

# Rising from the Ashes: Domitian's *Arae Incendii Neroniani* in New Flavian Rome

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In the August 1888 edition of the *Notizie degli Scavi*, professors Guglielmo Gatti and Rodolfo Lanciani announced the rediscovery of a Domitianic altar on the Quirinal hill during the construction of the Casa Reale (Figures 1 and 2).<sup>1</sup> This altar, found *in situ* on the southeast side of the *Alta Semita* (an important northern thoroughfare) adjacent to the church of San Andrea al Quirinale, was not unknown to scholars.<sup>2</sup> The site was discovered, but not excavated, in 1644 when Pope Urban VIII (Maffeo Barberini) and Gianlorenzo Bernini laid the foundations of San Andrea al Quirinale; at that time, the inscription was removed to the Vatican, and then the altar was essentially forgotten.<sup>3</sup> Lanciani's notes from May 22, 1889, describe a fairly intact structure—a travertine block altar with remnants of a marble base molding on two sides.<sup>4</sup> Although the altar's inscription was not *in situ*, Lanciani refers to it as an altar of the Neronian fire and gives indication of its unusually large size, "46 metri in tutto."<sup>5</sup>

This altar was part of a travertine-paved sacred precinct sunk three steps below the level of the *Alta Semita* and marked off with eleven travertine *cippi* (boundary stones) set close to the lowest step at intervals of 2.5 meters.<sup>6</sup> The altar itself is set 2.75 m back from the *cippi* and mounted

on a base of two steps; it is a long, solid rectangle, 6.25 m deep, 3.25 m wide, and 1.26 m high (lacking its crown). These dimensions make it the second largest public altar to survive in the ancient capital. Built of travertine and revetted in marble, this altar lacks sculptural decoration. Only its inscription identifies it as an *Ara Incendii Neroniani*, an altar erected in fulfillment of a vow made after the great fire of Nero (A.D. 64).<sup>7</sup>

Archaeological evidence attests to two other altars, bearing identical inscriptions, excavated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; the *Ara Incendii Neroniani* found on the Quirinal was the last of the three to be discovered.<sup>8</sup> Little is known of the two other altars; one, presumably found on the Vatican plain, was reportedly used as building material for the basilica of St. Peter in the sixteenth century.<sup>9</sup> The other was uncovered in 1618 on the southwest side of the *Circus Maximus* at the foot of the Aventine, along with the remains of steps and *cippi*.<sup>10</sup> This altar, according to Lawrence Richardson, also became building material for St. Peter's but elements of its original design are preserved in the archaeological record.<sup>11</sup> The remains are noted on Lanciani's *Forma Urbis Romae* in plate 35 and comprise a smaller,

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<sup>1</sup> Accademia nazionale dei Lincei et al., *Notizie Degli Scavi Di Antichità* (Roma: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1889), 159-160.

<sup>2</sup> Commissione archeologica comunale di Roma, and Museo dell'Impero Romano, *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma* 17 (1889): 331.

<sup>3</sup> Rodolfo A. Lanciani, *Ancient Rome in the Light of Recent Discoveries* (Boston: Houghton, 1892/1888), 83-84.

<sup>4</sup> Rodolfo A. Lanciani, *Codice Vaticano Latino* 13035, f. 155.

<sup>5</sup> The Neronian fire was a vast conflagration that swept through the city of Rome in 64 A.D. Nero, emperor at the time, was often blamed for the fire; his use of formerly public lands afterwards only exacerbated this. Rodolfo Lanciani, *Codice Vaticano Latino* 13035, f. 155.

<sup>6</sup> Lanciani's initial drawings record only two *cippi*, although his later drawings show that eleven were eventually uncovered.

<sup>7</sup> *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (hereafter cited as CIL), VI, 826 or 30837/MW 442.

<sup>8</sup> Lawrence Richardson, *A New Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 21; Emilio Rodríguez-Almeida, "Alcune notule topografiche sul Quirinale di epoca domiziana," *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma* 91(1986): 49-60.

<sup>9</sup> As no archaeological evidence, or reliable source, for this altar's location is known, its siting on the Vatican plain is, at best, apocryphal. The only true evidence of its discovery is a long-lost sixteenth-century archaeological notation (at some point held at the Archivio dello Stato in Florence) and the altar's inscription. However, no copies of the inscription remain in marble; we rely on three copies of the text made at the Vatican in the seventeenth century. Richardson, *New Topographical Dictionary*, 21; CIL, VI, 826.

<sup>10</sup> Rodolfo Lanciani, *Forma Urbis Romae* (Rome: Quasar, 1990), plate 35.

<sup>11</sup> In preparation for the two major construction campaigns of the new St. Peter's basilica, in 1506 (with Bramante as Capomaestro, and, in succession Raphael and Antonio da Sangallo following his death) and

though similar, precinct (Figure 3); in this case, the stairs from the road rise to meet the altar, and the precinct terminates at the altar's back.<sup>12</sup> The design of this altar, a rectangular solid set off by a paved, delineated space, suggests that the three known *Arae Incendii Neroniani* were part of a series; although topographical necessity determined certain design variations, their construction was a singular act.

Like most monumental altars, or altars independent of temple complexes, the *Arae Incendii Neroniani* have escaped intense scholarly scrutiny; but the importance of altars, as architectural monuments, is clear from the earliest period of development in Rome. Before temples dominated Rome's skyline and elite houses lined the contours of her hills, altars defined Rome's topography. As early as the seventh century B.C., monumental altars distinguished areas of this growing city—as is evidenced by the *Campus Martius*, named after the altar of Mars that made sacred this swampy plain. The number of public altars in Rome rivaled that of temples, columns and arches combined, and though some were small, others were truly monumental.<sup>13</sup> Despite their centrality in Roman religious and civic traditions, art historians and classicists alike concentrate more on the sculpture on these altars, ignoring their potential rhetorical force as monuments. The *Arae Incendii Neroniani*, though, present an opportunity to explore this architectural type and discuss the various topographical and propagandistic implications of this most ancient architectural form.

#### *Intra hanc definitionem*

The design of these altars, open-air precincts with travertine paving and stone markers, designates these spaces as both sacred and protected. This design alludes to ancient precincts in the countryside (occurring as early as the eighth century B.C.); these spaces evoke an archaic aura, and refer to the ancient means of offering sacrifice, in an open field

then again in 1547 when Pope Paul III appointed Michelangelo to the post, the city's archaeology was mined for ancient marble. Although it has become something of a cliché to assume missing ancient material was put to this purpose, these two instances appear to align properly with known building campaigns and thus seem plausible. Richardson, *New Topographical Dictionary*, 21.

<sup>12</sup> This is, no doubt, a result of the slope of the Aventine behind it. Rodolfo, *Forma Urbis Romae*.

<sup>13</sup> The earliest altar on record is the *Ara Maxima Herculis Invicti*, positioned between the *Circus Maximus* and the *Porta Trigemina* in the *Forum Boarium* (Servius *ad Aen.* 8.269; Macrobius, *Sat.* 3.11.7, 12.4; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.41; Strabo 5.3.3; Livy 1.7.10-11; Ovid, *Fasti* 1.581; Propertius 4.9.67-68; Solinus 1.10). Although there are few archaeological remains of this altar, dated by most to the time of Evander, literary sources in the later imperial period remember it as one of the defining monuments of the archaic city. Twelve altars allegedly dedicated by Titus Tatius (the legendary Sabine king who ruled with Romulus) are lost but their names are recorded by Varro: *Ops*, *Flora*, *Vediovis* and *Saturn*, *Sol*, *Luna*, *Vulcan* and *Summanus*, *Larunda*, *Terminus*, *Quirinus*, *Vertumnus*, the *Lares*, *Diana* and *Luciana* (*Ling.* 5.74).

<sup>14</sup> There are three copies of this inscription recorded, though only one,

(*funum*) left ritually bare for the gods. The altars' inscription, too, is unusual in Roman monumental epigraphy; its length and detail, primarily prescriptive and in the passive voice, only accentuates this archaic idea:<sup>14</sup>

Haec area, intra hanc / definitionem cip-  
porum / clausa ueribus,<sup>15</sup> et ara, quae / est  
inferius, dedicata est ab // imp. Caesare  
Domitiano Aug. / Germanico ex uoto  
suscepto, / quod diu erat neglectum nec  
/ redditum, incendiorum / arcendorum  
causa, // quando urbs per nouem dies / arsit  
Neronianis temporibus. / Hac lege dedi-  
cata est, ne cui / liceat intra hos terminos  
/ aedificium extruere manere // nego[t]iari  
arborem ponere / aliudue quid serere, / et  
ut praetor, cui haec regio / sorti obuenerit,  
sacrum faciat / aliusue quis magistratus  
// Volcanibus X K(alendas) Septembres /  
omnibus annis uitulo robeo / et uerre r.  
ac precationibus. / infra scriptam aedi[...]  
K Sept. / ianst[...] / [...] dari quae s[...] /  
quod imp. Caesar Domitianus / Aug. Ger-  
manicus Pont. Max. constituit q[uo]dque?  
/ fieri [iussit?].<sup>16</sup>

This area, enclosed by a spiked railing within this boundary line marked with cippi, along with the altar that is located further down, was dedicated by the (emperor) Caesar Domitian Aug(ustus) Germanicus, who took upon himself a vow that had long been overlooked and left unfulfilled, (made) for the purpose of preventing fires, when the city burned for nine days at the time of Nero. It was dedicated on

that on the Quirinal, is properly documented. It is impossible, though, to know their exact placement on the altars; the text of the CIL and Robin Darwall-Smith note that the Quirinal inscription was found within the precinct but not on the altar itself. No specific archaeological notes remain from the excavation of the other altars, which occurred in the sixteenth century. CIL, VI, 816; Robin Darwall-Smith, *Emperors and Architecture: A Study of Flavian Rome* (Brussels: Latomus, 1996), 236.

<sup>15</sup> This term, *veru/verus*, is problematic. According to the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, this inscription is the only instance of this word in Latin epigraphy. Translated here as a "spiked railing," the term has been translated variously as spits or javelin-like implements. Here, it appears to refer to a metal barrier or fence, with spiked ends, placed directly around the altar—the steps and *cippi* create the *definitio* and this spiked railing is within this area, closer to the altar. There is, however, no archaeological evidence for such a metal barrier in either the Aventine or Quirinal altars. As this word is plural, it is possible that it is metonymic, but the exact reference is unclear.

<sup>16</sup> As previously mentioned, this inscription exists only in a seventeenth-century copy; none of the original stones remain in the Vatican Collections. CIL, VI, 826 or 30837/MW 442. Another, slightly emended version appears in Rodríguez-Almeida, "Alcune notule topografiche," 50.

these conditions, that nobody be allowed to raise a building within these boundary lines, loiter, conduct business, plant a tree or sow anything, and that the praetor, who has obtained this *regio* by lot, or any other official make a sacrifice with a red calf and a r(ed) pig and with prayers every year during the Volcanalia on the tenth day (before) the K(alends) of September (=August 23rd) [...] the K(alends) of September [...] be given the things which [...] that the emp(erator) Caesar Domitian Aug(ustus) Germanicus Pont(ificex) Max(imus) established [and that] [he bid ?] be done.<sup>17</sup>

Though not direct, this inscription provides some basic information about these altars: Domitian built the *Arae Incendii Neroniani* sometime after 83 A.D.<sup>18</sup> The Neronian fire in 64 A.D. was the catalyst for their construction, and, though these altars are not explicitly dedicated to Vulcan, they should receive annual sacrifice during the celebration of the Volcanalia.<sup>19</sup> The wording of the inscription, though, leaves some of the essential questions unanswered: who exactly vowed these altars; which god is specifically honored in this precinct; what purpose did they serve? Citing the inscription's own claim that the altars were intended for "the purpose of preventing fires," Lawrence Richardson and Robin Darwall-Smith suggest that they were a part of Nero's civic improvements following the fire; specifically, that this vow was intended to assuage the fears of the Roman populace by appealing to a divine source.<sup>20</sup> Seeing the altars as a direct interpretation of a Neronian vow, these scholars entirely disregard any Domitianic agenda in their construction.<sup>21</sup>

A careful analysis of the inscription, though, provides some conclusions that these authors have overlooked: first, that Domitian evokes the name of Nero without ascribing him credit, or blame, for the vow and resulting altars. Nero (37-68 A.D.) was the fifth and last of the Julio-Claudian emperors. Despite the generally positive experience this family had at the helm of the Roman Empire, Nero's reign is most often associated with tyranny and extravagance. Though he was popular with the plebeians, he was widely blamed for the fire that engulfed Rome in 64, and his reign came to an end with his suicide in 68 A.D.<sup>22</sup> Nero's memory was soon stricken by the Senate (a *damnatio memoriae*). Although there is renewed scholarly debate concerning the actual effect of a *damnatio memoriae* on imperial architecture, mention of Nero's name on these new monuments shows that, evidently, Domitian did not publicly enforce it.<sup>23</sup> In this case, Domitian uses Nero's praenomen in adjectival form, *Neronianis*, without amending the traditional titulature (*Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus*). This is a clever way to say without saying—to simultaneously attract and divert attention to Nero's name and legacy. Whether this was a reaction to the Senate is unclear but mere mention of Nero's name would have demanded attention—if the sheer size and presentation of the altar precinct alone did not. The inscription, above all, proves that the construction of these altars was a Domitianic project, not a Neronian one.

#### *Domitian, the Architect Emperor*

Titus Flavius Domitianus (51-96 A.D.; Figure 4), the third and final Flavian emperor, assumed imperial power from his older brother, Titus, in September 81 A.D. Whereas his father and brother could boast popularity and success-

<sup>17</sup> The translation of this inscription most often reproduced was published by Rodolfo Lanciani in a larger work focusing on the archaeology of the Quirinal area in 1892. There are significant errors in this translation—especially in terms of agency, though more broadly in tone (Lanciani tended to err on the side of the poetic). The current translation has been prepared with the kind assistance of Dr. Valerio Caldesi Valeri and is the basis of all interpretation herein.

<sup>18</sup> The dating of this inscription and altar is based on Domitian's titulature—*imp. Caesare Domitiano Aug. Germanico*. Though the specific month is now debated, the title *Germanicus* was adopted as a result of victories against the Chatti tribe and first appears on a coin (Datari 618) in August 83 A.D.; Buttrey argues that the title was actually announced at Alexandria a few months before, in June (CIL 16.29), providing a secure *terminus post quem* for the altars. Theodore Buttrey, *Documentary Evidence for the Chronology of the Flavian Titulature* (Meisenheim am Glan: A. Hain, 1980), 56; Ian Carradice and T.V. Buttrey, *The Roman Imperial Coinage. Volume II, Part I, From AD 69-96* (London: Spink, 2007), 238 (hereafter cited as RIC).

<sup>19</sup> The festival of Vulcan, called the Volcanalia, was celebrated annually on 23 August. As a means to appease the god, priests offered live sacrifice, usually fish from the Tiber River, at the altar. Tradition dictated that this sacrifice be burned. Annual sacrifice to gods was a primary component of Roman public life; sacrifice to state gods, such as Vulcan, was required of both state and citizen. These festivals were ongoing and were dedicated, often, to several gods in concurrence. As Richardson and others have pointed out, a number of other divinities

received sacrifice on the Volcanalia—including the nymphs in the Campus Martius and Quirinus *in colle*. Richardson, *New Topographical Dictionary*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Darwall-Smith also picks up on this theme, noting that "this altar, and others like it, would serve no protective purpose in a fire. One can only see it as a religious gesture to appease the gods by keeping some areas ritually waste." Darwall-Smith, *Emperors and Architecture*, 236.

<sup>21</sup> Richardson, *New Topographical Dictionary*, 21; Darwall-Smith, *Emperors and Architecture*, 236. Darwall-Smith is troubled by the apparently untimely construction of these altars, but, in the end, she appears to focus on their more practical function. Citing Martial's discussion of Domitian's interventions in Rome following the fire of 80 (Martial, VII, 61), she links these altars to such fire prevention measures. This, though, comes in stark contrast to her general discussion of the multifaceted nature of Domitian's architectural campaign—melding style and dynastic aspirations.

<sup>22</sup> Galba criticized Nero's *luxuria*, both his public and private excessive spending, during rebellion. Tacitus, *Annals* 1.16; Patrick Kragelund, "Nero's Luxuria, in Tacitus and in the Octavia," *The Classical Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (2000): 494-515.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Eric Varner, *Mutilation and Transformation: Damnatio Memoriae and Roman Imperial Portraiture* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Penelope J.E. Davies, "What worse than Nero, what's better than his baths?":

ful military careers, Domitian had few friends at the time of his assassination fifteen years later: ancient authors labeled him a bloodthirsty tyrant, responsible for bringing a reign of terror to the throne.<sup>24</sup> A generation before, Nero's suicide had precipitated the first full-blown succession crisis in the history of the Roman Principate.<sup>25</sup> The uneasy political arrangement in Rome of Emperor and Senate sharing a level of authority, negotiated by Augustus in the face of an historical abhorrence of monarchy by Rome's elite, was again under scrutiny.<sup>26</sup> Domitian openly rejected the imperial system, and ancient authors focused on this misstep; they claimed that Domitian's sweeping changes to the imperial balance of power and his fastidiousness in economic matters and social policy radically altered the environment in Rome, and threatened her stability. Domitian's greatest offense, though, was to upset the political establishment, and, for this transgression, he was labeled a tyrant.<sup>27</sup>

However, archeological discoveries from the late nineteenth century onward reveal Domitian's impact on Rome to have been vast and largely positive. He is recorded as having built or reconstructed over fifty structures in Rome; most famously, he completely rebuilt the imperial houses on the Palatine, a palace that was rivaled only by Nero's *Domus Aurea*. His abilities as a builder did not go unnoticed; already by the fourth century, long before modern excavations began to reveal the remains, his reputation as one of Rome's greatest builders was revived. Both the Chronographer of 354 and Eusebius speak more highly of Domitian's architectural work in Rome than that of Nero, Trajan or even Hadrian.<sup>28</sup>

Architecturally speaking, Domitian inherited both the incomplete building programs of Vespasian and Titus, and the results of three recent disasters. In the three years before Domitian came to power, Rome had seen the devastating eruption of Mt. Vesuvius that destroyed much of the Bay of Naples, a fire that swept through the *Campus Martius*, reigniting fears and destroying ancient temples, and then, in

the same year, an outbreak of plague so rampant that Suetonius called it "the worst that has ever been known."<sup>29</sup> These events were devastating both physically and psychologically, but they created enormous opportunity for Domitian. With the imperial treasury flush from Titus's military exploits and his own aggressive taxation efforts, Domitian was poised to revive the Imperial capital.

In addition to lavishing the city center with elaborate temples, Domitian paid special attention to the restoration of Julio-Claudian projects: he reconstructed the Curia Julia, Caesar's Temple of Venus Genetrix, and restored Augustus's complex in the *Campus Martius*. Not to leave out his own gens, Domitian also constructed a temple on the site of his ancestral home on the Quirinal. Domitian's architectural projects speak to his interest in legitimizing his own family, as well as connecting them to the Julio-Claudian tradition.

The siting of the *Arae Incendii Neroniani*, widely placed around Rome, present an interesting topographical case (Figure 5). Taken broadly, they create a pattern: the altars surround the outer limits of Domitian's own architectural projects. The Aventine altar, on the outside edge of the *Circus Maximus*, highlights Domitian's work on the Palatine. Indeed, recent scholarship suggests that the *Circus Maximus* was actually considered *part* of the imperial palace on the Palatine, an Eastern tradition that repeats itself in the palace of Galerius in Thessalonike.<sup>30</sup> The Quirinal altar, on the apex of the Quirinal hill, highlights both his birthplace and the Temple of the Flavian Gens, a controversial, if not spectacular, monument. If indeed the third altar was sited on the Vatican plain, this would have put the altar adjacent to both Nero's stadium and the Domitianic gardens located there, the *Horti Domitiae*. The gardens of his wife, the empress Domitia, did not feature any monumental construction; their association with Domitian and the imperial family was strong, however. Although they later were dissolved and became the home of the Mausoleum of Hadrian, their Flavian name was used

'Damnatio memoriae' and Roman architecture," in *From Caligula to Constantine: Tyranny & Transformation in Roman Portraiture*, ed. Eric Varner (Atlanta: Michael C. Carlos Museum, 2000), 27-44.

<sup>24</sup> Brian W. Jones, *The Emperor Domitian* (New York: Routledge, 1992), vii.

<sup>25</sup> Anne E. Haeckl, "Dynasty, Cult, Topography: The Roman Contexts of the Templum Gentis Flaviae," in *Images of Empire: Flavian Fragments in Rome and Ann Arbor Rejoined*, eds. Elaine K. Gazda, Anne E. Haeckl and Rita Paris (Rome and Ann Arbor: Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali, Soprintendenza archeologica di Roma and University of Michigan, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, 1996), 11.

<sup>26</sup> Since the fall of the Republic, the authority of the Roman Senate had largely eroded under the quasi-monarchical system of government established by Augustus, known as the Principate. The Principate allowed the existence of a *de facto* dictatorial regime, while maintaining the formal framework of the Roman Republic. Most emperors upheld the public façade of democracy, and in return the Senate implicitly acknowledged the emperor's status as a *de-facto* monarch. Some rulers handled this arrangement with less subtlety than others however, and Domitian was among them. For more discussion on this issue,

see K.H. Waters, "The Second Dynasty of Rome," *Phoenix* 17, no. 3 (Autumn 1963): 201.

<sup>27</sup> Both Tacitus and Suetonius speak, specifically, of escalating persecutions toward the end of Domitian's reign, identifying a point of sharp increase around 93, or sometime after the failed revolt of Saturninus in 89. At least twenty senatorial opponents were executed, including Domitia Longina's former husband Lucius Aelius Lamia and three of Domitian's own family members, Titus Flavius Sabinus IV, Titus Flavius Clemens and Marcus Arrecinus Clemens (though the latter may have been exiled rather than executed). Some of these men were executed as early as 83 or 85 however, lending little credit to Tacitus' notion of a "reign of terror" late in Domitian's reign. For a full list of Domitian's senatorial victims, see Jones, *Emperor Domitian*, 182-188.

<sup>28</sup> James C. Anderson, "A Topographical Tradition in Fourth Century Chronicles: Domitian's Building Program," *Historia* 32 (1983): 93.

<sup>29</sup> Suetonius, *Titus* 8.3.

<sup>30</sup> Hazel Dodge, "Amusing the Masses: Buildings for Entertainment and Leisure in the Roman World," in *Life, Death and Entertainment in the Roman World*, eds. David S. Potter and D. J. Mattingly (Ann Arbor:

as late as the time of Aurelian.<sup>31</sup> Placed in a series, in and around the ancient heart of the city, the *Arae Incendii Neroniani* created a perimeter, or boundary, around Domitian's architectural footprint in Rome.

#### *Domitian and a New Rome*

The *Arae Incendii Neroniani*, through both their style and their inscriptions, evoke the Julio-Claudian imperial legacy and draw attention to Domitian's role as emperor and *pontifex maximus*. By constructing the altars and publicly placing Nero's name on a series of sacred monuments, Domitian highlights Nero's vow, a generous act by the emperor at a time of great distress. In completing this vow, Domitian focuses both on his own moral rectitude (something that might have been lacking in Nero) and on his image as a protector of the city.

A connection to Nero, though, was less important than one to Augustus. On this point, Domitian was very clear. In 86 A.D., Domitian publicly celebrated the centennial of Augustus' *Ara Pacis* by commissioning an issue of asses featuring the great altar on their reverse (Figures 6 and 7).<sup>32</sup> This coin issue provides the most accurate numismatic portrait of the *Ara Pacis* to date, featuring the west side of the altar with the flight of steps scaling the podium on the reverse of the coin.<sup>33</sup> The die-cutters detailed the sculpture on the façade of this precinct—the Romulus and Remus and the sacrifice of Aeneas panels are clearly discernible on top of abbreviated representations of the procession scenes on the north and south sides of the altar precinct, replacing the actual panels of vegetation. Significantly, on the north side of the façade, Domitian's die-cutters clearly emphasize the dynastic aims of this altar by showing one of the adult-child pairings from the dynastic processional on the monument's south side. On the obverse, the emperor's portrait does not recall Augustus (as a fair number of his surviving portraits do) but Nero. With his full head of hair, hooked nose, protruding lip and rounded,

thick neck, this numismatic portrait clearly blends Neronian traits with Flavian characteristics.<sup>34</sup> In this one coin, Domitian speaks of his connection to the Julio-Claudians, generally, and makes the leap from altar, to emperor, to dynasty.

These altars, though, do more than simply link Domitian to the Julio-Claudians. The archaic style of the altars, set off by *cippi*, placed around Domitian's own architectural projects, allude to the centuries-old tradition of the city's ruler (or hero) divining its sacred boundary. Legend states that Romulus himself ploughed the original Roman *pomerium* (sacred boundary), and that the Etruscan king Servius Tullius inaugurated it in the early sixth century B.C.<sup>35</sup> This *antiquissimum pomerium* remained unchanged until 80 B.C. when Sulla, in a demonstration of his absolute power as dictator, expanded the area slightly. From the first century B.C., then, the act of divining a boundary, or refining it, was part and parcel of Roman leadership—defining became a means to demonstrate control over the boundaries of Rome, and an emperor's realm of influence. The late second-century Roman author Aulus Gellius reports that several emperors took this privilege: Augustus, Claudius, Nero, and Trajan are all recorded as having expanded the boundary.<sup>36</sup> The only archaeological evidence that remains of any of the pomerial extensions in Rome are several white stone *cippi* commissioned by Claudius; these were found both *in situ* and scattered from their original locations.<sup>37</sup> These terminus stones, rather than a ploughed furrow, acted as the dividing line, and thus *cippi*, in their traditional role, were still markers of these ideas in imperial Rome.

Although the altars' inscription specifies the Neronian fire as their direct subject, upon taking the throne Domitian was troubled by a number of natural and manmade disasters. An archaizing monument to Vulcan, the god of both fire and volcanoes, must also have addressed these calamities. In addition to his role as the god of volcanoes and destructive (hindering) fires, Vulcan's positive aspect was to cause

University of Michigan Press, 1999), 241; J. H. Humphrey, *Roman Circuses: Arenas for Chariot Racing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 579-638.

<sup>31</sup> CIL VI.16983, cf. 34106 c; Hist. Aug. Aurel. 49.

<sup>32</sup> Roman coinage was a vehicle for political propaganda. Stamped with specially designed images and motifs, these coins were used by emperors to communicate with the masses—to announce victories, secure alliances, and solidify dynasties. This particular issue of asses is exceptional, and, as very few examples are known, it has come under scrutiny in numismatic literature. The obverse portrait of Domitian, facing right and with an aegis, is consistent with other smaller denomination bronze coinage issued in the same year (86) and in the latter part of 85. The reverse types for this year are all repeats from 85, with the exception of this one issue featuring an altar and the legend PACIS and SC (*senatus consulto*) in exergue. This is not the first time that a monumental altar appeared on a Domitianic as, though, and its authenticity is probable. Carradice and Buttrey, RIC, 249.

<sup>33</sup> This was not the first time that Domitian used the image of the *Ara Pacis* on his coins, though it is the only scene that is activated by figures. In several as issues in 84 and 85, a large altar (sometimes easily

identified as the *Ara Pacis*, as in RIC II<sup>2</sup> 226) appears on the reverse with the legend SALUTI AUGUSTI; Carradice and Buttrey suggest that this legend refers to Domitian's safe return from his German wars. Just as the altar has been constructed upon Augustus's safe return from Hispania and Gaul, Domitian here links himself to this tradition and reminds viewers of the unbroken connection with Augustus. RIC II<sup>2</sup>, 208-210, 224-227.

<sup>34</sup> Diana Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 176-177.

<sup>35</sup> Varro, *Ling.* 5. 143; Dionysius 1. 88.

<sup>36</sup> This is not an exhaustive list, as both epigraphic (the *lex de imperio Vespasiani* CIL VI.960 [= ILS 244]) and literary evidence supports Vespasian's extension of the *pomerium* in 70. Gell., 10.15; Mary T. Boatwright, "Tacitus on Claudius and the pomerium," *Annals* 12.23.2-24, *The Classical Journal* 80, no. 1 (1984): 36-44; M. Labrousse, "Le Pomerium de la Rome impériale," *MEFRA* 54 (1937): 165-199.

<sup>37</sup> The Claudian pomerial *cippi* likely originally numbered 139 and were placed at intervals of 70-150 meters around Rome. Thus, these were highly visible signs of Claudius's act, and, as Mary Boatwright suggests,

productive fires—fires that bring new life and new growth. Crafted as monuments to this new growth, the *Arae Incendii Neroniani* also reflect Domitian's intercession as a *pontifex maximus* as he sought to both protect the city (from fires) and monumentalize it to reflect his power over it.

Domitian's boundary was not a *pomerium* in the traditional sense, nor directly associated with the actual *pomerium* recently elaborated by his father. What these altars create, instead, is a sacred, delineated area, much like the "belt" of ancient altars, buildings, and places of religious importance surrounding the base of the Palatine; these spaces, often without elaborate architectural embellishment, were places of high veneration and created a sacred precinct (the Palatine itself) within the *pomerium* proper.<sup>38</sup> By placing these altars around the socially sacred boundaries of the city, in and among the most distinguished, and distinguishing, monuments and neighborhoods of Rome itself (the Circus Maximus, the Colosseum, the triumphal processional, the Quirinal), Domitian demonstrably intervened as *pontifex maximus*. As the *deus ex machina* of his empire, Domitian carved out an inner sanctum in Rome, emphasizing areas of the city that best served his interests.

The *Arae Incendii Neroniani* are symptomatic of Domitian's troubled reputation; they are simultaneously traditional and unconventional. As he conceived his designs for a new Rome, rising from the ashes of both fire and civil

strife, Domitian incorporated this series of altars as markers both of his architectural work and his regal aspirations. Acting as the *pontifex maximus*, or the supreme architect in the most traditional sense, Domitian laid out his new city as a reflection of his own familial greatness. Using the traditional form of a monumental altar as his medium, he constructed a new, internal boundary, one that both honored the vow made by his predecessor and illuminated his own designs for a new, Flavian Rome. By doing so, Domitian both angered and delighted Romans; the people loved him even more, and the Senate was repelled. In the year 96 A.D., fifteen years after taking the throne, Domitian was murdered by a mob of Senators, and his memory was obliterated from the record. The Senate, and their sponsored authors, wrote his story, labeling him an arrogant tyrant and enemy of the state. Although these authors attribute Domitian's downfall to his outrageous arrogance, it was his success in dispensing with the Senate and the old guard that was most threatening. A feeble misanthrope is strong-armed easily enough, but Domitian seemed to have the ability to move mountains, unrepentantly building upon the Julio-Claudian dynasty and launching the most extensive restoration and architectural campaign in a century. This made him very dangerous indeed.

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persistent reminders of Claudius's successfully aggressive foreign policy. Tacitus, *Ann.* 12.24; Gell. 13.14; Boatwright, "Tacitus on Claudius," 38.

tomb of Acca Larentia, the Lupercal—all archaic sites of veneration. Richardson, *New Topographical Dictionary*, 105.

<sup>38</sup> These "spaces" include, as Richardson notes, the spring of Juturna, the

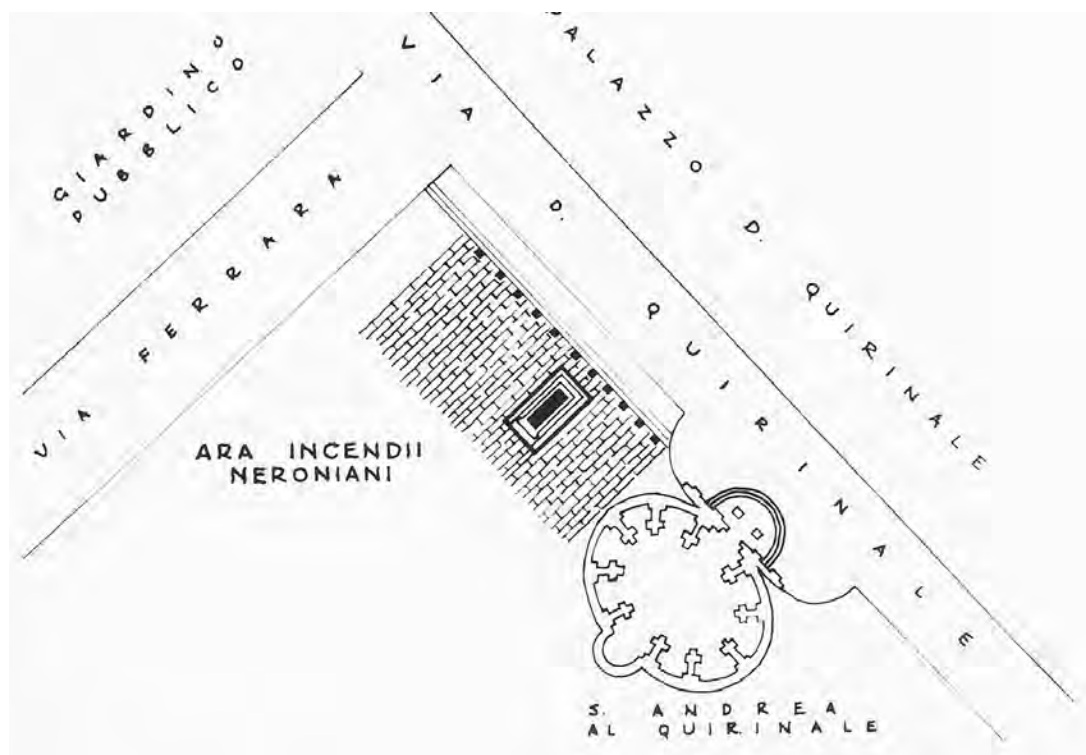


Figure 1. Rodolfo Lanciani. Drawing of *Ara Incendii Neroniani* on the Quirinal hill. Fototeca Unione, American Academy in Rome, Neg. 4357.

Figure 2. [Facing page] *Ara Incendii Neroniani* on the Quirinal hill. c. 83 A.D. Travertine. Fototeca Unione, American Academy in Rome, Neg. 3505.





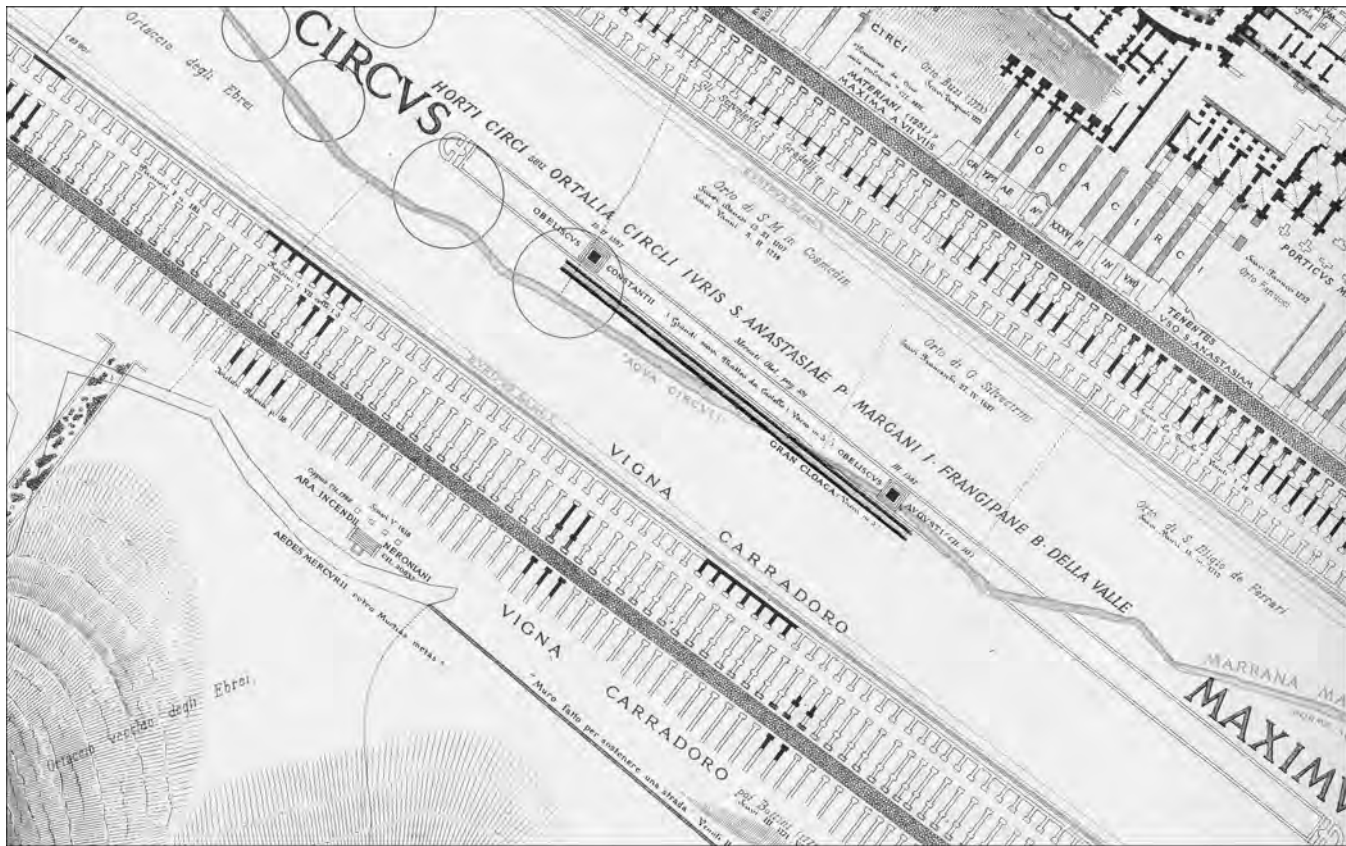


Figure 3. Rodolfo Lanciani. *Forma Urbis Romae*, Plate 35. Quasar, 1988



Figure 4. Bust of Domitian, first century A.D., marble. Reproduced with permission of the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali—Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma.



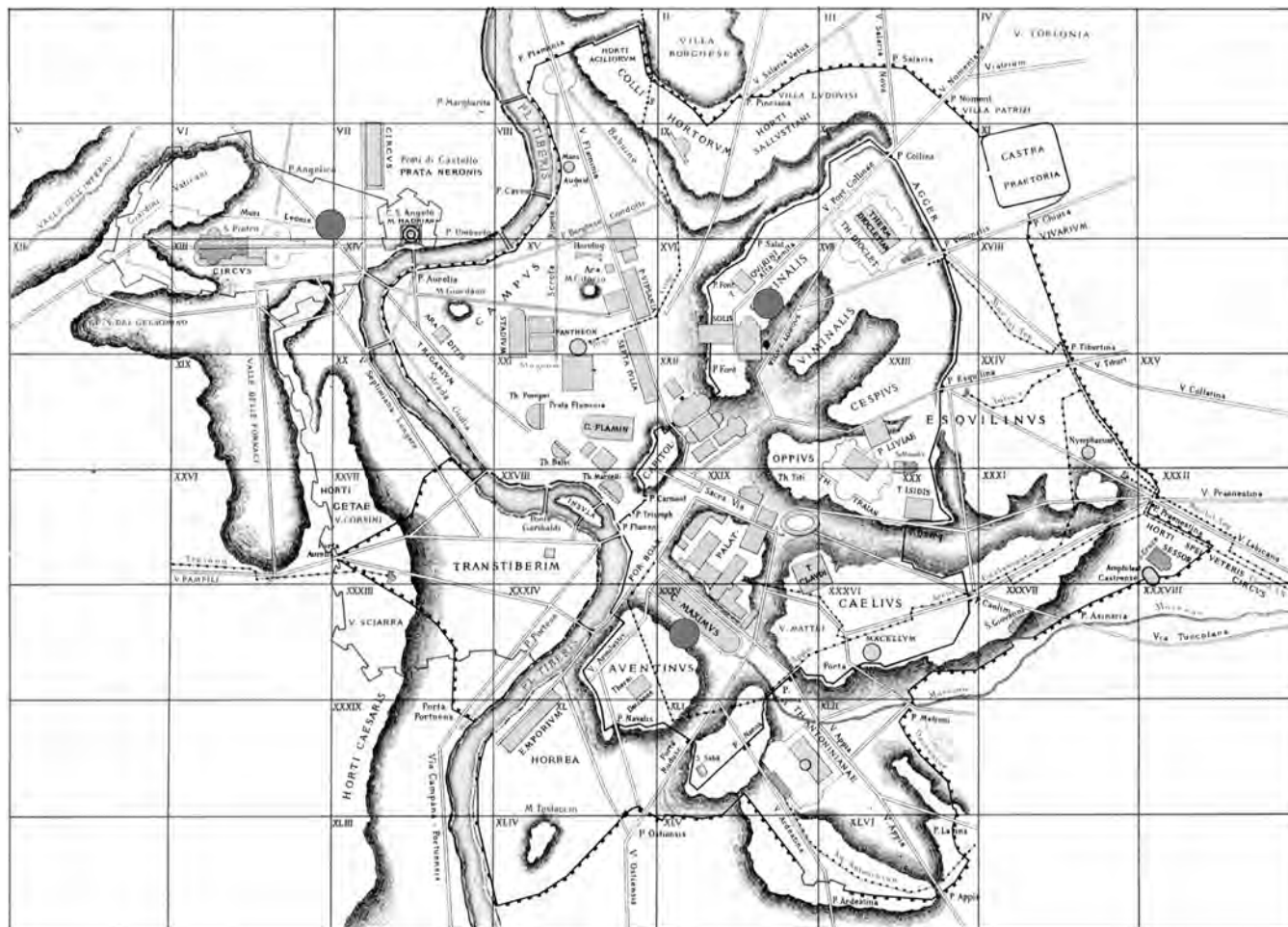


Figure 5. Rodolfo Lanciani's map of Rome, with the *Arae Incendii Neroniani* indicated. Quasar, 1988.



[above, left] Figure 6. As. Domitian 494. RIC.2.1 – Paris (Faux) 43. Reverse featuring the *Ara Pacis Augustae*. 86 A.D. Courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.



[above, right] Figure 7. As. Domitian 494. RIC.2.1 – Paris (Faux) 43. Obverse with portrait of Domitian. 86 A.D. Courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.