point is that it is fruitless to try to distinguish between the contributions of Severus and Celer, whether their duties were separate, as designer and engineer, or they were a flawlessly blended team. I therefore treat the architects in as neutral a manner as possible, citing both, or simply “Nero's architects”, when I need to discuss issues of architectural design, vision, creativity or fantasy.

## 2. THE KEY FEATURES OF THE ESQUILINE WING

The importance of the Esquiline Wing for the history of Roman architecture is clearly established. Its architectural design has been carefully studied and its key features widely recognized.<sup>20</sup> The following description is illustrated by Figures 3–5.<sup>21</sup>

The Esquiline Wing was terraced into the crown of the Oppian Ridge, whose flanks descended steeply in this area. The south façade of the Esquiline Wing opened to the valley to the south (Figs. 1, 3 and 5), which would have given a fine view over the roofs of the city below when the project was started in the Domus Transitoria phase and then a view across the parklands in the Domus Aurea phase. The north side was sunk into the terrace cutting, with the room vaults crowning at the ground level of the Oppian Ridge behind them. The northern edges and the far west end are terrace retaining walls (the north sides of Corridors 19, 92, 79 and 142 and Staircase 38. See also Figure 4, where the whole retaining wall is highlighted). The Esquiline hill was heavily built up before Nero, so in fact to the north of these terrace retaining walls there are earlier architectural remnants filled in with soil and rubble rather than the soil of the Esquiline itself.<sup>22</sup> The wall forming the north sides of Rooms 70, 72, 75, 77, and 78; the back walls of Rooms 84–86; and the north and west sides of Room 141 are all remnants of earlier structures that originally had other rooms behind them. The fact that these areas all became terrace retaining walls in the Neronian project is emphasized by the fact that they are all essentially *cryptoportici*, which not only serve obvious practical functions, but also isolate the rest of the rooms from the dank environment adjacent to the terrace fill.



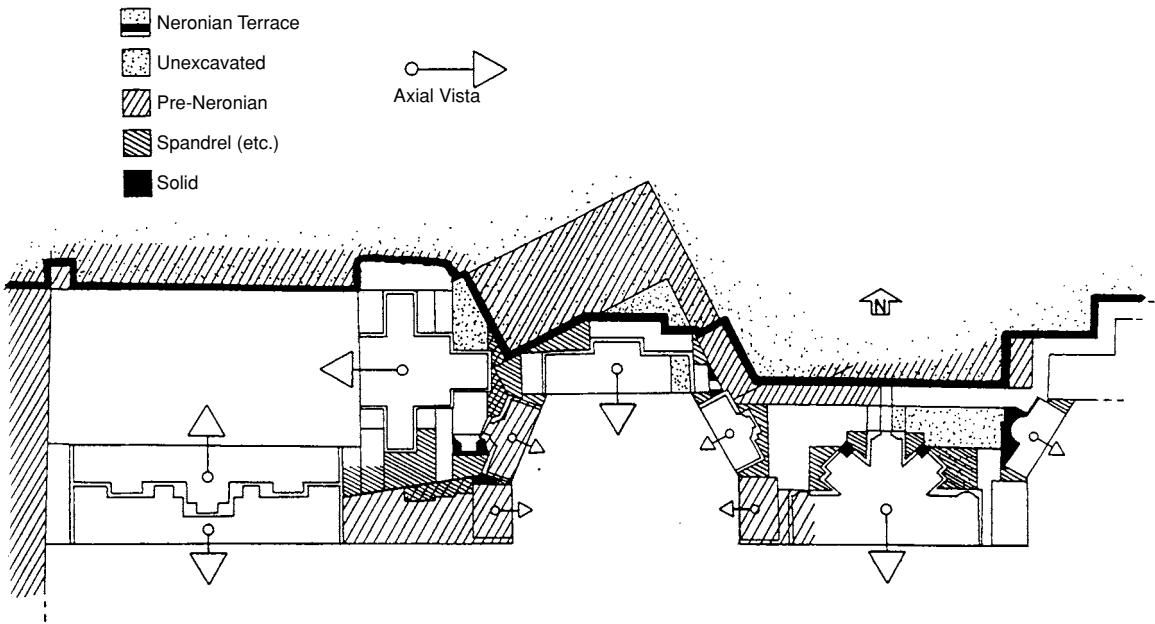
3. Esquiline Wing: Plan with the blocks, groups and suites labeled.

On the other hand, these retaining walls introduce, for the first time, a key design practice of Severus and Celer; they were extremely efficient. That is, the architects never built anything they did not have to, never replacing anything that already existed in a satisfactory form. Reusing earlier terrace retaining walls, or earlier buildings filled in to serve the same function, is an obvious thing to do, but Severus and Celer also reused earlier remnants much more creatively, as I discuss later.

Panella's recent excavations in the area of the Arch of Constantine have demonstrated that there had been a complex pre-Neronian urban setting in the area in front of the Esquiline Wing, including numerous buildings and at least five major roadways.<sup>23</sup> When these were swept away by the great fire the whole valley was filled in with rubble up to four meters deep. Panella confirms that the artificial lake noted by Suetonius was in the area of the Colosseum, albeit smaller than the amphitheatre and of strangely formal design. There are also remnants of the Neronian garden follies surrounding the lake, providing the Esquiline Wing with a vista to the south and southwest. The Esquiline Wing did not face the lake directly, however.

After Nero, the Esquiline Wing was buried within the substructures of the Baths of Trajan following another great fire in A.D. 104. The walls and vaults of the Esquiline Wing were reused by Trajan's engineers to supplement their own foundations. Wherever the Esquiline Wing had a large, open space, Trajanic foundations subdivided it into long, parallel rooms, easily vaulted to make a sturdy platform (compare Figs. 2 and 3).

The Trajanic subdivision of the major spaces distorts one of the most important aesthetic features of the Esquiline Wing, the fact that it consists mostly of

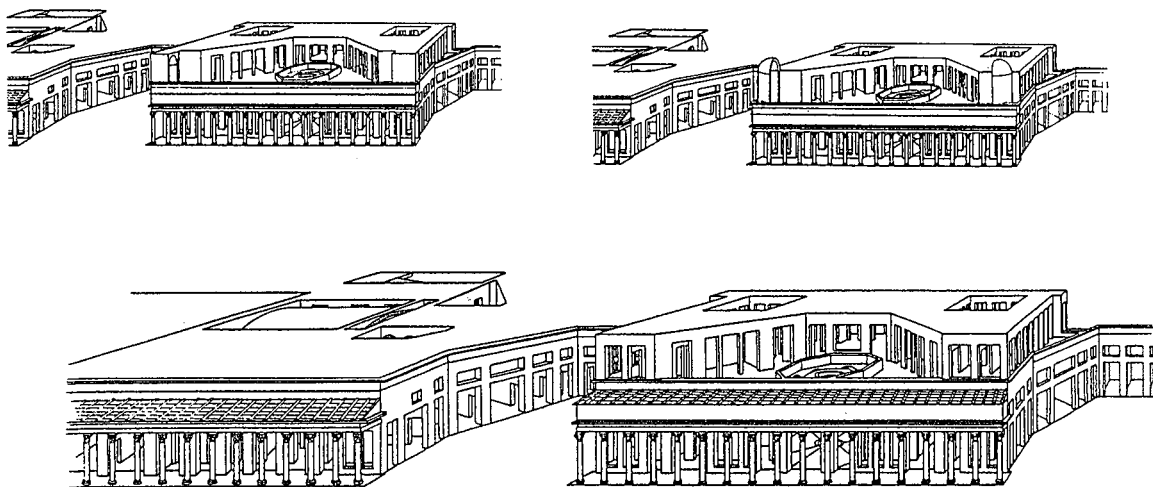


4. Esquiline Wing: Schematic plan highlighting symmetrical groups with their axial vistas, the spandrels between them, large areas of solid masonry and the terrace retaining wall.

symmetrical suites of rooms with their axes of symmetry pointing towards grand, spacious vistas. The most important of these vistas are marked in Figure 4. In most instances the central room of each suite is larger and fancier than the flanking rooms, commonly with a colonnade or several large windows and doorways at the end of the room with the vista (e.g., Rooms 29 and 44 with colonnades and Rooms 80 and 128 with large doorways). The Trajanic foundations divide all of these vistas into long, thin tubes of space, turning the original bright, airy Neronian design into a dark and claustrophobic experience. A visitor to the Esquiline Wing must therefore exercise considerable imagination to get any sense of the original aesthetics, but Severus and Celer's intentions are easy to see in plan (Fig. 4). In addition to the parklands to the south, there were also vistas across both axes of a great rectangular courtyard in the west (20), which provided the visual focal point for the major rooms of the West Block (Rooms 29 and 44).

The largest-scale features of the Esquiline Wing are the West Block and East Block, separated by the Pentagonal Court in the middle (Fig. 3). The West Block had an upper story at least at its east end, accessible via a grand staircase (Room 38), although the upper story has never been excavated. The *piano nobile* of the East Block was excavated by Fabbrini (Fig. 5).<sup>24</sup> This was lightly constructed, probably





5. Esquiline Wing: Perspectival reconstruction, based on Fabbrini's discoveries in the *piano nobile*. The main view is based on the presumption that the intrusive curved wall in the southwest corner (Fig. 70) is not original. If the curved wall is original, then it could be the basis for apsidal elements of the sort reconstructed in the two smaller versions above.

trabeated, with a triangular open veranda surrounding the octagonal Room 128 below. The whole *piano nobile* ensemble is obviously a belvedere, with colonnades and large windows opening in all directions. This includes a colonnade across the entire north side, next to an ornate, long, thin pool that was also the water source for a cascading fountain in Corridor 92 and Room 102 below. The extent of the northern vista cannot be reconstructed, but because the *piano nobile* clearly faced towards something to the north, we know that the terrace retaining wall for the East Block is not the northernmost extent of the Domus Aurea.<sup>25</sup> Access to the upper story of the East Block was via a staircase in Room 141, but this was so small and tortuous, and probably dark, that one presumes it was more suitable for the service staff. The staircase in Room 38 was much grander and brighter, and less steep, more obviously intended for Nero and probably serving the entire Esquiline Wing. Given the location of the main staircase (38) and the known *piano nobile* of the East Block, a second story along at least the north of the Pentagonal Court between them is also likely.

The Pentagonal Court is the most prominent and distinctive exterior feature of the Esquiline Wing. Because it is open along its long south side, the Pentagonal Court is not actually an enclosed courtyard at all, and if it were, it would have more than five sides. The name is appropriate in a study of the masonry, however, because the feature in question has five built sides that need to be explained, while

its sense of enclosure is close enough to a true courtyard for the name to make sense.

There was a colonnade across the south façade of the West Block. Fabbrini reports that there was also a colonnade across the façade of the East Block, different from the West Block colonnade in that it had a barrel vault instead of beams.<sup>26</sup> The fact that the two façade colonnades were structurally different from each other suggests that they were separate (i.e., that there was not a colonnade continuing across the south side of the Pentagonal Court), although the archaeological evidence in that area awaits excavation. Figure 5 reconstructs what we currently know about the colonnade, with the caveat that the number and spacing of the East Block colonnade remain speculative.

The major blocks of the Esquiline Wing are divided into the suites with axial vistas that I have already described. Between these are numerous lesser rooms that can be ignored for the time being, because they are essentially spandrels left between the larger groups. In the masonry explications of Chapters 2–5, however, the spandrels are of considerable interest because they tend to be where construction or design phases intersect, providing the most useful information on the overall masonry chronology.

I find it much easier to discuss the Esquiline Wing if the principal suites of rooms are given names rather than lists of numbers. These are labeled in Figure 3.<sup>27</sup>

In the West Block, the Neronian groups of rooms are called suites. These include the West Suite (Rooms 22–36) and the Nymphaeum Suite (Rooms 37–55), which form, respectively, the south side and east end of the West Court (20). These two suites and the West Court comprise more than 80 percent of the plan area of the West Block, giving some sense of how predominant the Neronian component is in the West Block (see Fig. 29). In addition, the West Block has the West End Group, Rooms 7–17, a pre-Neronian line of rooms at the far west end of the Esquiline Wing, and the North Corridor Group (Rooms 18 and 18A and Corridor 19), which is primarily of pre-Neronian date as well (Fig. 6, Chapter 2.1). The East Suite (Rooms 56–64) is a small pre-Neronian group that contributes little to the West Block but was retained because it provided useful rooms that could be made into the Pentagonal Court (Fig. 11, Chapter 3.3).

The Pentagonal Court is a relatively simple design in its Neronian conception, consisting of five major groups of rooms that I name according to compass orientation. These are the Southwest Group (Rooms 62–64), the Northwest Group (Rooms 65–70), the North Group (Rooms 71–82), the Northeast Group (Rooms 83–91) and the Southeast Group (Corridor 96 and Rooms 116–119). The masonry chronology in the Pentagonal Court is convoluted, however, especially where

pre-Neronian masonry intersects the Neronian design. Detailed description of these complications is necessary in Chapter 3, but they do not complicate the division of the Neronian Pentagonal Court into its constituent groups. The fact that the Southwest and Southeast Groups are also parts of the West and East Blocks, respectively, also creates some complications in terminology (these are, respectively, the East Suite in the West Block and the Southwest Quarter of the East Block), but these complexities are solved by treating the masonry in chronological order and discussing each topographical segment of the building only once. Thus, although the main discussion of the West Block is in Chapter 4 and the main discussion of the East Block is in Chapter 5, I describe their pre-Neronian portions in Chapter 3.

The East Block is the most complex design in the Esquiline Wing, but its division into groups is simple. In its Neronian conception, the East Block consists of just one major design, the Octagon Suite (Rooms 122–128), forming the axial core of the whole East Block. Everything else was tucked in around the Octagon Suite as best it could. There are five other sections of the East Block. The North Corridor Group consists of Corridors 91 and 142 and Room 141. This retains several important pre-Neronian remnants and is therefore described in Chapter 3.3. The Northwest Quarter is Rooms 87–91 and 93–101. Most of this is of little consequence in the Neronian design (Rooms 97–101 especially), essentially a spandrel between the Octagon Suite and the Pentagonal Court. The Northwest Quarter therefore overlaps the Northwest Group of the Pentagonal Court in Rooms 87–91, described in Chapter 3.4. The Northeast Quarter is Rooms 103–115 and 136–140, analogous to the Northwest Quarter in that Rooms 103–115 were an insignificant spandrel, whereas Rooms 136–140 were important rooms facing outward the east. I do not discuss the latter, however, because they retain their Trajanic backfill and are therefore largely inaccessible. The Southwest Quarter in the East Block is Corridor 96 and Rooms 116–119, that is, the same thing as the Southeast Group in the Pentagonal Court, described in Chapter 3.3. The Southeast Quarter, finally, is Rooms 129–135. This is a purely Neronian segment, designed to be pendant to the largely pre-Neronian Southwest Quarter, with few masonry complications.

Because most of the easternmost edge of the East Block (Rooms 132–144) retains its Trajanic backfill, there is little to be learned from it and it is therefore not treated separately here, nor is it given independent group names analogous to the similar parts of the Pentagonal Court. What masonry evidence there is indicates no complexities, apparently all bonding together with the Neronian masonry of the rest of the East Block. The design corresponds with this chronology, being essentially symmetrical with the west side of the East Block. Although this makes enough sense in its own right, Fabbrini has also suggested that there may have

been a second, eastern pentagonal court, of which this would be the west side.<sup>28</sup> Fabbrini also suggests a third major block of rooms beyond the second pentagonal courts, pendant to the standing West Block. If there were such a thing, then the axis of symmetry through the Octagon Suite would also be the central axis for a vast complex in three major blocks, articulated by two pentagonal courts.

Sadly, although this theory is appealingly grand, it is also improbable. The area east of the East Block is outside the perimeter of the platform for the Baths of Trajan, an area that was apparently swept clear of Neronian evidence, but *de Romanis* shows what was known about ancient remains east of the Esquiline Wing as of 1822, indicated in my Figure 2.<sup>29</sup> No substantial new information has been added since, and certainly no credible trace has been found of a second pentagonal court. This is an important point because the configuration of the walls shown by *de Romanis* responds to the axis of the Esquiline Wing, not to the axis of the Baths of Trajan. This suggests that they are Neronian or Flavian, but in any case based on the urbanistic situation of the Oppian ridge as it existed in Neronian times. If those remains are Neronian or earlier, then they definitely *preclude* a second pentagonal court; that is, their design is not compatible with such a thing. The second pentagonal court can only be an attractive hypothesis, therefore, but it is also a dubious one.<sup>30</sup>

We do not know the intended function of any room in the Esquiline Wing. Some guesses are better than others, of course; for example, the Octagon Suite could well have been a banquet hall, and some of the intentionally isolated rooms in the West Block (e.g., Rooms 34 and 59) may have served as bedrooms. Ultimately we do not know. The point is important because the intended use of the rooms has obvious bearing on the design. The West Block was undoubtedly intended for something different from the East Block. This is evident not only from the design of the rooms, but also from the fact that the West Block was decorated differently from the East Block (discussed later). Complex issues of masonry chronology may have some bearing on the differences between the decoration of the East and West Blocks, but the use of the rooms may just as readily explain the differences. If this is the case, then we are simply unable to reconstruct the rationale behind some of the key decisions concerning design and decoration.

Finally, I should explain my strategy for describing the masonry itself (Chapters 2–5). The masonry chronology of the Esquiline Wing is of vital archaeological significance, but the evidence is vast – as well as being an exquisite mess. Precious few readers will have either the need or the patience to read a comprehensive description of it, and I do not propose to provide such a thing here. My dissertation already provides a complete description.<sup>31</sup> It is unsparing in its detail, arranged