

II. TOWNS AND HINTERLAND

THE URBAN DEVELOPMENT OF ROMAN OSTIA: A REAPPRAISAL

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1. Research objectives

The main aim of this project is to produce a new evaluation of the urban development of the Roman city of Ostia, concentrating on four key themes: the formation of urban identity; the nature and mechanics of urban change; the social structure of urban space; and economics of urban life. The focus is Ostia itself, although the work also explores the symbiotic relationship of the town both with Rome, and with the littoral around the Tiber mouth.

2. Data collection and analysis

Fieldwork in 1999-2000 allowed all the site of Ostia to be visited, with some 75% of the buildings examined in detail. Using the existing topographical plans as a base, changes of phase and construction type were recorded, and construction details noted. The archival research was useful, particularly the rich collection of plans and sections from excavations below levels of mid- to late imperial date made since the 1950s, and records of more recent work including geophysical survey and excavations of late antique levels. As a work of synthesis, the study has benefited enormously from the work of Italian and foreign colleagues, particularly the geophysical exploration of the unexcavated areas carried out by the Deutsches Archaeologisches Institut in Rome.

3. Selected results and general conclusion

The main results of the study so far are:

- Much of the second-century city is shown to be the result of piecemeal development, rather than the simple result of imperial agency. Combined with a statistical study of the brick suppliers (derived from the brickstamps), and a better understanding of the size and nature of the original building projects, the completed study of insula development has cast light on the complex interplay of individual clients and builders and its contribution to the second-century rebuilding programme (DeLaine 2001; 2002).
- The construction analysis shows that most, if not all, of the smaller warehouses/markets are private concerns, and the variety in plan and detail suggests that this is true even for many larger ones. This diversity of commercial properties in the second-century city again implies the input of private enterprise, in contrast to the uniformity of such structures at Portus (confirmed by recent geophysical investigation carried out as part of the Tiber Valley Project (See Millett and Keay)) which represent state-owned storage facilities, while their location within the urban fabric and individual design details allow a new reading of the commercial landscape of the city (DeLaine forthcoming). The ubiquitous courtyards, absent at Portus, would have had a specific function, which in some contexts I interpret as the location of auction.
- the degree and nature of urban change over time is shown to include shifts between commercial, religious, and domestic structures of varying status, not just the

erection of new buildings on the same lines as previous ones at higher levels. From the excavation records these changes can often be associated with episodes of flood and fire; this is comparable to the evidence from the standing structures which demonstrate the effects of earthquake and fire.

- the construction sequence of the insulae surrounding the Forum area has revealed the phases of evolution of the temples on the north side and has shown that the theory of a Trajanic ‘masterplan’ for the whole space is untenable. The development of the north end of the Forum is thus shown to have both Trajan and Hadrianic phases, with implications for the political and religious history of Ostia (DeLaine 2002).
- a study of the *medianum* apartments and associated larger high-status dwellings of the second century AD has revealed a modular design process which suggests the activities of a closely related group of architects/master builders, and allows speculation on the market for which they were designed.
- several groups of builders working in second-century Ostia have been identified, based on the use of construction details combined with the choice and differential employment of building materials; both a small, presumably local, ‘firm’, and a major contractor who worked on civic projects, have been detected, providing a clearer picture of the Ostian building industry than previously possible.
- the location of members of the *fabri tignarii* in society and their relationship with the Ostian building industry have allowed a clearer understanding of how Ostian guilds work (DeLaine 2003).
- late antique Ostia has to be substantially rethought, following the discovery of the Constantinian cathedral, the re-identification of several buildings as *domus* rather than public buildings, and the identification of a surprising number of new small baths being built and large public baths restored. This allows a new spatial analysis of the late antique town.

4. Conclusions

Within the context of the Tiber Valley Project, Ostia provides a unique opportunity to study the nature of urban dynamics and the functioning of an urban community both extensively and in detail, complementing the more general and/or intensive but limited studies based on geophysics and targeted excavation. In the studies of commercial aspects and the building industry, Ostia to some extent also stands proxy for Rome itself, being part of the same system of supply that links Rome and the Tiber valley.

5. Future directions

Other areas of the proposed book, which still require further work include: the early formation and development of the site; the religious topography of the later Republican and early imperial city; the structure of public life; the relation between Ostia and Rome; and the relation between Ostia and its littoral.

6. Relevant publications

- DeLaine, J. (forthcoming) The commercial landscape of Ostia. In A. MacMahon and J. Price (eds), *Roman Working lives and urbanisation*. Oxbow.
- DeLaine, J. (2003) The builders of Roman Ostia: organisation, status and society. In S. Huerta (ed.), *Proceedings of the First International Congress on Construction History, Madrid 20-24 January 2003, Vol. II: 723-732*. Madrid, Instituto Juan de Herrera.
- DeLaine, J (2002). Building activity in Ostia in the second century AD. In C. Bruun and A. Gallina Zevi (eds), *Ostia e Portus nelle loro relazioni con Roma (Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae 27)*: 41-101. Rome, Instituti Romani Finlandiae
- DeLaine, J. (2001) Techniques et industrie de la construction à Ostie. In J.-P. Descoedres (ed.), *Ostie. Port et porte de la Rome antique*: 91-99. Geneva, Musées d'Art et d'Histoire.