

ESQUILINE HILL

The Esquiline Hill is known to be the highest and widest elevation of the whole Roman hill country; it is especially rich of hydrographical resources and for this reason, one of the most populated area of Rome. Two big springing moats delimited the southern and western sides: southwards the Rio Labicano which from Laterano converged in the swamp of Colosseum valley and westwards the Nodino, later transformed in Cloaca Maxima and currently hidden by via Cavour. From orographic point of view, the Esquiline system is composed by three sites at different levels and well-distinguished yet in ancient times: *Cispius*, *Oppius* and *Fagutal*, whose names derive from the vegetation kinds which grows there spontaneously even if, as Varrone reported, (*Rer. Humano*, VIII, 4), the toponymy descends from precise episodes of the historical tradition. The topographical location is still uncertain: *Cispius*, is probably included within the *V regio augustea*, and developed in the area currently occupied by the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, whilst the *Oppius*, belonging to the *IV regio augustea*, corresponded to the upper part overlooking still now the Colosseum valley. The location of *Fagutal* remains still uncertain; but for sure the three elevations were put by the ancient authors in the list of *Septimontium*, related to the most old Roman communities. It is probable, indeed, that the Esquiline was populated since Iron age: a necropolis discovered at the end of the last century, seemed to be already used in the first decades of VIII BC. The whole area always maintained a suburban connotation, at least until the first imperial age. The word Esquiline itself should mean “live outside” from *ex colere* and the *Esquilini* should be, for this reason, the inhabitants of one of the four rural communities (in addition to Palatina, Collina and Suburana) in which Servius Tullius divided the land, opposite to *Inquilini*, which constituted the real urban population.

The construction of Servian walls in VI BC, divided the orographic Esquiline system in two components: the eastern one (*Campus Esquilinus*) which remained outside the walls preserving the original sepulchral function, and the western one (*regio Esquilina*) included within the walls which assumed a typical residential character.

This latter was so higher than the rest of the city that resulted exposed to the attacks of the besiegers; Such an handicap led to the construction of an *agger*, an embankment which could avoid the walls destruction, which was installed at the hill foot towards Velia, by using preexistent defensive equipments (Varro, to such purpose, mentions the *Murus terreus Carinarum* as remain of a previous urban fortification; *De Lingua latina*, V,49). The so-called *Tigillum Sororium*, an unrefined travel point made by three wooden planks could suggest a rudimentary entrance to the city or an an-

cient pomerial road. The establishments settled on the Hesquilin hills according to socio-economical criteria: the upper part was reserved to *horti*, residential villas and public buildings, whilst in the bottom part of the valley, concentrated the working-class houses, as the famous quarter of *Subura*, crowded and with a bad reputation, located between the hillsides of *Cispinus*, *Oppius* and Quirinal Hills. In a simple house of *Subura* lived Julius Caesar before he went to the *Domus Publica* in the Forum, just after he obtained the Pontificatus Maximus. The religious monuments were quite rare on the Hesquiline hill and some dated back to very earlier age: the six *Sacraria Argeorum*, for example, resend to the heroes of Argos which accompanied Hercules to Tartessos, against Geryon and then in Lazio at the court of king Evandro. At the time of king Servius Tullius referred instead, the temples of Diana and of the *Fortuna Virgo*, later included into neronian *Domus Aurea*; the Sabine king Titus Tatius, later, should promote the construction in 373 BC of a sacellum devoted to Juno Licinia, patron saint of the parturients, surrounded by a sacred thicket. A century later, after the earthquake of 268BC, a temple dedicated to the goddess Tellus, was erected by Publius Sempronius Sofus and restored by Quintus Cicero in 54 BC. With the growing income of wealth, artworks and foreign workers from the provinces, at the end of the Republic, also the Hesquiline radically changed its appearance, becoming a real monumental centre from the old wooden quarter. The urban reform made by Augustus, requalified it and, thanks to the investments of Maecenas (who acquired some of the most degraded hill terrains), started the renewal of the area: the embankment of the ancient walls became a sort of public walk and the lands early used as necropolis and landfills, became magnificent gardens. The *Horti Mecenatiani*, included among others, the *Columbethra* (panoramic terrace) and another tower (*Turris Mecenatiana*) from where Nero, in 64, according to Svetonius, attended the terrible fire of Rome. The only evidence currently appreciable of the *Horti* is the so-called Maecenas Auditorium, rediscovered in 1874 and identified with a small frescoed nympheus.

The urban challenge of Gaius Cilnius Maecenas was immediately emulated by other illustrious politicians who, in a few decades, made the Hesquiline become a kind of green reservoir for Rome, with plenty of monumental gardens: *Horti Calyciani*, *Horti Lamiani*, *Horti Liciniani*, *Horti Maiani*, *Horti Pallantiani*, *Horti Epaphroditiani*, *Horti Tauriani e Horti Tarquatiani*. The road system of Hesquiline area is very complex and unclear: the northern valley of *Subura* was crossed by the Argiletum which, reached the *Cispinus*, branched off on the left in *vicus Patricius* (currently via Urbana) and on the right in the *vicus Suburanus* (currently via in Selci). From north to south, other two road axes run along the Servian walls above and below the *agger*, respectively;

finally, on the outer side of the urban fortifications, a segment of the ancient via Merulana developed from the northern corner of the current piazza Vittorio Emanuele, until the San Giovanni in Laterano hospital.

NERO

Nero Claudius Drusus Germanicus Caesar, born Lucius Domitius Enobarbus on December 15th 37AC in Antium, was the fifth and last emperor of Julio-Claudian dynasty, son of Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus Claudius and of Agrippina the younger, sister of Caligola, and second wife of Claudius which adopted him in 50AC. Nero succeeded to him as he was 17 years old and governed Rome until 68, when he killed himself. Nero was a very controversial *princeps* to whom some undeniable qualities are ascribed but also serious responsibilities in dreadful political crimes and tyrannical known as *quinquennium felix*, were marked by the complicity of his tutor Lucius Annaeus Seneca and his Praetorian prefect, Sextus Afranius Burrus. They both influenced the political and ideological choices of the emperor, shaping them towards the respect for Senate authority and for the tradition started by Augustus; among the various measures that the still young and weak sovereign, there was the intention to release a law which could guarantee a yearly pension to those senatorial families which dissipated the ancestors' goods, and another which, on the contrary, would totally upset the equestrian class economy. Nonetheless, starting from 58, Nero began to elude the control of his praetors: in the first months of 55 he already murdered Britannicus, son of Claudius and Messalina, and three later, he ordered to kill his mother Agrippina. Such murders were considered by Seneca as a rejection from the inglorious lineage of his stepfather Claudius, but Nero became soon intolerant towards the philosopher's ideas. Nero admired the political model of the eastern monarchs, which were venerated as goddess and started to display an intense hostility against the Senate, whose prominent members were accused from him of lese majesty and their goods confiscated. He tried also to find new ways to gather consensus among the Roman plebs by means of a demagogical policy, aiming to give population all those *donativa*, exhibitions included, which Seneca strongly disapproved. So, Nero started his own career of auriga and citharoedus, moving away from the power palaces of Rome and designating the empire management to the bloody Tigellinus who, from 62, succeeded to Afranius Burrus as praetorian praefect. In 64 Nero, promoted the first persecution of the christian communities to whom attributed the responsibility of the fire which in that summer, destroyed a large part of the popular quarters of the city. One year later, the emperor blocked an aristocratic conspiracy led by Calpurnius Piso and punished the opponents with a series of murders which included also Seneca, Lucanus and Praetorius. His cruelty politics and the high fiscal pressure hardened to finance the reconstruction of the burned city, widened the discontent also between the popular classes which suspected about a *princeps* involvement into the big fire, aiming to free some urban areas to build his imperial house. In foreign politics, Nero was completely disinterested in military campaigns, taking part only to a expedition in Armenia, during which he was not able to gain the goodwill of his army. During Neronian principality, the Parthian king Vologese

I, posed his brother Tiridates on the throne of Armenia, convincing Nero to start a war. Domitius Corbulo was sent to quench the continuous skirmishes among the local populations and few Roman groups but until 58 there wasn't a real war. Tiridates, became king of Parthians in 63, probably aided by Corbulo and in this way, the last breeding ground of war in the East was suppressed. Nero could embellish himself with the title of *Imperator Pacator*, by inviting Tiridates I in Rome; in this occasion, the Pompeius theatre was covered of gold as an homage to the guest king. Nero cannot avoid on the other side, the revolt of western provinces, which were neglected respect to the eastern ones (in 67 the emperor declared the Greece freedom, consisting in a mere fiscal immunity). Gaius Julius Vindex, governor of the Gallia Lugdunensis, revolted against Nero and this latter ordered a new suppression. Among others, he ordered the general Servius Sulpicius Galba, governor of hispanic provinces, to suicide. Galba, without alternatives and with no intention to obey, and supported by his army, declared loyalty to the Senate, rejecting the authority of Nero which, abandoned even by praetorians and by the army, was setted down by the Senate and declared to be public enemy of Rome. After a ruinous attempt of escape, Nero died in the villa of one of his freedman, near Rome, saying : "*Qualis artifex pereo!*"

DOMUS AUREA

In the first ten years of his reign, Nero made built the *Domus Transitoria*, (House of Passage) so called for its function of connection between the imperial properties of Esquiline (*Horti Mecenatiani*) and those of Palatinum, separated by public buildings and private houses. The features of this house are nowadays uncertain because it was destroyed by the great fire of Rome in 64. A very rich nympheus under the triclinium of the royal room in the Flavi Palace, is most likely to be identified with the *Domus Transitoria*. It is a pavilion with porphyry columns and a fountain in the middle; all around small rooms are facing, some of them with waterfalls and other probably alcoves. Further buildings ascribable to the *Domus Transitoria* complex were individuated near the *Domus Tiberiana* on Palatine Hill and under the Temple of Venus and Rome. The big fire of 64, allow Nero for espropriate a wide area of about 80 hectares and to build there a residence described by the coeval sources as a "city inside the city". The Domus Aurea complex covered parts of the slopes of the Palatine, Esquiline, Oppian and Caelian hills; its estimated size is an approximation, as much of it has not been excavated. From the original complex, only the pavilion along the Oppian hill (length 300mt, width 190mt) is left, because it was included inside the foundations of the future Baths of Trajan. Severus and Celer were the Roman architects and engineers who built Nero's Domus Aurea, while the pictorial decoration was commissioned to *Fabullus* or *Famulus* as reported by Tacitus (*Annali*, XV, 42). Most of the surface was occupied by the gardens, equipped with nympheus and halls for parties, fields, vineyards, woods and lakes as much as to intend the *Domus* as a landscape intervention. In the centre of the gardens there was an artificial lake upon which, rose up later the Colosseum. Nero designated the pavilion on the Oppian as the house of *otium* and parties, while he still maintained the official residence on the Palatine Hill. Around the *Domus Aurea*, a three orders of columns arcade served as the entrance of the *vestibulum*, located on the top of the Velia, with the aim of main entrance. Nero also commissioned from the Greek Zenodorus a colossal 35.5 m (120 RF) high bronze statue of himself, the Colossus Neronis. This statue may have represented Nero as the sun god Sol, with the right arm ahead (supported on a club during Commodus age, later replaced with a sheep's wheel), and the left bend to sustain an earth globe. The head was crowned by

seven rays, each one 7m long; the reproductions of *Colossus Neronis* were transmitted through the coins of the emperors Alexandrus Severus and Gordianus III. Vespasian modified the appearance of the statue, conforming to the god Sol, whilst Commodus gave to him the typical physiognomy of Hercules; Adrian moved the original location of the statue during the construction of the Temple of Venus and Rome and the monument was definitely destroyed when, in 410, started the first barbarian invasions. In the valley between Velia, Caelian and Oppian, probably existed a natural lake fed by a small river flowing between Caelian and Oppian; Nero started to build around this river and increased the water flow by merging in the *Aqua Claudia* through the nymphaeum flanking the Temple of Divus Claudius, on the Caelian. The *stagnum* was exactly in the middle of the *Domus Aurea* and it was certainly one of the most attractive features. Just for this reason, the lake was the first to be destroyed by Vespasian, who destined the water from Claudian aqueduct for public use. Vespasian drained the basin and on its site built the Flavian Amphitheatre which, in its name still resembles the big monumental complex of the last and discussed member of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. It was again Vespasian who demolished the nymphaeum on the Caelian side, completing the Temple which Agrippina the Younger dedicated to Claudius Divus and transformed the basement of the Domus Tiberiana in a thermal building. Titus started the realization of the thermal baths in the 79 and his follower, Domitian, made a new imperial palace to be built on the Palatine, inaugurated in 72, which deleted the Neronian buildings and subsumed their foundations. All that related to the Domus and not yet wiped out, was definitely lost in the fire of 104 or was used as foundation for the big thermal baths committed by Trajan to the architect Apollodorus of Damascus and inaugurated in 109. The Baths of Trajan rose just over the Neronian ruins of the Oppian while the original *vestibulum* of the *Domus Aurea* was later occupied by the Temple of Venus and Rome, launched by Adrian in 135. The *Domus Aurea* project seems to be inspired by the marine villa of Baia, whose main feature was a wide distribution of the buildings, inserted in a natural landscape frame, with panoramic views on the sea, gardens and porticoes. In particular, the will to put exotic animals and plants in the *horti*, was not a new trend in Rome, but dated back to the suburban villas of late Republican age. The originality of Nero does not concern the project, which was just experimented earlier and elsewhere, but in the grandeur and sumptuousness of its realization which was even more risky because conceived for the centre of the city on terrains which were subtracted to the public use. The message underlying such a project is then, the absolute power of a sovereign intended to be a goddess, who wants to impress and ready to use every tool to such purpose.