

The Development of the Maritime District of Ostia from the 3rd to the Beginning of the 6th Century AD

Marcello Turci

An overall urban reorganization took place in the maritime district of Ostia during the reign of Hadrian, evident in its sumptuous thermal complexes (fig. 1).¹ After the period of ‘military anarchy’ construction activity resumes at the Baths of Porta Marina, whose inscriptions document restorations up until the beginning of the 6th century.² At the same time, the construction of smaller *balnea* took place along the coastal road.³

In the southern part of *insula* IV, X is a building organised around a central courtyard (fig. 2). Three main phases can be identified. Despite the absence of stratigraphic data, the third phase may be dated to the second half of the 3rd/first half of the 4th century. From this period also dates the *balneum* located in the central part of the southern side of the complex. Some features which were distinctive of hotels and accommodation facilities, such as *mansiones* and *mutationes*, demand consideration. Firstly, the building type is focused on an inner courtyard and on hydraulic structures, such as thermal spaces and a large basin in the east wing of the complex. There is no clear evidence for the presence of animal stables; however, the room on the outer side of the eastern perimeter wall reveals some features compatible with stabling. Finally, the west wing,



Fig. 1: District outside Porta Marina: in red the Via Severiana (Google Earth 2007).

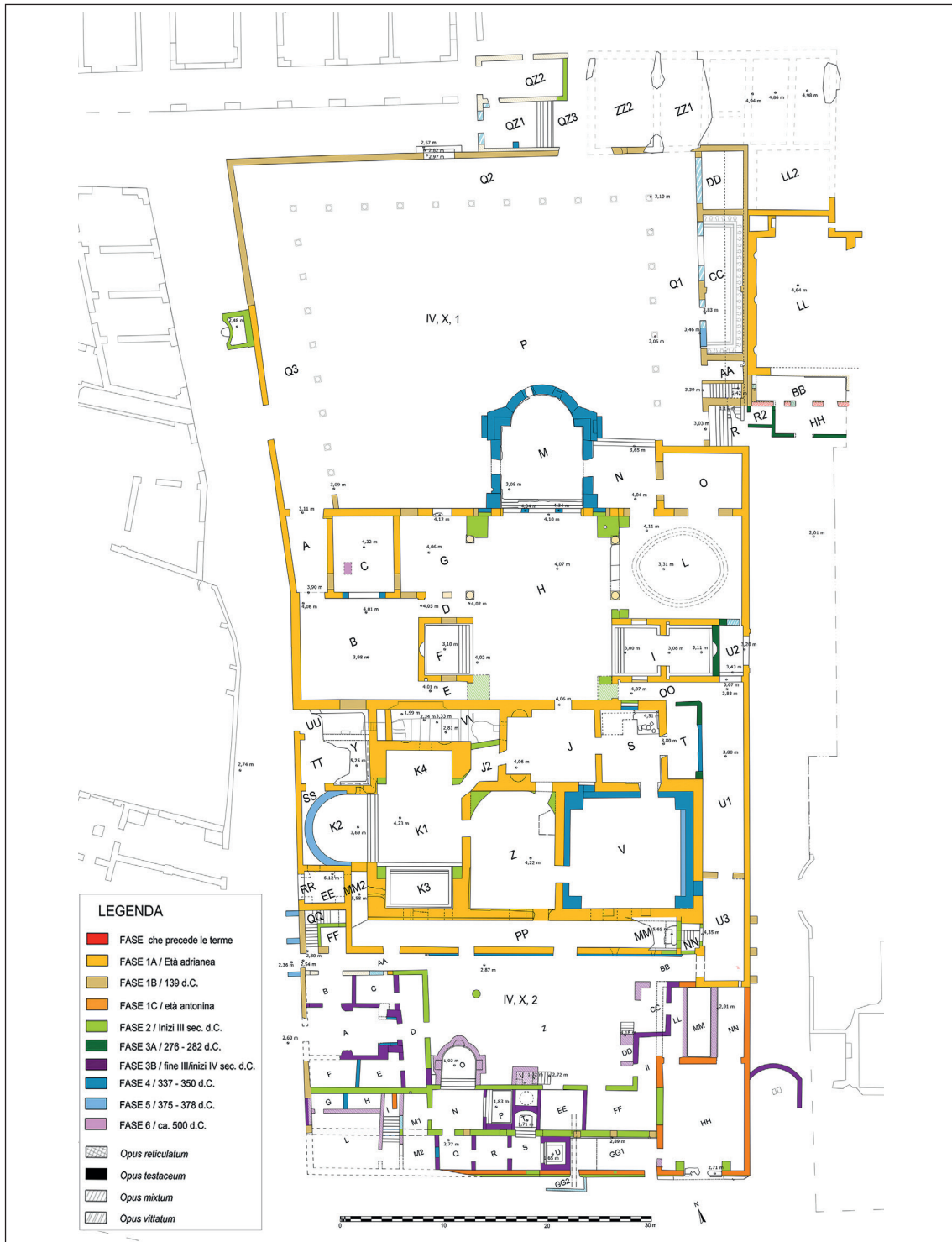


Fig. 2: Baths of Porta Marina and building organized around a courtyard in the southern part of insula IV, X.

being larger and divided into many spaces connected to the *balneum*, could have served accommodation purposes. The upper floor, documented by the presence of a staircase, could have housed dormitories.

The concentration of *balnea* along the coastal route shows the intensity of traffic during the 4th century, enough to attract private investment in the building of baths.⁴ In Late Antiquity the supply of wood for, and the maintenance of the baths in Rome was the responsibility of a guild under the control of the *Praefectus Urbi*: the *mancipes thermarum*.⁵ From other sources we know that the city of Terracina provided the timber for the baths.⁶ The *mancipes* probably travelled along land routes, such as the Via Appia, and presumably the Via Severiana, especially considering the fact that the majority of public baths were still active in Ostia and Portus in the 4th century.

Another kind of material imported to Rome was lime to repair buildings. It was requisitioned as a tax for certain properties of producers within Campania, Samnium, Picenum, and Tuscia-Umbria. The lime was transported from the producers' land to Rome by the guild of the *vectuarii*, who could count on three hundred oxen in the four regions.⁷ It is known that the Terracina lime supplies covered the needs of the lighthouse and the harbour facilities of Portus.⁸ The Via Severiana represents therefore the most direct way to Portus. Several Late Antique sources insist on the role of Campania as a *frumentifera* region linked to the supply of the *urbs*. Unique among the suburban regions, Campania was able to supply, with the exception of oil, all the foodstuffs part of public distributions in Rome: wheat, wine, and pork.⁹ The existence of an Aurelian forum at Ostia (later transformed into a *praetorium publicum*) near the sea seems perfectly consistent with the picture outlined above.¹⁰

That this complex should be located near the district outside the Porta Marina seems supported by certain elements. First of all, it must be considered that by its nature, it required a huge space. In the 19th century, Canina proposed the only hypothesis for its location; he postulated that the forum/*praetorium* was located to the east of the Baths of Porta Marina.¹¹ This position in the south-west part of region IV, close to the entrance from the Porta Marina and immediately to the east of the Baths of Porta Marina, appears reasonable also on the basis of the urban topography and the shoreline of Ostia. New identification data with the Aurelian's Forum proceed from recent investigations carried out in 2018–2019 (Turci et al. 2020, fig. 3).

The topographical contiguity with the Baths of Porta Marina, restored under imperial initiative up to the time of Theoderic, could be justified thanks to the presence of the *praetorium publicum*. In Late Antiquity, it could indeed be hypothesized that these baths ended up being connected to the *praetorium* following the intervention of Aurelian and especially during the 4th century. Following this interpretation, we could consider the intervention of Theoderic at the baths as an attempt to revitalize the *praetorium publicum* of Ostia, in connection with the ration requirements and the supply system of Rome and its port.

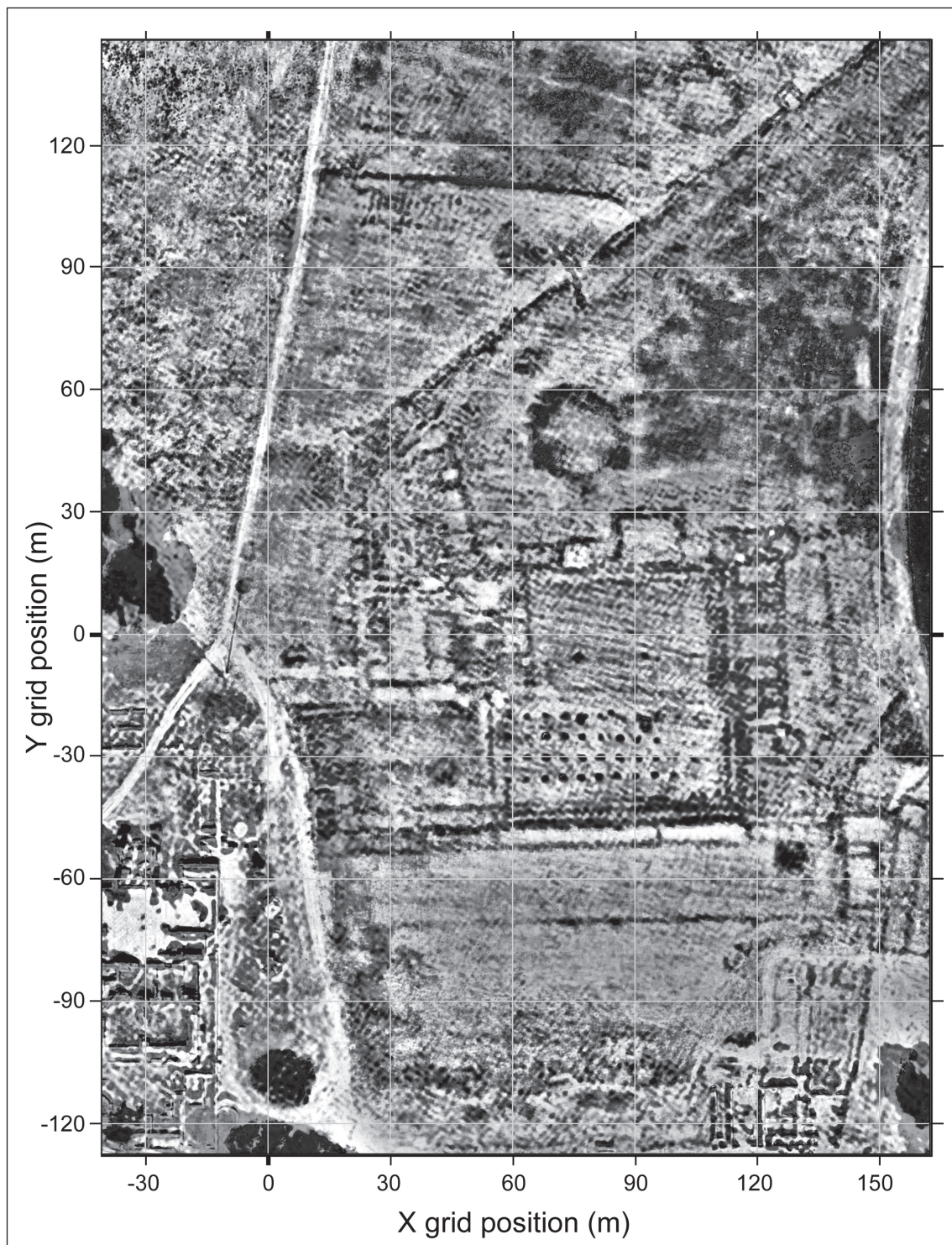


Fig. 3: Anomalies of vegetation based on the satellite images and orthoimages of the complex IV, XVII, 4 identifiable with the Aurelian's Forum of Ostia.

Notes

- ¹ Becatti 1969, 51. Basic literature: Calza et al. 1953; Pavolini 1980; Valeri 2001; Poccardi 2006; Pensabene 2007, 226–233; Turci 2019; Turci 2021.
- ² Valeri 2001, 307 f.
- ³ Pavolini 1980, 121; Poccardi 2006, 177–183.
- ⁴ Turci 2016, 170.
- ⁵ Chastagnol 1960, 361.
- ⁶ CTh. 14, 6, 3 (365 AD); CTh. 14, 6, 4 (382 AD); Symm., Rel. 40, 3 (384–385 AD).
- ⁷ Chastagnol 1960, 348.
- ⁸ CTh. 14, 6, 3 (365 AD).
- ⁹ Cracco Ruggini 1989, 232–236.
- ¹⁰ SHA Aurel. 65, 2.
- ¹¹ Canina 1838, 274 f. 307.

Image Credits

Fig. 1: Google Earth 2007 – Fig. 2: M. Turci – Fig. 3: Google Earth and Bing Maps processed by M. Uehara, M. Turci

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