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► **To cite this version:**

Jean-Paul Morel, Françoise Villedieu. The Garden of the Julio-Claudian Domus. Wilhelmina Jashemski; Kathryn Gleason; Kim J. Hartswick; Amina-Aïcha Malek. Gardens of the Roman Empire, , https://roman-gardens.github.io/province/italia/rome/regio_x_palatium/julio-claudian_domus/, 2021. hal-03502492

HAL Id: hal-03502492

<https://hal.science/hal-03502492>

Submitted on 3 Jan 2022

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The Garden of the Julio-Claudian Domus

Contributors : Jean-Paul Morel, Françoise Villedieu

Province

Italia

Italia (Pleiades)

Italia, Regio I (Pleiades)

Location

Rome

Rome (Pleiades)

Sublocation

Palatine

Mons Palatinus (Pleiades)

Garden

Garden of the Peristyle of the Julio-Claudian *Domus*, Palatine

Keywords

- brick (construction material)
- colonnade
- column (architectural element)
- domus
- flower garden
- flowerpot
- fresco (visual work)
- marble (decorative element)
- mosaic (visual work)
- peristyle (Roman courtyard)
- princeps
- terracotta (architectural)
- Suetonius

Garden Description

At the end of the Republican era and the beginning of the Empire, residential dwellings occupied, at least in part, the northeastern corner of the Palatine. Two distinct excavation areas have revealed the partial remains of one or more *domus* in the southern part of the terrace, some 6.5 meters below the present ground level. The two excavated sections have not been joined because of a wide road of Severan

date that divides them. It is not possible, therefore, to ascertain whether the pre-Domitianic remains, on either side of this road, belong to a single *domus*. It is clear, however, the remains all share several features: obliqueness with respect to the later platform, building materials and techniques, and a luxurious quality.

The most coherent remains belong to the northwest corner of a peristyle oriented WSW-ENE. Enough is preserved to show that this was a rectangular **peristyle** with six **columns** along the west, and more along the north side, which is not fully uncovered. Remaining are the foundations of the **colonnade**, two column bases, and several important sections of the peripheral walls (Fig. 1). In addition, several marble paving slabs were found in place. Impressions of others, the result of the removal of slabs in antiquity in preparation for a layer of simple **pozzolana**, reveal the original pattern. The slabs were cut into squares and rectangles, based on a Roman foot or half-foot, from three different **marbles**: **Chemtou (Giallo Antico)**, **“Africano”** and **“Palombino** (coming, respectively, from northwest Tunisia, the surroundings of Smyrna, and an unknown location). Set at a 45° angle with respect to the peristyle galleries, this pavement was limited on one side by the colonnade, and on the other by the back gallery walls, built with large blocks of **tufa** and **limestone**. Between the columns were white marble paving slabs with grooves, perhaps indicating they supported light barriers.

The garden area enclosed by the colonnade contained two **basins**, below the level of the peristyle, along the long sides (Fig. 2). While their lengths are not preserved, they are 2 meters wide and 1.50 meters deep. The edges were faced in white marble, but the basins had a covering of thick **plaster**, painted with two layers of light blue (**caeruleum** and **Alexandrian frit**). The short end of the south basin has two small steps painted blue, but these were later covered in marble. Although the excavations uncovered only a small section of the garden, a flowerbed, framed by triangular **bricks**, and fragments of **flowerpots** were brought to light.

An Augustan date is appropriate for some architectural and decorative elements, such as the peristyle column bases without **plinths**, fragments of **architectural terracottas**, and **frescoes** found *in situ* or gathered from the layer of earth rubble that buried the *domus*. Other elements, however, such as a floor **mosaic** or fragments from an ornamental wall mosaic could possibly date from slightly earlier periods. It seems likely that the Augustan dwelling (or dwellings) incorporated an earlier structure dating to perhaps the middle of the third quarter of the first century BCE. Because most of the decorative elements reflect the style of the **Augustan villa** and the contemporary **Temple of Apollo on the Palatine**, it is likely this *domus* was linked to the imperial court, or at least drew inspiration from the new artistic trends made fashionable by the first **princeps**.

The *domus* of the Vigna Barberini was included in **Nero’s Domus Aurea**, and featured the *coenatio rotunda*, a revolving dining room built atop a tower that provided diners with a view across the landscape of Rome. The *domus* did not last beyond Nero’s principate, as attested by a cache of coins dating no later than 65 CE found in the destruction layer. Such destruction could have been the result of landslides caused by two earthquakes that struck Rome in June 68 (**Suet. Nero, 48; Galba, 18**). Once ruined, the *domus* was spoiled of most of its elements, the majority of which were dismantled and re-used.

Figures



Figure 1. Peristyle column marble base of the Julio-Claudian domus. Photograph from Villedieu et al, 2001, Figure 14.

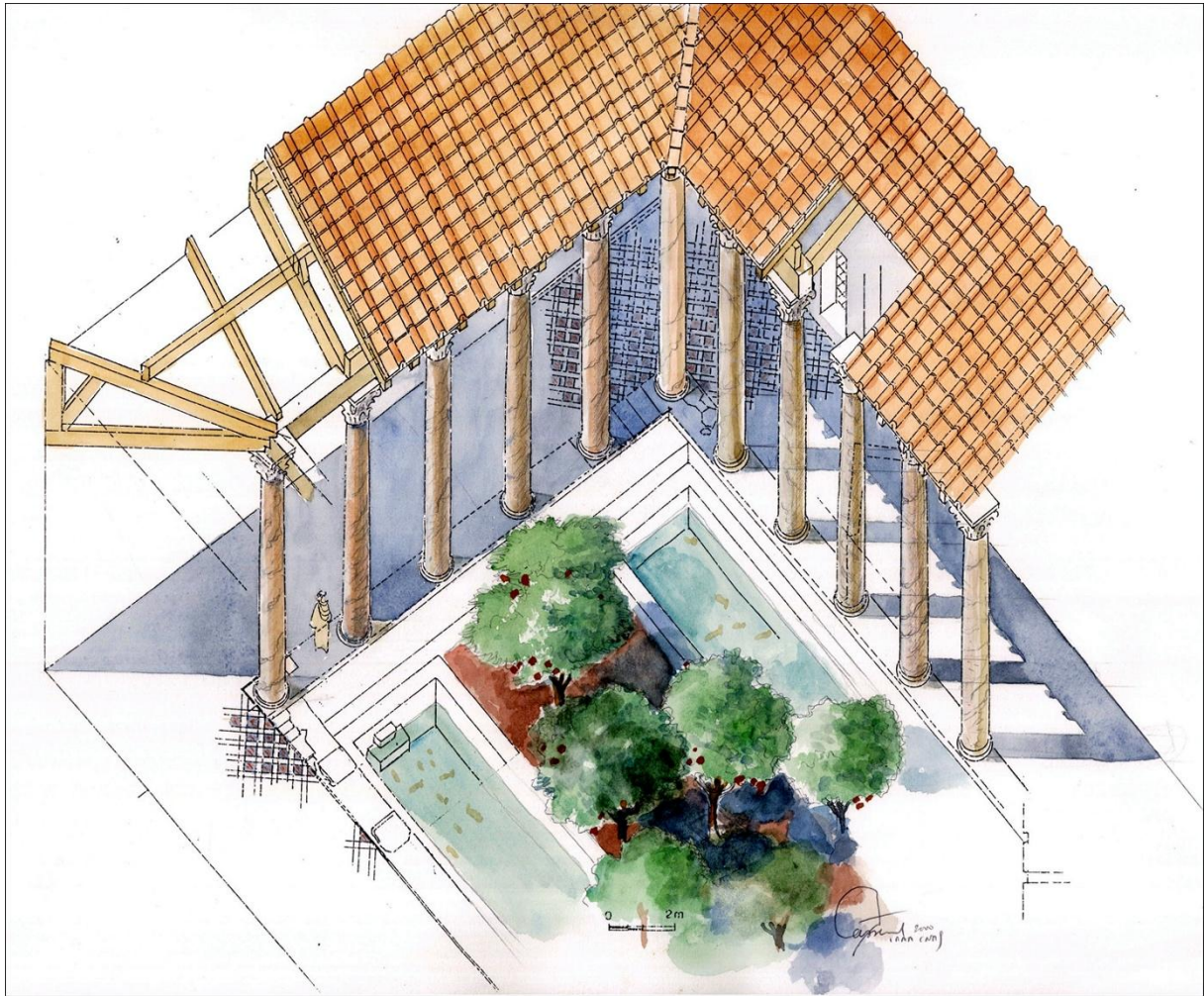


Figure 2. Axonometric reconstruction of the domus peristyle (© J.-M. Gassend, AMU-CNRS, IRAA).

Dates

1st century BCE- 1st century CE

Bibliography

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Pleiades ID

[971691208](#)

Publication date : 17 April 2021