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GOD AND MAN IN THE GOLDEN HOUSE

Nero built a ruinously expensive *domus* from the Palatine to the Esquiline, calling it the *Domus Transitoria*. It burned in the Great Fire of 64. He rebuilt it and renamed it the *Domus Aurea*. Suetonius is quite clear about this: one house, two successive names¹. Tacitus adds that Nero did not return from Antium to Rome until the flames approached the *domus* by which he had connected (*continuaverat*) the Palatium and the *horti Maecenatis*². Where was this palace?

Modern scholarship has been enchanted by the size of the fabulous Golden House. Elements of the *Domus Transitoria* have been identified in the rotunda and corridors under the Temple of Venus and Rome on the Velia, and in the elegant fountain-court over on the Palatine, under the *Domus Augustana*³. Since the *Domus Tiberiana* was revealed as a Neronian palace it too has been claimed as part of the *Domus*

Aurea, indeed it has been declared the Palatine nucleus of the complex, a *domus-villa* balancing the celebrated *villa-domus* nucleus on the Oppian⁴. It has also been suggested that the Golden House engulfed the *horti* of Maecenas on Esquiline⁵. Modern confidence in the overwhelming extent of the mansion is founded on the criticism of Nero's contemporaries, that it was taking over the city. Martial complained that a single house stood in the whole city, while the Elder Pliny asserted explicitly, not once but twice, that the Golden House surrounded Rome. Why stop there? A clever pasquinade continued: «Rome is becoming a house: move to Veii, citizens, unless that house takes over Veii too»⁶.

It is one contention of this paper that modern estimates of the extent of the Golden House have been, like the ancient claims, greatly exaggerated, and that such exaggeration is closely

¹ Nero 31, 1: *Non in alia re tamen damnosior quam in aedificando domum a Palatio Esquilias usque fecit, quam primo transitoriam, mox incendio absumptam restitutamque auream nominavit.*

² Ann. 15, 39: *Eo in tempore Nero Antii agens non ante urbem regressus est quam domui eius, qua Palatium et Maecenatis hortos continuaverat, ignis propinquaret.* After the Fire Nero took advantage of his country's ruin to raise a *domus* of extraordinary splendour: 15, 42.

³ E.g. (respectively, and with bibliography), W. L. MACDONALD, *The Architecture of the Roman Empire I. An Introductory Study* (rev. edn.) New Haven 1982, pp. 21-25; M. A. TOMEI, *Il Palatino*, Roma 1992, p. 29. Both identifications are widely shared.

⁴ A. CARANDINI, in *Gli Orti Farnesiani sul Palatino*, ed. G. Morganti, Roma 1990, pp. 14-15.

⁵ E. LA ROCCA, in *Le tranquille dimore degli dei*, ed. by M. CIMA and E. LA ROCCA, Venezia 1986, p. 32.

⁶ MARTIAL, *Spect.* 2, 4: *unaque iam tota stabat in urbe domus.* PLINY, *NH* 33, 54: *Nero Pompeii theatrum operuit auro in unum diem, quo Tiridati Armeniae regi ostenderet. et quota pars ea fuit aureae domus ambientis urbem!* *NH* 36, 111: *Bis vidimus urbem totam cingi domibus principum Gai et Neronis, huius quidem, ne quid deesset, aurea.* Suetonius, *Nero* 39, 2: *Roma domus fiet: Veios migrate, Quirites, / si non et Veios occupat ista domus.* The reference to Veii is significant.

tied to a misunderstanding of the nature and intent of the house.

Some preliminary remarks. First, in the matter of nomenclature, both elements of the house's original name, *Domus Transitoria*, are curious. In point of fact there was no «house» stretching from the Palatine to the Esquiline, not in any sense that we would recognize it, and nothing like any earlier *domus* in Rome: it was more *horti* or *villa* than *domus*. Nero enjoyed new definitions.

Yet the bland *transitoria* is a much more troublesome word. It should signify something that connects, a passageway *between* places, and Tacitus' *continuaverat* has the same implication. Buildings on the Velia might qualify as «transitional», but how can we call structures *on* the Palatine and the Esquiline hills *transitoria*, when those hills were just what was being connected? Compare precisely the Forum of Nerva, widely known in Late Antiquity as the *Forum Transitorium*. If we applied to the *Forum Transitorium* the same criteria that have been applied to Nero's mansion, it would not just «lie between», «offer a passageway», «connect», it would also overrun and absorb all it touches, the *Forum* of Augustus, the Temple of Peace, the *Forum Romanum*, the Subura itself – which is absurd. That is to say, the *Domus Transitoria*, and consequently the *Domus Aurea*, did *not* include the Palatine, or the Esquiline, or any building on them. This is *not* to deny that several substantial structures on the Palatine and elsewhere were Neronian: it is just that they can't have been, and were not thought of as, the Golden House.

Second, the question of boundaries. We really have no clear idea of where the Golden House was and where it stopped. C.C. Van Essen's hugely influential reconstruction of the topogra-

phy seems far too generous, including as it does all of the Palatine and large chunks of the Esquiline and the Caelian⁷. But not only is there nothing «transitional» about them, Suetonius and Tacitus don't really seem to be thinking of these heights when they describe the Golden House: that is to say, everything they notice applies perfectly well simply to the mansion on the Oppian and to the open country below it. Moreover, many of the elements in Van Essen's reconstruction are not surely Neronian, and even when they are it is circular to *assume* that they were part of the Golden House when one is trying to define its area. P.G. Warden sensibly cut Van Essen's 80 hectares in half, confining «The Golden House» to the slopes, not the summits, of the hills⁸. Although nobody has paid this view much attention, it has the great advantage of making the area covered by the Oppian house and its grounds much more «transitional», not including but in a sense joining the hills.

Third, the matter of access. How was the Golden House defined? Did it have a wall around it? If it did, or if it was otherwise delimited, were people forced to go around the vast area – that seems inconceivable – or could they pass regularly through various monumental entrances, at the site of the arch of Constantine for instance, onto the roads which certainly ran through the grounds? When Nero held his great triumph in 67, did he drive in silence down the future Via San Gregorio, or did he let the people in specially to applaud him, or did they have free access anyway, or was the area not part of the «Golden House» at all? Did the roads run through open country, or were they perhaps lined with walls like the those of the *horti Salustiani*, made famous in the year 69? That would break up the unity into discrete areas,

⁷ C. C. VAN ESSEN, in *Mededelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afd. Letterkunde* n.s. 17, 12, Amsterdam 1954, pp. 371-398. Com-

monly reproduced, as in J. B. WARD-PERKINS, *Roman imperial architecture*, Harmondsworth 1981, p. 60.

⁸ P. G. WARDEN, in *JSAH* 40, 1981, pp. 271-278.

which looks impossible. In short, what and where were the boundaries, internal and external, of the «Golden House» (which wasn't a house at all)? The nature of public access is central to interpreting the Golden House, yet it has only really been considered by M. Griffin and N. Purcell⁹. Creating a rural estate in the heart of the city, making a *domus* into a real *villa*, connecting the urban Palatine with the suburban Esquiline, what did Nero think he was doing?

I want to consider the Golden House not as a dwelling-place, but more as a setting which Nero purposefully designed to support and complement the public roles he chose to act. It is easy to fall into platitudes about role-playing and theatricality in Roman public life, but the fact remains that Nero *was* the most self-consciously theatrical ruler the Romans would ever have, that he *did* expend more thought and effort than most in crafting and presenting his public image. In short, I am less interested in defining the Golden House by its place in the historical development of Roman villas and Hellenistic palaces, than I am in defining it within the context of Nero's other actions as ruler. With that in mind, let us consider two different readings of the Golden House.

The first is an interpretation of the House which is by now very familiar: it was meant to represent the palace of the Sun. The great exponent of this view was H.P. L'Orange, who was roundly dismissed by J. Toynbee and A. Boethius¹⁰. Boethius wrote: «His suggestion that the

whole Domus Aurea complex was a palace of Nero-Helios, a palace of the Sun, must, as far as I can see, be discarded as completely unverified. Again, I emphasize its obvious connection with the Hellenized late Republican villas». Yet it is not obvious why it could not be *both* sun-palace and villa. We may discount L'Orange's theocratic concerns: although Nero *presented* himself as a god, there is no reason to assume that he or anyone claimed he *was* that god, any more than they thought of earlier *principes* or Hellenistic monarchs as «being» the deities with whom they wished to be associated. But, once we assume that Nero and his audience were concerned with metaphor, not reality, L'Orange was essentially right, and his *Sonnenpalast* has been returning to favour, witness the important recent contributions of Voisin, Hemsoll, and Bergmann¹¹. The evidence that Nero presented himself as the Sun and his Golden House as the Palace of the Sun seems overwhelming.

I should make clear one point which is relevant but not vital to the argument. I believe that all the evidence – the prose writings of Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio; coins, both imperial and local; and inscriptions – converges to show that Nero began to associate himself publicly with the god Apollo only in the year 59, after the murder of Agrippina (as Tacitus indeed tells us explicitly), and with the god Sol or Helios only in the year 64, after the Great Fire of Rome. That is to say, he was not presented as Apollo or Phoebus Apollo in the first five years

⁹ M. GRIFFIN, *Nero. The End of a Dynasty*, London 1984, pp. 138-141: an excellent summary, acknowledging discussion with N. PURCELL. The present paper reasserts Dr. GRIFFIN's central point, that «nothing suggests that Nero meant to shut himself up in the Domus Aurea». For a restatement of the opposite and widely held opinion, see the paper of E. MOORMANN elsewhere in this volume.

¹⁰ H. P. L'ORANGE, in *Serta Eitremiana (SO Suppl. 11, 1942)* pp. 68-100 = *Likeness and icon*, Odense 1973, pp. 278-297. *Contra*: J. M. C. TOYNBEE, *NC 7, 1947*, pp. 126-

149; A. BOETHIUS, *The Golden House of Nero*, Ann Arbor 1960, p. 119.

¹¹ J.-L. VOISIN, in *L'Urbs, Espace urbain et histoire*, Rome 1987, pp. 509-543; D. HEMSOLL, in *Architecture and architectural sculpture in the Roman Empire*, ed. by M. HENIG, Oxford 1990, pp. 10-38; M. BERGMANN, *Der Koloss Neros, die Domus Aurea und der Mentalitätswandel im Rom der frühen Kaiserzeit*, in *TrWPr*, Heft 13, 1993, pp. 3-37.

of his reign, nor was a new Golden Age proclaimed *by him* until long after his accession¹².

Apollo and Sol represented to Nero his two great passions, singing to the lyre and racing horses. For centuries the two gods had been closely associated, and Nero would promote the connection between them, claiming in his last years that his talents as a citharode put him on a level with Apollo, his charioteering with Sol¹³. But I want to concentrate on the Sun alone. In fact the Sun had more to offer.

In the year 66, when Nero liberated the people of Achaëa, the official decree of thanks from Acraëphia called him «the New Helios lighting the Hellenes». Other undated, private dedications name him the New Sun, or the New Sun God¹⁴. As is well-known, Nero's head is shown «radiate» – that is wearing a diadem with sharp rays rising from it – on the obverse of his bronze coins in Rome, from 64 onwards. Provincial coins from several cities in Northern Greece and Asia Minor follow Rome's lead by depicting the emperor with the radiate crown¹⁵. This radiate portrait probably celebrated the fiftieth anniversary in 64 of the death and divinization of Augustus, and Augustus' posthumous

portrayal with the radiate crown¹⁶. Yet the widespread representation of the living Nero with the crown of rays must surely recall the association of Hellenistic monarchs with the Sun.

There are also sculptural representations of Nero as the Sun, or to be precise a Nero-like figure with solar attributes. Most intriguing is the relief portrait of a very Julio-Claudian Sun on a dedication to Sol and Luna from one, Eumolpus, slave of Caesar, who identifies himself as none other than the man in charge of the furnishings of the Golden House, that is, after 64¹⁷.

Of course the greatest example of the emperor as Sol must be the Colossus which commanded all of Rome from the vestibule of the Golden House. The argument that Nero was represented as the radiant sun, and that the features and attributes were in some way altered after his death, has been so fully and convincingly set out by C. Lega and M. Bergmann that I need say little here¹⁸. Nero was an avowed adherent of the Sun, and one who allowed himself to be depicted with solar attributes. In her book on the Colossus, Bergmann has performed the tremen-

¹² This is not the place to argue the matter. The main evidence for a new Golden Age beginning in 54 is found in the eclogues of Calpurnius Siculus and in a poem in the *Apocolocyntosi* of Seneca. I believe, as do apparently more and more Latinists in the Anglo-American world (D. ARMSTRONG, in *Philologus* 130, 1986, pp. 113-136; E. COURTNEY, in *REL* 65, 1987, pp. 148-15; N. HORSEFALL, in *CR* 43, 1993, pp. 267-270; B. BALDWIN, in *ICS* 20, 1995, pp. 157-167), that Calpurnius Siculus wrote long after Nero's death; and I will argue elsewhere that the poem in Seneca can be shown (on several grounds) to be an interpolation. Be this as it may, there are no signs of an *officially sanctioned* new Golden Age until 64: cf. below.

¹³ Suetonius, *Nero* 53.

¹⁴ *SIG*³ 814; *IGRR* 3, 345; *SEG* 18, 566.

¹⁵ *RIC* I² 73-76, 121-123, 205-212, 380-381, 384-385, 414-417, 451-455 (all *asses*); *RPC* I. 1275 (Corinth), 1371 and 1376 (Nicopolis), 1439 (Thessalian League), 1599 (Thessalonica), 1752 (Perinthus). Cf. Suetonius, *Nero* 25, 2.

¹⁶ M. Grant, *Roman anniversary issues*, Cambridge

1950, pp. 82-83.

¹⁷ Eumolpus relief at BERGMANN, Tafel 5.3; inscription at *ILS* 1774. Note also the Neronian solar charioteer on the breastplate of the acephalous statue of a Julio-Claudian prince at Caere: M. FUCHS, *Untersuchungen zur Ausstattung römischer Theater in Italien und den Westprovinzen des Imperium Romanum*, Mainz 1987, Tafel 33, 1. The Uffizi's great black basalt head of Nero, which is agreed to be either an authentic ancient work or a baroque copy of lost original, offers his final portrait-type with a radiate crown in high relief: *LIMC* IV, 1988, s.v. Helios/Sol, p. 445 (C. LETTA). A late antique cameo, presumably copying an earlier original, shows (and names) Nero as the radiate Sun driving a chariot: A. ALFÖLDI, E. ALFÖLDI, *Die Kontorniat-Medaillons* 1-2, Berlin 1976, 1990, Tafel 250, 3. Also the relief mentioned below, n. 22.

¹⁸ C. LEGA, *Il Colosso di Nerone*, in *BCom* 93, 1989-1990, pp. 349-351; *LTUR* I, Rome 1993, pp. 295-298; BERGMANN, pp. 4-6, 14-17.

dous service of drawing attention to a carved amethyst, now in Berlin, which does seem to present the figure of Nero/Helios in precisely the same way as our only other clear representation of the Colossus, that is, on a medallion of Gordian III showing the statue as it stood next the Colosseum. What we see is a stocky male figure, radiate, with his left elbow supported by a column, right arm resting on a rudder. Bergmann suggests that the empty left hand originally held a globe, which would be appropriate for the world-ruler¹⁹. Be that as it may, the Colossus is another representation of Nero as the Sun to be dated to the years after the Great Fire of 64.

Sol was of course a charioteer, and the circus, a cosmos in miniature, was dedicated to him. In 64, Dio complains, Nero reached new heights of excess by driving chariots in public, and it is only thereafter that the solar charioteer becomes a prominent public figure. In 65 the all-seeing Sun saved Nero's life: special thanks were rendered to the god for revealing the conspiracy of Piso, since it was in the ancient temple of Sol in the Circus Maximus that the plotters had met to plan. On the notorious Golden Day in 66, a sensation was created in the Theatre of Pompey when, according to Dio, «the awnings stretched overhead to keep off the sun were purple and in the centre of them was an embroidered figure of Nero driving a chariot, with golden stars gleaming all around him» – an image preserved, apparently, on a fragmentary relief showing Nero's head radiate against a background of stars²⁰. When the audience squinted up at the sun, they saw instead Nero himself, and the stars around him indicated that his chariot was a heavenly one. In 67, after his artistic and athletic successes in Greece, Nero celebrated his

own special version of a triumph. He did not conclude it with the customary solemn visit to Jupiter the Best and Greatest on the Capitol, but went on to give thanks to Apollo the Citharode over on the Palatine, and then he descended to the Circus Maximus to dedicate all of his racing crowns to the Sun. He ranged them around the obelisk of the Sun which Augustus had removed from Heliopolis and set up in the Circus, and then he raced around the course²¹.

In short, Nero associated himself closely with the Sun and the solar charioteer; and, where the evidence can be dated, none of it predates the Great Fire of 64.

After the Fire came a new Golden Age. The wild rumor that Queen Dido's treasure had been found, a vast quantity of unworked gold, gave panegyrists a theme at the second Neronia in 65: the earth, they claimed, teemed with new fertility and the gods brought forth unexpected wealth, pure gold, not gold alloyed with other metals as before²². In late May of 66, Rome witnessed the extraordinary Golden Day. That was the day on which the emperor crowned Tiridates King of Armenia at fabulous expense. It received its name from the people because of a stunning embellishment of the Theater of Pompey, where the stage, the walls, everything portable, were all in some way gilded. Pliny the Elder, who must have seen it, says simply that Nero covered the theater with gold for that one day. It would have been blinding were the crowd not protected from the sun by the awning, at the center of which Nero drove the chariot of the Sun.

Earlier on the Golden Day the emperor had received the homage of Tiridates in the Forum and crowned him before a vast crowd. The ceremony was timed to begin at sunrise, and Dio's

¹⁹ BERGMANN, Tafel 2, 3.

²⁰ R. PARIBENI, *BdA* 8, 1914 pp. 283-285.

²¹ A.D. 64: DIO, 62, 15, 1 (cf. TACITUS, *Ann.* 15, 33: Nero's first appearance as singer in public, in 64). A.D. 65:

TACITUS, *Ann.* 15, 74. A.D. 66: DIO, 63, 6, 2 (Loeb translation modified). A.D. 67: DIO, 64, 21, 1.

²² TACITUS, *Ann.* 16, 2: strong evidence that the Golden Age had *not* been proclaimed in 54?

source remarked on the white clothes of the civilians who crowded everywhere, even on the rooftops, and the shining armor of the soldiers in their ranks, with their weapons flashing like lightning. The theatrical effect when the rising sun first hit the Forum must indeed have been dazzling. It was an effect, one that was deliberately planned: an earlier day for the ceremony had been set by edict, but it had been postponed because of cloud. In the forum as in the gilded theatre, where Nero repeated the coronation under his solar awning, the Golden Day was also the Day of the Sun²³.

In 64, I believe, Nero had inaugurated a new solar ideology, presenting himself as the Sun, beautiful, all-seeing, all-nourishing, and the age was adorned by the mineral of the Sun, gold. What does that make of his Golden House? A letter of Seneca is sometimes adduced, but its precise significance has been underappreciated. Writing in the late summer or autumn of 64 – that is, after the Golden House had begun to rise from the ruins of the *Domus Transitoria* – Seneca launched a direct attack on the new solar ideology. The subject here is the vanity of material riches. Gold glitters throughout:

People seem to think that the immortal gods cannot give any better gift than wealth – or even possess anything better [here he recites Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 2. 1]:

The sun-god's palace, set with pillars tall
And flashing bright with gold

Or look at the chariot of the Sun: [again, Ovid, 100 lines later]

Gold was the axle, golden too the pole
And gold the tires that bound the circling
wheels....

²³ DIO, 63, 1-6, especially 64, 6, 1-2; Suetonius, *Nero* 13 (including the delay *propter nubilem*); Pliny, *NH* 33, 54.

²⁴ Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* 115, 12-13 (Loeb translation, R.M. Gummere): *Nihil illis melius nec dare videntur di immortales posse nec habere. «Regia Solis erat sublimibus alta columnis, clara micante auro». Eiusdem currum*

And finally, when they would praise an epoch as the best, they call it the «Golden Age» (*saeculum aureum*)²⁴.

The passage exhibits astonishingly open contempt for the new Golden Age, as Seneca attacks the very equation of gold with the Sun which underlay Nero's project. The vulgarity, the superficiality of people who define the gods in terms of gold are mercilessly etched in specifically Neronian terms – the *palace* of the Sun, the *chariot* of the Sun – and the concept of a new Golden Age is turned astonishingly upside down, viewed not as sublime but ignoble.

Seneca goes on to dissect lines from the Greek tragedians which seemed to praise wealth. In one, from a play by Euripides about Bellerophon, money, *pecunia*, is deemed superior to love. When the entire audience rose as one to eject from the theatre the actor who had spoken these words during the first performance, Euripides himself (writes Seneca) jumped up and urged them to wait and see *quem admirator auri exitum faceret*, how one who adored gold would die²⁵.

Aspects of this we don't have time to pursue here: the extraordinary trappings of gold in Nero's daily life, from golden poems to golden chamber pots, from golden chains to gold-shod mules to golden poison box; also, the strong hints that the emperor was offering himself not just as the Sun but in a sense as a *successor* of the Sun, a successful Phaethon. Rather, what I am interested in, above all, is the play of light.

Seneca wrote, in Ovid's words, of the Sun god's palace flashing bright with gold, *regia Solis clara micante auro*. Martial would sing

aspice: «Aureus axis erat, temo aureus, aurea summae / curvatura rotae, radiatorum argenteus ordo». Denique quod optimum videri volunt saeculum aureum appellant. Cf. HEMSOLL, p. 31.

²⁵ 115, 15.

of new works rising where the hateful house of a savage king once shone, *invidiosa feri radiabant atria regis*. Why did it shine? In his precious account of the Golden House, Suetonius describes in order the vestibule, the lake, its buildings, and the open countryside, then says «in other parts everything was covered with gold and studded with gems and pearls» – after which his tour proceeds to the dining-rooms and baths. I take the gilt and jewel adornment to mean not just the interiors, but also the exteriors of the Golden House as well, just as the Theatre of Pompey was gilded throughout for one day. Nero, as we have seen from the Golden Day, was interested in dazzling light effects. Curiously, Pliny tells of a Temple of the Fortuna of Sejanus which he set up somewhere in the grounds of the Golden House. What made it memorable was that it was built of a marble-hard stone recently discovered in Cappadocia, *phengites*, the shining stone, white, streaked with yellow veins. Pliny was deeply impressed by its translucence, which made the temple as light as day even when the doors were shut, uncannily striking the viewer as lit from within²⁶.

It is striking that Seneca also dwells, in the same letter, on being dazzled by light, in a remarkable discussion of moral chiaroscuro. The philosopher distinguishes between superficial beauty and the true inner radiance of the virtuous soul. The problem is a matter of vision: we cannot see inner beauty because we have been blinded by too much exterior *splendor*, or by too much darkness. If we could but purify our vision we would see internal beauty, however buried it might be in outward poverty, or lowliness, or disgrace. «Conversely», he continues, «we shall get a view of evil and the deadening influences of a sorrow-laden soul, in spite of the hindrance that results from the widespread gleam of riches that flash round about,

divitiarum radiantium splendor, and in spite of the false light, *falsa lux*, of great power which beats pitilessly upon the beholder»²⁷. The evil, unhappy soul, masked by the splendor of radiant riches, the false light of great power – all this just before Seneca turns to describe the Sun-god's palace, shining with gold.

Imagine a visitor toiling up the straightened and splendidly redeveloped Via Sacra. Dominating the vista, indeed visible throughout much of the City, loomed the sparkling Colossus, which viewed the stars close-up (in Martial's words), and marked the transition from the old center of Republican Rome to the new imperial palace. Past this overwhelming vestibule the amazed visitor would find, not the expected «house» but a bowl of open countryside dotted with woods, pastures, fields, animals, and different buildings, all scattered around an artificial lake, a large suburban villa set down in the heart of the city. In fact, where one might expect to discover just such a scene painted, one would see a reality – a double *trompe l'oeil*. The visitor's eye would be drawn immediately to the tremendous facade of the main residential complex, imposed carefully on, out from, into, the side of the Oppian Hill, and strictly oriented East-West. The significance of the orientation is still not clear, but undoubtedly a building which faced due south would be washed with sunshine throughout the day. The effect of sunlight hitting a gilt and bejewelled facade, over 360 meters long, from dawn till dusk, would be blinding. It could indeed be taken to be the Palace of the Sun.

The house itself looked down from the periphery of the area onto a world in miniature, with, as Suetonius tells us, an artificial sea, artificial cities, and artificial countryside of all inds, stocked with tame and wild animals. As many have observed, it was a microcosm: perhaps of

²⁶ MARTIAL, *Spect.* 2, 3; SUETONIUS, *Nero* 31; PLINY, *NH* 36, 163.

²⁷ 115, 6-7 (Loeb translation).

the world, but perhaps precisely of the Roman world, surrounding the Mediterranean. Looking down on this world from the Oppian was the shining facade of the palace of the Sun, while high above its entrance stood the statue of its master, Nero, as the charioteer Sol, holding (one suspects) the world in his hand.

The Domus Aurea meant to blind, to bewilder, to overwhelm the mortal viewer. Who was the intended observer?

This leads us to my second reading of the Golden House, which will be less familiar. It arises from the belief that throughout his reign Nero wished also to present himself as a sort of year-round *princeps Saturnalicus*. In the season of the Saturnalia, serious business stopped, drinking, gambling, casual clothing took over the city, gifts were presented, within the household slaves were given licence to eat with their masters – there had been no slavery under good King Saturn – and statuses might even be temporarily exchanged: masters might serve their slaves, and within the miniature republic of the household slaves might act as magistrates and judges²⁸. *Temporarily*: the proverb insisted that «Saturnalia does not last forever». Nero, I believe, intended that, in some sense, it should. The appeal of Saturnalia to the leaders of Rome lay in social control, the temporary suspension or reversal of norms offering a safety valve. The appeal to a Nero, it can be argued, went further: by freeing Saturnalian behaviour from its strict seasonal confines, by redefining it, by introducing it deliberately into other parts of Roman life, Nero not only amused himself, he drew emperor and people, ruler and ruled, closer together, in an alliance which did not appeal to his aristocratic critics. Deliberately Saturnalian behaviour made him popular. To demonstrate this

would take us too far from Golden House, so let us begin in the middle, with Nero's greatest party.

In 64, before the Great Fire, warned by the gods, the emperor suddenly abandoned his plans for a tour of the East. According to Tacitus, in what sounds like a précis of an imperial edict, Nero gave as his reason the misery of his fellow-citizens at his departure. «Hence, as in private relationships the closest ties were the strongest, so the people of Rome had the most powerful claims and must be obeyed in their wish to retain him»²⁹. He proceeded to set up banquets in public places and, says Tacitus, he treated the whole city as if it were his house. These images of the people of Rome as his closest friends, *necessitudines*, and their city as his house, *domus*, are central.

What followed was the notorious banquet hosted by Tigellinus on the Stagnum Agrippae in the Campus Martius. The whole thing was a grand paradox. A great raft was built for Nero's banqueters, not the luxury yacht of a Ptolemy, but planks fixed on empty wine casks. This was towed around the stagnum by tugboats adorned with gold and ivory; their rowers were not rowers but male prostitutes, arranged by age and sexual proficiency. The pond in downtown Rome and its surroundings were stocked with exotic birds and beasts imported from distant lands and seas. On the banks stood taverns and brothels into which the populace crowded while Nero and his companions floated and dined in splendour. The world turned inside out: on one side the brothels were filled with noblewomen, while on the other naked prostitutes plied their trade in the open – this according to Tacitus. Dio emphasizes the promiscuous availability of women of all kinds. When night fell, all the surrounding groves and buildings echoed with

²⁸ MACROBIUS, *Sat.* 1, 7, 26; SENECA, *Ep.* 47, 14. On the Saturnalia in general, see now H. VERSNEL, *Transition and reversal in myth and ritual*, Leiden 1994, pp. 136-227.

²⁹ TACITUS, *Ann.* 15, 36 (translated by A. J. Church and W. J. Brodribb).

songs and shone with lights (so Tacitus); or there was chaos, pushing, blows, shouts, and for many, both men and women, death (Dio). In short, society was turned thoroughly upside down, but in July, not in December. Upside down and inside out: to crown it all, the emperor, dressed and acting as a bride, married one of his freedmen, and the intimacies of the marriage bed became a spectator sport³⁰.

Our informants are shocked, but a remarkably similar banquet had concluded the celebration of Nero's Juvenalia in 59. Then he had feasted his people on boats in the Naumachia of Augustus; then noble men and women had acted lewd roles; inns and other rendezvous had been set up in the surrounding grove; everything was offered for sale, and money was distributed for spending³¹. The parallel with the more notorious banquet of 64 is striking: a party for the people of Rome where social and sexual roles are again upset, and (perhaps significantly) participation seems to have been voluntary. A canal drained the Naumachia into the river: down that canal at midnight Nero sailed into the Tiber as a finale to the Juvenalia.

Indeed Suetonius, speaking generally, says that Nero would *often* feast in public places, in the Naumachia, in the Campus Martius, in the Circus Maximus, served by prostitutes and dancing girls from all over the city. Whenever he floated down the Tiber to Ostia, or sailed along the gulf of Baiae, taverns doubling as brothels were set up along the banks and coasts: there matrons would imitate hostesses and urge him to put ashore³². In short, not just in 59 and 64, and not just in certain places in Rome, but frequently, within and outside the city, Nero

delighted in dining while aboard ship, he liked artificial inns to be set up on the shores he passed, he took pleasure in Roman matrons acting as prostitutes and procurers. Elaborate feasting, sexual license, and messing about in boats: the combination is arresting. With such theatrical banquets, I suggest that he was deliberately recreating at Rome the notorious maritime delights associated with one place in the western empire above all: Baiae, the pleasure capital of Italy.

I need not remind you of the character of Baiae, «the golden shore of blessed Venus», ringed by resorts and pleasure villas, and notorious as a sink of corruption and pleasures prohibited at Rome – vice on ship and shore is the theme classically enunciated by Cicero and Seneca³³. Nero's love for the region is equally well-known. This affection for Baiae is an element in two of his largest and most costly construction projects: the navigable canal from Lake Avernus to the mouth of the Tiber, of which Tacitus is reminded in his discussion of the Golden House, and extensive cuttings for which are visible today; and the vast covered pool, surrounded by colonnades, which was to stretch from the port of Misenum through Baiae to Lake Avernus, and which appears as the Stagnum Neronis on glass flasks³⁴.

To ancient critics such projects were against nature, they were ruinously expensive, they harmed local viticulture. To modern rationalists they benefited the economy and ensured the peace of Rome by preserving the grain fleet from the real hazards of the sea. But to an artist like Nero there was another, ideological benefit. Pliny gives a hint, writing of «Nero's navigable

³⁰ TACITUS, *Ann.* 15, 33-37; DIO, 62, 15, 1-6.

³¹ DIO, 61, 20, 5; TACITUS, *Ann.* 14, 15.

³² *Nero* 27.

³³ *Pro Caelio* 35; *Epistulae Morales* 51, 1-4. In general: J. H. D'ARMS, *Romans on the Bay of Naples*, Cambridge, Mass. 1970.

³⁴ Canal: TACITUS, *Ann.* 15, 42; SÜETONIUS, *Nero* 31, 3; PLINY, *NH* 14, 68; STATIUS, *Silvae* 4, 3, 7-8; W. JOHANNOWSKY, in *BA* 4, 1990, pp. 1-13. *Stagnum*: SÜETONIUS, *Nero* 31, 3; S. E. OSTROW, in *Puteoli* 3, 1979, pp. 85-87, 127-130.

ditch, which he had begun from the Gulf of Baiae up to Ostia». That is to say, when his plans were complete, Nero would be able in fact or fancy to sail not only from the Naumachia into the Tiber, but also down the Tiber to the newly rebuilt port of Ostia, thence by canal to Lake Avernus, and thence by the Lake of Nero to the gulf of Baiae. The passage by water from Rome to Baiae, from Baiae to Rome, would be quick, safe, and direct.

Thus, his engineering projects would make real what he had already achieved symbolically: they brought Baiae to Rome. Baiae was the aristocrat's playground *par excellence*, its luxurious diversions part of a universe unimaginably distant from the daily round of the man and woman on the dusty Roman street. Now their emperor brought its pleasures to Rome to share them with the people he loved. By treating the whole city as his house he invited the people to be his guests. They too could watch and enjoy the exotic delights of Baiae, the elaborate feasting, the music, the lights at night, the seaside inns, the boating parties, the lavish expense. On that view, the parties of 59 and 64 (at least) were politically astute pageants, bringing together the showman emperor and his people to enjoy in artificial form a revelry which was normally the prerogative of the rich.

When Nero came to the throne there were two large, permanent, artificial bodies of water in Rome, the Stagnum Agrippae and the Naumachia Augusti. Both were fed by aqueducts, both were surrounded by parks, around both Nero erected pavilions, and the area of the Pool of Agrippa (at least) he stocked with exotic birds and animals. In 64 he moved to add a third large, artificial body of water to the city, one surrounded by parkland, animals, and pavilions: the Stagnum Neronis, at the heart of the Golden House. But the pavilions here were permanent.

Two observations about the Stagnum Neronis occur to me, both pointing beyond the Golden House. The first concerns its relationship with the Baths of Titus, which lay immediately to the West of the villa on the Oppian and which are the only other public buildings to share the East-West axis. F. Coarelli suggested – though this is very uncertain – that they began as the Baths of the Golden House; perhaps one might hope that they were at least initially conceived as such. As I. Nielsen expressed it, this would explain, on the one hand, why there is otherwise no trace of baths serving the Oppian complex; that is, the Baths of Titus or their forerunner were planned as the baths of the Golden House. On the other hand, it would also explain why the Baths of Titus lacked the amenities of gardens, pool, porticoes; that is, the lake and gardens of the Golden House provided them. Thus the baths and the house complex would fit together very nicely³⁵. If that were true, the *Domus Aurea* complex would then become very much a reflection of the one in the Campus Martius. The Baths of Titus mimicked on a smaller scale the new and innovative Baths of Nero in the Campus, with their great square palaestra, and where the Baths of Nero were integrated with the other facilities around the adjacent Stagnum of Agrippa, the Baths of Titus were or would be connected by a splendid staircase with the Stagnum of Nero. On this view, the *Domus Aurea* offered another version of, a pendant to, part of the Campus Martius. That raises again the question of access.

The second observation about the Stagnum is this. The mansion on the Oppian can be described as a porticus villa, and its great facade looks down on a lake ringed by buildings. The complex, as has often been observed, in many ways recalls the Campanian *villae maritimae*, with their porticoes, windows, gardens, terraces, and

³⁵ I. NIELSEN, *Thermae et balnea*, Aarhus 1990, pp. 45-47, with bibliography.

(above all) grand panoramic views of the sea. I have claimed that Nero intended for his own reasons to bring Baiae to Rome. It would follow logically then that the *Domus Aurea* was a Campanian seaside villa³⁶. That too raises the question of access.

The standard charge against Nero, formulated in a pasquinade during his own lifetime and later echoed by Pliny and Martial, was that his house was taking over the city. Accordingly, the Flavians dismantled or built over the components of the Golden House and ostentatiously dedicated them to new public use, the Baths of Titus, the Colosseum, the Temple of the Divine Claudius, the paintings in the Temple of Peace³⁷. But here a basic principle must be emphasized: more than is realized, criticisms of Nero are direct distortions of his own words and deeds. The idea of the city as house originated with Nero, not his critics, who turned a popular act into one of tyranny. Yes, he treated the whole city as his house, as we know; yes, he even sought to make the city into his house: but his intention thereby was not to exclude the people, as his critics claimed. It was to include them. The *princeps* and the *populus Romanus* were *necessitudines*: sharing the delights of Baiae, they would share the Campus Martius and the *Domus Aurea*. In a sense, Saturnalia would last forever.

How then, to return to the matter of access, do we define the *Domus Aurea*?

The historical evolution of the *horti Romani* has been brilliantly explained in a variety of modes, political, social, architectural, religious, philosophical, theatrical, and I suspect that Nero

understood them at least as well as we do. Let me give a brief, selective, and necessarily assertive summation of how I think he meant the Golden House to be understood.

Horti have been defined as an urban villa with a park. Like the *domus*, they were luxurious dwellings of the Roman aristocracy which imitated in several respects the palace complexes of Hellenistic kings. One of the great markers separating *horti* from *domus* was the line between private and public, and the deepest luxury of the *horti* was their sense of privacy and space virtually within the city. Nero, with his *Domus Transitoria*, connecting the *domus* on the Palatine with the *horti* on the Esquiline, meant to erase that boundary between public and private with something new: it was to be, as it were, a fusion of *domus* and *horti*. I emphasize: here alone, not everywhere. Public business would still be transacted in the *aulae* of the real *domus* on the Palatine. True privacy – or at least urban privacy – would still be found in the *horti* of Maecenas or Servilius.

I think of the Golden House then as something physically separate from the structures, public or private, which crowned the Palatine, the Caelian, and the Esquiline. I would stress its character as a bowl formed by the valley and the hillsides, because it seems designed for visual effect, calculating what a viewer would observe when looking around from the vestibule on the Velia, or up from the lake to the facade of the palace on the Oppian, or down from the palace to the lake: it is, in short, a theatre, or rather an amphitheatre. People are meant to look. Privacy is not an issue.

³⁶ I leave the point undeveloped here since, I am delighted to report, Professor FAUSTO Zevi has independently come to the same conclusion, that Nero was consciously seeking to emulate Baiae in the *Domus Aurea*. In his paper on the topic he brings in a host of other evidence, including an intriguing passage from the *Historia Augusta*, *Alex. Sev.* 26, 9-10: *Ulisse. Il mito e la memoria*, ed. by B.

ANDREA E and C. PARISI PRESICCE, Roma 1996, pp. 320-331.

³⁷ In fact, much of Nero's construction after 64 did not tamper with private property, and if Vespasian returned one square foot to any previous owner we do not hear of it: see the excellent paper by M.P.O. MORFORD, in *Eranos* 66, 1968, pp. 159-179.

Two spectacles were presented simultaneously – the House of the Sun-God, and the Villa of the People – and actor/spectators were essential. On the one hand, Nero's association with Sol/Helios in the *Domus Aurea* is so much a part of his public solar ideology, and the visual effects of the exteriors (at least) of the Golden House are so calculated to impress spectators, and there are simply so many rooms in it, that I find it hard to imagine the Palace of the Sun-God *not* being a place open to the public. Gods need worshippers. On the other hand, the Golden House also conforms to a pattern of Nero consciously upsetting the hierarchies of Roman society, sharing pleasure with his people, staging at Rome riotous scenes of public license on sets reminiscent of a Campanian resort which

was, until then, the playground of the rich. The god-like *princeps* is, after all, just a human being like the rest of us, and he invites us to share his house. In short, Nero conceived of the Golden House as a stage on which he could play simultaneously two of the roles which he played elsewhere in public, god and man, Sol and Rex Saturnalicus. It was indeed a private house, but it was the house of the whole Roman people.

The boundaries are then as Nero redefined them. Next to the glamorous *Domus Aurea*, its original name, the bland *Domus Transitoria*, hardly draws a second glance. But I suspect that it too was to be taken both literally and metaphorically. A computer search of Latin literature shows that the adjective *transitorius* is extremely rare. It may be that Nero invented the word³⁸.

³⁸ Indeed, an Ibycus computer search of classical Latin literature shows the word used *only* to describe Nero's House and Nerva's forum. It also appears on an inscription

from Puteoli, which refers to a *solarium aedifici, quod extruit in transitorio*: ILS 5919.