

Spain – Ostia – Rome: Evidence of Economic and Artistic Relationships from the Excavations of the Palazzo Valentini in Rome

Paola Baldassarri

The archaeological excavations beneath the Palazzo Valentini, conducted by the Città Metropolitana di Roma Capitale, have brought to light a residential quarter of the Middle and Late Imperial period. In particular, these excavations have uncovered two sumptuous *domus* with two building phases, dating to the 2nd and to the first half of the 4th century AD. In this late phase they probably became a single, large *domus* with annexed *thermae*. The vastness of the building, the splendour of its internal decoration, and the location in the heart of the city suggest that the owners/inhabitants belonged to the highest social class, perhaps senators or high dignitaries of the imperial court.

The focus of this contribution is on the thermal complex in its Late Antique phase: a two-storey structure on the east side included an *apodyterium* connected with the large *frigidarium* on the ground floor. A room upstairs probably was dedicated to the care of the body, but also to cultural activities, and this room opened onto the *frigidarium* via a sort of loggia. The latter room had a unique *opus sectile* floor, found collapsed on the ground floor and now reassembled and partially exposed. The floor belongs to a limited group of examples of ‘*opus sectile a modulo quadrato con motivi complessi*’ following Guidobaldi’s classification.¹ The uniqueness of the composition, due to the complexity of the pattern and the preciousness of the marbles, only allows comparison with four other floors: one in Rome, now lost (Vigna Lupi), one at Ostia (Domus of Amor and Psyche), and two at Seville from Italica (the area of ‘olive groves’ and Domus of the Exedra).² In particular, the different patterns seem to use the same giallo antico almond-shaped motif and, at both Ostia and Palazzo Valentini, they are associated with porphyry eyelets which are not found elsewhere.

The chronology of the floor in Palazzo Valentini, as assured by the excavation data, dates to the years around 320 and 360 AD. A similar date is proposed for the Spanish floors, and also could support the reconsideration of the dating proposed for the two other examples, particularly for the floor at Ostia.

Among the reused marbles, the presence of an inscription from a dismantled funerary monument at Ostia could suggest a connection of our buildings with Ostia’s milieu. Moreover, the reuse of antique sculptures from older contexts as furnishing elements of Late Antique *domus* seems to be a common feature of both the *domus* of the Palazzo Valentini and of Amor and Psyche at Ostia.

On the other hand, the two *domus*, especially the *domus* at Ostia, appear to show a connection with a Hispanic, particularly Baetic residential context. While the *domus* at Ostia shows strong similarities with the Domus of the Exedra in Italica in terms of its floor, the *domus* of the Palazzo Valentini has a number of pieces of evidence that allow

us to hypothesize that its owners could have had a Spanish origin, or at least relationships with the Spanish provinces. The presence of Iberian amphorae, particularly from Baetica, supports this theory. The types and products are representative of a domestic life, that however reflects the general economic situation linking Rome with Baetica. Furthermore, in the *opus sectile* pavements of the *domus*, the presence of *broccatello* of Dertosa has been recognised, a Spanish marble commonly utilised in Spain but rarely further afield.³

All these clues could suggest a triangular situation between Rome, Ostia/Portus and Spain, as is attested for other provinces of the Late Empire. The owners of the *domus* of the Palazzo Valentini could have had a Spanish origin and/or their wealth could have come from the ownership of large properties in a Spanish province. This wealth may have been based on trade in a variety of goods, not only foodstuffs, but also furniture and marbles, which originated from Spain and travelled to Rome through the harbour of Portus. In the opposite direction, ideas and images for the decoration of the Spanish *domus* could have started from Rome and arrived in the province. Having a foothold *domus* in Ostia could have supported the control of the overseas affairs of this family.

Notes

¹ Guidobaldi 2001.

² References in Baldassarri 2017, 265–268; Baldassarri 2020.

³ Gutierrez 2014.

References

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