The Farnese Gardens were created in the mid-16th century by Cardinal Alexander Farnese, sealing underneath them what remained of the principle level of the Domus Tiberiana. The absence of surface remains led in time to the suggestion that there were monuments of different kinds in this area, in particular garden pavilions of the Neronian period. Thus until recently the Domus Tiberiana has been considered a part of the Domus Aurea, its architectural forms monumentalised by Nero.

Excavations began about ten years ago to establish the cause of the serious subsidence of the complex, and are still underway. They have examined both the garden terrace, and the back-filled cryptoporticuses beneath it, and revealed previously unknown architecture – articulated over two levels – that allows us to reconstruct a completely new chronological framework for the Domus Tiberiana.

At the garden level excavation has revealed the remains of a colonnaded portico and, within the peristyle, a large multi-lobed basin, covered with white marble slabs. This basin shows signs of rebuilding several times during the imperial period, but its original construction ties in with the presence of a lead water pipe inscribed with the name of the emperor Claudius.

This provides unexpected but important evidence that it was not Nero who transformed the Domus Tiberiana into a monumental palace, but the elderly Claudius (AD 41–54) perhaps drawing on an existing project of Tiberius and Caligula. Claudius was the learned emperor married first to Messalina, who was killed for her infidelities, and then to his niece Agrippina, whose son, Nero, he adopted.

It was in this palace (as Suetonius, Nero, 8 relates) that Nero was made emperor at the age of 17, and here that he lived under the enlightened influence of Seneca, in the early years of his reign.