

"His wastefulness showed most of all in the architectural projects. He built a palace, stretching from the Palatine to the Esquiline; and when it burned down soon afterwards, rebuilt it under the new name of The Golden House. A huge statue of himself, 120 feet high, stood in the entrance hall; and the pillared arcade ran for a whole mile. An enormous pool, more like a sea than a pool, was surrounded by buildings made to resemble cities, and by a landscape garden consisting of ploughed fields, vineyards, pastures, and woodlands - where every variety of domestic and wild animal roamed about. Parts of the house were overlaid with gold and studded with precious stones. All the dining-rooms had ceilings of fretted ivory, the panels of which could slide back and let a rain of flowers, or of perfume from hidden sprinklers, shower upon his guests. The main dining-room was circular, and its roof revolved slowly, day and night, in time with the sky. When the palace had been decorated throughout in this lavish style, Nero dedicated it, and condescended to remark: 'Good, now I can at last begin to live like a human being!'"

- Suetonius' Life of Nero (trans. Graves)

The Golden House of Nero seems to have been an ancient Versailles: a palace built to reflect the enormous ego of its occupant. No expense was spared in its construction, and it became symbolic of the profligate reign of this last of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Later emperors, in their condemnation of Nero's reign, ignored the complex, until finally the emperor Trajan obliterated the entire complex and built a large bath-house on its ruins. In this Trajan was only following the lead of earlier rulers, since the Flavian dynasty had already filled in the huge lake of the palace in order to construct the famous Colosseum.

In 1907, the Baths of Trajan were being investigated by a German archaeologist named Weege. Passing through an inviting hole in one wall, Weege suddenly found himself in a maze of rooms partially filled with rubble; he managed to explore most of the rooms (there turned out to be 88 in all), and it was soon clear that what he had come upon was one wing of Nero's Golden House. Thus began the modern study of an intriguing part of one of the most infamous palaces of antiquity.

Today the remaining wing has been thoroughly studied and we have a clearer view of its nature. The wing is divided basically into a western and an eastern segment: the western half features a large number of rooms arranged around a peristyle garden - a rather conventional arrangement also well illustrated in the houses of Pompeii. It is thought these rooms may have been private in nature, perhaps the bedrooms of the imperial clan. The eastern segment, however, is rather unconventional, featuring a spacious "Sun Court" and an unusual octagonal room. It was in this area that some of the more spectacularly decorated rooms were found: one, called the Hall of the Gilded Vault, had an elaborate ceiling painted with scenes from Greek myth, some of

a decidedly erotic nature. The octagonal room was lighted by a hole in its roof and may have been a dining room (some authorities even suggested it was the infamous revolving room described by Suetonius), or another court area.

William L. MacDonald, in his book The Architecture of the Roman Empire, has seen in The Golden House a revolution in Roman architecture. As he puts it, this structure "was the first true successor of the forms and technology found in the great vaulted concrete structures of the second and early first centuries B.C. ~~It~~ is the earliest monumental design based upon an artistic and architectural, as opposed to a more purely technological, understanding and use of vaulted spaces... . The new style, distinguished by its vaulted interiors and their particular effects upon the senses, was quickly adopted at home and in the provinces. Soon it became as much a part of the imagery of the Empire as the eagle." Nero, no doubt, would have been pleased.