

# CADMO

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REVISTA DE HISTÓRIA ANTIGA  
JOURNAL FOR ANCIENT HISTORY

30



CENTRO DE HISTÓRIA DA UNIVERSIDADE DE LISBOA  
2021



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Editor Principal | Editor-in-chief  
Nuno Simões Rodrigues



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# SUMÁRIO

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### 09 AUTORES CONVIDADOS

#### GUEST ESSAYS

- 11 UN RILIEVO DALLA TOMBA MENFITA DI PTAHMES E LE TRATTATIVE FALLITE  
PER LA VENDITA A LEOPOLDO II DELLA TERZA COLLEZIONE NIZZOLI

*A RELIEF FROM THE MEMPHITE TOMB OF PTAHMES AND THE FAILED  
NEGOTIATIONS FOR THE SALE OF THE THIRD NIZZOLI COLLECTION TO LEOPOLD II*

Daniela Picchi

- 39 OS EPIGRAMAS FÚNEBRES DE GREGÓRIO DE NAZIANZA  
Da Klea Andron à Arete Cristã

*THE FUNERAL EPIGRAMS OF GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS  
From Klea Andron to Christian Arete*

Rita Codá

### 51 ESTUDOS

#### ARTICLES

- 53 O ESCORPIÃO COMO ANTIGA MANIFESTAÇÃO DIVINA  
NA MESOPOTÂMIA:  
A sua presença na glíptica do Diyala (c. 3150-2340 a.C.)

*THE SCORPION AS AN ANCIENT DIVINE MANIFESTATION IN MESOPOTAMIA:  
Its presence in the Diyala glyptic (c. 3150-2340 a.C.)*

Vera Gonçalves e Isabel Gomes de Almeida

- 81 OS CITAS NAS HISTÓRIAS DE HERÓDOTO:  
Identidade e nomoi

*THE SCYTHIAN IN HERODOTUS STORIES:  
Identity and nomoi*

Rui Tavares de Faria

- 105 LA INCORPORACIÓN DEL ELEFANTE DE GUERRA EN CARTAGO  
*THE INCORPORATION OF THE WAR ELEPHANT IN CARTHAGE*

José Luis Alejo Martínez

- 123 STOICISM IN POWER:  
Nero and his reflective enigmas  
*ESTOICISMO NO PODER:*  
*Nero e os seus enigmas reflexivos*  
Carlotta Montagna
- 141 L'HYMNE ORPHIQUE À APOLLŌN  
ET LA DATATION DES HYMNES ORPHIQUES:  
Considérations archéoastronomiques et comparaisons égyptologiques  
*THE ORPHIC HYMN TO APOLLO AND THE DATING OF THE ORPHIC HYMNS:*  
*Archaeoastronomical considerations and egyptological comparisons*  
Alicia Maravelia
- 191 CONTRIBUTION À LA CONNAISSANCE DE LA VILLE DE THALA NUMIDE:  
Contexte géo-historique  
*CONTRIBUTION TO THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE NUMIDIAN CITY OF THALA:*  
*Geo-historical context*  
Ouiza Ait Amara

## **217 NOTAS E COMENTÁRIOS**

*COMMENTS AND ESSAYS*

## **221 RECENSÕES**

*REVIEWS*

## **283 IN MEMORIAM**

## **289 POLÍTICAS EDITORIAIS E NORMAS DE SUBMISSÃO**


*JOURNAL POLICIES AND STYLE GUIDELINES*



**ESTUDOS  
ARTICLES**

# STOICISM IN POWER: Nero and his reflective enigmas

## ESTOICISMO NO PODER: *Nero e os seus enigmas reflexivos*

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To my aunt Emanuela

**Abstract:** Nero has always been an enigma and today he remains hard to understand. This paper reveals the philosophical and philological sense of Nero's plans for Rome, with its enigmas.

First, it is demonstrated that it is necessary to study the Neronian Age from a philosophical and philological perspective, whereas previous scholarly references to Nero's interest in philosophy and philology are indeed very limited. In fact, Nero was deeply influenced by his tutor Seneca and he was himself a Stoic philosopher and a philologist.

Second, this paper focuses on the solution of Nero's enigmas. It is demonstrated that Nero burnt Rome in order to purify and to rebuild it, in line with the Stoic concept of celestial fire as a creative agent (cf. *SVF* I 102; Sen. *Nat. q.* 3.28.7). Hence, under Nero Rome could rise again as the Phoenix, the Stoic symbol of the wise (cf. Sen. *Ep.* 42.1). Besides, it is clarified that the *Domus Aurea* was the representation of the universe. In a theatrical reality, the Imperial Palace was located at the core of the *genius loci* of Rome and its octagonal room stood as an *Augusti machina* (as the numismatic sources attest), or the Roman Empire. It is maintained that Nero believed to be on the earth in the guise of a *deus ex machina*, or, in greater detail, as the creative, silent, and divine *Artifex*, the Latin translation of the Platonic *ἄρτυροποιός*, as he implicitly declared on the point of death (cf. Suet. *Nero* 49).

**Key-words:** Nero, Stoicism, philology, enigma, silence, power.



Nero has always been an enigma: at first the best of the Roman emperors, during the so-called *quinquennium felix* (54-59 CE), then the worst.

On the one hand, the ancient historians Tacitus and Suetonius blame Nero for the death of his step brother Britannicus (55 CE), his mother Agrippina (59 CE), his tutor Seneca (65 CE), his two wives Octavia and Poppaea (in 62 and 65 CE, respectively). Other sources blame him for the first Christian martyrs in Rome, such as Saint Paul.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, the later Latin historian Sextus Aurelius Victor (IV century CE), the author of a short history of the Roman Empire, refers to Trajan's praise of Nero in *De Caesaribus* 5.1-4.

Nowadays, it is still necessary to find how to shape Nero's apparently contradictory actions into a coherent personality, as Marianne Bergmann argued in 2013.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, recent scholarship has tried to rehabilitate Nero's record, with more optimism than convincing arguments. However, most modern works on Nero's biography are critical and it remains questionable whether Nero was a cruel tyrant who suffered from psychological issues.

In the recent *Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero*, published in autumn 2017, Eric Gunderson asserts that it is "impervious" to unmask Nero<sup>3</sup>: the path to now tread in order to discover the true man Nero is demanding. Nevertheless, this paper shows that it is possible to reach Nero; and to find his truth, but a new working model is due.

Gunderson asserts that "one more investment in hermeneutics is all we need to get behind the scenes".<sup>4</sup> In particular, it is necessary to highlight the importance of reading the Greek and Latin sources in the original texts, in order to directly access the truth of the Classics, and thus achieve further levels of analysis, understanding, and knowledge of antiquity. As Mario Torelli suggested in 1994, it is advisable to conduct future studies from an interdisciplinary perspective, in order to see the ancient Romans in context, in light of their versatility.<sup>5</sup> As this paper demonstrates, it is advisable to widen one's horizons without missing the importance of details.

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1 Cf. Pollini 2017, 233.

2 Cf. Bergmann 2013, 355.

3 Gunderson 2017, 347.

4 Gunderson, *Ibidem*, 343.

5 Cf. Torelli 1994, 177.

Besides, it is necessary to look at the historical reality from a realistic and pragmatic perspective, in view of the fact that the historical truth hardly accords with extremist interpretations. Life is made of shades and a realistic approach to the truth should aim for a sense of measure. In all probability, Nero was neither a monster, nor a saint.

Mainly, this paper demonstrate that Nero's behavior is understandable when it is interpreted in accordance with Stoicism, in greater detail with Seneca's Stoic view of *virtus*.

Previous scholarly references to Nero's interest in philosophy are indeed very limited. Paul Veyne maintained that Nero's approach to philosophy was merely utopian and that Nero lacked political sense.<sup>6</sup> Richard Holland wrote that Nero enjoyed organizing and attending philosophical banquets at his court.<sup>7</sup> Sigrid Mratschek noted the tradition that Chaeremon, an Egyptian priest, introduced Nero to Stoicism during his childhood.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to this, Miriam Griffin has strongly underlined that Seneca's teaching career was a failure and her view has conditioned the modern reception both of Seneca and of Nero, defined by Griffin as "a tyrant and a prima donna".<sup>9</sup> As Yun Lee Too argued in 1994, it is still controversial that Seneca taught Nero to be a wicked tyrant, and he was therefore responsible for the corruption and excess of the emperor-to-be.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, it must be considered that Seneca, the leading Roman Stoic of the Neronian age, was the tutor and close adviser of Nero for thirteen years, from 49 to 62 CE.

Would one be the same person if he or she had had other teachers? Would one have not been influenced by a teacher who had continuously devoted himself to him or her for thirteen years? As the modern sociologist Karl Mannheim argued in 1974, the relationship between a student and his/her teacher is the core of every educational experience and duly mutates into a reciprocal influence.<sup>11</sup>

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6 Cf. Veyne 1985-1986, 723.

7 Cf. Holland 2002, 70.

8 Cf. Mratschek 2013, 46-47.

9 Griffin 1984, 119; cf. Champlin 2003.

10 Cf. Too 1994, 211. Cf. Romm, 2014.

11 Cf. Mannheim 1974, 350.

Besides, interpersonal relationships may end even dramatically, as the suicide of Seneca in 65 CE shows: Seneca committed suicide when ordered to do so by Nero. However, is it possible to completely erase the past and all its consequences easily?

It is comforting that in the *Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero* Daniel Hooley remarks upon the real influence that Seneca had on Nero. As Hooley states, “Nero, despite his drift in other directions, did not want this Stoic master to walk away”, when Seneca retired.<sup>12</sup>

It is necessary to point out that Hooley’s insight stands in line with the ancient sources, whose evidence cannot be put aside.

In *Annales* 14.55, Tacitus tells that Nero himself stressed Seneca’s relevance as his teacher, in his last formal discussion with Seneca, just before Seneca’s retirement in 62 CE:

ad quae Nero sic ferme respondit: “quod meditatae orationi tuae statim occurram id primum tui muneris habeo, qui me non tantum praevisa sed subita expedire docuisti”; (*Nero’s reply was substantially this: “My being able to meet your elaborate speech with an instant rejoinder is, I consider, primarily your gift, for you taught me how to express myself not only after reflection but at a moment’s notice”*).

Suetonius and Martial too refer to Nero as an intellectual: Suetonius in *Nero* 52, Martial in the epigram 8.70.8:

venere in manus meas pugillares libellique cum quibusdam notissimis uersibus ipsius chirographo scriptis, ut facile appareret non tralatos aut dictante aliquo exceptos, sed plane quasi a cogitante atque generante exaratos; ita multa et deleta et inducta et superscripta inerrant; (*several little pocketbooks and loose sheets have come into my possession, which contain some well-known verses in his own hand, and written in such a manner, that it was very evident, from the blotting and interlining, that they had not been transcribed from a copy, nor dictated by another, but were written by the composer of them*).

Sed tamen hunc [scil. Nervam] nostri scit temporis esse Tibullum/Carmina qui docti nota Neronis habet; (*whoever is acquainted with the verses of the learned Nero, knows that Nerva is the Tibullus of our day*).

In line with Suetonius, the realistic poet Martial points out that the only adjective *doctus* is enough to describe Nero. So, what does this emblematic adjective

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12 Hooley 2017, 123.

*doctus* mean? According to the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, *doctus* must be translated here as “well-read in philosophy” (cf. *ThLL* s.v. I A).

Nero’s interest in philosophy is also attested by Tacitus in *Annales* 14.16:

etiam sapientiae doctoribus tempus impertiebat post epulas, utque contraria adseverantium discordia frueretur;  
*(he would also bestow some leisure after his banquets on the teachers of philosophy, for he enjoyed the wrangles of opposing dogmatists).*

Nero’s “*doctrina*” included the knowledge of Stoic ethics (Cf. *ThLL* s.v. I A 1), which he must have learned first from the Egyptian Stoic Chaeremon and later from Seneca.

In order to properly approach Nero’s view of philosophy, it is advisable to consider the depiction of philosophy itself in Seneca.

As Seneca writes in the epistle 95.10, philosophy is both contemplative and active:

philosophia autem et contemplativa est et activa; spectat simul agitque;  
*(philosophy is both theoretic and practical; it reflects and at the same time acts).*

As Seneca writes in the epistle 94.46, contemplation and action are mutually consequential; the one is said to follow directly from the other, and *vice versa*. Action and contemplation harmonise in contributing to the achievement and the expression of virtue.

In duas partes virtus dividitur, in contemplationem veri et actionem. Contemplationem institutio tradit, actionem admonitio. Virtutem et exercet et ostendit recta actio;  
*(virtue is divided into two parts – into contemplation of truth, and action. Training teaches contemplation, and admonition teaches conduct. And right conduct both practises and reveals virtue).*

Is it possible to read this text from a political perspective. As I have explained in my previous contribution published in 2019, Seneca regards philosophy and politics as functionally complementary with each other. On the one hand, through philosophical contemplation, the wise man achieves that virtue which allows him to rule the State properly; on the other hand, through political action, the wise man

fully expresses his philosophical view of the world, in his actual life. Thereby, Seneca emphasizes the political role of the wise man in Stoicism, as recalled in *De Otio* 3.2:

Epicurus ait: “Non accedet ad rem publicam sapiens, nisi si quid intervenerit”; Zenon ait: “Accedet ad rem publicam, nisi si quid impediens”;  
 (Epicurus says: “The sage will not take part in politics unless it is unavoidable”; Zeno says: “The sage will take part in politics unless it is unavoidable”)  
 (cf. Sen. *Ep.* 16.3; Diog. Laert. 7.64).

In my previous studies, I have also explained that Seneca expressed his concept of philosophy and politics throughout his life, in that he behaved as a politician in philosophy and, at the same time, as a philosopher in politics.<sup>13</sup>

In this regard, here it is sufficient to briefly recall that Seneca took advantage from his knowledge of ethics, in order to achieve and exert political power. Thus, he used *philosophia* as his *instrumentum regni*. At the same time, Seneca presented *virtus* as the highest expression of power, which rules the universe (cf. e.g. Sen. *Ep.* 94.7, 108.13), and regarded politics as his *instrumentum philosophiae*, in that he actualized his knowledge of Stoicism through his own political conduct. Actually, in the guise of Nero’s tutor and close adviser, Seneca gave to Nero the knowledge that was necessary to overcome the moral decadence in Rome, namely the most formidable enemy of the Neronian Empire, as if knowledge were an arm to fight with against decadence. Hence, from an ethical perspective it is presumable that Seneca behaved as the *alter ego* of Agrippa, thereby emulating the Augustan general (cf. Tac. *Ann.* 14.54).

It is relevant that we find Seneca’s praise of Agrippa in the epistle 94 (§ 46): a letter which Giancarlo Mazzoli has aptly defined as crucial for the comprehension of Seneca and the Age of Nero.<sup>14</sup>

M. Agrippa, vir ingentis animi, qui solus ex iis, quos civilia bella claros potentesque fecerunt, felix in publicum fuit, dicere solebat multum se huic debere sententiae: “Nam concordia parvae res crescunt, discordia maximae dilabuntur”. Hac se aibat et fratrem et amicum optimum factum; (Marcus Agrippa, a great-souled man, the only person among those whom the civil wars raised to fame and power, whose prosperity helped the state, used to say that he was greatly indebted to the proverb “Harmony

13 Cf. Montagna 2019.

14 Cf. Mazzoli 2005, 201.

*makes small things grow; lack of harmony makes great things decay." He held that he himself became the best of brothers and the best of friends by virtue of this saying).*  
(cf. Sen. *Ben.* 3.32.4, 6.32.3-4).

In view of future studies on the Neronian Age, it should be considered plausible that Nero drew inspiration from Stoicism for his politics, so as to express actively his knowledge of ethics and assert himself as the foremost emperor of Rome, in line with the Stoic concept of *virtus* as the highest expression of power (cf. Sen. *Ep.* 94.7, 108.13).

John Drinkwater has stressed the positive outcomes of Nero's policy from an economic and social perspective.<sup>15</sup> What I consider even more impressive is that Nero's political choices ultimately could be the effort to overcome the moral decadency in Rome (i.e. the First Imperial Crisis<sup>16</sup>), and promote moral progress, thought as love for truth, solidarity, happiness, peace, freedom, knowledge, sight, ontological and ethical equality, reason and intelligence, according to the Stoic concept of *virtus*. It is also intriguing to investigate in which terms Nero, as a philosopher in politics and a politician in philosophy himself, emulated his teacher Seneca and developed Stoic ethics further, creatively.

As it is evident, these are big questions, which I have started to consider in my previous studies<sup>17</sup> and would require further pages. Nevertheless, I think that the importance of the previous contribution is to cast new light on Nero's world-view, by focusing on the main Neronian enigmas: the Great Fire of 64 CE, the palace of the *Domus Aurea* and Nero's ultimate self-definition as the *Artifex*.

To begin with, it can be argued that Nero's enigmas were the bright visualization of philosophical imagination in Stoicism, in Greek *εἰδωλα* and in Latin *simulacra* (cf. Plat. *Theaet.* 150b; Sen. *Ep.* 94.51) of conceptual truths. The solution of Nero's enigmas attests the influence, the power, the leading role of Stoicism in the Neronian Rome; their solution also points out Nero's subtle and deep adhesion to Stoicism.

Actually, as I have already supposed in my review of the Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero, I am glad to state that the Neronian enigmas can be solved.

15 Cf. Drinkwater 2019.

16 Cf. Montagna 2013.

17 Cf. Montagna 2017, 202-203.

How is it possible to see Nero's truth? By considering the equivalence of *σοφία* (or *virtus*) and *λόγος* (or reason) in Stoicism, and, as a consequence, the equivalence of philosophy (the science of *σοφία*) to philology (the science of *λόγος*) (cf. Sex. Emp. *Adv. Math.* 1.79 = Crat. fr. 17 Mette). In line with Plato, in Stoicism, through his transfiguration (aiming at the ultimate achievement of *virtus*), the *proficiens* (the would-be *sapiens*) becomes similar to a *κριτικός*, or a *philologus*, who is subtle and trained in ethics. At the same time, throughout his moral progress, the *proficiens* becomes able to find the deepest and most comprehensive sense of reality: by virtue of his sapiential power, he can see the deepest truth whereas the others are blind and see only common opinions (cf. e.g. Plat. *Theaet.* 161a; Sen. *Ep.* 108.30; Sex. Emp. *Adv. Math.* 1.79 = Crat. fr. 17 Mette).<sup>18</sup>

Hence, in order to solve the Neronian enigmas, it is advisable to conduct research from a perspective that is historical, philosophical, and philological; in other words, it is necessary to look for Nero's truth beyond the common opinion, beyond appearances.

More openly, it must be considered that Nero was both a philosopher and a philologist; the Great Fire of 64 CE, the palace of the *Domus Aurea* and Nero's ultimate self-definition as the *Artifex* are philosophical and philological reflections (in the double sense of "images" and "rational considerations") of the Stoic truth.

Through his enigmatic words and projects, Nero acted from an oracular perspective, as far as possible without using words. Thus, Nero followed the example of Seneca, who expressed his ideas in his written works and largely used both metaphors and similes, although he would have preferred to show his view of Stoicism, as he openly wrote in the epistle 75.2:

si fieri posset, quid sentiam, ostendere quam loqui mallet;  
(if it would be possible, I would prefer to show my opinion instead of telling it).

At the same time, Nero aimed to shape a world that was reflective, clearly rational and, *ipso facto*, according to Stoicism, good.

That said, it is possible to focus on the Great fire of 64 CE.

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18 Cf. Montagna 2019.

As John Pollini argued, current scholarship rejects the popular view of Nero as an arsonist<sup>19</sup>, even though this view is claimed both by Tacitus and by Suetonius (cf. Tac. *Ann.* 15.40; Suet. *Nero* 38.1).

In contrast with present scholarly trends, it is advisable to investigate whether Nero burnt or, to better say, made Rome conflagrate<sup>20</sup>, in order to purify and rebuild it according to the key tenets of Stoicism. In historical fact, Rome burnt and was rebuilt better than before, as the historical and archeological evidences attest (cf. Elsner 1994, Von Hesberg 2011<sup>21</sup>, Mratschek 2011<sup>22</sup>, and Vout 2017<sup>23</sup>). Hence, it is possible to attest that Rome died and rose again as the Phoenix, which was the Stoic symbol of the *sapiens*, as Seneca also refers in the epistle 42.1.

Scis quem nunc virum bonum dicam? Huius secundae notae. Nam ille alter fortasse tamquam phoenix semel anno quingentesimo nascitur;  
(*Do you know which kind of man I consider wise, now? That one of the second choice. In fact, that one of the first choice was born, maybe, every five hundred years, as the phoenix*).

This theory is in line with the Stoic concept of celestial fire as an agent which is both destructive and creative, that is expressed in Sen. *QNat.* 3.28.7 (a text concerning the universal conflagration caused by God):

cum deo uisum ordini meliora, uetera finiri, aqua et ignis terrenis dominantur; ex his ortus, ex his interitus est: ergo quandoque placere res nouae mundo, sic in nos mare emittitur desuper, ut feruor ignisque;  
*when it seems fine to God that a better age start and an old one end, water and fire rule everything in the world; from them everything arises, by them everything is destroyed; therefore, whenever the renovation of the world is wanted, the sea swoops in on us, so like the fiery fire*  
(cf. *SVF* I 102)

Besides, this theory accords with the words of Tacitus in *Annales* 15.41:

quamvis in tanta resurgentis urbis pulchritudine multa seniores meminerint quae reparari nequibant. fuere qui adnotarent xiiii Kal. Sextilis principium incendii huius ortum, et quo

19 Cf. Pollini 2017, 213.

20 Cf. Wash 2019. Interestingly, Walsh starts his book by defining the Great Fire as a conflagration, but he refrains from considering any philosophical reasons for such a conflagration.

21 Cf. Montagna 2017, *Ibidem*, 202.

22 Cf. Mratschek *Ibidem*, 48.

23 Cf. Vout 2017. Interestingly, Vout wonders where the boundary between the inventive and the decadent lied in Nero's Rome (187), but she cannot avoid to state that "for Nero, growing up became imperative" (185).



Senones captam urbem inflammaverint. alii eo usque cura progressi sunt ut totidem annos mensisque et dies inter utraque incendia numerent;  
*(notwithstanding the striking splendour of the restored city, old men will remember many things which could not be replaced. Some persons observed that the beginning of this fire was on the 19th of July, the day on which the Senones captured and fired Rome. Others have pushed a curious inquiry so far as to reduce the interval between these two fires into equal numbers of years, months, and days).*

As it may be noted, Tacitus refers to the Gallic fire of 387 BC, which happened about five hundred years before the Great fire of the Neronian Rome. Is this reference just a coincidence?

In Greek mythology a phoenix is a long-lived bird that is cyclically reborn out of fire. There are different traditions concerning the lifespan of the phoenix, but by most accounts the phoenix lived for five hundred years before its next rebirth (cf. Sen. Ep. 42.1).

In the same paragraph, it seems significant that Tacitus uses the verb *resurgere*, which means “to be reborn, to rise again”. What can be argued from Tacitus’ words? Probably, that Tacitus knew the truth or, more appropriately, that Tacitus did not express the truth about the Great Fire of 64 CE completely (probably for political reasons). Nevertheless, very subtly, he did not tell a falsehood either.

Again, it is helpful to draw attention to Seneca. In his epistle 91.1 (which probably dates back to summer or early autumn 64 CE) Seneca refers to the fire of *Lugdunum* (Lyon) of summer 64 CE:

Liberalis noster nunc tristis est nuntiato incendio, quo Lugdunensis colonia exusta est;  
*(our friend Liberalis is now downcast; for he has just heard of the fire which has wiped out the colony of Lyon).*

Even in his following letters Seneca completely avoids any reference to the greater fire of Rome. How is it possible to explain Seneca’s choice? It is plausible that Seneca did not refer to the fire of Rome deliberately, because *e silentio* he meant to suggest that in Rome there was not a fire, as in Lyon, but, rather, a conflagration.

Silence speaks loudly, in Seneca. Actually, in other texts, Seneca refers to silence as the highest expression of communication, as we read in *De Tranquillitate* 4.6:

si quis fauces oppresserit, stes tamen et silentio iuves. Numquam inutilis est opera civis boni; auditus visusque, voltu, nutu, obstinatione tacita incessuque ipso prodest;

*(if somebody stops your mouth, stand nevertheless and help your side in silence. The services of a good citizen are never thrown away: he does good by being heard and seen, by his expression, his gestures, his silent determination, and his very walk).*

(cf. Sen. *Ep.* 52.10, 90.6).

As for the palace of the *Domus Aurea*, it is noticeable that the words “*domus*” corresponds to the Greek “*οἶκος*”. Nero’s palace has been interpreted variously as an imitation of the Hellenistic palaces, by Heinz-Jürgen Beste and Henner von Hesberg<sup>24</sup>, or as evidence of Nero’s luxury, by Sigrid Mratschek<sup>25</sup>. In the *Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero*, Eugenio La Rocca and Eric Varner respectively regard Nero’s palace as “a new and gigantic imperial house”<sup>26</sup> and as “a private residence”.<sup>27</sup>

More deeply, it should be investigated whether Nero’s palace was the representation of the universe, corresponding to the Stoic *οἰκουμένη*, located at the core of Rome<sup>28</sup>. Actually, according to the Roman concept of the *genius loci*, it is possible that Nero regarded the *Urbs* as a man, as Suetonius implicitly attested in *Nero* 31.2:

eius modi domum cum absolutam dedicaret, hactenus comprobavit, ut se diceret “Quasi hominem tandem habitare coepisse”;

*(upon the dedication of this magnificent house after it was finished, all he said in approval was (that), “he had ultimately started to live (a town) like a man”).*

This sentence has been commonly understood as an evidence of Nero’s will to live as a man. Rather, it may be read, more subtly, as an expression of Nero’s intention to live in a town, Rome, which was similar to a man, or, to better say, to a *sapiens*, whose internal structure, or core, (with the *Domus Aurea*) reflected (upon) the reason in the universe.

The logic system of the *Domus Aurea* should entirely occupy the microcosm of Rome, as Suetonius recalls in *Nero* 39.2, in the same way reason permeates the universe and ultimately coincides with the universe itself in Stoicism (cf. e.g. Sen. *Ben.* 4.7.1).

24 Cf. Beste and von Hesberg 2013, 326.

25 Cf. Mratschek *Ibidem*, 51.

26 La Rocca 2017, 203.

27 Varner 2017, 250.

28 Cf. Cic. *Fin.* 3.64, *N.D.* 2.154, *Leg.* 1.23; *SVF* 2.168.527 = Stob. 1.184.8; *SVF* 2.169.528 = Eus. *PE* 15.2.379.20.

This new interpretation of Nero's Rome is in line with Seneca's words in the treatise *De Beneficiis* 7.27.1, which was presumably written after 62 CE. In this text, Seneca compares the human condition to a town:

si tibi vitae nostrae vera imago succurret, videre videberis tibi captae cum maxime civitatis faciem, in qua omisso pudoris rectique respectu vires in concilio sunt velut signo ad permiscenda omnia dato Non igni, non ferro abstinetur;

*(if a true picture of our life were to rise before your mental vision, you would, I think, behold a scene like that of a town just taken by storm, where decency and righteousness were no longer regarded, and no advice is heard but that of force, as if universal confusion were the word of command. Neither fire nor sword are spared).*

Following the doctrines of Democritus<sup>29</sup> and Posidonius<sup>30</sup>, in the epistle 65.24 Seneca also describes the human being as a microcosm, which stands as a mirror to the universe:

quem in hoc mundo locum deus obtinet, hunc in homine animus: quod est illic materia, illic in nobis corpus est;

*(God's place in the universe corresponds to the soul's relation to man. World-matter corresponds to our mortal body).*

(Cf. Sen. *Nat. q.* 3.29.3)

Considering the octagonal domed hall in the centre of the *Domus Aurea* may be helpful. The octagonal room, or *coenatio rotunda*, was the main room of the palace, as Suetonius describes it in *Nero* 31.2:

praecipua cenationum rotunda, quae perpetuo diebus ac noctibus uice mundi circumageretur; *(the chief banqueting room was circular, and revolved perpetually, night and day, in imitation of the motion of the celestial bodies).*

29 Cf. Diels 1954, fr. 34.

30 Cf. Sext. Emp. *Math.* 7.93.



**Fig. 1.** Octagonal domed hall in the centre of the Domus Aurea (*Fototeca Unione*).

It may be investigated what the octagonal room represented, in the system of symbols of the *Domus Aurea*.

In line with my previous considerations, it is plausible that the octagonal room represented the core of the universal οἶκος/οἰκουμένη, namely the Roman empire, or MAC(hina) AUG(usti), through which the emperor, as a *deus ex machina*, came to a world which Seneca repeatedly describes as theatrical, in his latest works.<sup>31</sup>

This interpretation of the octagonal room as the theatrical Roman Empire in the hearth of the universe is in line with the numismatic sources we have.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. e.g. Sen. *Epp.* 28.10, 78.18 120.22; *Ben.* 2.18.1. As for the theatricality of Roman society during the Early Imperial Age, see, among others, Champlin 2003, 81 and Dean Hammer 2010, 65.



Fig. 2. Coin RIC 402 (*Ashmolean Museum, Oxford*).

The interpretation of this *dupondius* (Lugdunum mint) is still disputable. In fact, the common interpretation of the words MAC AVGVSTVS on the reverse of this coin is “*Macellum Augusti*” (a market-place built by Nero), as would also be represented on the coin itself.<sup>32</sup> Rather, it is more credible that this coin represents the octagonal room in the *Domus Aurea*, as has been supposed in the past by Jean-Louis Voisin<sup>33</sup> and David Hemsoll.<sup>34</sup>

These interpretations of the Great Fire and the *Domus Aurea* accords with Nero’s ultimate declaration.

On point of death (in 68 CE), Nero defined himself as the *Artifex*, thus leaving to us his *imago vitae*, as Suetonius wrote in *Nero* 49.1:

scrobem coram fieri imperavit dimensus ad corporis sui modulum, componique simul, si qua inuenirentur, frusta marmoris et aquam simul ac ligna conferri curando mox cadaueri, flens ad singula atque identidem dicitans: “Qualis Artifex pereoi!

(he ordered a pit to be sunk before his eyes, of the size of his body, and the bottom to be covered with pieces of marble put together, if any could be found about the house; and water and wood, to be got ready for immediate use about his corpse; weeping at everything that was done, and frequently saying, “Like the *Artifex* I perish!”)

32 Cf. Holleran 2018, 465.

33 Voisin 1987, 509- 519.

34 Hemsoll 1990.

Ultimately, it may be investigated what Nero meant to declare with his last words. Nero's ultimate self-definition has been considered as evidence of Nero's obsession with the arts, among others, by Edward Champlin and Marisa Ranieri Panetta<sup>35</sup>. In the *Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero*, Matthew Leigh<sup>36</sup>, Donatien Grau<sup>37</sup>, and Caroline Vout<sup>38</sup> translate *artifex* as the "artist". Rather, it is plausible that Nero suggested to posterity that he resembled the intelligent *Artifex*, namely the creative God in an artistic world, according to Seneca's definition of God in the following text, from the epistle 58.28:

manent enim cuncta, non quia aeterna sunt, sed quia defenduntur cura regentis; immortalia tutore non egerent. Haec conservat Artifex fragilitatem materiae vi sua vincens;  
*(all things abide, not because they are everlasting, but because they are protected by the care of him who governs all things; those which were imperishable would need no guardian. The divine Craftsman keeps them safe, overcoming the weakness of their fabric by his own power).*

Interestingly, the word "*Artifex*" is the Latin translation of the Greek word "*Δημιουργός*", namely the divine and silent Platonic Craftsman who transfers his ideas into reality, and previous scholarship has clearly ascertained Plato's influence on Seneca.<sup>39</sup>

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35 Cf. Ranieri Panetta 2011, 34-35.

36 Leigh M. 2017, 26.

37 Grau D. 2017, 267.

38 Vout C., *Ibidem*, 193.

39 Cf. e.g. Reydamas – Schils 2010, 196-215.

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