

REVIEWS

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EDITORIAL NOTICES

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Ostia in the Light of Recent Discoveries

by GUIDO CALZA

Director of Excavations, Ostia

TWENTY years have gone by since I was first appointed Director of Excavations at Ostia, and I feel that I have devoted the better part of my activity as an archaeologist to the great task of bringing the dead city back to life.

All that was known about Ostia when scientific investigation was first started there was the legendary tale of its foundation at the mouth of the Tiber by Ancus Marcius, fourth King of Rome; its probable expansion under the republic, although the growth of Pozzuoli and the clogging up of the river's bed would support the theory of a period of decline for Ostia at that time; and its tremendous development under the Empire, especially in the second century. Of this there was proof in the vestiges of imperial constructions rising above ground and in the historically ascertained fact that Ostia was Rome's trading centre and outlet on the sea. Little or nothing was known of the later period of the city, nor of its decline and final disappearance.

On the other hand the existence of Ostia was never quite forgotten and certain medieval acts of vandalism, together with partial explorations effected after the year 1500 and a few attempts at scientific research ordered by the Papal Government, did throw light upon the extension of the old Roman city and gave inklings of its prodigious wealth.

The first modern campaign conducted in view of possible historical and archaeological results had, as chief object, to glean something of the topography of the city, retrace the course of streets, piece together the ruins rising above ground and isolate important monuments and edifices. Twenty years ago barely four or five streets had been uncovered in part, six or seven acres of land had been explored and not more than six buildings brought to light. The results today are: forty roads uncovered, some forty-nine acres of ground thoroughly explored, and over one hundred buildings unearthed and restored. Ostia is now a city risen from the dead, alive with memories which speak

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of past splendours, and no longer a desolate waste of land with ghost-like ruins peering above ground here and there.

We may now affirm that the town extended along the banks of the Tiber as far as the sea and that the main thoroughfare or *decumanus* ran parallel with the river and crossed the *cardo maximus* at right angles in the Forum.

The ground-plan is that of a Roman colony, with straight regular roads and houses evenly distributed along the roadside, very similar to modern cities. In this respect Ostia must have appeared ultra modern even in imperial times, if compared, for instance, with Pompeii, where streets were narrow and houses scattered about without heed to symmetry. An ancient inscription from Ostia (C.I.L. XIV, 352), mentioning a fifth region of the city, enabled me to trace the ground-plan of the five districts into which the town was divided.

The importance of imperial Ostia, as a source of data for the life of the Great Empire, becomes more and more evident as public and private houses come to light. Temples, among public buildings, are especially interesting, particularly those dedicated to Mithras, as giving a fairly good idea of the intense religious life which developed at Ostia through countless different cults, eastern and traditional, until the advent of Christianity. Of this there remained few but unmistakable traces, mainly due to the fact that Saint Augustine and his mother Saint Monica lived there for a time.

The chief interest of the Theatre, which is one of the very few built on level ground, lies in the entrance, which is in the very centre, an uncommon feature. The number of thermal establishments stresses the Roman craze for bathing; the baths recently unearthed near the Forum were supplied with special rooms for sun-baths. Even greater interest is aroused by a hitherto unknown type of architecture, revealed by the *horrea* or public store-houses, of which there are several well-preserved examples at Ostia.

Private houses were built upon what we should call modern principles, with several storeys, a type of building which was only exploited by the Romans after they had replaced the Pompeian system of illumination through inner courtyards, with windows looking into the street.

These are a Roman invention, in consequence of which came a new type of dwelling which later developed into apartment-houses (*insula*) for the middle classes, rising side by side with the rich and noble *domus*. Each builder, naturally, planned apartments, windows, balconies and

OSTIA IN THE LIGHT OF RECENT DISCOVERIES

staircases upon designs of his own, and one of the large blocks recently unearthed is unmistakably the forerunner, in architectural style, of the great palaces of the Renaissance. What is left of decorative motives is no less interesting, for it reveals that certain patterns considered typical of Byzantine or Romanesque art are purely Roman. Thus a visit to Ostia not only serves as a reminder of the past, but also furnishes evidence upon the Latin origin of certain architectural features which it is customary to consider as modern devices for the solution of problems brought about by the present-day overcrowding of urban centres. As time goes by and work progresses we find that dead cities are not only alive because their past has been resurrected, but, chiefly, because of their living links with the present.

Historical and archaeological data supplied by Ostia is rendered all the more rich and vivid by an artistic setting of documentary and aesthetic interest; mosaics, paintings, stucco-work and terracotta wares are profusely scattered everywhere, and although mural decorations of the second and third centuries have no special style of their own, as is the case at Pompeii, their interest is due to the medley of elements inherited from earlier periods, and ingenuously harmonized by these unrefined Roman artists.

Mosaics are numerous and very original; indeed they reveal considerable study and research, especially in the case of certain geometrical patterns found in the most humble dwellings, which are unlike others seen before. The variety of motives is remarkable. Among the large pieces is the now famous one with Neptune in the baths on the *Decumanus*, dated to the Antonine period. It covers the entire floor of the entrance hall, and depicts sea-horses, tritons, nereids and other strange vividly represented creatures. The twelve signs of the Zodiac are rendered with extraordinary accuracy of detail and mastery of design. Several mosaics in the square of the Corporations are worth particular mention for their subjects and execution; they are the signs used by commercial corporations, shipping companies and other trades, laid out on the pavement, before the entrance to each shop. Their chief interest lies in the fact that, besides the trade-mark, each bears a sign indicating the nationality of the tradesman, and therefore is unique. (PLATES I-II).

Originality, however, is not a term applicable to sculpture, for in this field almost everything that has come to light at Ostia is a copy from Greek models. A certain individuality is revealed by portraits, for the Romans excelled in this art, which drew upon their keen sense

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of observation and their knowledge of technique. A portrait of Trajan from Ostia, is the best in existence of the *optimus princeps*, and that of a young princess of the Julio-Claudian family, disguised as Artemis, is also a remarkable piece of work. The large statue of Rome, placed by the people of Ostia in the Temple of Rome and Augustus in the Forum where it was worshipped, is quite characteristically Roman and unlike any other Graeco-Roman sculpture known to this day.

The art which sprang up at Ostia, therefore, was not provincial art, nor could it have been, with Rome so close at hand and Ostia's enormous wealth to draw from. It is, rather, the work of first-rate artists who were presumably quite lavishly paid by prominent citizens of the colony, and is therefore useful as furnishing elements for the study of art as expressed in the capital.

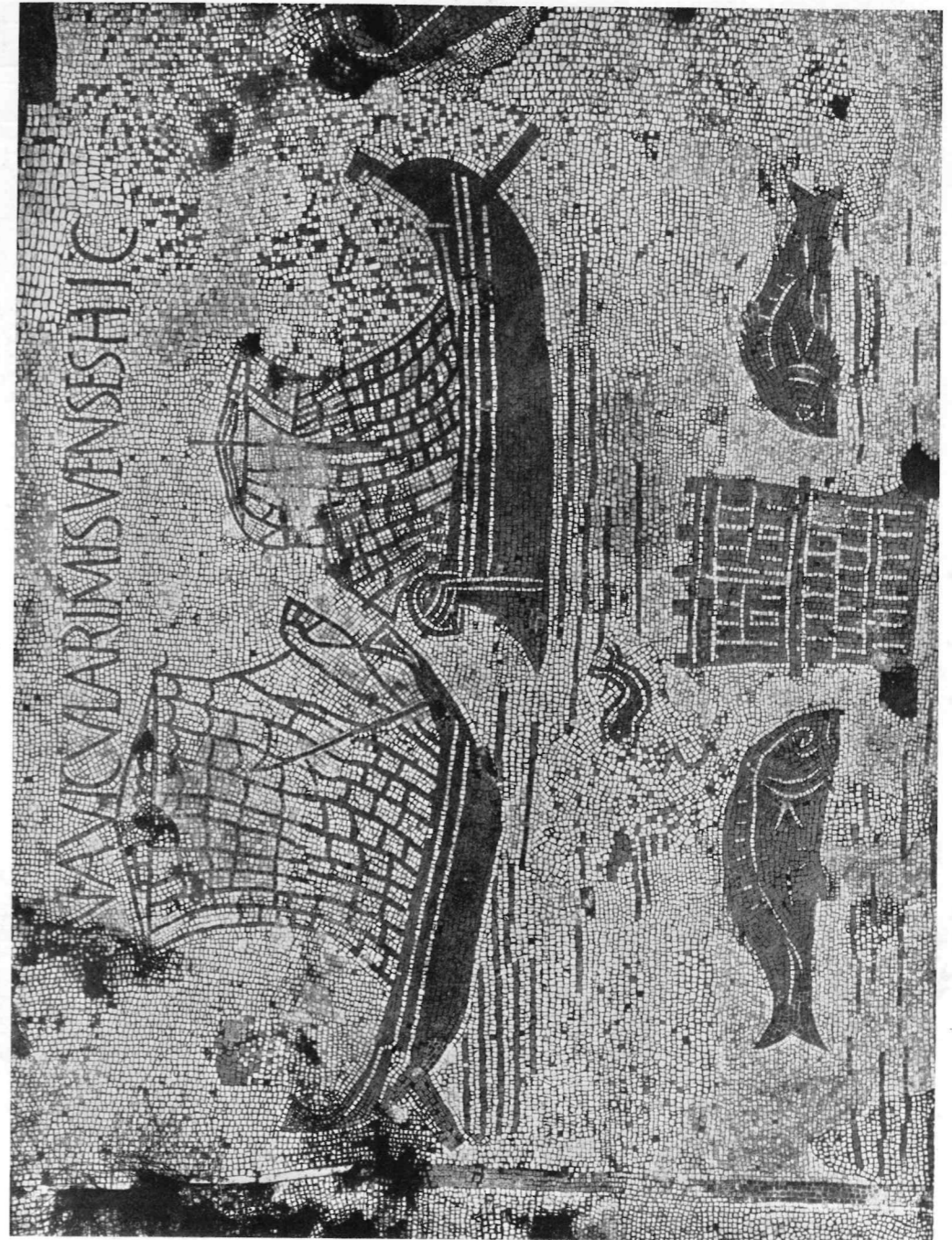
This brief survey of historical and archaeological data which Ostia offers to the student, provides indication of the far vaster interest which the city holds for anyone ready to delve deeper among its ruins in search of life and art. Ostia is not a copy of Pompeii or Herculaneum, nor a duplicate of the many Roman towns of Latin Africa from all of which little that is unknown is to be gleaned. It is, rather, a small-scale reproduction of what Rome itself really was in its hey-day, with the added charm that Ostia has preserved many typical features of the architecture and taste of that period, which have long since vanished in the imperial capital.

There are private houses, shops, store-houses, buildings for public use, sanctuaries and temples of long-forgotten eastern cults; there are mosaic paintings, stucco decorations and sculptures in most cases far better preserved than those found in Rome, and which supply missing links for the reconstruction of the history of a people.

Moreover inscriptions brought to light at Ostia supply invaluable data for the social and economic aspects of Roman daily life, and have entirely solved problems connected with the history and positions of the Roman colony on the sea. Further excavations will, no doubt, yield more interesting material, and probably reveal the existence of other monuments, and so give more documentary evidence upon the glory of Rome.

The tombs of Ostia belong to the less well preserved of the ruins but now we have been fortunate enough to find a complete necropolis not far from Ostia, and through it we are able to recognize a great part of the life of the first colony of Rome.

The recent discovery of a vast Roman necropolis at the mouth of



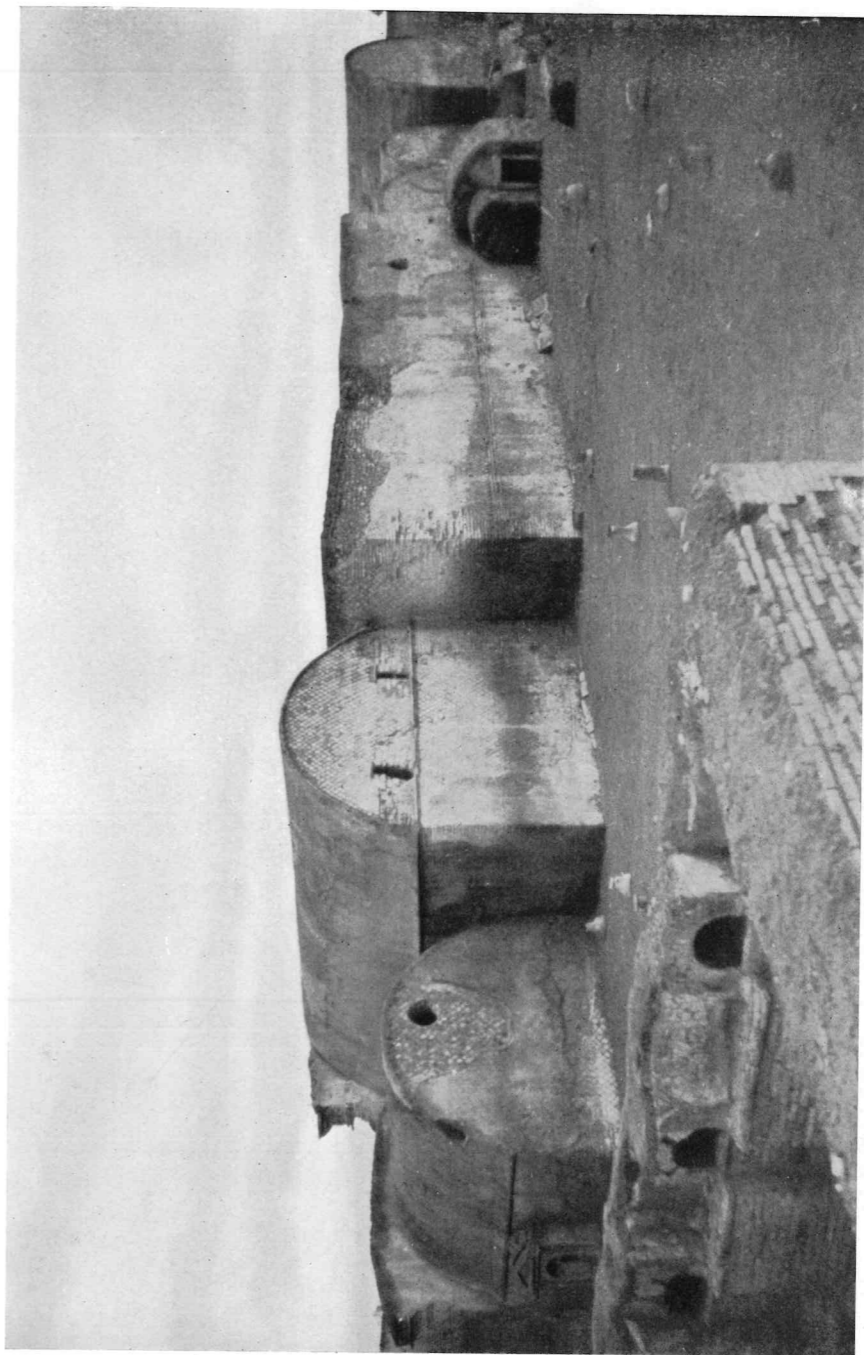
MOSAIC FLOOR WITH REPRESENTATIONS OF SHIPS, OSTIA
Pl. Anderson

PLATE II

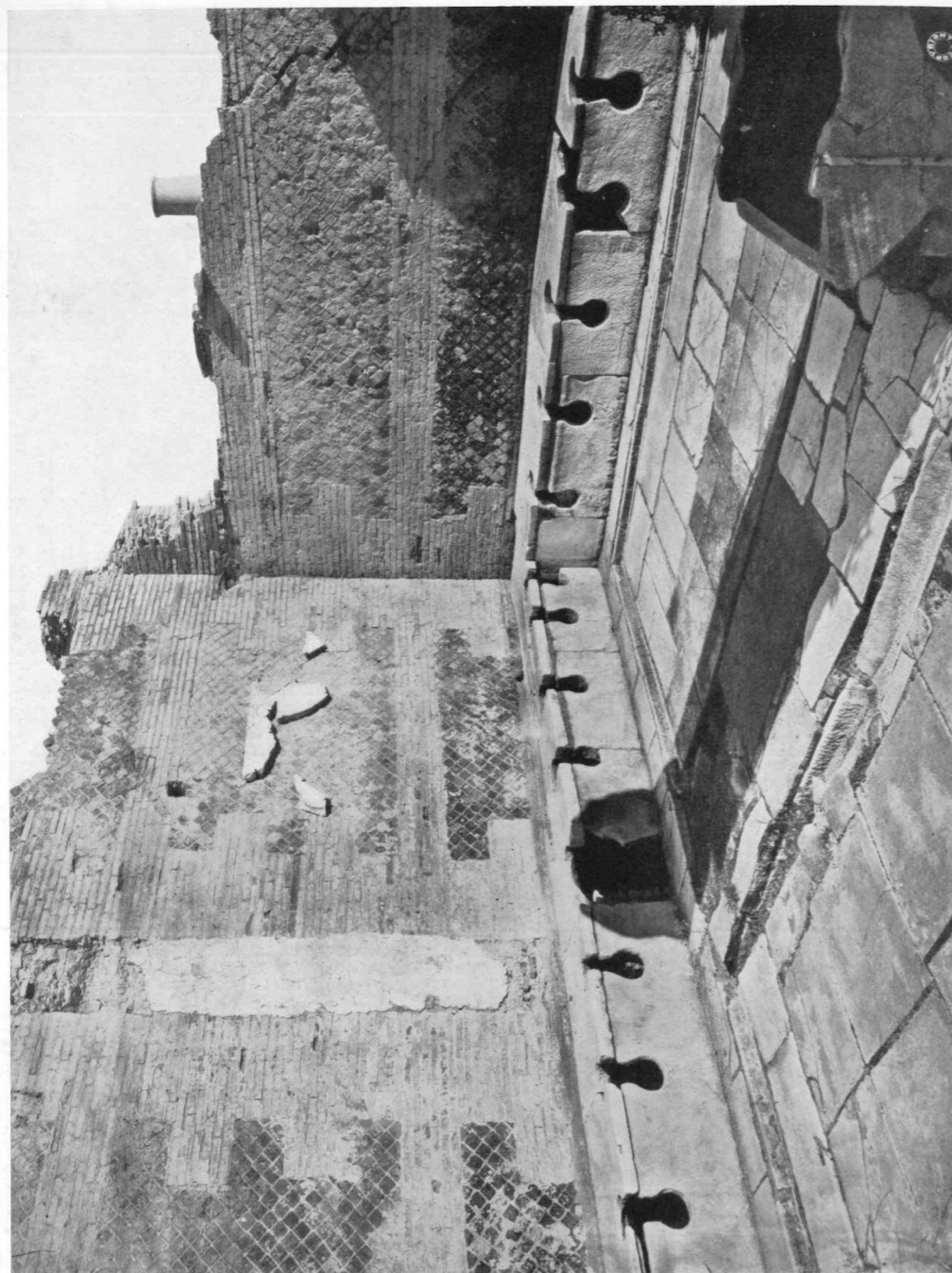


MOSAIC FLOOR WITH REPRESENTATION OF A LIGHT-HOUSE, OSTIA
Pl. O. G. S. Crawford

PLATE III



TOMBS AT OSTIA, SEEN FROM THE BACK
Pl. O. G. S. Crawford



PUBLIC LAVATORY, OSTIA
Ph. Anderson

OSTIA IN THE LIGHT OF RECENT DISCOVERIES

the Tiber, in a triangular stretch of land known throughout history as 'Isola Sacra' (sacred island) enclosed between the course of the river, an artificial canal dug by Trajan, and the sea, is of the greatest importance to the history of Ostia, as well as to that of the later port itself, which was given the pompous name of Portus Romae at some time in the third century.

The principal feature of the necropolis is the architecture of the tombs and their variety and their decoration. The burial-ground as a whole is of the second to fourth centuries A.D., as shown by dates on the inscribed tablets found on almost every tomb with the name and the age of the deceased. Large chamber-tombs generally have decorations in relief on the architrave over the door, and are in excellent style, not unlike good Tuscan cinquecento architecture. (PLATE III). Niches in the interior were used to receive the ashes of servants and slaves, masters being buried in full-sized sarcophagi, placed along the walls. Like the vaults, these niches are decorated with mythological paintings, very primitive and obviously the work of unskilled and untrained hands. Reliefs placed outside several tombs were intended to indicate the profession of the deceased.

Sarcophagi, however, are the most remarkable of the finds. A lid of uncommon size, supporting the reclining figure of a priest of Cybele, entirely preserved, whose sacerdotal robes and symbolic ornaments are of special interest to students of ancient cults, has received universal attention. Dancing children, or cupids, sculptured in high-relief on a marble sarcophagus of a child, miraculously intact, save for the figure on the lid, are so admirably designed and executed as to recall the work of such great masters as Nicolò Pisano or Donatello. Among notable sculptures are Hellenistic marble groups representing Pan and a satyr, a child on horseback followed by a servant, statuettes of a child, and of a genius; also reliefs showing scenes from life, such as child-birth, the bleeding of a leg, a blacksmith's shop, a corn-mill and a water-carrier. A marble bust of one Caius Volcacius Myronous, is in its way, as remarkable a discovery as the sarcophagus with the priest; the admirable expression of the face, which must surely have been an astonishing likeness, and the perfect technique would place this portrait in an even better period than the Antonine, to which for other reasons it must unquestionably be dated.