

Introduction

This study explains and interprets the standing architecture and archaeology of a domestic complex in Rome's port city of Ostia. It focuses on the monument known as Domus del Ninfeo (III, VI, 1-3) which was, in its first phase, a multi-storey building with shops and apartments (*insula*) erected during the reign of Hadrian in Region III of Ostia. The structure is located along the *decumanus maximus*, in an area previously occupied (at least partially) by the seaside gate of the town's second wall circuit: Porta Marina¹ (Plates 1, 2 and 3). During the building's long life, lasting well into Late Antiquity, it underwent a number of changes to suit the needs of its various owners. The most important of these was the conversion of the structure into a well-appointed *domus*, namely a largely single-storey residence serving one family only.

The first part of this volume deals with the topographical analysis of the neighborhood of the complex which provides external evidence that the house was part of a large urban-planning project deployed in a relatively short time and aimed at enhancing the western stretch of the *decumanus*. The second part presents the building analysis of the Domus del Ninfeo. Originally, this was designed as a complex with shops, two apartments and an open area (a peculiarity of the building) on the ground floor. The upper storeys were occupied by flats. The building underwent a radical modification in the late Roman period (perhaps around the 3rd century A.D.), when most of the upper floors were dismantled and some 80% of the ground floor was converted into an elegant *domus*. This was also the final phase of the house, which survived until the end of the 4th century. Chapter II also provides the first results of the Superintendency's clearance undertaken in area A between 2005 and 2008 in conjunction with my PhD research. Chapter III assesses the differences between the Hadrianic and the late phases of the house, taking into consideration the social strata of their inhabitants, the function of individual rooms, the internal routes and the spaces for entertaining guests. Finally, the chronological discussion (Chapter IV) aims to put into historical context not only the structural transformations of the building, but the very existence of such a wealthy and luxurious residence at a time considered, by traditional historiography, to be one of crisis in the life of the town. A set of Appendices offer important supporting and supplementary data, notably the Gazetteer, the brick-stamps found in the Domus del Ninfeo and discussion of the restoration activity.

No comprehensive study of this monument exists. In 1949, Becatti gave the first description of the house in an article that was destined to remain the only account, in the aftermath of the excavation, of the late-antique houses discovered during the E42 campaign (1938-1942)². Becatti's text was, to quote his own words, only a "brief illustration of the essential traits of these houses"³. Thus, many late-antique *domus*-style residences still await a comprehensive study⁴. Given the lack of records and the deterioration suffered by the monument, Becatti's account remains fundamental for a great deal of information that would otherwise be impossible to acquire. The Domus del Ninfeo has subsequently been referred to in general studies of late-antique architecture like Heres' monumental work, where the structure of the *domus* is briefly analysed⁵, or in studies of Ostia's *domus*-style houses such as Vivaldi's *Tesi di Licenza*⁶, Muntasser's PhD or Danner's recent works⁷. More recently, Pavolini has dealt with the Domus del Ninfeo in an article on the internal routes of some late-antique *domus*-style houses; another account of the structure has just been published⁸. Notwithstanding that the conclusions of this study diverge from those mentioned above, my text does not set out to be a criticism of previous scholars but stands alone as an original study dedicated to a single monument. Other scholars have concentrated upon single aspects of the monument, mainly the large-scale paintings⁹ and the pavements in *opus sectile*¹⁰ but without any notable reference to the structure.

What I will not produce in this text is a comparative study between the various high-status dwellings from

¹ All buildings are identified according to their designation in Calza *et al.* 1953, 231-232. Apart from *decumanus maximus*, I have consistently used capital letters when naming roads.

² Becatti 1949, 10-13. Becatti's text was first published in 1948 in *Bollettino d'Arte* 33, 4, 102-128 and 197-224. A re-print (with the same title) can also be found in *Kosmos. Studi sul mondo classico* (Roma 1987: L' «Erma» di Bretschneider). Throughout this work I will refer to the 1949 publication. For the E42 see Chapter I.

³ Becatti 1949, 3: "Una sintetica illustrazione dei caratteri essenziali di queste *domus*".

⁴ A notable exception for its completeness is block V, II by Boersma 1985.

⁵ Heres 1982, 472- 476.

⁶ Vivaldi 2002-2003: this includes a long section devoted to just one part of the Domus del Ninfeo.

⁷ Muntasser 2003; Danner 2014, 416-419 and 2017 (especially 213-217).

⁸ Pavolini 2011 and Pavolini 2018. The volume of the latest *Actes du colloque international Rome-Ostia* has appeared concurrent to my publication deadline and apart from Pavolini's article, that I was kindly given as an advance copy by the Author himself, I could not get acquainted with its content. In the case of Danner 2017, I just had the opportunity to read the sections specific to the Domus del Ninfeo (see below).

⁹ Andrae in Helbig 1972; Mielsch 1978, 195-6; Mielsch 2001, 125, 137, 192, 204.

¹⁰ Guidobaldi 1985, 220; Guidobaldi 2001, 363; Bruno and Bianchi 2014. I have recently discussed all pavements in Pellegrino and Pompili 2017.

Ostia and other parts of the Empire. Of course similarities and comparative material especially from Ostia will be mentioned, but the focus remains the Domus del Ninfeo in its own specificity and peculiarities. This is also fitting since an up-dated study on the late-antique houses of Ostia has very recently seen the light¹¹. Apart from the topographical and historical chapters, both of which require a different methodology, building analysis has been at the core of my own study with all its merits and deficiencies. This explains why a number of drawings (one plan and eight between elevations and sections), all at a scale of 1:50 with some details at larger scale, have been produced as an integral part of the archaeological enquiry¹²: in the good tradition of the schools that have trained me, namely those of Prof. Cairoli Fulvio Giuliani at the Università “La Sapienza” (Rome) and Prof. Roger Ling at the University of Manchester, it will be all too apparent that the drawings do not constitute an attempt to enhance the aesthetic side of the book; rather, their purpose is that of helping the reader to understand the structure. One tenet imparted to me over the years is that physical contact with a monument is an essential starting point to approach it. This implies that my conclusions will be mostly grounded in the attempt at understanding what the monument was trying to tell me, rather than what I would have liked the monument to tell me and trying to find proof for it. A second implication of this approach is at the root of my doubts on the merits of a comparative approach between the *domus*-style houses of Ostia and those from other parts of the Empire. Of course there are recurrent themes that may be traced in decorative patterns or even architectural trends (i.e. a renewed focus on water displays, a progressive rigidity in the internal organisation of the houses, the specialisation of routes etc.), but every *domus* is different because each was conceived to suit the needs of its occupants and to fit its surroundings. This is especially true for the late-antique Ostian *domus*, all of which (with the exception of the Domus dei Pesci) suffer the additional disadvantage of having been erected within the constraint of the more ancient buildings they replaced¹³. This is why I think that, notwithstanding the indisputable merits of comparative studies, the late-antique *domus*-style houses of Ostia deserve to be considered one by one and not as ‘variants’ of a supposed, untraceable ‘ideal’ model. This study is an attempt at reconstructing the building history of the Domus del Ninfeo and, on that

¹¹ Danner 2017.

¹² The first aim of the drawings is to address the scarcity of visual records since, in a manner similar to the analysis, the graphic documentation available for the Domus del Ninfeo has rarely been updated since Becatti’s time. The plan utilised in Becatti 1949, 10 is slightly different from Gismondi’s plan published in Calza *et al.* 1953 tav. 11 (see, for example, the obliquity of the western side of the plot). In the archive of the Superintendency of Ostia (A.S.A.O. letto 0, cartella 6) there is a copy of the pavement (with separate drawings detailing the different patterns) and the four elevations of room E, plus drawings of apse U and the *nymphaeum* in courtyard D (as published in Ricciardi and Scrinari 1996 II, 216–217) executed by the Scuola di Specializzazione per lo Studio e il Restauro dei Monumenti (P. Aponte, P. Reali and M. G. Turco) in 1987. The drawings for this book have been executed by myself on site to a scale of 1:50 with the support of the optical instrument Wild T2 (see also Appendix 1).

¹³ For the Domus dei Pesci see Pavolini 2014.

basis, offering a social reading of the house as it developed from one phase to the other.

One important caveat has to do with the language adopted throughout the text. Many readers might be surprised that I still use architectural terms that have been called into question. They are perfectly entitled to their reaction, as not only the usefulness of such labels but most of all their adherence to the built reality are more than imperfect. As a result, terms like *insula*, *domus*, etc. are closely scrutinised by current scholars and rightly put to the test against the material evidence with promising results¹⁴. On the other hand, I consider that decades of studies on Ostia, Pompeii, Herculaneum and countless sites across the Mediterranean, have resulted in the formation of a lexicon that allows us to communicate effectively and picture an idea in our minds without the need to engage in countless detailed discussions. Generally all labels, whether old or new, cannot but be considered generic denominations only. Thus, except in those instances where identifications are patently wrong, I will still employ the term *insula* to indicate a multi-storey building (thus exploiting the vertical dimension) with either shops or apartments or a combination of both on the ground floor and private flats on upper floors; the term *domus* as a dwelling exploiting mainly the horizontal dimension and hosting an extended family (*dominus*, *domina*, children, slaves)¹⁵; the term *taberna* as a quadrangular space that may or not be provided with a backroom, widely opening onto the road and generally used for commercial purposes; the term ‘mezzanine’ as the wooden floor typical of (but not exclusive to) Ostian *tabernae* that was customarily accessible from within the *taberna* itself via a staircase either of wood or with the first steps in concrete and the rest of wood. Likewise, I will use the labels *decumanus maximus* and *cardo maximus* (attested in Latin literature, for example in Hyginus Gromaticus)¹⁶ even though they belong to the vocabulary of centuriation - or division of land outside the city - rather than to the description of urban planning. Here, following a general convention, they indicate the main east-west and north-south axes of the town¹⁷. And

¹⁴ See for example Pirson 1997 on Pompeii.

¹⁵ Generally speaking, the so-called *domus*-style house (for which Pompeii provides the widest possible range of examples) is a single family residence organised around one or more open spaces (*atrium* or *atrium* plus peristyle) mainly on one level, and therefore characterised by the exploitation of the horizontal dimension. Ostia’s evidence of *domus*-style houses is meagre in comparison to Pompeii, and limited to two main periods: from the Republican period (2nd century B.C.) to the end of the 1st century A.D., and from the 3rd century A.D. onwards. The distinction between *domus* and *insula* is also associated with a variety of social issues (wealth, status, sharp division between social classes etc.) that will be explored in the discussion of the implications underpinning the ‘renaissance’ of Ostia’s late-antique *domus*-style houses (Chapter III).

¹⁶ Dilke 1971, 89.

¹⁷ With the exception of the *Semita dei Cippi* (whose ancient name was almost certainly *Semita Horreorum*), the present nomenclature of all other urban roads is modern and purely arbitrary. Ostia’s roads generally take their name either from topographical locations (e.g. Via della Foce), or from important buildings facing them (e.g. Via del Sabazeo). A few street names (e.g. Via della Vittoria) lack any relationship with the site. In this volume, I will refer to the street called *Cardo degli Aurighi* as *Via degli Aurighi*, to avoid confusion with the main *cardo* of the city (known as *Via della Foce*).

finally, this work does not feature the differentiation between the patron (the person “who commissioned and paid for the building”) and the contractor / architect (“who was responsible overall for seeing the building process through to completion”), simply because there is not enough information in relation to the Domus del Ninfeo to make such distinction meaningful¹⁸. I have therefore invested the architect himself with the responsibility for the building project in all its aspects.

Almost at every stage of writing the book I wrestled with the problematic notion of Late Antiquity - in particular Late Antiquity at Ostia - and at some point I even considered the possibility of leaving the matter undefined. Late Antiquity is a conventional label referring to the long transition from the Roman Empire to the Middle Ages. Depending on any particular writer’s focus, the chronology for the beginning of Late Antiquity varies: Byzantine scholars generally find the foundation of Constantinople (A.D. 330) a natural starting point; theologians, on the other hand, adopt the Council of Chalcedon (451) as marking the major turning point from Antiquity¹⁹; Roman historians, though with notable exceptions²⁰, may extend the boundary up to the 4th or 5th century, when structural and administrative changes became more apparent. The late-antique phase of the city of Rome is conventionally set to start in the 4th century A.D.²¹.

The label ‘Late Antiquity’ has been applied to the history of Ostia from the 3rd to the 9th centuries A.D., and to various sub-periods within that span²². A first controversy in relation to the history of the town concerns this starting point and the evidence advocated for it: reduced building activity and institutional change. In the writings of such eminent scholars of Ostia as Russell Meiggs and Giovanni Becatti, this ‘beginning’ took place immediately after the ‘golden age’ in the 2nd or 3rd century A.D. Meiggs, in particular, dates Ostia’s “decline in prosperity” to the second half of the 2nd century, a remarkably early chronology²³. According to Becatti, the “crisis” first manifested itself during the decade 240-250, with the local institutional change and the dismantling of some important facilities (this view has been revived in more recent times by Pavolini)²⁴.

What these views appear to share is the belief that building activity can be used as a means of tracing the outlines of its history. As a consequence of this approach, the inevitable slowdown in building after the 2nd century can only be a reflection of the Third Century Crisis: the possibility of a ‘knock-on’ effect from the previous building extravaganza is not taken into consideration. We all know that building activity, often the archaeologist’s main evidence to interpret social and political change, in fact suffered considerably: “The troubled period of the mid-third century, when monumental building and the production of statuary and other works of art almost came to a standstill, nearly broke the tradition of skilled craftsmanship”²⁵. The recently re-discovered awareness of the somewhat tenuous link between building material and chronology, however, is an important reminder of the difficulty in differentiating between building phases unless other types of evidence are available²⁶. A good example of this problem is found in the area at the back of the Domus del Ninfeo, which saw diverse modifications from the 2nd century A.D. onwards. When appropriate, I will refer to the traditional chronology of the structures under discussion, but the reader should bear in mind that the vast majority of the dates are based upon observation of the masonry types since much of the other archaeological evidence has disappeared or was recorded only superficially.

There is no doubt that the 3rd century was a period of violent conflicts with serious repercussions for the politics and economics of the Empire - though mainly away from the Empire’s western territories. The political instability, aggravated by the ever more frequent and bold incursions of the ‘barbarians’ and by civil war, brought a period of stagnation and recession which affected the whole Empire. Living conditions were affected, but the repercussions of this process varied greatly across the Roman world: the Third Century Crisis was certainly far from being homogeneous²⁷. The political events were destined to have an impact on the economics of Ostia as well: drawing much of its wealth from inter-provincial trade, it would be a surprise if during the period of imperial anarchy Ostia had not experienced stagnation. The upheavals of the time have also been advocated as the main reason for the administrative change that Ostia experienced around the middle of the 3rd century. The last mention of local magistrates dates to A.D. 251: the logical assumption is that around this date the authority of the council was superseded by the direct control of Rome, in a process of centralisation dictated by the general instability. Instead of focusing on the loss of independence suffered by Ostia, however, we may regard the process of centralisation as having been a symptom of the special role played by the town from the 3rd century onwards. The attempt to ensure a continuous supply of essential goods to Rome even during perilous times, may, in fact, have been behind the

¹⁸ These definitions are in DeLaine 2002, 41-42.

¹⁹ Cameron 1993, 7.

²⁰ Gamsey and Humfress 2001, 3. See also Swain’s (2004, 2) remarks.

²¹ Harris 1999, 9.

²² Issues concerning the appraisal of Ostia’s history in the late-antique period are explored in Chapter IV. On the subject of loss and decline during the Late Roman Empire see Christie and Augenti 2012 (in particular Christie 2012 with a mention of Ostia at 5-6). An overview about periodisation is in Marccone 2008; see also James 2008 and Mayer 2009 (in general the whole volume).

²³ Meiggs 1973, 83-84.

²⁴ Becatti in Calza *et al.* 1953, 157; Pavolini 1986, 273-283. According to Pavolini we can subdivide the late-antique period into two macro-phases: the first from 250 to 420, when the town experienced a steady decline but was still able to perform new functions, and the second from 420 onwards, when decline appears to accelerate and become irreversible.

²⁵ Jones 1973 II, 1014.

²⁶ Tione 1999.

²⁷ A sample of contrasting positions on the matter is in Hekster *et al.* 2007. For earlier studies see Cameron 1993, 1-12.

change. Claudius had been the first to centralise control of the supply at the time of the construction of the harbour, when he appointed a procurator directly responsible for the *annona*. In Late Antiquity, the *annona* remained the main focus of the administration, and it was supervised by a *praefectus* who may have resided in Ostia or Portus²⁸. It remains open to debate, therefore, whether any local administrative change combined with the slackening in building activity in the first half of the 3rd century is a sufficient reason to set a starting point for the late-antique period immediately after the ‘golden age’, i.e. about a century before the customary date.

A problematic assumption that has partly to do with the chronology of Late Antiquity is the notion embedded within it. The widespread use of the evolutionist theory is a consequence of the tendency to read the history of the town in light of the 2nd century. This structures events into a rigid ‘birth - growth - maturity - decline’ sequence leaving little space for anomalies. The identification of the ‘mature phase’, therefore, becomes paramount in assigning a place to all the other pieces, as in a jigsaw. The crux of this approach is the judgment rooted in the interpretation of the historical events. At Ostia, the labelling of the 2nd century as the phase of ‘maturity’ was almost inevitable; similarly the characterisation of the post-2nd century period as the phase of ‘decline’. In this work I have considered Ostia’s 3rd century as the start of this ‘Late Antiquity’ because of the gravity of the historical situation which clearly called for unprecedented measures, whose reflections can be traced in the urban fabric. This was followed by the (ephemeral) economic recovery and prosperity underpinning the phenomenon of the elegant mansions we call ‘late-antique *domus*-style houses’. What I dispute is the negative judgment sometimes associated with the very notion of Late Antiquity and the inevitability of it. As will become clear in the last chapter, I advocate the need to consider that late-antique urban areas have their own specific trajectories, and should not be evaluated with a comparative mindset in relation to their classical counterparts.

The elements we have available to debate about late-antique Ostia are, at the moment, sparse. There is extremely promising research being carried out²⁹, but a coherent and homogeneous picture is not yet at our disposal. The archaeological data from past explorations are known and repeated from one study to another (and this book is not an exception): ultimately, it depends on individual bias whether one claims rupture or continuity with the classical past. I am of the opinion that both aspects (rupture and continuity) are present, and as such that we find ourselves

often locked in categorisations that take little account of the complexity of historical processes.

No doubt much of what I am writing here will at some point become obsolete thanks to new discoveries: this is the nature of a discipline that allows dwarves to benefit from climbing on the shoulders of giants. Proof of this is the ever-growing number of ‘late-antique *domus*-style houses’: to the list given by Becatti we should now add the Schola del Traiano (IV, V, 15), the Domus dei Tigriniani (III, I, 4), the Domus IV, IV, 7, the building commonly known as Edificio con Opus Sectile (III, VII, 8) and the Sede degli Augustali (V, VII, 2)³⁰. If their residential status is confirmed, these structures would add a new dimension to our knowledge: one striking feature, for instance, is the variation in their sizes, ranging from extremely spacious (Edificio con Opus Sectile) to small (Sede degli Augustali).

I would like to end this Introduction with the words of another of my former teachers: Prof. Letizia Ermini Pani. In an article about the modifications of the urban texture of Rome between the 6th and 9th centuries (i.e. the abandonment and reoccupation of older structures with changes of use) she wrote: “The phenomenon can only be outlined *per exempla* without generalising - which would be risky from the historical point of view and methodologically unacceptable.... the danger would be that of reconstructing the appearance of a city through some buildings only, leaving its connective components (our perception of which is only possible for very minute fragments) shadowy”³¹. Here I have tried both to avoid the danger of generalisation and to enjoy the study of one of Ostia’s most remarkable residential buildings.

Notes for the Reader

Given the breadth of this work it was necessary to re-name the rooms of the complex: the new convention is in Plate 5 and will be respected throughout the book. This plate represents the monument as it stands now: it is a simplified version of the plan in Plate 4. A full-size version of the latter (and of Plates 6–14) is available to download from www.barpublishing.com/additional-downloads.html.

In this work the label ‘room’ is adopted for a roofed space and ‘area’ for an open-air space. Worth noticing is also the adoption of the term ‘garden’ for every open-air possibly used as a leisure space (that is, the distinction between

²⁸ For the presence of businessmen with interests in Portus or officers of the *annona* see for example Pavolini 1986, 276, Pavolini 1996, 265-266 and Pavolini 2002, 347.

²⁹ See for example the Progetto Ostia Marina by the Università di Bologna under the guidance of Prof. David or the Visualising Late Antiquity Project by Dr. Lavan and Dr. Swift of the University of Kent (<https://visualisinglateantiquity.wordpress.com/>).

³⁰ Traiano: Bocherens 2012; Tigriniani: Brenk 2005; Domus IV, IV, 7: Guidobaldi 1995; Edificio con Opus Sectile: Arena 2005; Sede degli Augustali: Laird 2000. To most of the aforementioned buildings Danner 2017 adds the Domus delle Muse (III, IX, 22), the Domus accanto al Serapeo (III, XVII, 3), the Caseggiato di Bacco e Arianna (III, XVII, 5) and the Insula dell’Aquila (IV, V, 8). On this topic see also Pavolini 2018, 223-224.

³¹ Ermini Pani 2001, 265: “Il fenomeno, va detto subito, può essere delineato unicamente *per exempla*, astenendosi pertanto da ogni generalizzazione quanto mai pericolosa sul piano storico e inaccettabile su quello metodologico.... Il pericolo insito in tale procedimento è quello di ricostruire l’assetto di una città unicamente attraverso alcuni dei suoi edifici, lasciando in ombra il suo tessuto connettivo, la cui percezione è possibile per limitatissimi frammenti”.

‘area’ and ‘garden’ has more to do with the likely function of the space rather than its structural characteristics).

Other conventions adopted are as follows:

1. single inverted comma ‘xxx’: generalisation or artificial concept.
2. double inverted comma “xxx”: quote (both original language and translation). Though I have tried to be as comprehensive as possible, I have only enclosed quotes and translations from those passages by Latin writers that appeared to me to be more relevant to the discussion. In all other instances, the reader will find a standard bibliographic reference.
3. The long-standing practice of treating the stretch of the *decumanus maximus* facing the Domus del Ninfeo as running east-west had a rebound effect on the conventional orientation I adopted for the building and its surroundings. Thus, in this book the façade on the *decumanus* is called the external south wall, the wall facing the alley between the Domus and III, III, 2 the external east wall, the wall facing the alley between the Domus and the Domus dei Dioscuri the external north wall and the one facing the ‘Sullan’ walls the external west wall. More generally, the Domus del Ninfeo is said to be located along the northern side of the *decumanus* whilst the Caupona di Alexander Helix along its southern side and so on. It is easy to appreciate in what measure this choice conflicts with the topographical reality (see Plate 1), but I considered it a necessary evil in order to avoid any confusion with conventional labelling. Of course, reference to the accurate orientation is given when this is central to the argument being discussed (for example in relation to the possible functions of rooms C and E in Late Antiquity).

Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author.