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Tabernae and commercial investment along the western *decumanus* in Ostia

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The streets of Roman cities were generally surrounded by shops, and public urban landscapes throughout the Roman world were dominated by everyday commercial life. Whatever the economic basis of individual cities or the urban system as a whole, and however negative the attitudes of elite authors towards manufacturing and retail, there is no doubt that, through their spatial positioning, craftsmen and retailers had a fundamental impact on the public atmosphere in many Roman cities. This also was true for Roman Ostia, from the Republic onwards, throughout its history until the last stages of urban decline. Key element in this spatial dominance of commercial life was the *taberna*, a multifunctional commercial facility consisting of one big room with a wide opening to the street, and, often, one or more secondary rooms behind or above the main room. The *taberna* tends to leave clearly identifiable remains in the archaeological record, which allow archaeologists to reconstruct and analyse the commercial landscapes of cities that have been excavated on a larger scale, such as, in central Italy, Pompeii, Ostia, and a limited number of other sites.

Indeed, in the past few decades, some scholars have already begun to explore the possibilities of *tabernae* for understanding urban landscapes. R. Laurence used the spatial distribution of shops at Pompeii to discuss the

city's urban geography showing how streets closer to the city center in Pompeii were more densely commercialized, and how this impacted on the sociability of the urban landscape¹. For Ostia, J. DeLaine has analysed the urban commercial landscape. She distinguished several types of commercial venues that played a role in Ostia's retail and trade economy, and providing a basic categorization of the Ostian *tabernae* according to their spatial context, distinguishing four groups: *tabernae* along the main roads, *tabernae* associated with major public buildings, *tabernae* along minor roads and dead end streets, which could or could not be closed off from the main road system, and *tabernae* in purpose-built markets or bazaars². These approaches highlight both the spatial articulation of urban commercial landscapes, and their varied nature, and went much further in analysing the role of *tabernae* in the city than earlier, more traditional studies of *tabernae*, which either primarily aimed at discussing their basic structural properties, as G. Girri did for Ostia, and V. Gassner for Pompeii, or, alternatively, focused on reconstructing what happened inside *tabernae* – something for which the archaeological record is notoriously unhelpful³.

While the work of R. Laurence and J. DeLaine presented a major step forward, it may be argued that one can still go one step further: it is one thing to analyse one specific

¹ Laurence, *Roman Pompeii*, 102-116.

² DeLaine, "Commercial landscape".

³ Girri, *Taberna*; Gassner, *Kaufläden*. See for a critical discussion of the uses of *tabernae* Holleran, *Shopping*, 99-158.

commercial landscape at one point in time – as R. Laurence did for Pompeii in AD 79 and J. DeLaine for Ostia in the second century AD – but it is quite another thing to try to reconstruct how Roman commercial landscapes developed, historically, and which kinds of people and decisions played a role in shaping and reshaping it. Arguably, however, this is a crucial issue: if it is true that Roman cities were spatially and socially defined by commercial activity, the question as to what shaped their commercial landscapes is central to our understanding of Roman urbanism, Roman social history, and Roman economic history.

Unfortunately, raising this question is significantly easier than answering it, which requires detailed analysis of large amounts of data on the micro-scale level. For Ostia, the issue is further complicated by the fact that while the city's urban core is well-known, there is, as M. Heinzelmann's survey has confirmed, a huge amount of unexcavated urban space beyond the city walls⁴. Hence, we miss the urban outskirts, where streets may have been less densely commercialized, and a complete picture is beyond our reach. Yet this does not mean that the basic mechanisms behind investment in commercial space in Ostia are bound to remain unknown; enough of the site is known to be able to build up a relatively credible and nuanced picture. The most promising approach seems to start with studying the commercial histories of a specific subset of urban quarters on a micro-scale level: this makes it possible to partially overcome the problem that significant parts of Ostia's urban topography are unknown to us. One case study, and for several reasons a crucial one, is the western branch of the *decumanus* that connected Ostia's forum to the sea and to the coastal road that ran southwards towards

Laurentinum and Anzio. The aim of this article is to discuss the commercial history of the immediate surroundings of this road, which is not only relevant because of its role in the urban traffic system and the varied nature of the buildings surrounding it, but also because of the degree to which their history is known to us through archaeological excavations underneath the second century AD surface. Yet before discussing the western *decumanus* itself, it makes sense to briefly sketch a general picture of the way in which Ostia's commercial landscape seems to have evolved, and what we know of it.

1. The bigger picture: commercial investment in Ostia

Ostia, of course, presents a picture of urban investment that is fundamentally different from anywhere else in Italy, but it is known to us only to a very limited extent. Because of Ostia's specific history, it is relatively straightforward at Ostia to map patterns of investment in the second century AD and, partially, afterwards, but it is much less easy to see what preceded it; one is often dependent on the limited number of places where archaeologists have dug underneath the Hadrianic levels and exposed earlier phases, and, on the degree to which these excavations have also been published. Nevertheless, a couple of general observations can be made.

In the first place, to judge from the present map of the city, in the period when the city was growing organically – before the second century AD building boom – plots assigned to private individuals for building seem to have been relatively narrow, allowing only for a limited number of *tabernae* next to an entrance

⁴ Heinzelmann, "Beobachtungen", 188-189; Stöger, *Rethinking Ostia*, 206-207.

to the main building behind the façade. Remains of this pattern of land use can be seen along parts of the western *decumanus*, along the *cardo*, and along the streets of regions three and five. While plots may have been deep, they thus interacted with the street only to a limited degree, and provided fairly limited commercial possibilities. It is not immediately clear *why* this was the case, but it may simply represent a socio-economic reality: there was no pressing need for commercial buildings with a long façade, and there were no people intending or able to build *atrium* houses of the size of Pompeii's large urban villas, such as the House of the Faun, and the House of Pansa. Crucially, however once established, this pattern of land use severely complicated future investment: for private investors, it is hard enough to buy up one house, and rarely possible to buy up two or three. Hence, property boundaries remained relatively stable throughout Ostia's history in the part of the city that grew organically around the original *castrum*. It is impossible to understand Ostia's commercial landscape without acknowledging the fact that the possibilities for private investment, at any given point, and for almost all classes of economic actors, were limited by the existing built-up environment. This was different, of course, when the authorities were involved.

Equally fundamental is the observation that large complexes with many *tabernae* existed in Ostia from the second century BC onwards, and became increasingly visible in the early imperial period. Examples include the long row of at least ten republican *tabernae* on the location of the later, early first century AD, *Horrea* of Hortensius along the eastern *decumanus*⁵. In the early first century, rows of *tabernae* were constructed along the

west *castrum* wall, quite possibly by the (local) government⁶. Thus, the commercial landscape of Ostia, before the Hadrianic period, appears dichotomous: small-scale private investment involving a limited number of two or three *tabernae*, and, at the same time, large scale, sometimes public, investment in buildings consisting of long rows of *tabernae*. This is a picture that already differs markedly from most other cities in Roman Italy.

The building boom of the second century AD saw a development towards investment on an even larger scale, and part of this was initiated directly by the authorities⁷. This is most spectacularly attested by the commercial development of the road between the *Forum* and the Tiber, and the porticus of Pius IX that surrounded it, but also by the Baths of Neptune development, which included a long portico with twenty-four shops along the eastern *decumanus*, and several shops around the palaestra and along the internal roads of the quarter⁸. Yet some developments on a smaller scale can also be observed, particularly in the area of the former *castrum*, which was partially excavated underneath Hadrianic levels by G. Calza and G. Becatti. For example, Caseggiato I, VIII, 7, opposite the Caseggiato del Larario, consists of three *tabernae* in the space that was, in an earlier phase, occupied by just two, suggesting that an increase in commercial pressure in this area led to intensification (fig. 1). The so-called Casa Basilicale, which occupies the space of three medium-sized republican *atrium* houses, illustrates the changes in the nature of ownership: each of the preceding houses may have had two *tabernae*, and the Casa Basilicale had six, so the total amount of *tabernae* may have remained the same, but the shop holders had a different kind of owner to deal with, and one

⁵ Calza *et al.*, *Topografia generale*, 118, fig. 29.

⁶ Calza *et al.*, *Topografia generale*, 118.

⁷ On the building boom see Heinzelmänn, "Bauboom".

⁸ For both complexes see DeLaine, "Building Activity".



Fig. 1. Caseggiato I, VIII, 7: three tabernae with the remains of two earlier tabernae occupying the same spot.

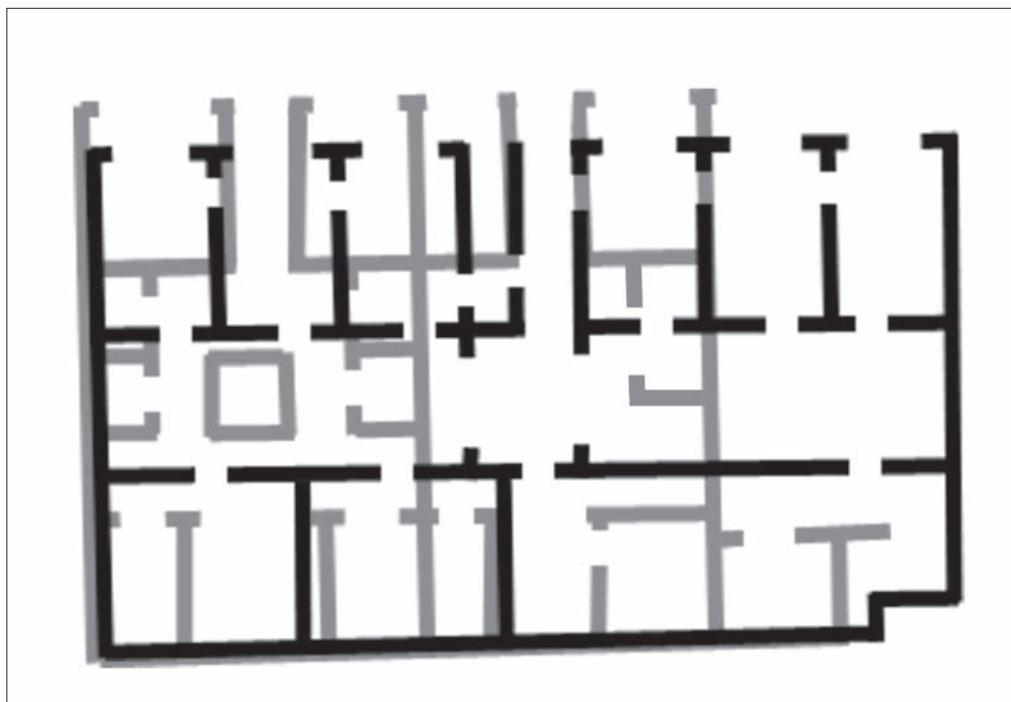


Fig. 2. So-called Casa Basilicale (I, IX, 1) and the buildings preceding it.



Fig. 3. Map of the western *decumanus* and the buildings surrounding it.

that operated on a larger scale (fig. 2)⁹. Moreover, the spatial dynamic of the environment changed, as the *atrium* houses had disappeared, and with them the social processes that defined traditional domestic space.

It is hard to extrapolate from such observations, but it is likely that, with the increasing scale of the built environment, the proportion of shop holders working in *tabernae* belonging to a complex including large numbers of other *tabernae* increased. Thus, taken together, the developments of the early second century AD seem to suggest a gradual shift towards property ownership on a larger scale, thus transforming the socio-economic landscape in which shop holders operated. This is a development that can also be traced along the western *decumanus*.

2. The Western *decumanus*

As has been pointed out by H. Stöger, the western *decumanus* occupied, together with the eastern *decumanus*, and the Via della Foce, a highly central position in the entire urban

road system. Stöger's space syntax analysis highlighted not only the key role of the western *decumanus* in directing urban traffic, but also its commercial viability¹⁰. In other words: this was a place where retail space was a desirable commodity, and where serious money could be made from building retail facilities that could be rented out. This also shows: between the Bivio del *Castrum* and the Porta Marina, there was, until late antiquity, only one brief stretch of closed façade, at the height of the Terme della Basilica Cristiana (fig. 3). Looking at the patterns of land use surrounding the road, the *decumanus* can be divided into three clear sections. The first section runs from the Bivio del *Castrum* to the Via degli Aurighi (and the Vico Cieco), the second from the Via degli Aurighi to the Porta Marina, and the third from the Porta Marina to the beach, where the road ended, though traffic could continue southward over the coastal road that could be reached by means of the road that sprang off the *Decumanus* between the sanctuary of *Bona Dea* and the so-called Loggia of Cartilius Poplicola. It makes sense to discuss these three sections separately.

⁹ Calza et al., *Topografia generale*, 103.

¹⁰ Stöger, *Rethinking Ostia*, 215-219.

1. *First part: from the Bivio del Castrum to the Via degli Aurighi*

The first section of the western *decumanus* was about 150m in length, and had 21 *tabernae* on the south side, and 20 on the north side¹¹. This is 0.27 *taberna* per meter road. On both sides, there is a sequence of medium-sized plots of land, generally larger than the plots along the *cardo* and in region V, but much smaller than the canonical Ostian *insulae*. Most plots are deeper than they are wide, allowing only for a limited number of *tabernae* along the street. As a consequence, in the second century AD building phase, the average number of *tabernae* per building is three along the north side, and about 3.5 along the south side. This number is unlikely to have been significantly higher in earlier phases, but it may have been a little bit lower.

Along the south side, several plots seem to have merged in the Trajanic or Hadrianic period – the *Schola* del Traiano (IV, v, 15) is built over what seems to have been two houses, and something similar may be true for the plot on which the Traianic Terme delle Sei Colonne (IV, v, 10-11) emerged later on – the front zone seems to fall into two distinctly oriented architectural parts, that each seem to consist of a *fauces* surrounded by a shop on each side¹². Underneath the neighbouring building (IV, v, 7), G. Calza and G. Becatti identified a classic atrium-peristyle house of the republican period; the same is true for building opposite the Via degli Aurighi (IV, vi, 1)¹³. The development in these complexes is not necessarily one of increasing commercialization: the quantity of shops seems to have remained roughly equal, and they also may already have



Fig. 4. Remains of a predecessor building in front of the Temple of the Fabri Navales (III, II, 2).

been rented out in this earlier phase. Yet what does change, besides the merging of properties, is the context in which the *tabernae* operated: in the second century AD phase, domestic functions had disappeared in almost all plots, and, as a consequence, the owners of the complexes had disappeared as well: the physical distance between shop holder and proprietor had increased, and with it had, in all probability, the social distance between them¹⁴.

Changes along the north side seem less spectacular: none of the preceding buildings seems to have been distinctly residential in nature, and no plots seem to have merged. Both the building on the plot of the temple of the *Fabri Navales*, and its western neighbour are thought to have had the exact same number of *tabernae* as their second century AD successors (fig. 4)¹⁵. However, it must be emphasized that, with the exception of the temple of the *Fabri Navales*, this area has been less thoroughly investigated underneath second century AD levels, particularly the part closest to the Bivio del *Castrum*.

¹¹ I use ‘south’ and ‘north’ here because I follow the convention; in reality, ‘east’ and ‘west’ are closer to the mark.

¹² For the entire stretch of the road see Paolini, *Ostia*, 189-196. On the *Schola* see Morard, this volume; Perrier *et*

al., “Domus aux Bucranes”. On the Terme delle Sei Colonne see Bloch, “Bolli laterizi”, 226: “certamente traianaea”.

¹³ Calza *et al.*, *Topografia generale*, 108-109, fig. 129.

¹⁴ Cf. Paolini, *Ostia*, 188-189.

¹⁵ Calza *et al.*, *Topografia generale*, 29-30.



Fig. 5. Caseggiato delle Trifore (III, III, 1).

2. *Second part: from the Via degli Aurighi to the Porta Marina*

The subsequent section of the *decumanus*, south of the via degli Aurighi, presents a rather different picture, though it is equally densely commercialized: it has the same length of about 150m, and had, in the second century, 24 shops along the north side, and 18 along the south side, which comes down to 0.28 shops per meter road. However, instead of being surrounded by medium-sized buildings, the road is surrounded by long rows of shops along both sides. While the buildings along the first stretch of the road appear to have grown organically over time, this stretch seems to have been, to some extent, planned: it

is likely to have been a conscious choice by the (local) government to give out the land along the road here in long parcels running parallel to the road, and it is probable that their predominantly commercial use was already envisaged at that moment. It is possible, but not knowable, that the government was the key investor in this area.

There are three separate buildings along the north side, of which the mid-second century AD Caseggiato delle Trifore (III, III, 1) with twelve *tabernae* is the largest (fig. 5)¹⁶. G. Calza and G. Becatti reconstructed a row of nine *tabernae* with a portico in front of it as the predecessor of three quarters of this building, dating it to the Augustan period¹⁷. The other two buildings on the north side have

¹⁶ Calza et al., *Topografia generale*, 147; Pavolini, *Ostia*, 151.

¹⁷ Calza et al., *Topografia generale*, 110.



Fig. 6. *Caseggiato della Fontana con Lucerna (IV, VII, 1-3) with portico in front of it.*

two (III, III, 2) and ten (III, IV, 1-3) *tabernae* respectively, and are slightly earlier in date¹⁸. On the south side, most of the space is taken up by the Caseggiato della Fontana con Lucerna (IV, VII, 1-2; fig. 6.) with thirteen shops, dated by H. Bloch to around 120 AD; connected to it was a contemporary complex that has only partially been excavated (IV, VII, 3); it had four shops¹⁹. Besides the building under the Caseggiato delle Trifore, there is little in the way of chronological development that can be traced, though a wall running parallel to the road has been found underneath the Caseggiato della Fontana con Lucerna²⁰. This suggests that the area was developed at a

relatively late moment, and spatial pressure in the area seems to have remained low until well after the Augustan period.

In this respect, one relevant observation can be made based on the second century AD development: both the Caseggiato delle Trifore and the Caseggiato della Fontana con Lucerna have rather big *tabernae*. The former has only twelve *tabernae* for its 77 meter of façade – or 6.5 meter per *taberna*. The latter has eleven *tabernae* for a façade of 69 meter – just over six meter per *taberna*. By contrast, building III, IV, 1-3, which later was transformed in the Casa del Ninfeo has ten *tabernae* for a façade of just fifty meter – which

¹⁸ Calza *et al.*, *Topografia generale*, 136; Pavolini, *Ostia*, 169.

¹⁹ Bloch, “Bolli laterizi”, 227. Cf. Calza *et al.*, *Topografia generale*, 135; Pavolini, *Ostia*, 187.

²⁰ Calza *et al.*, *Topografia generale*, 109, fig. 29.



Fig 7. Building III, IV, 1-3.

comes down to five meter per *taberna* (fig. 7). In other words, the two former buildings could easily have had three additional *tabernae* without these spaces becoming too small to be rentable: with fifteen *tabernae*, the Caseggiato delle Trifore would still have had more than 5 m per *taberna*, and with fourteen, the Caseggiato della Fontana con lucerna would be only just below that. However, when these buildings were planned, it was decided otherwise. The question is why. One possibility is that commercial pressure along the *Cardo* was too low to make a higher density of smaller *tabernae* attractive, and that it was decided, instead, to build decently sized *tabernae* with good and affordable living accommodation attached to them. This is a feasible explanation for the building preceding the Caseggiato delle Trifore, which was built when

the area was not yet very strongly commercialized, and for the Caseggiato delle Trifore itself, which was built when the market along the street was already saturated – as the other buildings had already been constructed in the mean time. An alternative possibility, and one that may be of relevance for understanding the situation on the south side of the road is that it was decided to build bigger and more luxurious *tabernae* to exclude certain kinds of businesses: larger *tabernae* were more expensive to rent, and thus attracted a more upmarket kind of trades. Yet whatever the intention, it may be pointed out that diversification is likely to have been the effect: the large *tabernae* behind the *porticus* on the south side of the road are likely to have been more expensive than the *tabernae* directly on the street on the opposite side of the road, and the small *tabernae* of Caseggiato

giato III, vi, 2-3 probably were the cheapest in the area. This must have had an impact on which shop holders could afford them, and thus on the spread of different kinds of businesses along the road.

3. *Third part: from the Porta Marina to the beach*

Outside the Porta Marina, things were more irregular and haphazard. There also was much *less* commercial activity. This stretch of the road was 95 meters long, and there were only 11 *tabernae*, all on the north side. This is less than 0.12 *taberna* per meter road. There are no *tabernae* on the south side of the road, where there is the so-called Foro di Porta Marina and the Sanctuary of *Bona Dea*. The latter goes back to at least the early first century AD, and its location suggests that a predecessor of the Foro di Porta Marina was already in place by then – making it unlikely that there ever were any *tabernae* in this area²¹.

The shops on the north side emerged from the mid first century AD onwards. First, there was the construction of the *Domus Fulminata* (III vii 3-4) with its six *tabernae* in the early 70s AD (fig. 8), later followed by the construction of the Trajanic building III vii 7, which had three shops, and of the small building III vii 1, in the Hadrianic period, which filled the narrow gap between the old wall and the late republican funerary monument with two *tabernae*, thus maximizing the commercialization of the area²². The Hadrianic loggia of Cartilius Poplicola, which has been identified as a kind of covered market, further attests the increasing commercialization of the last stretch of the *decumanus*²³. It may be noted, however, that all these buildings were rela-

tively small in scale, and that their background points to investment by private parties that did not necessarily have infinite access to capital – a marked contrast with the other side of the Porta Marina, and even with the first section of the *decumanus*.

3. Conclusion

The commercial landscape of Ostia's western *decumanus* was characterized by a certain variety, with small- to medium-scale investment along the sections close to the city centre and outside the Augustan city wall, and large scale investment along the central section between the Via degli Aurighi and the Porta Marina. Interestingly, this central part was also the last one to develop commercially: before the Hadrianic period, there only seem to have been shops where now is the Caseggiato delle Trifore, while outside the Porta Marina, the north side of the road commercialized from the Flavian period onwards, and perhaps even earlier, depending on the activities taking place in the Foro di Porta Marina. It is unclear why this was the case. There appear to have been factors at work that made small-scale investment between the Via degli Aurighi and the Porta Marina impossible: in the late first century AD it was easier to buy a medium-sized plot of land just outside the city than it was on the other side of the wall, even if that area appears not to have been urbanized either.

Further, it is clear that, along the western *decumanus*, there were developments towards investment and land-ownership on a larger scale from the late first century AD onwards: in the first stretch, several plots were merged,

²¹ On the sanctuary of *Bona Dea* and the Foro di Porta Marina see Pavolini, *Ostia*, 185-186; Calza *et al*, *Topografia generale*, 121; on the Foro di Porta Marina see DeLaine, "Commercial Landscape", 39.

²² Van der Meer, "Domus Fulminata"; Calza and Becatti, *Topografia Generale*, 121; Pavolini, *Ostia*, 174-176.

²³ DeLaine, "Commercial Landscape", 38; Pavolini, *Ostia*, 178; Bloch, "Bolli laterizi", 227



Fig. 8. *Domus Fulminata* (III, VII, 3-4).

and in the second stretch, several large complexes were built. Yet this is not the whole story: it is easy to think of second-century Ostia as a city of building-projects on an extremely large scale, but many building projects were of a much smaller scale, and while it may be attractive to emphasize that these actually were often respecting pre-existing plot-boundaries, such as along the first stretch of the road, or that they were filling in the last gaps in the urban landscape, such as just outside the *Porta Marina*, they constituted an

important component of Ostia's investment landscape. This should not be overlooked. Indeed, the second century AD boom saw a proliferation of large scale building rather than a disappearance of the small scale. While the increase in scale is highly important, much more fundamental, also along the *Decumanus*, is the disappearance of *atrium* houses and the resulting separation of domestic and commercial space, and the fundamental changes that it caused in the relationship between shop holder and proprietor.