

RECENT DISCOVERIES AT THE MARITIME PORT OF IMPERIAL ROME

Excavations at Portus in the summer of 2011 uncovered the remains of a large building interpreted as a *navalia*, or military shipyard. It was uncovered during excavations undertaken by the Portus Project, which since 2006 has addressed some key questions about the character and development of Portus through targeted excavation supported by intensive geophysical surveys.

The *navalia* was built during the reign of the emperor Trajan. It is rectangular in form and lies immediately to the east of the “Palazzo Imperiale”. The building extends from west to east for at least 145m along the northern side of the famous Trajanic hexagonal basin at the heart of the port. A series of massive brick-faced concrete piers defined up to ten parallel arched bays c. 58m long and 12m wide opening onto both the Trajanic and Claudian basins. The building’s main entranceways took the form of massive arched openings, comparable in scale to that of the main vaulted hall in Trajan’s market at Rome. The building is without ready comparanda at Portus or Ostia, though its closest parallel in terms of layout and scale seems to be the building traditionally identified as the Porticus Aemilia (190 BC) in Rome.

The scale, position and layout of the building suggest that it played a key role in the construction and/or repair of ships at Portus. Much of the repair and construction work must have taken place in the bays, although the existence of a flat area c. 30m across between the southern façade and the Trajanic basin could also have been used for further work prior to dragging the ships to the water’s edge. As yet there is no evidence for ship ramps, which probably lie beneath the early 20th century embankment that currently runs around the outside of the hexagonal basin.

We do not yet know which kinds of ship might have been repaired, sheltered or built in this building. The existence of shipbuilding activities at Portus can be inferred from stone inscriptions that refer to the corpus of the *fabri navales portensium*, which was composed of wealthy freed slaves. This might be taken to suggest that it was used for commercial ships, but it is more likely that it played some kind of as-yet undefined military role as a *navalia*. Inscriptions mentioning sailors from the Misenum fleet have been found at Portus and Rome, and the presence of a detachment of the fleet makes sense if the emperor used the port from time to time. A *navalia* has also been recently claimed for nearby Ostia, although this is much smaller.

The preliminary results of the project have been published in: *Portus and its Hinterland*, (ed S Keay / L Paroli), Archaeological Monographs of the British School at Rome, 18.

www.portusproject.org

www.bsr.ac.uk

www.heritageportal.eu

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Aerial view over the northern sides of the hexagonal basin at Portus, showing the position of the Palazzo Imperiale (upper left) and the shipyard building (beneath the trees at the top of the photo).



Computer graphic reconstruction of the shipyard building from the hexagonal basin (Archaeological Computing Research Group of the University of Southampton).