

Aesthetics as Approval of Urban Trade? The Porch and Its Variations on the Main Façade of the Roman Macella

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In her survey Cl. de Ruyt¹ pointed out that the colonnade/porch on the macellum main façade were external elements which did not emphasize their buildings, but rather disguised them. However, this original observation does not seem to be still completely valid.

The macellum is a commercial space and a functional medium of the Roman urban life model. Of course, the city influenced the development of the market building, thus the analysis of each one requires to refer to its urban and territorial context. But also, the macella are often integrated into pre-existing not-rationally urban planning.² The macellum location in the city network is very important for the turnout of foodstuffs buyers and sellers: in fact, the building is located to meet the needs for its full operation. The 126 macella are always located in the heart of the town or in a high density housing area³ and open on a main street or a wide road, in relation to the forum or the most important streets: but, the most of these spots is occupied by public and/or residential buildings. In this respect, it should be remembered that this building is conceived as an interior space arranged around a courtyard, where the shops of macellarii, the porches protecting the buyers from sunlight and rain, the decorations and the shrine are located (the external tabernae did not sell meat and fish⁴). So, whether functional and aesthetic are focused inside, the outside becomes the link to communicate between macella and the urban landscape, the hotspot where the building realised its integration. This space is occupied by the porches on the fronts, serving as a functional and social purpose and allowing to be essential to insert the macella into the architectural landscape of their cities: that could have been the purpose of decorating the outside of these buildings.

The porch imitates as much as possible the style and uses the same materials of the porticoes/colonnades around and sometimes different columns in size and design and steps on the street marked the main entrances (fig. 1): all these are a strategic choice to aestheticise and to mark the presence of the macellum, offering a variety of architectural solutions dependent on the city cultural background at the construction date.

The porch on front is a colonnade, covered or uncovered, whose stylobate coincides with the sidewalk at the edge of the square or along the street. The idea of a macellum porch like a link between trade space and urban space is confirmed because their marked main entrance and because its design introduced aesthetics that made it new into the urban landscape: it is the synthesis between food trade and citizens. And this feature is surely the more relevant if we consider the macellum as an enclosed interior space per definition.



Fig. 1: Pompeii macellum porch.

Interesting data have emerged from macella of Minturnae, Paestum, Regina (?), Ostia, Dougga and Puteoli on the role of the porch on main front. The Gerasa, Pompeii and Perge case studies are examples of macella inserted in an urban restyling project, not as a strangeness in a previously constructed context. The main façades of the Philippi, Pompeii, Timgad (Sertius' Market) and Cuicul macella were underlined by porches publicizing the citizen patronage, too.

The final step is surely the front porch of the Cyrene market⁵ on the Valley Street, in which a propylaeum topped by bronze equestrian group representing Septimius Severus and his family was inserted in 195–198 AD, becoming a point showing the loyalty to the Imperial family.

In conclusion, the analysis of the samples highlighted that the beginning idea of a porch disguising the market core is misguided: the structure was not designed as a masking rather than it was conceived as the sign of the entrance for those approaching the macellum from the main street or the forum. I definitely think that this feature confirms even more the approval of the structure in its urban landscape. The reassertion of the centrality of the role of the macellum front porch would not entail the complete abandonment the opinion of Cl. de Ruyt: in fact, we admit that the initial forced inser-

tion of the new building in the cultural background and in the traditional architectural landscape needed a disguising structure to make soft its approval. But it is undeniable that the structure quickly turned into an opportunity for the macellum to establish itself through its aesthetics and function.

Notes

¹ de Ruyt 1983.

² Only the British macella are inserted in no traumatic way in the cities plans, because expected from the beginning.

³ de Ruyt 1983, 284–289.

⁴ de Ruyt 1983, 118. 145 f. 153.

⁵ Cristilli 2015, 76.

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Fig. 1: by the author.

References

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