RETHINKING NERO

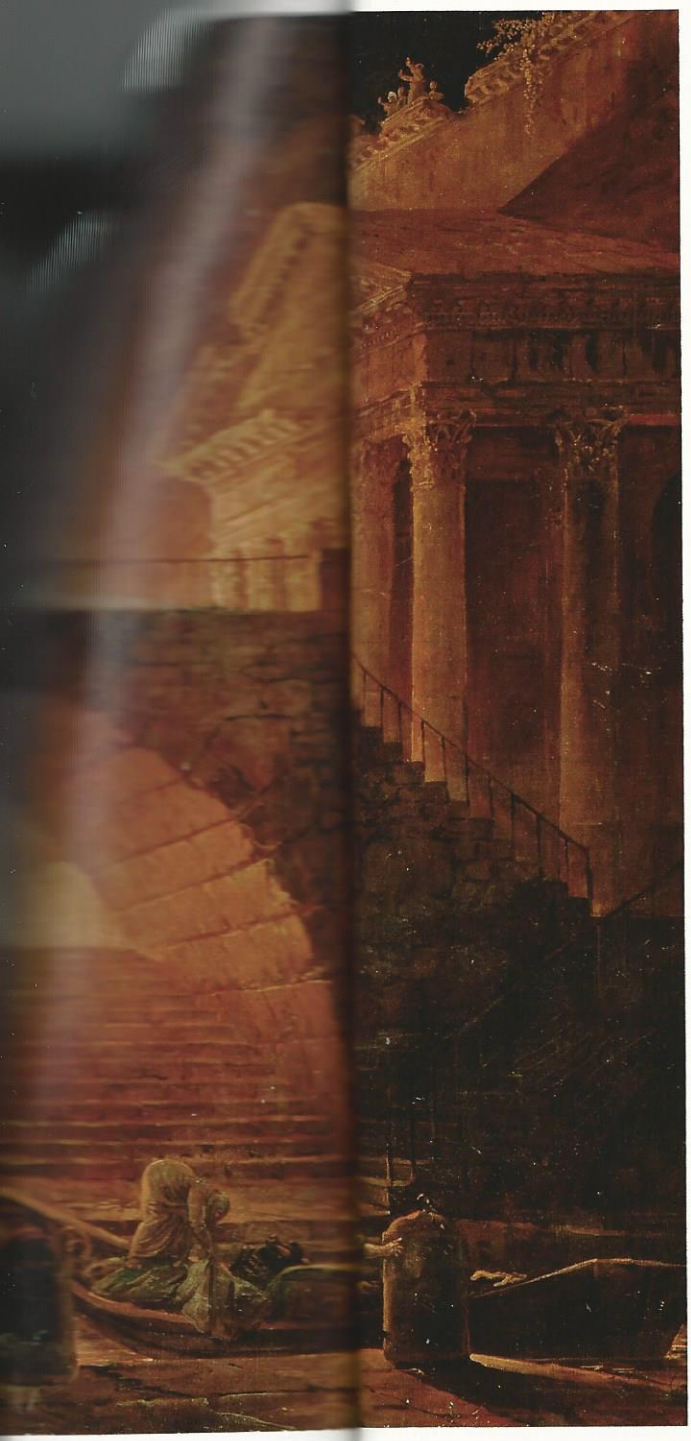
A statue of Nero resides in Anzio, Italy, his hometown.
RICHARD BARNES

Nero's successors largely buried his legacy from view. Beneath the Oppian Hill (at left) the remains of his palace are closed to the public. By contrast, the Colosseum receives more than 10,000 visitors a day.
RICHARD BARNES


Linea C
Roma

A painting depicts Rome in flames on July 18, A.D. 64.

"THE FIRE OF ROME," CA 1770-1790, BY HUBERT ROBERT, MUSÉE ANDRÉ MALRAUX, ERICH LESSING, ART RESOURCE



UNDERNEATH ROME'S OPPIAN HILL,

today a modest public park marred by unclever graffiti, where young men idly kick around a soccer ball, elderly couples walk their dogs, and transients build charcoal fires, part of the greatest palace in the history of the Eternal City lies buried.

The palace is called the Domus Aurea, or Golden House, erected by and for Nero. When the 30-year-old emperor's crazed world exploded in A.D. 68, and he ordered a subject to drive a knife through his throat, gasping, so they say, "What an artist dies in me," his palace may not even have been completed. The next few emperors reconfigured or ignored it, and in 104 Trajan reused the palace's walls and vaults to create a suitable foundation for his famous baths. For the next 1,400 years the entombed palace was utterly forgotten.

Around 1480 a few excavators began digging on the Oppian Hill and found what they thought were the ruins of the Baths of Titus. One of them fell through the dirt, landed in a pile of rubble, and found himself looking up at a ceiling still covered in sumptuous frescoes. Word spread across Italy. Great artists of the Renaissance—Raphael, Pinturicchio, Giovanni da Udine—climbed down into the hole to study (and later replicate in palaces and the Vatican) the repetitive ornamental motifs that would eventually be termed grotesques, after the grotto-like conditions of the Domus. More digging begat more wonderment: long, colonnaded hallways overlooking what had been a vast park and artificial lake; traces of gold and shards of marble quarried from Egypt and the Middle East that once covered the walls and vaulted ceilings; and a magnificent octagonal room with a domed roof, constructed fully six decades before the completion of Hadrian's exalted Pantheon.

Today, following the partial collapse of its roof in 2010, the Domus Aurea is closed to the public until further notice. Staff show up daily to tend to the frescoes and patch the leaks, their cult-like labors unseen by the park's pedestrians 25 feet overhead. Until he recently retired, a Roman architect named Luciano Marchetti oversaw the activity at the Golden House. One morning Marchetti stood in the chilly underground darkness of the octagonal room at the eastern end of the palace complex. Holding a flashlight, he gazed up at the vaulted, eight-sided ceiling, 50 feet from one corner to the next, externally buttressed by the arches of adjacent rooms and thereby hovering without visible support, like a UFO.

"I'm so moved by this," he said quietly as he pointed to the self-sustaining flat arches over the doorways. "This is an architectural sophistication that had never been seen before. The Pantheon is marvelous, of course. But its dome sits on a cylinder, which they built up brick by brick. This dome is held up by structures you don't see."

Sighing, the architect then muttered a Latin phrase: *Damnatio memoriae.* Canceled from memory—the fate of the palace as well as the accomplishments of its owner.

To the immediate southwest of this wing of the Domus Aurea, just across an ever humming Roman boulevard and directly on top of where Nero's artificial lake had been, sits the Colosseum. The world-famous amphitheater, built by Vespasian in the years following Nero's suicide, was apparently named for the more than 100-foot-tall bronze statue of Nero depicted as the sun god—the Colossus Neronis—that once loomed over the valley. Today the Colosseum receives upwards of 10,000 visitors each day. The PR-savvy shoe manufacturer Diego Della Valle has donated $34 million toward its refurbishment. From the Colosseum's ticket sales, a small stream flows to fund the ongoing restoration of the dank and shuttered palace across the street.

Just to the west of the Colosseum sprawl the lavish imperial ruins on the Palatine Hill. In April 2011 the Special Superintendency for the Archaeological Heritage of Rome opened an exhibit at the Palatine and other locations nearby devoted to the life and works of Nero. On display for the first time were the monster king's many architectural and cultural contributions; also unveiled, on the grounds of the Palatine itself, was a recently excavated chamber believed by many to be Nero's famed *coenatio rotunda,* a rotating dining hall with sweeping views onto the Alban Hills. The exhibitors knew that any show about the notorious Nero would attract visitors. They had not anticipated a turnout greater than any since the superintendency hosted its first exhibit a decade before.

"Well, he's good box office," observes Roberto Gervaso, the bald and hawk-eyed 77-year-old author of the 1978 biographical novel *Nerone.* "They've made lots of films about Nero, but they couldn't resist making a caricature of him. There's no need to do that—he himself was a bit of a caricature anyway. Such picturesque depravity attracts a biographer. I could never write a biography of St. Francis! And I would certainly rather go to dinner with Nero than Hadrian."

Tonight Gervaso is stuck with me for a dining companion. We sit outside, just a hundred yards from the slumbering Domus Aurea, at Osteria da Nerone, one of the few structures in Rome that bear the emperor's name. "The restaurant is always full," says Gervaso, insisting there's a connection. "He was a monster. But that's not all he was. And those who came before and after him were no better. The true monsters, like Hitler and Stalin, lacked [Nero's] imagination. Even today he would be avant-garde, ahead of his time.

"I wrote my book 35 years ago precisely because I wanted to rehabilitate him. Maybe you could do more."

WELL. ONE IS HARD PRESSED to "rehabilitate" a man who, according to historical accounts, ordered his first wife, Octavia, killed; kicked

Robert Draper is a contributing writer with the magazine. To visually capture Rome, Richard Barnes photographed the ancient architecture and Alex Majoli depicted modern-day life.

his second wife, Poppaea, to death when she was pregnant; saw to the murder of his mother, Agrippina the Younger (possibly after sleeping with her); perhaps also murdered his stepbrother, Britannicus; instructed his mentor Seneca to commit suicide (which he solemnly did); castrated and then married a teenage boy; presided over the wholesale arson of Rome in A.D. 64 and then shifted the blame to a host of Christians (including Saints Peter and Paul), who were rounded up and beheaded or crucified and set aflame so as to illuminate an imperial festival. The case against Nero as evil incarnate would appear to be open and shut. And yet…

"HE WAS A MONSTER. BUT THAT'S NOT ALL HE WAS ... EVEN TODAY HE WOULD BE AVANT-GARDE, AHEAD OF HIS TIME."

—ROBERTO GERVASO

Almost certainly the Roman Senate ordered the expunging of Neronian influence for political reasons. Perhaps it was that his death was followed by outpourings of public grief so widespread that his successor Otho hastily renamed himself Otho Nero. Perhaps it was because mourners long continued to bring flowers to his tomb, and the site was said to be haunted until, in 1099, a church was erected on top of his remains in the Piazza del Popolo. Or perhaps it was due to the sightings of "false Neros" and the persistent belief that the boy king would one day return to the people who so loved him.

The dead do not write their own history. Nero's first two biographers, Suetonius and Tacitus, had ties to the elite Senate and would memorialize his reign with lavish contempt. The notion of Nero's return took on malevolent overtones in Christian literature, with Isaiah's warning of the coming Antichrist: "He will descend from his firmament in the form of a man, a king of iniquity, a murderer of his mother." Later would come the melodramatic condemnations: the comic Ettore Petrolini's Nero as babbling lunatic, Peter Ustinov's Nero as the cowardly murderer, and the garishly enduring tableau of Nero fiddling while Rome burns. What occurred over time was hardly erasure but instead demonization. A ruler of baffling complexity was now simply a beast.

"Today we condemn his behavior," says archaeological journalist Marisa Ranieri Panetta. "But look at the great Christian emperor Constantine. He had his first son, his second wife, and his father-in-law all murdered. One can't be a saint and the other a devil. Look at Augustus, who destroyed a ruling class with his blacklists. Rome ran in rivers of blood, but Augustus was able to launch effective propaganda for everything he did. He understood the media. And so Augustus was great, they say. Not to suggest that Nero was himself a great emperor—but that he was better than they said he was, and no worse than those who came before and after him."

Ranieri Panetta is among the energetic and multiplying voices who have spurred a reappraisal of Nero. Not everyone is on board. "This rehabilitation—this process of a small group of historians trying to transform aristocrats into gentlemen—seems quite stupid to me," says the famed Roman archaeologist Andrea Carandini. "For instance, there are serious scholars who now say that the fire was not Nero's fault. But how could he build the Domus Aurea without the fire? Explain that to me. Whether or not he started the fire, he certainly profited from it."

It's worth lingering on Carandini's logic—Nero benefited from the fire, therefore he caused the fire—since the horrific blaze that damaged or destroyed 10 of Rome's 14 regions is central to Neronian mythology. *(Continued on page 99)*

GRAND AMBITION

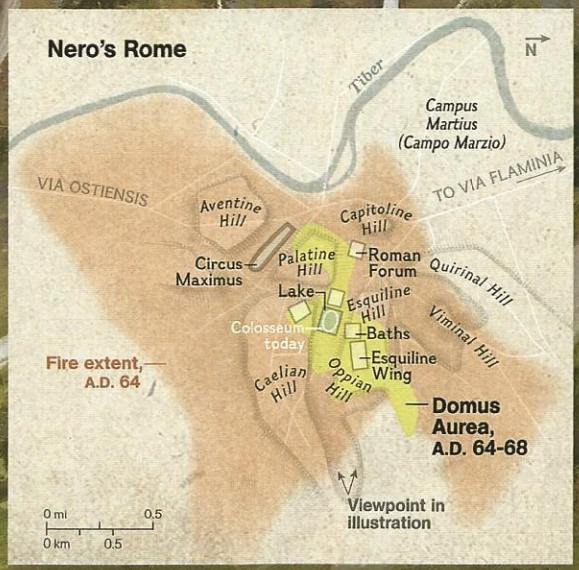
1 Circus Maximus
In A.D. 64 a fire broke out at Rome's largest stadium. It raged through the city for nine days.

2 Palatine Hill
Imperial residences were situated here from about 30 B.C. to the time of Constantine, in the fourth century A.D.

3 Man-made lake
This boating venue was drained shortly after Nero's death to make way for the amphitheater now called the Colosseum.

Tiber River

Colosseum
Named for the Colossus of Nero, the arena became a symbol of the empire.



See an animated graphic on our digital editions.

GRAPHICS: FERNANDO G. BAPTISTA AND MATTHEW TWOMBLY, NGM STAFF; PATRICIA HEALY. TEXT: A. R. WILLIAMS, NGM STAFF. ART: JAIME JONES. MAPS: LAUREN E. JAMES, NGM STAFF. 3-D RENDERING (DOMUS AUREA): PROGETTO KATATEXILUX

SOURCES: LARRY BALL, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN, STEVENS POINT; MARIANNE BERGMANN, INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF THE ANCIENT WORLD, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY (COLOSSUS); A. T. CROOM (CLOTHING); DIANA KLEINER, YALE UNIVERSITY; ALESSANDRO VISCOGLIOSI, "LA SAPIENZA" UNIVERSITY OF ROME

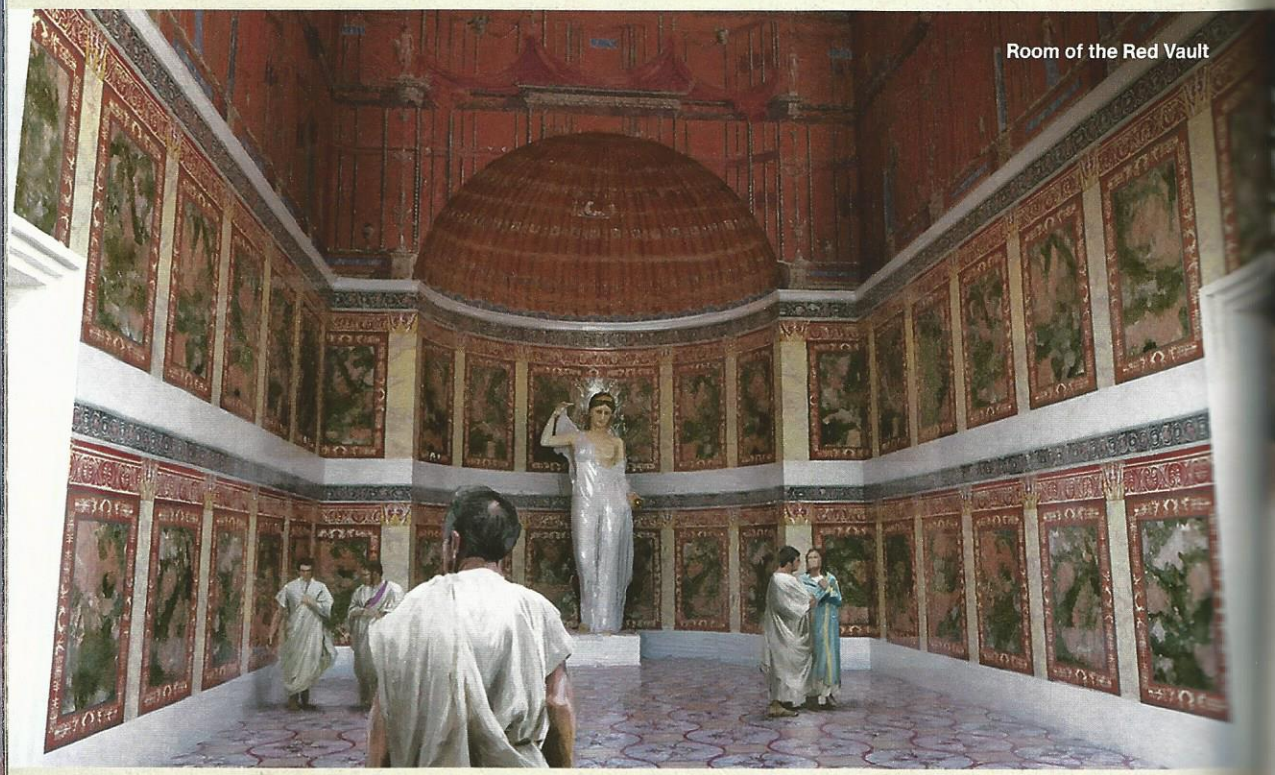
Nero built his extravagant new palace—the Domus Aurea, or Golden House—as a reflection of his own magnificence. Replacing perhaps hundreds of acres of urban sprawl destroyed by fire, the palace grounds included buildings, landscaped woods and gardens, and a large artificial lake.

4 Palace entrance
A monumental bronze statue of Nero was created for the courtyard that served as the palace's entryway.

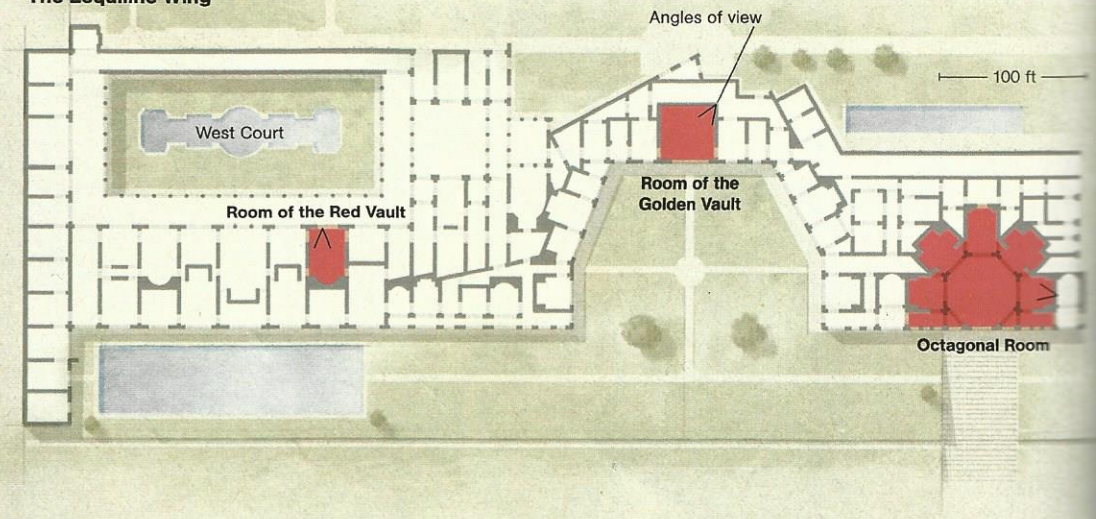
5 Entertainment rooms
The imperial retreat had more than 150 lavishly decorated rooms, including one with an unusual octagon shape.

6 Public areas
Ordinary Romans could visit the palace grounds, where wild and domesticated animals wandered freely.

THE DOMUS AUREA



The Esquiline Wing



Room of the Red Vault

Experts believe this chamber may have served as an art gallery. The two-foot-square brick base found in the apse likely supported a statue.

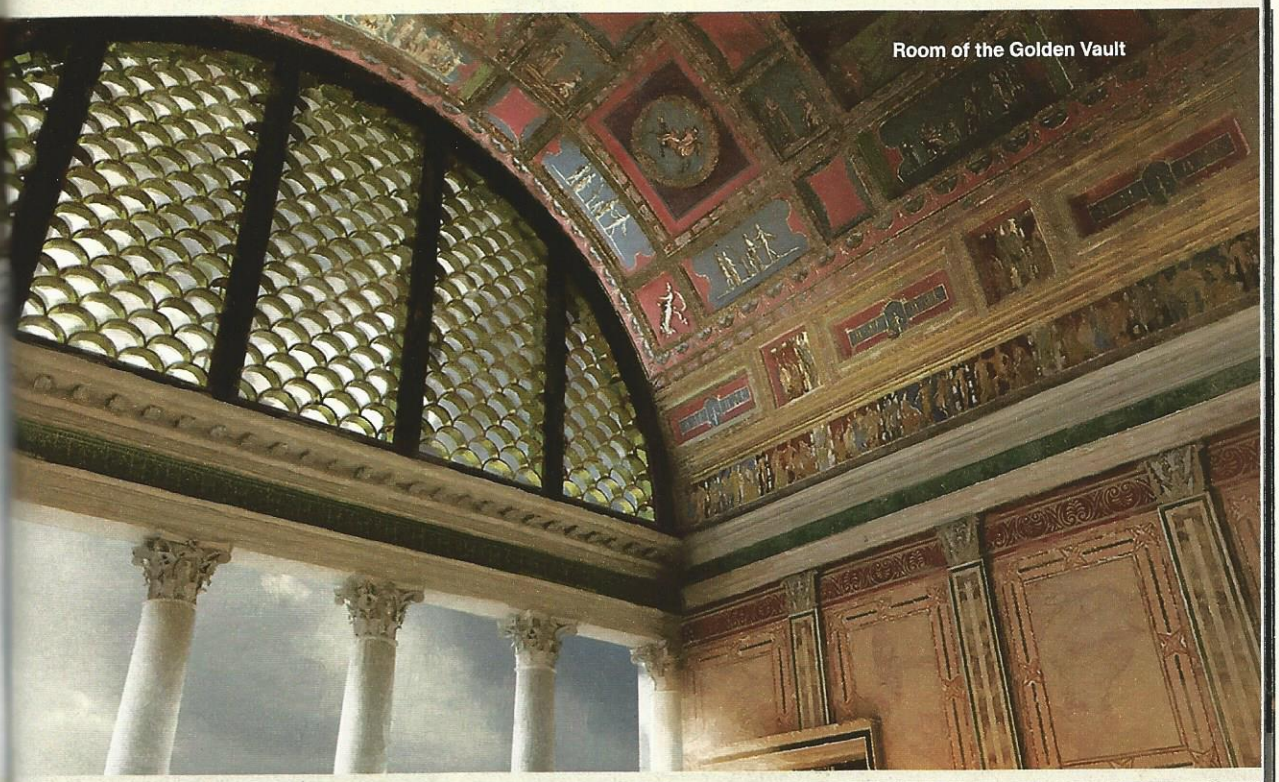
Room of the Golden Vault

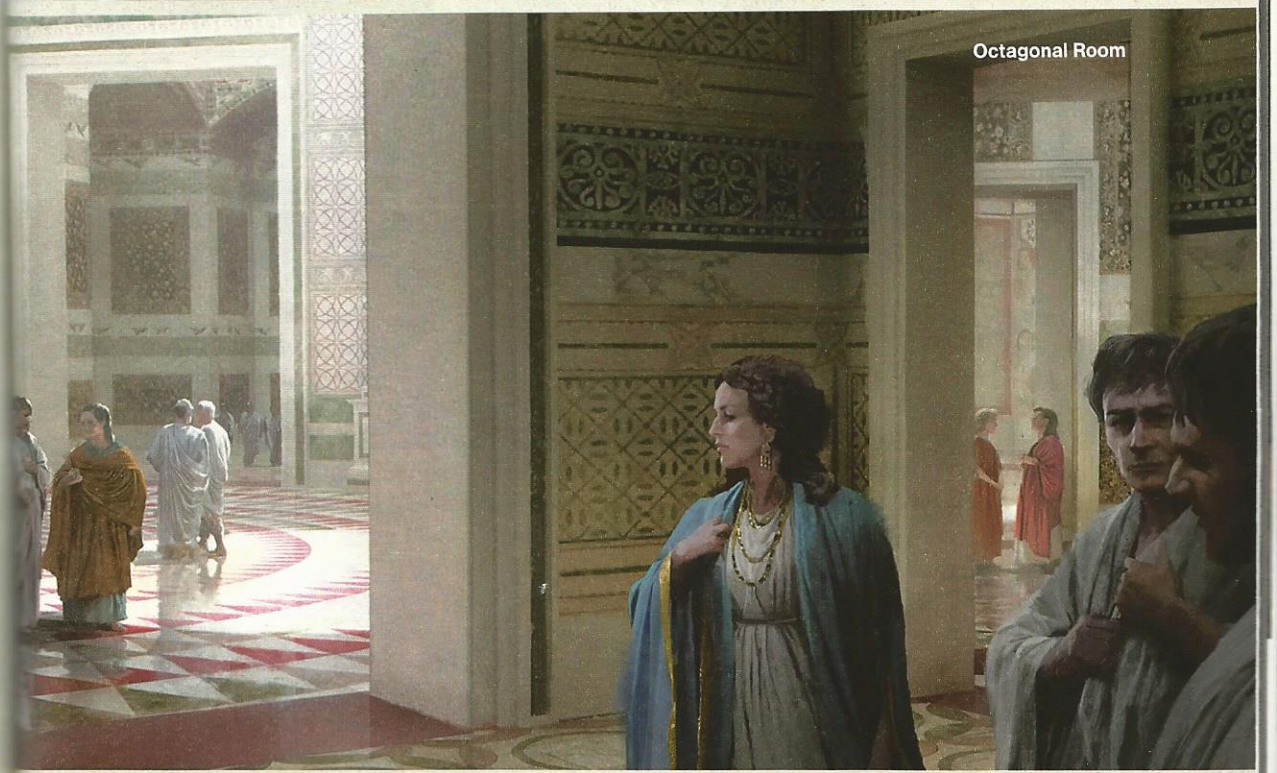
Traces of gilded plaster gave this room its modern name. The frescoes discovered here and in other rooms inspired Renaissance painters.

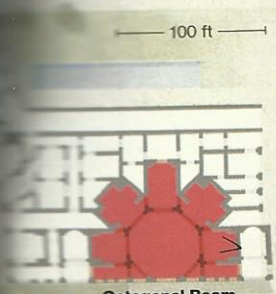
Octagonal Room

This unique hall was open to the sky. Its decoration included marble from around the Mediterranean—a symbol of Nero's far-reaching power.

By the time Nero began to build his villa, Roman architects had mastered the technical aspects of working with concrete. This allowed them to construct wide, soaring vaults—part of an innovative design of light-filled rooms. These re-creations offer glimpses of what the villa might have looked like in all its glory.







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the people wanted, often before they knew it themselves." Nero introduced, for instance, the "Neronia"—Olympic-style poetry, music, and athletic contests. But what pleased the masses did not always please the Roman elites. When Nero insisted that senators compete along with commoners in other public games, his golden age began to crackle with tension.

"It was something new, like young people today with their social media, where suddenly everything personal is on exhibit," says archaeologist Heinz-Jürgen Beste. "Nero was an artist, like Warhol and Lichtenstein, who embodied these changes. Like his baths—and what Martial said about them—this is the polarity of Nero. He'd created something no one had seen before: a light-flooded public place not just for hygiene but also where there were statues and paintings and books, where you could hang out and listen to someone read poetry aloud. It meant an entirely new social situation."

In addition to the Gymnasium Neronis, the young emperor's public building works included an amphitheater, a meat market, and a proposed canal that would connect Naples to Rome's seaport at Ostia so as to bypass the unpredictable sea currents and ensure safe passage of the city's food supply. Such undertakings cost money, which Roman emperors typically procured by raiding other countries. But Nero's warless reign foreclosed this option. (Indeed, he had liberated Greece, declaring that the Greeks' cultural contributions excused them from having to pay taxes to the empire.) Instead he elected to soak the rich with property taxes—and in the case of his great shipping canal, to seize their land altogether. The Senate refused to let him do so. Nero did what he could to circumvent the senators—"He would create these fake cases to bring some rich guy to trial and extract some heavy fine from him," says Beste—but Nero was fast making enemies. One of them was his mother, Agrippina, who resented her loss of influence and therefore may have schemed to install her stepson, Britannicus, as the rightful heir to the throne. Another was his adviser Seneca, who was allegedly involved in a plot to kill Nero. By A.D. 65, mother, stepbrother, and consig had all been killed.

Nero was free to be Nero. Thus ended so-called good years of his reign, followe years in which, as Oxford historian Miriam fin writes, "Nero escaped more and more a world of fantasy," until reality crashed d upon him.

SPENDING TIME IN THE still great but recess battered city of Rome and discussing the la the Julio-Claudian emperors with scholars political figures, one is tempted to compare grandiosity of Nero to the showmanship more recent fallen Italian leader.

"Nero was a fool and a megalomaniac, a fool can also be charming and interesti says Andrea Carandini. "The thing he inver which all demagogues after him repeated, that he cherished the masses. He made a giga thing of inviting the whole city inside his Do Aurea, which was one-third of the city, and n ing a gigantic show. This is television! And S Berlusconi did exactly the same thing, using media to connect with the plebes."

The former mayor of Rome and Italy's for minister of culture and the environment, W Veltroni, rejects any comparison between N and the scandal-ridden former prime mini on the grounds that the latter thoroughly lac Nero's cultural appetites. "Berlusconi had no terest in archaeology—the word was simply in his head," says Veltroni (who, it should said, also ran for prime minister but was feated by Berlusconi in 2008). By contrast says, "for me, Nero's Domus Aurea is the n beautiful place in the city—the most myst ous, where different periods of history we together. When I was minister of culture in late 1990s, I took Martin Scorsese to see it, was so impressed with the grotesques. And I took Ian McEwan into it—he wrote about Domus Aurea in his novel *Saturday*."

The entire palace complex was laid out a stage, with woodlands and lakes and pro nades accessible to all. Still, acknowledges N revisionist Ranieri Panetta, "it was a scan

because there was so much Rome for one person. It wasn't only that it was luxurious—there had been palaces all over Rome for centuries. It was the sheer size of it. There was graffiti: 'Romans, there's no more room for you, you have to go to [the nearby village of] Veio.'" For all its openness, what the Domus ultimately expressed was one man's limitless power, right down to the materials used to construct it. "The idea of using so much marble was not just a show of wealth," says Irene Bragantini, an expert on Roman paintings. "All of this colored marble came from the rest of the empire—from Asia Minor and Africa and Greece. The idea is that you're controlling not just the people but also their resources. In my reconstruction, what happened in Nero's time is that for the first time, there's a big gap between the middle and upper class, because only the emperor has the power to give you marble."

"HE WANTED TO BE CLOSE TO THE PEOPLE—BUT AS THEIR GOD, NOT AS THEIR FRIEND."

—ALESSANDRO VISCOGLIOSI

A paradox began to define the reign of Nero. He had become the entertainer in chief, yet increasingly imperial in the process. "As he separated himself from the Senate and tried to move closer to the people, he was concentrating his power like an Egyptian pharaoh," says Ranieri Panetta. But an emperor could get only so close. "He was completely isolated in a bubble, and you had to go through a million layers to get to him," says Beste.

"He wanted to be close to the people," says professor of Greek and Roman architecture Alessandro Viscogliosi, who has designed a remarkable 3-D computerized reconstruction of the Domus Aurea. "But as their god, not as their friend."

ONE EVENING I WAS ENJOYING a meal at a palatial *enoteca* near Piazza Navona called Casa Bleve when the manager offered to take me downstairs to the wine cellar. Surrounding the racks of Barolos and Chiantis were stone remnants of an ancient structure. I later mentioned this to archaeologist Filippi. She said of this enduring swath of Rome, "Everything under that area is Campo Marzio, a part of the city where Nero was constructing." Discovering it would be left to chance—the lot of subway-line diggers and basement remodelers. Otherwise the full architectural greatness of Nero's reign would stay buried beneath centuries of Roman history. Even in the mountain village of Subiaco, where Nero began building his audacious villa in A.D. 54—damming the Aniene River to create three lakes beneath his patio—the ruins repose behind a locked gate, unnoticed by the hordes of tourists who walk right past it en route to a nearby Benedictine monastery.

In all of the former empire, there is one locale that has elected to celebrate Nero: Anzio, the famed beachhead for American troops in World War II. This is where Nero was born and where he kept another villa—now mostly underwater, though numerous artifacts from the complex are housed at the local museum. In 2009 Anzio's new mayor, Luciano Bruschini, declared his intentions to commission a statue of the town's infamous native son. The statue was unveiled in 2010. Today it sits at the edge of the sea, a rather stunning representation of the emperor in his early 20s, well over six feet tall, standing in his toga on a pillar, his eyes intent as his extended right arm points toward the water in all its splendid mystery. The plaque gives his full ruling name in Italian—Nerone Claudio Cesare Augusto Germanico—and memorializes his birth here in Anzio on *(Continued on page 110)*

December 15, A.D. 37. Then, after describing his lineage, it says: "During his reign the empire enjoyed a period of peace, of great splendor, and of important reforms."

"When I was a boy, I used to swim among the ruins of the villa," Mayor Bruschini told me one spring morning as we sat in his office overlooking the sea. "As children, we were taught that he was evil—among the worst emperors of all. Doing a little research, I came to conclude that it's not true. I consider Nero to be a good, even great emperor, and maybe the most beloved of the entire empire. He was a great reformer. The senators were rich, and they owned slaves. He took from them and gave to the poor. He was the first socialist!"

A proud socialist himself, Bruschini smiled and went on, "After I was elected, I decided to do this rehabilitation of Nero. We put up posters that said: 'Anzio, City of Nero.' Some people said, 'But Mayor, he killed lots of Christians.' I told them, 'Only a few—nothing like the thousands of Christians who were killed later in the empire.' We received proposals from two different sculptors. One of them portrayed Nero as a lunatic. We got rid of that one and used this other artist, which is the statue you see today. It's now the most photographed place in the city. In summer big crowds congregate."

Sometimes, the mayor told me, he would take a stroll out to the statue and listen to what the tourists were saying. Now and then, he would hear them read the plaque—"of peace, of great splendor, and of important reforms"—and mutter to themselves, "What a bunch of BS." Myth-believers to the end, Bruschini would conclude, the same who believed that foolishness about fiddling while Rome burned and who would fail to appreciate the tragedy of Nero's final day: a beleaguered ruler now in flight, persuaded by traitors to retreat not to Anzio or Egypt but instead to a villa north of Rome, pursued by enemies and distraught with the knowledge that the only choice left was his manner of death.

No matter. The boy king was home now in Anzio, surrounded by the masses once again. □