

# A Monumental Structure on the Riverfront. Archeology and Architecture of the *Felicitas Iulia Olisipo cryptoporticus* (Lisbon, Portugal)

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## The Roman Monument's Historiography

The Roman building commonly known as “Galerias da Rua da Prata” was discovered in Lisbon following the earthquake of 1755, when a block was being rebuilt between the streets of Conceição and Prata, in the presently protected historical “Baixa Pombalina” area (fig. 1). This flooded subterranean building consisting of a complex of vaulted communicating galleries of different sizes, whose construction was, almost since its discovery, recognized to be from the Roman period, served as an urban cistern until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, it is one of the emblematic monuments of *municipium ciuium romanorum Felicitas Iulia Olisipo*.



Fig. 1: *Cryptoporticus* location in Lisbon's old city center (Baixa Pombalina).

The monument has been subjected to several interpretations. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was identified as part of a thermal building – due to the fact that it was flooded, the water seemed to sprout naturally from the ground and a pedestal with an inscription dedicated to *Aesculapius* was found nearby.<sup>1</sup> A baths building, for medicinal purposes or not, is the interpretation offered by most of the bibliography produced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, this interpretation has been rejected due to the state of conservation of the galleries (the cracks in the building allow the water to ingress) and from the result of the analyses of the water that floods it (the water belongs to the phreatic veins that cross lower Lisbon and has no medicinal properties). There were also those who suggested that the subterranean structure had been a cistern since its origins.<sup>3</sup> But the most consensual interpretation, from the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is that it is a Roman *cryptoporticus*, an engineering solution used to overcome slopes or build on unstable terrain, creating artificial platforms and functioning as a foundation for other structures.<sup>4</sup> Theoretical speculation has also arisen regarding which buildings would be based on the subterranean structure. In addition to the version that the thermal complex was built on the *cryptoporticus*,<sup>5</sup> certain hypotheses have appeared suggesting that there were storage facilities (*horrea*),<sup>6</sup> or a port *forum* with commercial vocation also associated to religious functions of the *Aesculapius* cult.<sup>7</sup>

There is no ancient description of *Felicitas Iulia Olisipo*, but there are enough traces available to give an idea of this capital of municipality of Roman citizens enrolled in the *Galeria* tribe. The *forum*, where one could find the main administrative and religious public buildings, has not yet been located. Other public constructions, such as the *theatrum*<sup>8</sup> and *thermae*, private<sup>9</sup> and public,<sup>10</sup> are blended in the urban fabric (fig. 2). In the outskirts of the city, along the *viae*, there could be found the necropolises<sup>11</sup> and other constructions, such as the *circus*<sup>12</sup> and, in the riverfront, salted fish processing units<sup>13</sup> as well as *horrea*.<sup>14</sup> Lisbon's epigraphy provides obvious proof of a brilliant municipal life, where all the magistrates have a perfectly Latin nomenclature, which differs significantly from other harbor centers where the Greek *cognomina* appear in the social group holding power. Greek *cognomina*, however, are numerous in *Felicitas Iulia Olisipo*, often related to freed men. These names could be the result of a cultural Hellenizing fashion but may also refer to a population of eastern origins, usually numerous in the large ports of the Empire.<sup>15</sup>

Due to its geographical location – a harbor city between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic – *Felicitas Iulia Olisipo* had some commercial importance and could have had a second *forum*, built over the artificial platform created by the *cryptoporticus*, with mostly economic functions, near the area of the port<sup>16</sup> and the industrial area of salted fish processing units. This hypothesis would have found parallels in *Hispalis* and *Ostia*.<sup>17</sup> In this context, the location of the *cryptoporticus* should, in fact, be related to the riverfront and its sandy river beach, as well as the city's harbor, the *horrea* and the numerous salted fish processing units presently known.

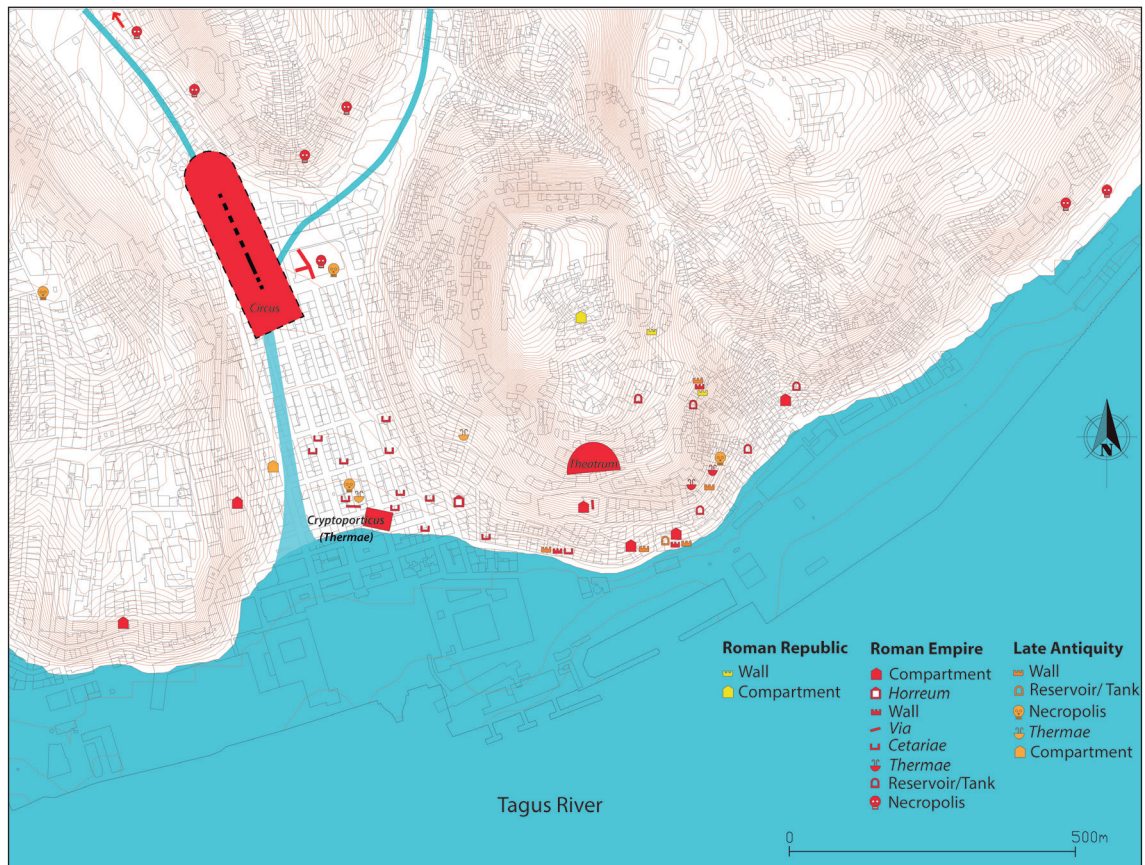


Fig. 2: Plan of the most relevant Roman period archaeological evidences in Lisbon's historical center (ancient Roman riverfront).

### The Archaeological Approach (2015–2018)

The available archaeological information about Roman Lisbon, along with the latest results of the *cryptoporticus's* archaeological approach, led by Lisbon's Center of Archaeology (CAL),<sup>18</sup> have finally enabled us to put forward hypothesis about the monument's original function and chronology, and get to know some of the technical contingencies of its construction.

The archaeological excavations that took place inside some of present-day buildings supported by the *cryptoporticus* showed related archaeological evidence: the remains of the *cryptoporticus* riverfront boundary wall built in *opus quadratum* and *opus caementicium*; a polychromatic marble flooring and water tanks in *opus signinum* coated with white marble associated with a *frigidarium*, on the west side; an inner wall and an external *cloacae*; and an *hypocaustum* on the top of the vaulted lower part of the subterranean complex, on the East side (fig. 3, 4). These remains seem to confirm the 18<sup>th</sup> century interpretation, suggesting a public port *thermae* supported by the *cryptoporticus*. The

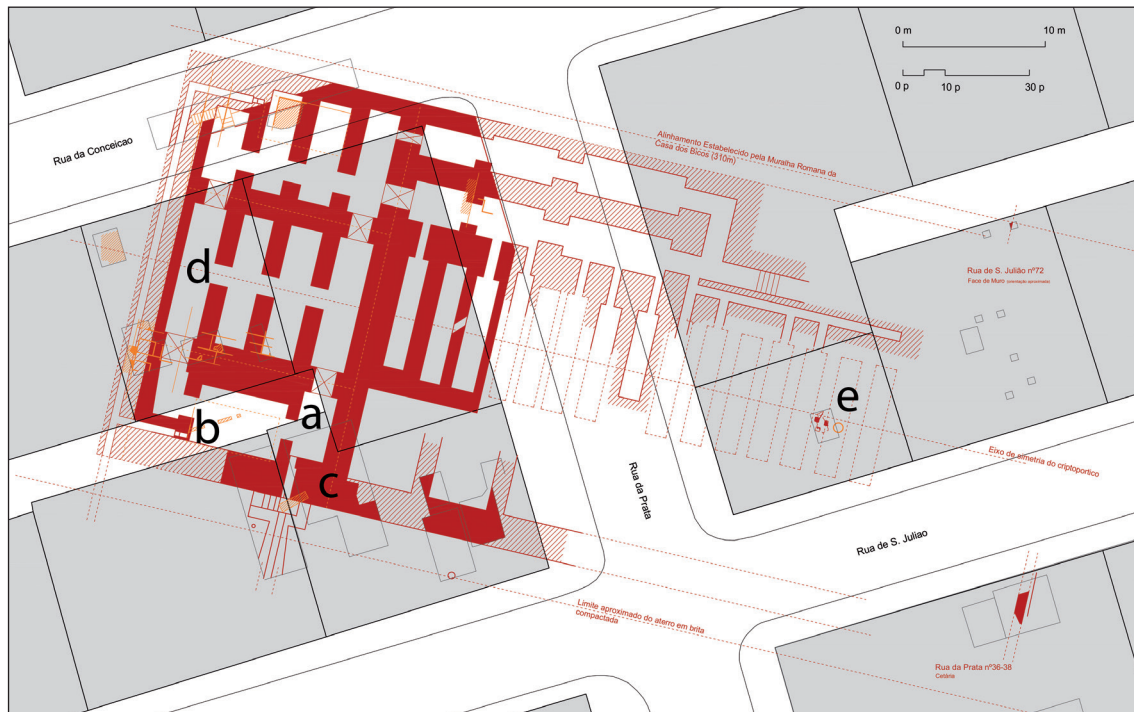


Fig. 3: *Cryptoporticus* plan study based on old surveys and on the information revealed by the recent archaeological excavations. Visitable area in deep red (Pedro Vasco Martins – *Forma Urbis Lab*).

construction and abandonment of the building's primary function occurred from the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD to the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. The underground structure was accidentally flooded during the Roman period (probably after an earthquake during its construction or shortly thereafter) leading to significant reconstruction works in this building that should have had some importance on the riverfront as a monumental harbor structure.<sup>19</sup>

Summing up, the *cryptoporticus* seems to be the remains of a public monumental *thermae* with a port vocation in the city's riverfront.<sup>20</sup>

A complex of vaulted communicating galleries related with a Roman baths complex is not unusual and it can be found in *Lutecia* ("Thermes du Nord" in Paris),<sup>21</sup> *Pictavium* (Poitiers)<sup>22</sup> and *Cassinomagus* (Chassenon),<sup>23</sup> all built in the early Empire. Roman *thermae* complexes offer several options in what concerns the scale, the specific organization of the functional parts, and the urban context.<sup>24</sup> In these matters, one can also find parallels for this Lisbon's structure in the so-called port *thermae* in *Barcino* (Barcelona),<sup>25</sup> *Tarraco* (Tarragona)<sup>26</sup> and *Baelo Claudia* (Bologna).<sup>27</sup>



Fig. 4: The breaking of a basement wall that concealed one of the main galleries is going to be the new, permanent, safe and inclusive entrance (a); remains of a cold-water tank (with a related drain) coated with white marble – *frigidarium* (b); *cryptoporticus* river-front boundary wall (integrating a *cloaca*) dismantled in the Late Antiquity (c); view of the set of subterranean galleries that make up the interior of the *cryptoporticus* (d); remains of *suspensura* and *pilae* from the *hypocaustum* – *caldarium* or *tepidarium* (e).

#### Lisbon's Roman *cryptoporticus* Research and Valorization Project (CRLx)

The Lisbon Town Council has played an active role in the Roman *cryptoporticus* since the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, promoting initiatives towards its investigation, conservation and divulgation. Among these activities, the most important was the monitoring of the accessible part of the monument.

The current dynamics of urban rehabilitation of Lisbon's historic center and the interest of the local administration in the valorization of the city archaeological heritage promoted an investigation and conservation project in 2015. CAL is developing CRLx, a municipal and multidisciplinary project that gathers internal and external partnerships, bringing together renowned institutions (linked to Archaeology, Geology, Hydrology, Engineering, Architecture and Urbanism) and collaborations with several investigators, working together in research and in promoting the use and enjoyment of the monument by the public.<sup>28</sup>

The project has been creating numerous possibilities for the scientific study of the *cryptoporticus*, namely through archaeological interventions and rigorous architectural surveys which were almost impossible to accomplish beforehand. Conservation and restauration solutions are also being studied and tested.<sup>29</sup>

The monument is very difficult to access. In fact, this flooded structure continues to support buildings. In a few days the public may visit the galleries on a yearly basis, once

complicated water drainage procedures and risky downward stairways in the middle of a busy street have been finalized. Meanwhile, there are currently no signs or visual information at the site of the monument or in the present day Lisbon's urban landscape.

A great number of procedures are to be undertaken so as to turn the Lisbon's Roman *cryptoporticus* into a monument, which will be permanently open and well known to the public. The CRLx's final goal is to create a new, safe and inclusive entrance and an interpretation center for the monument. The new access will be open at the basement of an 18<sup>th</sup> century building, whose reconstruction in 1913 damaged part of the *cryptoporticus*. A past heritage attack became an opportunity in the present.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Serpa 1963.

<sup>2</sup> Castilho 1935, 144–157; Figueiredo 1889; Martins 1909; Silva 1934; Moita 1977.

<sup>3</sup> Sequeira 1967, 306–308; Maciel 1993–1994.

<sup>4</sup> Encarnação 1973; Garcia 1974/1975, 10–11; Mantas 1976, 165; Moita et al. 1986, 59–60; Fabião 1994; Ribeiro 1994a; Ribeiro 1994b; Ribeiro 1994c, 83–84; Salvado 1994, 505.

<sup>5</sup> Alarcão 1988, 124–125; Moita 1994, 50.

<sup>6</sup> Almeida, 1973, 80; Garcia 1974–1975, 10–11.

<sup>7</sup> Ribeiro 1994a; Ribeiro 1994b; Ribeiro, 1994c, 83–84.

<sup>8</sup> Hauschild 1990.

<sup>9</sup> Bugalhão 2001, 66; Filipe et al. 2007; Filipe et al. 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Encarnação, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Silva 2012, 201–203.

<sup>12</sup> Vale et al. 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Amaro 1982; Diogo et al. 2000; Bugalhão 2001; Sepúlveda et al. 2003; Fernandes et al. 2011; Amaro et al. 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Amaro et al. 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Mantas 1994, 71–73.

<sup>16</sup> Fabião 1994, 69.

<sup>17</sup> Ribeiro 1994b, 193.

<sup>18</sup> Caessa et al. 2015a; Mota et al. 2018b; Mota et al. 2018c; Sarrazola et al. 2018a; Sarrazola et al. 2018b; Vieira 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Mota et al. 2018a.

<sup>20</sup> Interpretation of the archaeological structures done in collaboration with Pedro Vasco Martins (architect) from *Forma Urbis* Lab/Faculty of Architecture (University of Lisbon).

<sup>21</sup> Krencker 1929, 251.

<sup>22</sup> Krencker 1929, 252.

<sup>23</sup> Boyer et al. 1966.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Krencker 1929; Nielsen 1993; Yegul 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Miró 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Macias 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Bernal et al. 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Caessa et al. 2015b.

<sup>29</sup> Caessa et al. 2018.

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