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Nicolò Masturzo, Thalassophilia *and living by the Sea.* Villae Maritimae *and* Domus *in Lepcis Magna*

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Thalassophilia and living by the Sea. *Villae Maritimae* and *Domus* in Lepcis Magna

Nicolò Masturzo*

Keywords: Tripolitania, Lepcis Magna, Urbanism, Roman architecture, Roman dwelling, Roman *domus*, Roman villas.

Parole chiave: Tripolitania, Leptis Magna, urbanistica romana, architettura romana, *domus*, abitazioni romane, ville marittime.

Abstract:
The city of Lepcis Magna, located on the coast of Libya, was initially established as a Phoenician trading post (7th c. BC). Over the course of its history, the city underwent significant development in its relation to the sea. This article examines the urban characteristics and value of the eastern coastal side of the city for its citizens, who constructed luxury residences along this strip during the Roman Imperial Age. The study is based on a topographic reconnaissance and, in one case, on an old archaeological excavation. An analysis of the layout of the coastal domus *of Lepcis indicates that these residences, constructed closer to the sea, highlight the way the landscape was viewed and emphasise their relationship with the marine environment.*

Lepcis Magna fu inizialmente fondata sulla costa della Libia come stazione commerciale fenicia (VII sec. a.C.) e nel corso della sua storia la città ha subito uno sviluppo significativo grazie al rapporto con il mare. Il particolare valore urbano che ebbe la costa orientale della città è indicato dall'affioramento di numerose strutture attribuibili a residenze di lusso. Il grande momento di sviluppo di queste domus *affacciate sul mare si può collocare fra il I e il IV secolo d.C. Lo studio si basa sulla ricognizione topografica e, in un caso, sul riesame di un vecchio scavo. L'analisi della disposizione delle* domus *costiere di Leptis rende evidente il rapporto dialettico fra abitato e ambiente naturale, e sottolinea il valore attribuito al paesaggio marino.*

The subject of this paper is the utilisation of the eastern seawards-side of Lepcis Magna for the construction of a number of residences for the middle and upper classes of citizens during the Roman Imperial Age[1]. The study is based on a survey conducted along the eastern coastline and provides the first overview of the urban layout of the area. However, it is pertinent first to provide some general indications regarding the subject of coastal villas and dwellings in Roman times.

Rather simplistically, here I use the term *domus* for houses inside the walls and villas for those outside, in the country (*suburbium*)[2]. Although the survey carried out on the eastern seawards-side of Lepcis has only partially defined its architectural models, they appear to be at time of the Roman-Italic type, which, as is well known, was influenced by Hellenistic architecture[3]. Furthermore, the chronology of the buildings examined, dating from the first or second century AD, makes it improbable that the architectural layout employed here derives directly from eastern models of Hellenistic Age. In her research on the villa at Wadi Yala, Luisa Musso has also clearly demonstrated that there is no

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This paper derives from the studies conducted in Lepcis from 1996 to 2001, either by the University of Macerata, at the time directed by Antonino Di Vita, or by the Archaeological Mission of the University of Roma Tre, directed by Luisa Musso. To them go my thanks to valuable support in the fieldwork. For a preview of the survey activity, see Musso *et al.* 1997, p. 267. The study was also developed through the examination of historical cartography and satellite images. The study of the eastern coast of Leptis was presented in 2022 at the *1st International Conference on Mediterranean Harbour & Coastal Archaeology* in Aix-en-Provence. I hope that this text will help the Libyan authorities in their efforts to protect the archaeological site. I would like to thank Maureen Fant for her careful original checking of the English text, with some additional aid from Doniert Evely later.
[1] For a summary profile of Lepcis Magna, see Mattingly 1995, pp. 116-122. Also, Masturzo 2013; Masturzo 2016; Mugnai 2021.
[2] On the distinction between *domus* and *villae*, see Musso *et al.* 1997, p. 262.
[3] A classic and well know example: The House of the Faun in Pompeii. For the development of houses with a peristyle in that city, but from a highly typological perspective, see Bruni 2023, pp. 102-119.

real Punic legacy in Tripolitan architecture during the imperial period, especially in coastal villas. Instead, she has emphasised the significant impact of Roman-Italic models[4]. In one case, the size of the remains (more than 6,000 square metres in plan) and the luxury of the peristyles suggest that it could be defined as a palace, by analogy with the largest type of *domus* enjoyed by the Roman aristocracy[5].

Villae and *Domus*

The practice of the upper classes of citizens of residing outside the city in luxury dwellings constructed along the Mediterranean coast (*villae maritimae*) is a cultural phenomenon that originated and spread hugely during the Roman Imperial Age[6]. It could be defined as a veritable passion for the sea or *thalassophilia* that affected the Roman aristocracy[7] or, more accurately, of the extensively Romanized upper classes too. In this context, I would like to review the case of Lepcis Magna. In addition to the specific location of such dwellings, built facing the sea - and especially so in North Africa - their reception rooms were decorated with rich mosaics whose iconography frequently evoked a marine environment[8]. Mural painting from the Augustan period also features landscapes with marine subjects, including port cities, lidos and villas[9]. The majority of examples of marine subjects originate from Campania and Rome; however, they are also present in Tripolitania[10]. This topic is of course a remarkably complex one: here we can only mention that marine subjects offer an insight into the Roman mental concepts that considered the sea as connected with history and life.

One of the most significant documents for understanding the value the Roman ruling classes placed on so-called 'pleasure villas' remains even today the letters of Pliny the Younger[11]. For example: in a letter to Gallus, in which he describes the virtues of his property in Latium, he writes: '*gratiam villae, opportunitatem loci, litoris spatium*'. That is, he refers to the quality of the construction, the location, and the landscape aspect related to the sea at Laurentum[12]. The only apparent and rhetorical modesty of the narrative construction (*villulae nostrae*, 'my little villa') is contrasted with the proud description of the various rooms, which numbered about forty. As is well known, in Pliny, a senator of consular rank, we are dealing with the self-representation belonging to the highest class of the Roman aristocracy.

Although this is a widespread phenomenon, it is worth examining the local aspects, which indicate how dominant cultural models were interpreted. We will now look at how Roman-Italic housing models were transposed to Tripolitania through a phenomenon of emulation by local Libyan-Punic aristocracies[13].

If in public architecture the phenomenon of emulation of Rome is evident, thanks to the monuments of the Augustan and Julio-Claudian ages[14], in the field of private architecture of Lepcis Magna we do not possess significant data. The older excavations have revealed the streets, but have not extensively investigated the dwellings within the blocks[15]. We can, however, refer to Sabratha. The houses in '*Regio* II, *insula 6*', which are small in size, may have retained an older layout to some extent, even in the 2nd c. AD arrangement. In these houses, a narrow courtyard gave light and air to the surrounding rooms. These were dwellings intended for citizens of low social status, probably built maintaining more traditional forms[16]. Even in the eastern urban expansion of Sabratha, which can be attributed to the first half of the 2nd c. AD, the mid-level houses in a few cases are organized around a large courtyard and mostly maintain a compact layout[17].

Despite the fact that the houses of the Libyan aristocracy prior to Rome's rule are unknown, in Lepcis Magna the complete adherence in the Augustan age to the official architectural models (theatres, large arcaded areas (*porticus*), marketplaces, temples) suggests that the aristocratic houses of the imperial age may have mirrored the components of Roman-Italic luxury dwellings[18].

[4] Musso 2024, pp. 242-243.

[5] On the late Republican or early Imperial aristocratic housing in Rome, see Carandini 2010, pp. 11-15; Coarelli 2012, pp. 290-296, 303-319. It is always worth reading Cicero's, *De domo sua*, chapters 23–24, 40–41 and 44.

[6] See Marzano, Métraux 2018; Musso 2024, pp. 243-245.

[7] See Marzano 2007, pp. 15–34. But here the typological approach seems to overlook the *ars combinatoria* of the owners.

[8] Fantar 1994, pp. 112–122.

[9] Pliny, *NH* 35.116-117; cf. edn. Turin 1988, the note at p. 421 (Corso A.).

[10] See Croisille 2005, pp. 206-218, fig. 317.

[11] Vs. the use of 'pleasure villas' vd. Musso 2024, pp. 235, 245.

[12] Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 2.17, to Gallus. On his letters and the villas, see Re 2021.

[13] See note 4.

[14] Kreikenbom 2011; Masturzo 2013. See also below.

[15] However, an entire residential quarter at south-west of the theatre has not yet been published. See, Caputo, Traversari 1976, tav. A.

[16] Kenrick 1986, pp. 124-135, also cf., pp. 313-315.

[17] Kenrick 1986, pp. 314-315, fig. 124.

[18] See note 14 and 28. *Contra* the theory of a Punic tradition (Thébert 1986, pp. 240-241) see Musso 2024, p. 243, note 38.

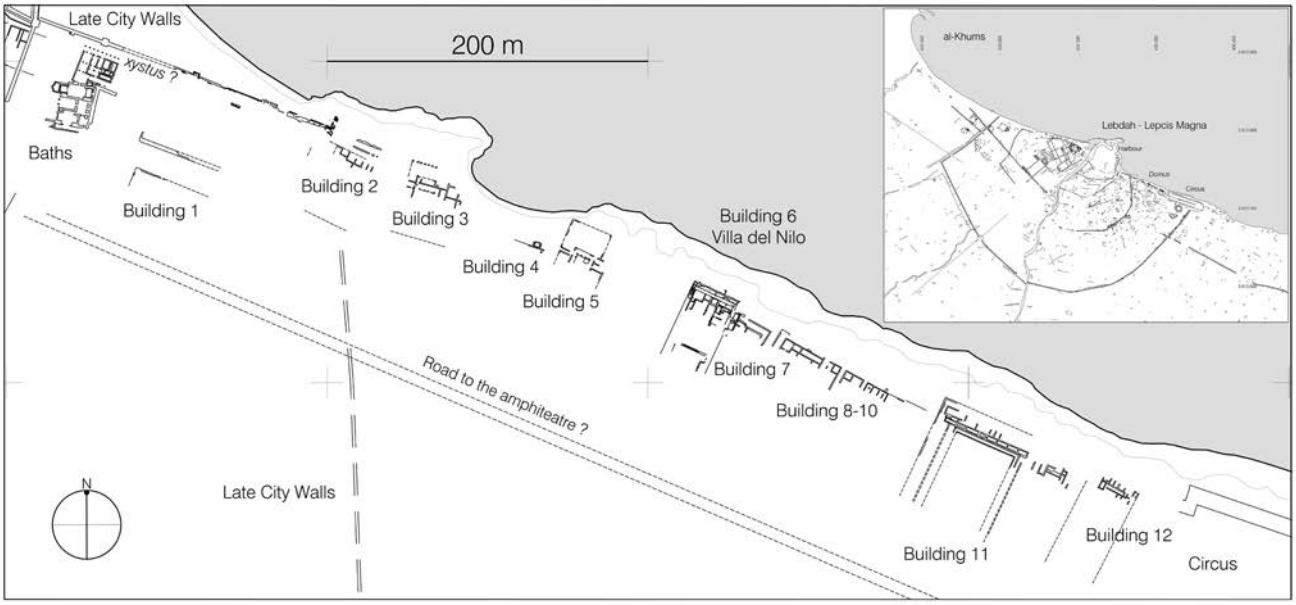

Fig. 1. The buildings along the east coast of Lepcis Magna. Reconnaissance and topographic surveys were conducted in 1996, 1998 and 2001 by N. Masturzo and G. Matug (Department of Antiquities of Leptis Magna). A general plan of the city is shown at the corner (drawing by the A.).

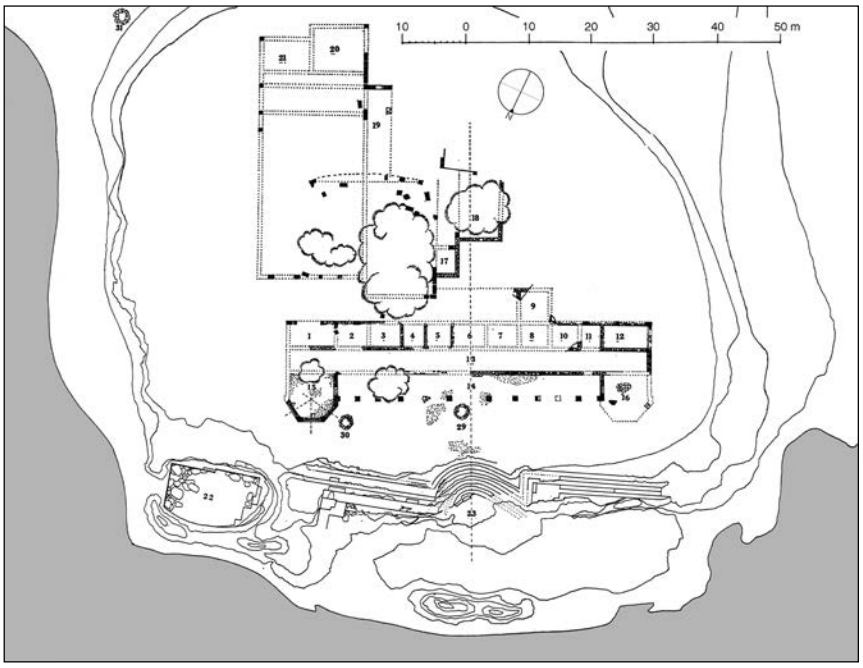

Fig. 2. Plan of the 'Villa of the Maritime Odeon' (from Salza Prina Ricotti 1971, tab.1).

Maritime Villas and the City of Lepcis

Let us begin with a quick examination of the maritime villas, the luxury dwellings built outside the city along the coast of the Lepcis region (fig. 1). These cases will later be compared with the *domus* built in the city along the coast.

The chronology of the maritime villas is still vague, but the culmination of the phenomenon can be placed with some certainty in the Antonine period (138-193 AD)[19]. Of some villas, just the plan is known, but even so this allows us to identify its schemes. It can be seen that in the villas built in the Silin district, some ten kilometres west of Lepcis Magna, the layout of the rooms is quite free, even though the various rooms are grouped into distinct quarters[20].

The plan of the so-called Villa dell'Odeon Marittimo (Villa of the Maritime Odeon) is notable for its polygonal pavilions at the end of a portico and a long corridor that faces the sea. Best protected from the sea winds is the large southern quarter (fig. 2)[21]. More extensive and with a more complex plan is the so-called Villa del Piccolo Circo (Villa of the Small Circus), in which at least four distinct quarters can be identified. On the west is a path (*xistos* or *ambulatio*) for strolling along, which has suggested the villa's name[22] (fig. 3). In my opinion, here we find the same system as

[19] In Villa Silin – wadi Yala, for example, floor mosaics indicate an early phase around 140-160 AD and new interventions from the early Severan age. See Musso 2024, p. 241.

[20] The survey conducted by Eugenia Salza Prina Ricotti remains a reference on this topic: Salza Prina Ricotti 1971. Now cf. Wilson 2018, pp. 286-297.

[21] Salza Prina Ricotti 1971, pp. 140-151.

[22] Salza Prina Ricotti 1971, pp. 154-160.

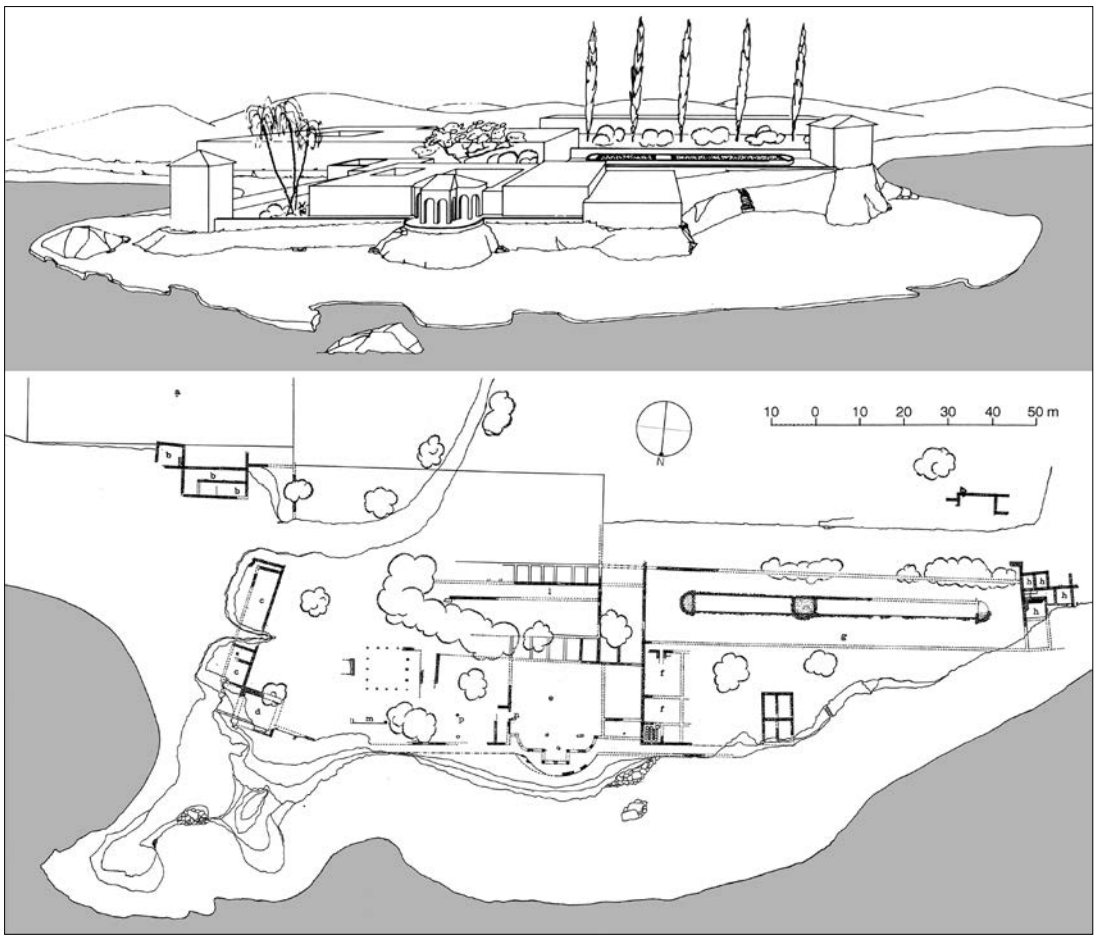

Fig. 3. Perspective and plan of the 'Villa of the Small Circus' (from Salza Prina Ricotti 1971, fig. 12, pl. 3).

in Pliny's description: different groups of rooms, some intended to enhance the marine landscape aspects and others, more reserved, that functioned for rest and private activities. The connection of maritime villas with inland ownership is debated, but this hypothesis cannot be excluded a priori: the pragmatic use of land (*utilitas*) was closely associated with the ruling classes of the Imperial Age[23].

In these two examples, one can recognize elements of an exotic character, which adopt and combine architectural elements of Roman-Italic origin such as pavilions (*diaetae*), walking paths (*ambulationes*) and covered aisles (*cryptoporticus*). Without going into detail, the references to the well-known Roman architecture in Campania, as for example Herculaneum (Casa dei Cervi, Casa dell'Atrio a Mosaico), Pompeii (*insula* VIII 2: Case a terrazze, Casa di Campionnet), and Stabiae (Villa San Marco, Villa Arianna) seem clear, especially in those parts where the view of the coast and seascape is particularly fine[24]. In the past, the question of the place of residence of the wealthy classes in the cities of Tripolitania was raised; it was presumed that families of great wealth lived in villas outside the urban centres[25]. However, the study of the rich *domus* on the east coast of Lepcis Magna, which I will now illustrate, tends to modify this assumption. I believe that the villas were semi-permanent residences in which the wealthy citizens of Leptis resided when they were not engaged in the typical offices of the Roman upper classes, such as private and public business (*negotia*) and receiving subject peoples (*clientes*) or friends (*amici*), and not least the duties of citizenship as the obligations to the community (*munera*). For these needs, the wealthy of Leptis had to have homes in the city that reflected their status.

As an example, around the middle of the 2nd c. AD in the city of Oea, near Leptis Magna, the wealthy Pudentilla had a large house in the city, renowned for its health-giving properties due to its proximity to the sea, and various villas, farms and lands in the countryside. On the occasion of her second marriage, Pudentilla moved to the countryside to avoid the rich donations to her fellow citizens that the ceremony entailed[26]. Thus, the wealthy citizens chose their place of residence on a case-by-case basis, inside or outside the city, according to their particular needs.

[23] See Salza Prina Ricotti 1971, pp. 149-154; cf. Musso 2024, pp. 235, 246.
[24] Cf. Zanker 1993, pp. 84-87.
[25] Cf. Salza Prina Ricotti 1971, pp. 135-136; Musso 2024, p. 245.
[26] Apuleius, *Apologia*, LXXII, LXXXVII, XCIII.

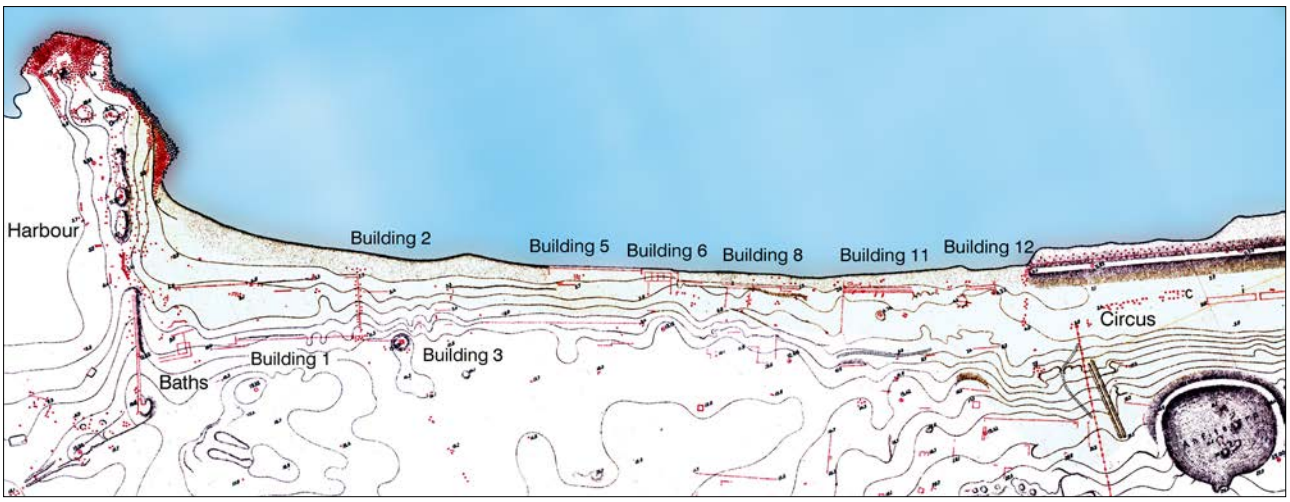

Fig. 4. The structures along the east cost of Lepcis Magna in the topographic plan realised by the Italian 'Istituto Geografico Militare' in 1915 at a scale of 1:2,000 (from Romanelli 1925).

The City

The urban development of Lepcis Magna has been extensively discussed in the past. It is useful here to recall only the main stages: the foundation by Tyre took place no later than the 7th c. BC., but, while the city's earliest period is virtually unknown, its urban layout can be traced only from the Hellenistic period. If its first expansion according to a regular pattern can be attributed to that age, the main phase of expansion of the city's surface occurred in the early imperial age[27]. In fact, from the Augustan period, the city maintained its Phoenician-Punic background combined with monumental patterns imported directly from Rome. Within a few decades several buildings of great architectural and urban impact were built in the city centre by the local elites: the Market, the Theatre, and the Calchidicum[28]. In addition, the harbour was reorganized during the reign of Nero[29].

The coastal Domus *of Lepcis Magna*

While the western area of Lepcis has been extensively excavated, in the area east of Wadi Lebda (the stream that runs through the town with its mouth east of the promontory) only the main monuments were investigated[30]. The east wharf of the harbour, the recently excavated thermal baths, and the two imposing performance buildings, the circus and the amphitheatre, have been brought to light and published[31] (figs. 3, 4). While the location of the road that connected the central area of the city to the amphitheatre is uncertain, it certainly did not run along the beach, as has been assumed in the past[32]. Instead, it is likely that the route was further inland, beyond the low escarpment that marks this stretch of coastline. Anyway, a large part of this stretch of coastline lies in a peri-urban area probably not strictly organised, that is, in that strip between the central intensively urbanized area, defended by the inner walls at least in the late Imperial Age, and the large defensive circuit, the *monticelli* of Italian descriptions or the Great Earthen Bank of English research[33] (fig. 3, general plan).

Along the east shore of the city, several structures were visible, and a survey of the *domus* was organized with the support of the Department of Antiquities of Leptis Magna (fig. 3)[34]. The topographic survey was conducted in three work periods between 1996 and 2001, allowed the identification of at least ten *domus*, some of them certainly of great

[27] For a partial summary of the previous research, see Masturzo 2013, pp. 200-207.
[28] Kreikenbom 2011; Masturzo 2013, pp. 200-207.
[29] Bartoccini 1960, pp. 29–39.
[30] On the great Italian excavation campaigns: Romanelli 1925; *Leptis Magna* 1963; Floriani Squarciapino 1966.
[31] On the Harbour: Bartoccini 1960; Salza Prina Ricotti 1974; Laronde 1988; Laronde 1994. On the Baths: Paulin, Dagnas 2010, with previous bibliography. On the circus: Humphrey *et al.* 1977; for the dedication or restoration in the year 161/162 AD, Evrard Di Vita 1966. Amphitheatre: for the dedication in 56 AD, Evrard Di Vita 1966, pp. 29-32; now, Ricciardi 2018. The temple of Jupiter Dolichenus is still unpublished.
[32] The hypothetical road would have passed over the coastal *domus*: cf. Humphrey *et al.* 1977, p. 29.
[33] Here it can be simply mentioned that this is an extensive strip of land which contained both necropolises and dwellings. For the walls see Goodchild, Ward-Perkins 1953, pp. 45-47.
[34] The survey was made in 1996, 1998 and 2001, thanks to the indispensable and precious help of Giabar Matug and his staff.

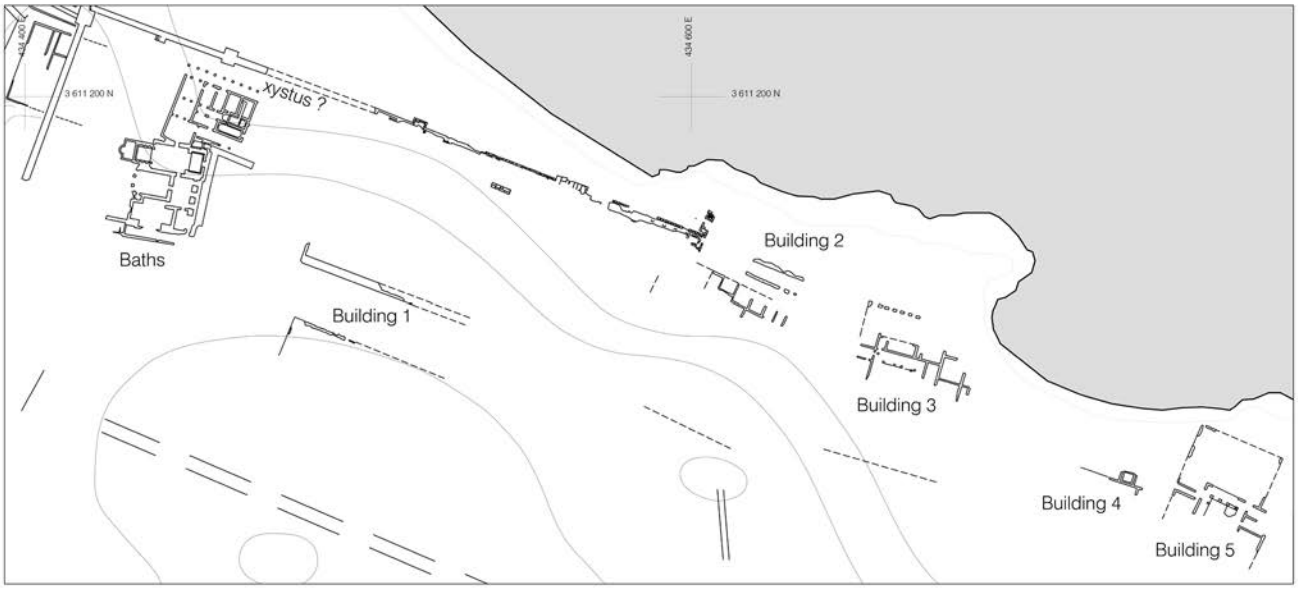

Fig. 5. Lepcis Magna, survey 1996 and 2001. Western coastal sector (drawing by the A.).

luxury. The visible parts of these *domus* are mostly those close to the sea, brought to the surface by the washout of the coastal escarpment and by the waves. Only one *domus* built in this area near the shore, the so-called Villa del Nilo (Building 6), was partially investigated in the first half of the 20th century[35]. Although the survey examined the outcropping structures of these dwellings mainly from a topographical point of view and did not go into detail, it does reveal for the first time an extensive housing sector of considerable interest for understanding the urban development of Lepcis Magna.

It must be accepted that the choice to build these *domus* close to the sea was not due to the overexploitation of space within the city. A similar tendency is shown by the villas built along the entire coast of the region[36], for which a limitation of usable space did not in any way apply. This fact suggests rather that, even in the urban sphere, a proximity to the sea was desirable for aesthetic and functional reasons.

What was created with a freer and more imaginative layout in the seaside villas, in the city took more rigid and closed forms. Appreciation of the marine environment was heightened by the coolness of summer breezes, and in the case of Lepcis by the lack of urban traffic on this seaward side[37]. As we have seen before, the preference of the wealthy classes for seascapes is, moreover, a widely attested phenomenon in many parts of the Roman Empire[38].

The remains (figs. 3-4)

Building 1, *domus* (?). The outcrops do not allow us to define the building with any certainty. The remains of a cryptoporticus more than 100 m long exist and, higher up the slope, a peristyle can be identified. In the 3rd or, more likely, 4th c. AD, a section of the new city wall was built to enclose the area east of the harbour[39], and the building was probably demolished in its construction.

Building 2, *domus*. To the east of the later city walls are the remains of a dwelling whose sea front had a length of at least 25.6 m. If a wall drawn on the IGM 1915 plan is taken as a reference (fig. 4), the complex could have extended ca. 55.5 m inward and thus covered an area of approximately 1,420 sqm. A single line of sandstone and limestone blocks emerges on the beach and, at a distance of about 3.2 m inward, there are at least five rooms. The walls are made up of square blocks of calcareous sandstone (calcarenite) joined by a strong concrete with sandstone flakes as aggregate.

Building 3, *domus*. The front facing the sea is at least 36.0 m long and extends perhaps 46 m inward, according the IGM 1915 plan (fig. 4). If so, the *domus* would have an area of at least 1,656 sqm. Of the seafront, a structure

[35] Some information in Romanelli 1925, pp. 150-152. For the remains, see Aurigemma 1929; Guidi 1933.
[36] Salza Prina Ricotti 1971; Wilson 2018, pp. 286-297.
[37] See Zanker 1993, pp. 84-87, and the fifth chapter.
[38] See the various contributions in Marzano, Métraux 2018. For Tripolitania: Salza Prina Ricotti 1971; Wilson 2018, pp. 285-297.
[39] Masturzo 1996; Paulin, Dagnas 2010, pp. 101-103.

Fig. 6. Lepcis Magna, Building 3. The remains of the peristyle (photo by the A.).

Fig. 7. Lepcis Magna, Building 5. The remains of eastern walls and the fountain in the peristyle (photo by the A.).

formed of several limestone blocks is preserved. It has a deep recess on the top, perhaps for inserting a wooden beam. This could be the support structure for a wooden planking. At least seven rooms were articulated along the seaward side of the *domus*, and a small one may have been a stairwell. The walls of these rooms were made of somewhat irregular blocks of different stones – calcarenite and yellowish limestone. There is a peristyle characterized by five Attic bases visible on its northern side[40] (fig. 6). Their profile follows local patterns used extensively in the 1st c. AD, and the form is generally traceable to the western Ionic-Attic or 'Roman' type, the most common in Lepcis[41]. The possibility of proposing a precise dating of the *domus* suffers from our limited knowledge of private domestic architecture. While the shape of the bases seems to point to the 1st c. AD, the quality of the yellowish limestone used in the *domus* instead suggests the following century[42].

Building 4. A large basin leaning against a wall emerges from the ground, covered on the inside with a hydraulic plaster consisting of lime mortar with cocciopesto. The basin is made of concrete with calcarenite flakes as aggregate, and the walls are made of somewhat regular blocks of calcarenite.

Building 5, *domus*. Towards the sea some sections of wall bordered a large rectangular area, the front of which had a length of ca. 26.5 m. Further inland was the main body of the building, consisting of several rooms around a peri-

[40] This should be the base Mahler 2006, cat. no. 591-595, p. 91, which he dates to the first half of the 1st c. AD at the latest.
[41] Mahler 2006, p. 89.
[42] A systematic study of stones used in the various public constructions of Lepcis is lacking. For the use of the various types of stone, see the brief note in Ward-Perkins 1993, p. 90.

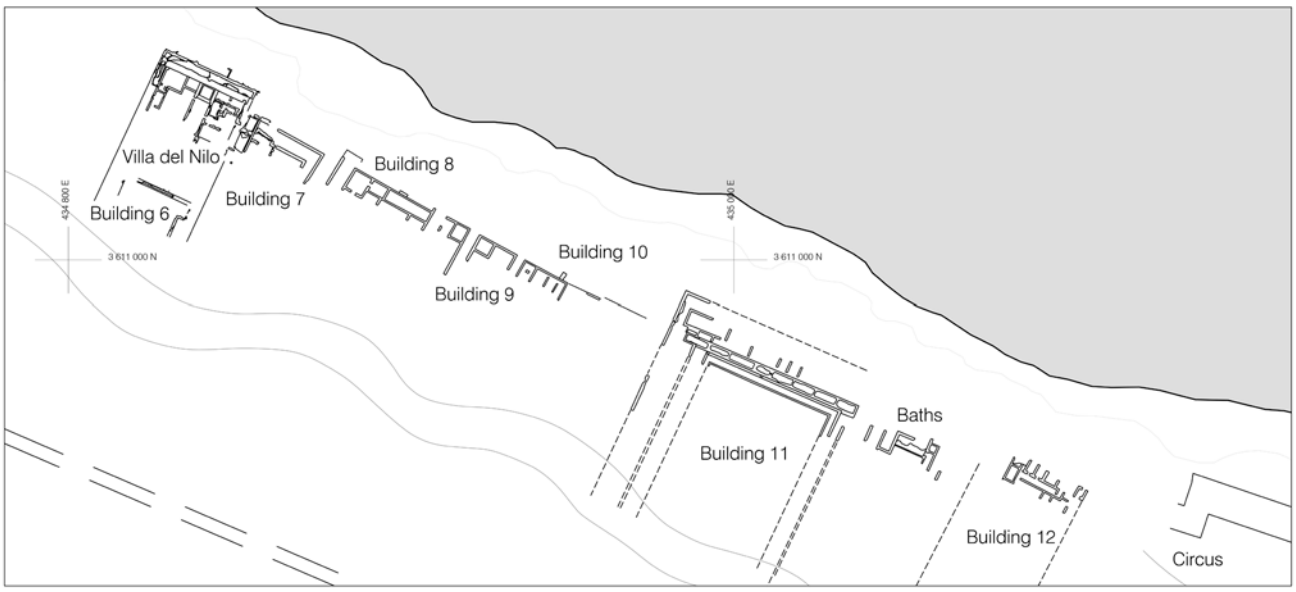

Fig. 8. Lepcis Magna, survey 1996 and 2001. Eastern coastal sector (drawing by the A.).

style (fig. 7). The *domus* appears to have a width of about 30.7 metres along the shore and about 48.50 metres inland from it, giving an approximate area of 1,489 sqm.

To the west are preserved the structures of a room ca. 1.5 m wide, certainly an access corridor to the central peristyle. A few sections of the end wall of the portico and four foundation blocks for supporting columns with Attic bases remain from the peristyle. One base is still in place, partially encased in a basin in the northeast corner of the peristyle. The material of the bases is white porous limestone of mediocre quality, while the shape roughly recalls those of the northern tholos of the macellum, no more recent than the Flavian period[43]. In contrast, the stone of the foundation plinths of the columns is a compact yellow limestone. The walls are concrete with somewhat regular calcarenite rubble stone between block piles.

Building 6 or Villa del Nilo (Villa of the Nile). This *domus* has been known since the earliest years of the Italian excavations thanks to the discovery of some mosaics in a cryptoporticus (figs. 8-11). They were dated to the 2nd c. AD, but that is too early[44]. The 1998 survey made it possible to associate the cryptoporticus with the thermal environments of the Villa of the Nile, as anticipated by Giacomo Guidi, to whom we refer for this building[45].

With respect to the various thermal rooms and the cryptoporticus, a possible third level of the *domus*, at the approximate elevation of 12.39 m a.s.l., is indicated by some walls that seem to delimit a large open area, perhaps a peristyle. Its total area may be around 1,800 sqm.

The structures of the *domus* can be traced back to the middle and late imperial age. However, the mosaics found in the old excavations offer more precise indications of the latest transformations that took place in the complex. Aurigemma had placed the creation of the two panels with hunting scenes in the 2nd c. AD. This date is certainly too early and was considerably lowered in Katherine Dunbabin's study to the late 3rd or 4th c. AD[46]. Following extensive examination, Guidi places the mosaics of the *frigidarium* in the 2nd c. AD[47]. The dating turns out to be shifted slightly, between the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries AD, in Dunbabin's re-examination[48].

Regarding the composition of the plan scheme, the *frigidarium* is, on a completely different scale, influenced by the model of the Baths of Hadrian, in which there is an elongated room equipped with rectangular cold pools at both ends[49]. The elongated floor plan of the *frigidarium* is found also in the 'Thermes du Levant' and the 'Terme della Caccia' (Hunting Bath)[50].

[43] For the possible dating of the *domus*, the considerations made for Building 3 must be borne in mind, but here the limestone of the Attic bases seems similar to that of the late 1st-early 2nd-c. AD achievements, though of undoubtedly lesser quality. See Bianchi 2005, pp. 211–216; Mahler 2006, pp. 89-91, cat. nos. 410-425.
[44] Romanelli 1925, pp. 150-151. Aurigemma 1929, p. 259
[45] Guidi 1933, for the relationship between the two structures pp. 1 and 4, footnote 3.
[46] Dunbabin 1978, pp. 52, 264.
[47] Guidi 1933, p. 56.
[48] Dunbabin 1978, pp. 126, 264.
[49] For the example of the Baths of Hadrian, see Bartoccini 1929; Yegül 1992, pp. 186–192.
[50] Paulin, Dagnas 2010, pp. 121-123; Ward-Perkins *et al.* 1949, p. 168, pl. 47.

Fig. 9. Lepcis Magna. The west side of Building 6, the "Villa del Nilo." External portico and drainage system (photo by the A.).

Fig. 10. Lepcis Magna. The seafront of Building 6, the 'Villa del Nilo'. The trench for a stone block wall is visible at the side of the two wide concrete walls (photo by the A.).

Building 7, *domus*. Immediately to the east of Building 6 are several rooms (fig. 11). On the lowest level of the *domus* there is a cistern, formed by two communicating tanks, partly carved into the sandstone bank and partly built of concrete (fig. 12). A courtyard that discharged rainwater into the cistern below can be recognized on the upper level.

One room, approximately 6.80 m wide, has a mosaic floor carefully made of glass and stone *tesserae*. The rather simple design consists of a broad white perimeter field and an area full of holes in the centre; they are separated by two rectilinear bands with a laurel leaf festoon approximately 0.18 m wide (fig. 13).

The paucity of surviving mosaics makes dating difficult. However, the Severan period (193-238 AD) can be ruled out, because of the usual decorative overabundance popular then, with the laurel wreath often becoming the rich supporting element of complex interlaced designs[51]. A rather schematic garland, attributed to the late Antonine period (third quarter of 2nd c. AD), comes closest[52]. The presence of the extensive white perimeter field, with limited areas of the surface decorated with the leaf festoons running along a band that could frame figurative fields, as well as the elegant scale-like arrangement of the white *tesserae*, suggests that the mosaic can be dated to the mid-imperial period,

[51] See Parrish 1984, cat. nos. 1, 3, 23, 31, 32.

[52] See Parrish 1984, cat. no. 28.

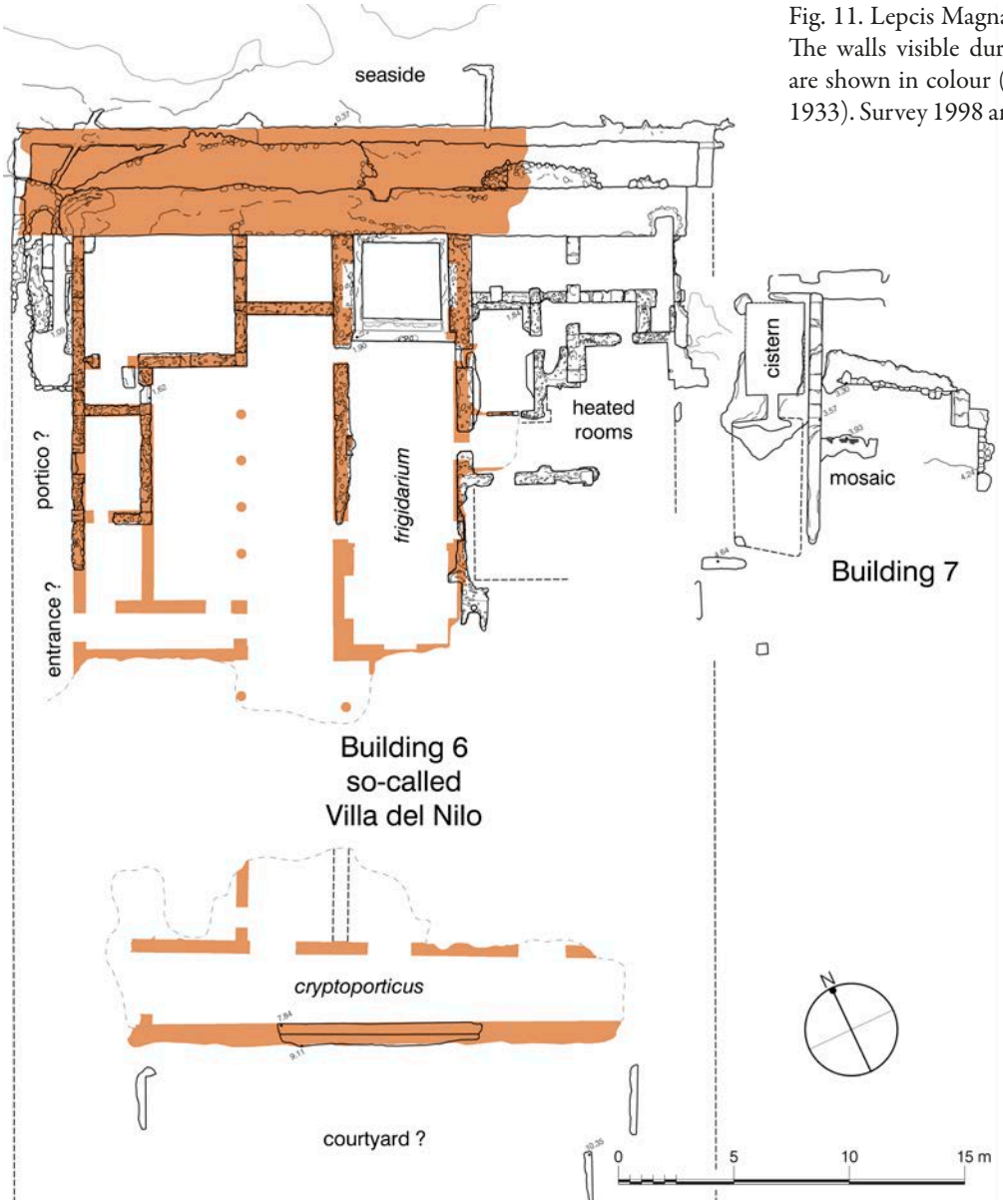

Fig. 11. Lepcis Magna. Plan of Buildings 6 and 7. The walls visible during the first Italian surveys are shown in colour (Aurigemma 1929; Guidi 1933). Survey 1998 and 2001 (drawing by the A.).

Fig. 12. Lepcis Magna, Building 7. The cistern of the *domus*. (photo by the A.).

Fig. 13. Lepcis Magna, Building 7. A detail of the mosaic (photo by the A.).

Fig. 14. Lepcis Magna, Building 8 (photo by the A.).

and more precisely to the late Hadrianic or Antonine period (second or third quarter of 2nd c. AD)[53]. The width of the monochrome perimeter band and the size of the room lead us to rule out the possibility that this could be a room in the 'private' section of the *domus*.

Building 8, *domus*. The dwelling appears to have had a rather wide front of ca. 44.3 m (around 150 Roman feet) facing the sea, with two large rooms at the western corner and a series of elongated rooms in the centre (fig. 14).

The structure of the walls seems quite homogeneous and consists of a concrete casting with limestone and sandstone flake aggregate between overlapping blocks of yellowish limestone. The remains of a large peristyle may have been recorded in the IGM 1915 plan (fig. 4). At the eastern corner of the *domus* was a square room. The complex could have extended about 50 m inwards, more or less to the foot of the slope, with a total area of ca. 2,200 sqm.

Building 9, *domus*. This is apparently the smallest structure of those examined, with a sea front of approximately 13 m, in which are two rooms. The perimeter is built of sandstone blocks, *opus quadratum*, consolidated on the seaward side with a second concrete wall with sandstone flakes and dark-coloured lime mortar. Parallel to the coast and about 6 metres inland, there is a more recent wall, made up of sandstone blocks assembled in a rather irregular manner, which completely cuts off the older structures. This wall seems to indicate a moment of radical transformation of the *domus*.

Building 10, *domus*. The front extends for ca. 25 m on the side facing the sea. However, the outcropping of other barely visible structures suggests an extension of ca. 40 m, covering an area of ca. 1,000 sqm. The perimeter of the *domus* is in sandstone *opus quadratum* at the base of the walls, while the elevation of the inner walls is of concrete with limestones and sandstone flakes. Four rooms can be identified, the westernmost of which had a central support whose foundation has been preserved.

Close to the shore is a limestone capital with a smooth profile formed by a wide inverted groove at the top and a torus at the base[54].

Building 11, palace. This is a building of remarkable size, far beyond the dimensions of an ordinary *domus*. It extends uninterruptedly for at least 62 m on the seaward side, or up to ca. 91 m if one considers some of the rooms located to the southeast[55]. At least four distinct quarters can be distinguished in the layout: at the western corner is an L-shaped 'corridor' surrounding a large elongated room; in the central area is an enormous peristyle with marble colonnades (figs. 8, 15, 16), which has a series of cisterns supporting the porch on the seaward side. Again, on the seaward side a series of side-by-side rooms are probably substructures; and finally, a short distance to the southeast, is another group of rooms.

The size of the peristyle attests the rank of the owner of the complex, who certainly belonged to the highest level of the Lepcis aristocracy. The visible side of the colonnade was 44.2 m long (ca. 149 Roman feet) and consisted of 13

[53] I would like to thank Luisa Musso for some suggestions on the chronology of the mosaic.

[54] This is an architectural element in which the decoration was made of stucco.

[55] It was probably concealed by a higher ground level at the beginning of the last century, as Romanelli did not notice its importance and only noted the presence of the series of cisterns built along the northern side. Romanelli 1925, p. 151.

Fig. 15. Lepcis Magna, Building 11. The great peristyle and the *viridarium* (photo by the A.).

Fig. 16. Lepcis Magna, Building 11. The great peristyle and the row of cisterns facing the sea (photo by the A.).

columns if we include the corner supports[56]. The distance between the centre of the shafts can be calculated to be ca. 3.34 m and the intercolumniation ca. 2.73 m (ca. 9 Roman feet). Two Pentelic marble Attic bases are preserved; their shapes can be traced back to the standard production of the mid-2nd c. AD[57]. A singular base of the same type, but made of local yellow limestone, is preserved a short distance from the western corner of the *domus*. Its proportions reflect those of the Lepcis tradition: the two *torus* and the concave *scotia* are of roughly equal height, and the upper torus protrudes clearly from the upper lath of the *scotia*. There is, however, a marked reduction in the height of the profiles in relation to the diameter, with a *ratio* of ca. 2:5.

Between the colonnade and the raised wall bordering the central part of the peristyle that formed the *viridarium* (fig. 15), a rather irregular pavement of mixed marble and brown limestone *tesserae* is preserved. The wall of the *viridarium* preserves traces of fresco decoration in imitation of breccia stone[58].

[56] For comparison, on the Palatine the peristyle of the Domus Flavia, the emperor's palace, extended for about 50 m a side (ca. 170 feet), and the peristyle of Cicero's house, if square, might have had sides of 75 feet. Coarelli 2012, p. 317.

[57] The western base has a single symbol (a sort of rho-lambda) engraved on the upper side and is 0.35 m high, plinth width 0.84 m, plinth h 0.105 m, diam. 0.70 m. There are no particular differences between these and the bases of the west entrance to the *natatio* of the Baths of Hadrian: cf. Pensabene 2001, figs. 74–75; Bianchi, Bruno 2018, pp. 122 and 128.

[58] For a similar decoration in a room of the second phase of the villa of Wadi er-Rsaf, attributed to the last quarter of the 2nd c. AD, Musso *et al.* 1997, pp. 261–262 and p. 270, fig. 3, pl. 143b; ibid. (M. Munzi, M. Pentiricci), pp. 273-274.

Fig. 17. Lepcis Magna, Building 12. Vaulted rooms and the remains of a drainage (photo by the A.).

The masonry in the peristyle area is in *opus quadratum* on the east and west sides, while the rest of the structure is carefully cast in concrete with sandstone and limestones flakes. The usual method of building with stone blocks along the walls, which facilitated the casting of concrete, is absent here. This fact indicates the wide availability of timber for the construction of the formwork and the presence of particularly specialised workers.

A group of rooms to the southeast are probably connected to the building and seem to have had service functions. The second room from the west shows the remains of a rustic *cocciopesto* floor, and the same type of floor is found in the room further east, possibly a corridor. A deep *cocciopesto*-covered basin and a communicating room close the group of rooms to the east. These features and the presence of some water pipes suggest that this may be a *balneum*, perhaps chronologically later than the main phase of the villa. At the moment, a date in the first half of the 3rd c. seems plausible.

To judge from the current terrain and satellite images, the peristyle may have had a roughly square plan, so that it reached an area of slightly more than 1,800 sqm. The entire structure could perhaps have covered a surface area of 6,000 sqm, if one also includes the ensemble of rooms to the southeast. It is a palace complex whose size and architectural decoration make it comparable to the greatest manifestations of private luxury[59].

Building 12, *domus*. The last residential complex before the circus had a seaward front of ca. 24.4 m. Two rooms with a rectangular plan are at the western corner of the *domus*. Toward the shore there remain poorly preserved walls in elevation, built with sandstone blocks and refaced on the outside with a cast stone bonded with lime mortar.

Further inland some sections of concrete walls define three side-by-side rooms. Set back from them is a long foundation wall running east-west, made in concrete casting between sandstone block piles. A different structure of somewhat irregular sandstone blocks rests on this structure: it must be a rebuilding. Its extension to the east could have been the foundation of a small peristyle. Two vaulted rooms close the front of the *domus* on the southeast (fig. 17). The type of concrete is similar to that of the cisterns in Building 11.

This *domus* must have extended even further inland, as the slope of the ground and the arrangement of vegetation seem to indicate. In that case, the complex could have covered an area of some 2,100 sqm.

Conclusions

We now come to examine the architectural models that can be traced in these *domus*. These general observations are based on a surface survey and would require further, more in-depth investigation. Nevertheless, the study has revealed an important urban area that has so far been overlooked by the more recent archaeological studies.

The width of the sea-facing façades of the *domus* does not appear to follow a specific urban pattern, as it seems to vary between 110 and 140 Roman feet, but the largest *domus* measuring about 310 feet. Therefore, the available data do not allow for a precise determination of the urban layout. However, it is certain that there were access paths between one property and another, leading to the sea or to the *domus*. The occupied surface area varies hypothetically from 1,000 to 2,200 sqm in six complexes. Building 11 is exceptional both for the surface area that it occupies and for

[59] Cf. Zanker 1993, p. 44.

its architecture. Here we are well beyond the configuration of a private residence[60]. It is clearly a palace, linked to a family endowed with great wealth and power that could have aspired to or had attained a senatorial position.

The *balneum* was an integral element of the life of luxury, in which self-celebration was combined with concrete pleasure, presumably to be shared with family members and guests. The only bath whose layout has been identified is the one belonging to Building 6, the Villa del Nilo. If one considers the surface area of the thermal rooms, about 320 sqm, it is probably a private facility. Here, clearly, the view of the seascape was favoured from the upper level of the *domus*. Other rooms could be distributed around a hypothetical courtyard.

For the size of a bath serving a *domus,* as opposed to public ones, an example can be found in the baths of the seaside villa of Silin–Wadi Yala, about 13 km west from Lepcis, arranged in an elegant and compact circular scheme occupying an area of about 230 sqm[61]. On the other hand, the so-called Terme della Caccia (Hunting Baths), certainly not directly connected to a *domus*, have an area of about 850 sqm[62].

We have little information with which to reconstruct the development of our twelve buildings. A mosaic from Building 7 can be attributed to about the middle of the 2nd c. AD. The mosaics of the Building 6 *frigidarium* date to the late 2nd to early 3rd c. AD, while those of the *cryptoporticus* to the late 3rd or 4th c. AD. But in favour of an earlier date for the first phases of these buildings is the shape of some bases in local stone in Buildings 3 and 5, which can be traced back to the late 1st c. AD.

The various *domus* were probably abandoned in the second half of the 3rd or in the 4th c. AD, when an economic and social crisis hit Tripolitania before the other provinces of North Africa, and in any case after the construction of the later defensive walls of Lepcis that cut them off [63].

With the houses on the east coast of Leptis we are in the wake of the Hellenistic-Roman tradition, which over considerable time has seen the transmission of aristocratic models to the middle classes of the society. The plans are characterised by the importance attributed to the peristyle. Of the courtyards, the impressive peristyle conveyed to visitors the luxury of the dwelling and the power of the owner[64]. Even the smaller *domus* of Lepcis east coast boasted a peristyle – just porticoes with a few columns – as one of the connecting elements between the rooms facing the sea and the others facing inland, as for example in Buildings 3 and 5.

One does not find the same distribution of spaces in the urban *domus* as in the maritime villas, which were quite freely articulated along the coastal landscape. Instead, in Lepcis the marine complexes appear enclosed within well-defined land boundaries. Either way, the residences were linked to a class of large landowners and were a full expression of their social position, which was determined only to a secondary degree by trade.

To delineate the process that led from the Punic dwellings, included in the first expansion of Lepcis that took place in the Hellenistic period, to the large *domus* of the Empire, is not possible as we lack knowledge of the oldest part of the city. It extended in regular blocks along the curved strip that stretched from the ancient sanctuary of Šadrafa and Milkʿaštart, facing the later Roman forum, to the Market zone. A general consideration can, however, be proposed. As is well known, in the Augustan period the monumental layout of Lepcis Magna was radically transformed. It is thus difficult to believe that the local Punic aristocracies of this Age did not adopt the same Roman models in the private sphere that were so evident in the public sphere.

If we are unable to draw comparisons between the houses of the earliest urban phases at Leptis and the *domus* on the coast, instead at Sabratha there are extensive sections of the city that have been excavated and which reveal earlier housing patterns. Even without delving into the chronological details, it is evident that the houses in *insulae* 6 and 7 are primarily characterised by enclosed spaces and are arranged according to utilitarian functional patterns[65]. In contrast, the buildings in the outlying areas of Sabratha display patterns similar to the *domus* on the eastern coast of Leptis. Examples include the large residential complex near the Temple of Isis[66] and other 'villas', or rather coastal luxury dwellings, near the city[67].

With their *domus* facing the sea, the upper and middle classes of Leptis Magna were able to emulate the housing models of the late Romano-Italic aristocracy. The prominence given to the peristyle is especially noticeable, and we found this feature in the majority of the *domus* we examined[68].

[60] Cf. Nielsen 1994, p. 11; Carandini 2010, p. 13; Coarelli 2012, pp. 303-319.

[61] See Cappellino 2019, fig. 2 (plan by M. Cappellino and A. Chighine). Also, Musso 2024, p. 240.

[62] Ward-Perkins *et al.* 1949.

[63] On the crisis of the city, see Tantillo, Bigi 2010, pp. 13–16; Masturzo 2025, pp. 233-234. For the later defences of Lepcis, Goodchild, Ward-Perkins 1953, pp. 47-55; Masturzo 1996.

[64] For the late republican Roman-Italic aristocratic sphere, the main reference comes from the oldest Macedonian palaces. Cf. Nielsen 1994, pp. 81–94 and 166-168.

[65] Kenrick 1986, pp. 124-140 and 313-315.

[66] Kenrick 1986, fig. 125.

[67] Montali 2018, pp. 393-403.

[68] Cf. Zanker 1993, pp. 157-160.

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