

REFORMULATING CIRCULATION AND DISTRIBUTION SPACES FROM THE HOUSE OF THE BRONZE HEAD IN POLLENTIA: A COMPARATIVE APPROXIMATION WITH THE HIGH-IMPERIAL DOMUS OF ROMAN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The “House of the Bronze Head” is a *domus* located in Sa Portella, one of the residential areas of the Roman City of Pollentia. Relevant issues regarding its interpretation remain undetermined, mainly because of the partial knowledge that exists of its architectural layout. As with other houses in the same residential area, defined by their symmetry, this house reveals several features regarding its spatial distribution and connectivity, specifically those of its peristyle and entrances. These issues highlight the need to search for parallels in North Africa that can clarify how this *domus* would have been organized and how it would have functioned.

KEYWORDS: Pollentia, *domus*, peristyle, Africa, domestic architecture, Sa Portella.

REFORMULAR LOS ESPACIOS DE CIRCULACIÓN Y DISTRIBUCIÓN DE LA CASA DE LA CABEZA DE BRONCE DE *POLLENTIA*: UNA APROXIMACIÓN COMPARATIVA CON LAS *DOMUS* ALTOIMPERIALES DEL ÁFRICA ROMANA

RESUMEN

La Casa de la Cabeza de Bronce de *Pollentia*, situada en el área residencial de Sa Portella, alberga una serie de hándicaps interpretativos relacionados especialmente con el conocimiento parcial que se tiene de la planta de dicha *domus*. La hipótesis de que se pudiera tratar de una edificación regida por la simetría, en consonancia con otras casas de dicha área residencial, dota a la Casa de la Cabeza de Bronce de unas particularidades precisas a sus espacios de circulación y distribución, concretamente el peristilo y los accesos, que al mismo tiempo apremian la necesidad de buscar paralelos, en este caso en el norte de África, que clarifiquen cómo se articularía y sería el funcionamiento de esta edificación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Pollentia, *domus*, peristilo, África, arquitectura doméstica, Sa Portella.

INTRODUCTION

The Roman city of Pollentia, located in the northeast of the island of Mallorca and next to present-day Alcúdia, was the most important enclave in the Balearic Islands in Roman times. Numerous archaeological interventions carried out almost uninterruptedly since 1923 have brought to light various archaeological sites and objects that allow a more precise understanding of the origin and development of this enclave since its foundation, according to sources, in 123 BC. This event occurred in close relation to the Roman conquest of the Balearic Islands by Quintus Caecilius Metellus (Arribas *et al.*, 1973: 15-18; Orfila *et al.*, 1999: 99-101; Cau y Chávez, 2003: 30-32; Orfila, 2008: 26).

One of the most interesting areas of this archaeological site is the residential area of Sa Portella, located in the north of the island, which is key to understanding the domestic architecture of this Roman city. However, the partial nature of the architectural remains means that in many cases it is difficult to identify the type of dwellings and how they were organised, both internally and among themselves.

Of the *domus* that make up this residential area, only the entire floor plan of the “House of Two Treasures” has been preserved, which is an atrium *domus* with a layout that shows a clear visual axis: *fauces-atrium-triclinium* (Roca y Subías 1996-97: 826-829). Of the rest of the buildings that make up this neighbourhood, for various reasons, only partial floor plans have been preserved. This makes it difficult to understand how these architectural spaces were structured and how the different rooms that made them up were arranged among themselves (fig. 1.)

Among the different buildings, it is worth mentioning the House of the Bronze Head (HBH). It has been interpreted as a peristyle *domus*, but whose total surface area is impossible to know given that a large part of it was lost due to the construction of a large trench for the railway station of Ramo de Guerra during the Spanish Civil War, which sought to link the town of Sa Pobra with the port of Alcúdia. (Woods, 1970: 5-6; Arribas *et al.*, 1973: 41-45).

Given this situation, and in order to carry out a reconstruction of what the House of the Bronze Head could have been like, it is worth evaluating other structures arranged around a peristyle. These can help us understand how this *domus* could have been configured and to formulate hypotheses regarding how the different rooms would have been organised.

THE HOUSE OF THE BRONZE HEAD

The House of the Bronze Head, located to the south of the residential area of Sa Portella, has been the subject of various archaeological interventions since the end of the 1950s. These have showed that it was a large space, configured around a peristyle. It was estimated to date from the Augustan period, although the structure would probably have taken advantage of the existence of an earlier Republican building (Arribas *et al.*, 1973: 43; Cau y Chávez, 2003: 35; Orfila, 2004; Pérez-González, 2014: 582). The existence of a pre-existing structure to this *domus* was





Figure 1. Plan of the residential area of Sa Portella (Pollentia).
Source: Pollentia documentary collection.

indeed corroborated during the excavation campaigns of 2014 and 2015 in the work carried out in room C of this building, in which various pre-existing walls to those that made up the House of the Bronze Head were identified. Although they represent a different structuring of the space, they have the same orientation as those of the later room C, which means that many of them were reused as foundations.

This construction would be active until the 4th century AD., date of its final levels of occupation, characterized by the presence of ashes, which indicate a process of destruction and subsequent abandonment (Arribas, 1978: 179).

Regarding the functionality of the spaces and rooms that make up this *domus*, its interpretation has always been complex. The excavations carried out between 1957 and 1958 brought to light a very rich material record, both ceramic and metallic, including the bronze female head which gave the *domus* its name, though they were not sufficient to allow definitive spaces to be identified (Arribas, 1978: 187).



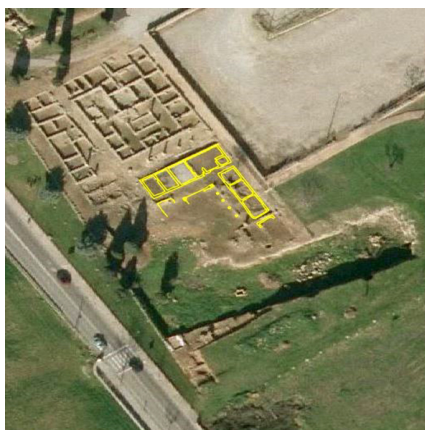


Figure 2. Preserved remains of the HBH.
Source: Hacomar Ruiz.

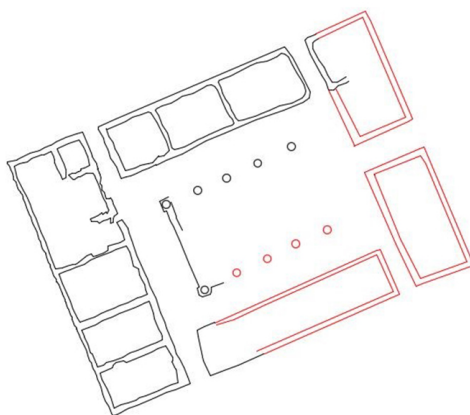


Figure 3. Hypothetical reconstruction.
Source: Hacomar Ruiz.

Partial knowledge, as noted above, has been a major drawback when it comes to understanding this house from its floor plan (fig. 2). Arribas and Tarradell themselves suggested that it was a *domus* governed by symmetry (fig. 3), and therefore the rooms preserved and located to the north and east should be projected towards the areas where no remains were preserved, resulting in a building that would have covered an area of 704 m² (Arribas, 1974: 363). The opinion that the House of the Bronze Head was governed by this regularity is based on two key ideas. Firstly, the preserved remains show the orientation of the enclosing wall to the west and, therefore, we know the width of the building, which seems to be arranged in the same way in its eastern area. Secondly, both Arribas and Tarradell considered that the residential area of Sa Portella was arranged by orthogonal urban planning, marked by *insulae* with little urban dynamism. They believed this to be the case of the House of Two Treasures and the *domus* to the north of it, which were organised in a similar way to the houses of the Hadrianic reform in Italica (Arribas, 1978: 208; Roca and Subías, 1996-1997: 825-833).

Consequently, if we accept this idea and project the remains preserved today towards the areas that were razed to the ground during the construction of the railway trench, the resulting *domus* would have had a large peristyle, covering some 247.87 m² or 34.85% of the total surface area of the dwelling of 696.9 m². To this, we must add that it would have been a building with multiple entrances, given that in the remains, we can see the existence of three of these, which would have directly connected the road to the peristyle of the *domus*. This number will increase to five entrances if the hypothetical symmetrical floor plan is projected, corresponding to two entrances on the east side of the house, two on the west and one located to the south. The latter would correspond to the main entrance of the building, given that it does not seem that any of those located on the sides would have been able to act as such.



SEARCHING FOR PARALLELS: WHY AFRICA?

Based on the hypothetical reconstruction of the House of the Bronze Head, we can now look for possible parallels to this architectural structure, which though not intended to reconstruct this *domus*, may give us a better understanding of how it may have functioned, and help us assess whether it is feasible that there was such a dwelling with this layout.

The choice of North Africa is not random¹, given that this territory is key to understanding the Roman world, especially from the 2nd century AD onwards. This is visible in the urban reactivation that took place and the architectural development that accompanied it. Both were fundamental elements in the process of Romanisation of the territory (Le Bohec, 2005: 112-116). This development of Roman cities in Africa is related to the economic development of its provinces, especially Mauritania and Africa. This can be seen in the presence of African materials in other Mediterranean contexts, among which pottery stands out, either as consumer goods or as amphorae remains, and are linked to the exports of oil and wine (Hobson, 2012; Villaverde, 2001: 48-50). Pollentia did not escape this influence, as it was part of the commercial routes of the western Mediterranean, as shown by the presence of African materials, particularly at levels dating from after the 1st century AD.

Another reason for choosing North Africa is that its domestic architecture is characterised by an absence of Italica influences and the typical atrium *domus*. Therefore, there is a clear predominance of the peristyle formula as a way of providing space for movement. In addition, it should be noted that the urban development of North Africa is marked by a rigid orthogonal urbanism (Mahjoubi, 2000: 196-197), or at least one with little dynamism, which we assume is also the case for the residential area of Sa Portella. This characteristic is particularly useful to appreciate how peristyle *domus* functioned. Especially in a context where the African elites were not involved in processes of urban exodus that characterised other territories such as Italia or the Iberian Peninsula. Thus, the main residences of these families continued to be located inside the city (Thébert, 1991: 317-319).

VOLUBILIS

The city of *Volubilis* was one of the most important Roman enclaves located in present-day Morocco, with a strategic location from a commercial point of view. It also had a close relationship with agricultural production as it dominated the fertile

¹ However, the present work does not ignore the importance of the diffusion of the axial model of the peristyle house in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. This private-architectural typology is new evidence of the romanization and adaptation by the native elite, a process not unknown in the Iberian Peninsula (Meyer, 1999:115-121).



Maison aux néréïdes

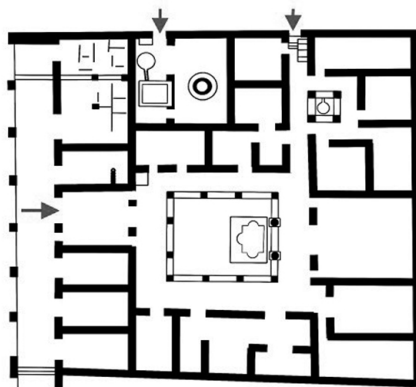


Figure 4. Floor plan of the House of Nereides (Panetier, 2002).

penepain around the valley of the River Sebu, and in the foothills of the Middle Atlas, on whose penepain the city was established (Villaverde, 2001: 151-157).

From the 3rd century BC onwards, its development as an urban centre can be seen. This was given extra impetus when Emperor Augustus created the Kingdom Mauretania, placing it in the hands of Juba II. It then received the status of municipality under Emperor Claudius, with the consequent architectural apparatus linked to this designation. As far as urban domestic architecture is concerned, the north-western quarter is particularly relevant within the urban structure of Volubilis, which has an organization and structure with little dynamism (Panetier, 2002: 91-99).

House of Nereides

The House of Nereides is a peristyle *domus* which, according to Étienne, initially dated from the 3rd century AD. However, the latest studies of materials seem to date the beginning of this construction from the end of the 1st century AD (Étienne, 1960: 68-70; Carucci, 2006: 493). (Étienne, 1960: 68-70; Carucci, 2006: 492). It is a *domus* with a very well-defined axiality and where the public functionality of Roman domestic architecture predominates. This can be seen in the powerful visual axis: *vestibulum-peristylum-triclinium* as opposed to the more traditional style of Italic houses (fig. 4).

With three known entrances, it seems that none of them have the same layout as those of the “House of the Bronze Head” at Pollentia, where there is direct access from the street to the peristyle. The main entrance of the House of Nereides has a vestibule as a transition room towards the peristyle, and the other two entrances located to the north do not connect with it. One of them is the entrance to a productive area annexed to the house, and the other connects to an *atriolum* that seems to link to a flat area (Rebuffat, 1969: 668-669; Carucci, 2006: 491-493).

As for the surface area of the peristyle, the House of Nereides has an open space covering 208 m². This corresponds to 22.93% of the total surface area of this building, which would indicate its importance, but whose percentage area is less than that of the peristyle of the House of the Bronze Head at Pollentia.

House of the Cortege of Venus

This is a very interesting architectural structure with a classical floor plan typical of a peristyle *domus*. It is dominated by a clear visual axis between two vestibules. The peristyle is the distribution axis, and the *triclinium* where the mosaic that gives the *domus* its name is located (Carucci, 2006: 481-483). It is a structure with only two entrances, the main one located to the north, in which two vestibules acted as transition rooms towards the peristyle, and a secondary entrance, located to the west but which only connects with the productive area and the baths annexed to the *domus*. As for the peristyle, this distribution axis measures 182 m², 17.07% of the total surface area of the *domus*, which is less than the area covered by the “House of the Bronze Head”.

DJEMILA (CUICUL)

The Roman city of Cuicul, founded in 96 AD, underwent a very important urban and architectural reform during the Antonine period, directly related to the economic and political development of North Africa, and therefore of the African elites, in the 2nd century AD (Sintes and Rehabi, 2003: 298-299). As in the case of Volubilis, it is a city marked by orthogonality and by a domestic architecture framed by *insulae* delimited by the city's roads. This initiated a process of regrouping structures on the part of the city's elites, with Cuicul being a unique case compared to the House of Europe (Thébert, 1991: 333-334).

Maison d'Amphitrite

The *Maison d'Amphitrite*, located to the east of the forum and capitol of the city, is a structure governed by a symmetrical layout and marked by rigid orthogonality, perhaps determined by its location within the urban topography of Cuicul. The dating of this structure is complex, given that it was based on decorative motifs from between the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, date now considered older today according to the study of materials from the 2nd century AD. c. (Blanchard Lemee, 1975: 107-128; Carucci, 2006: 396-397).

The main entrance to the *domus* is one of the most interesting examples to help us understand the importance of connecting spaces in African domestic architecture between the exterior and the peristyle. The House of Amphitrite has a large vestibule (10 metres long by 3 metres wide) in the form of a corridor connecting



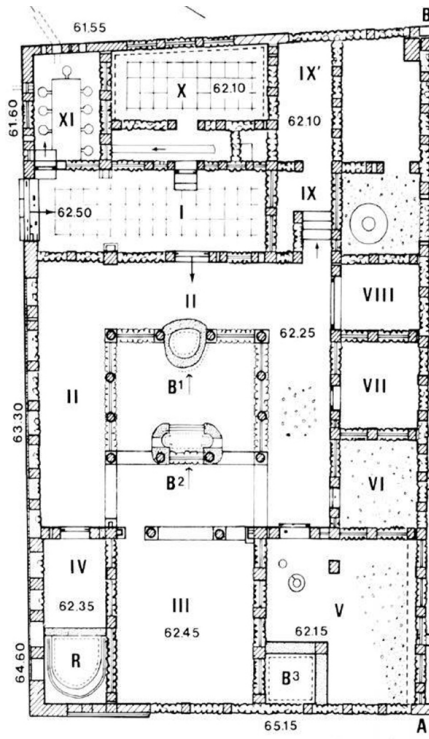


Figure 5. House of Amphitrite (Blanchard-Lemée, 1975).

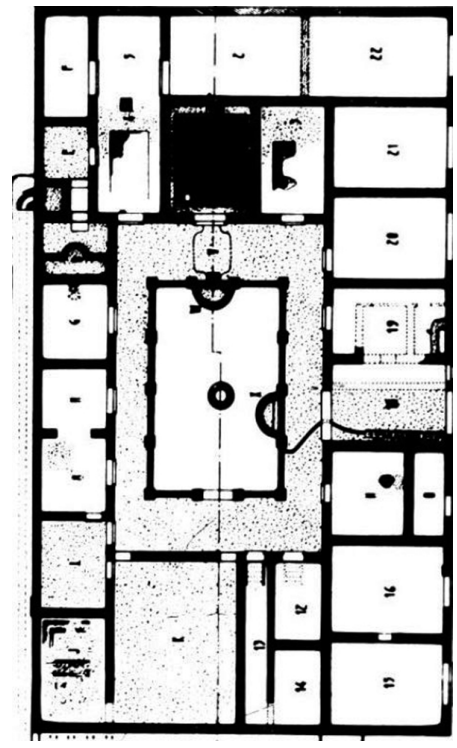


Figure 6. Villa of Frescoes (Rebuffat, 1969).

the exterior with the peristyle, and this is the only access to the dwelling (fig. 5). This element is evidence of the importance of these transit spaces (in this case the vestibule), and it shows how unusual it is to have direct access from the outside to the peristyle, like in the House of the Bronze Head.

What this *domus* from Cuicul does have is a large peristyle, which, although it is only approximately 143 m², covers 29.42% of the total surface area of the building. This is only slightly less than the peristyle of the *domus* in Pollentia, although it is true that there is a possibility that this dwelling has a first floor, given that a possible stairwell was found (Carucci, 2006: 397).

TIPASA

The city was located on the Algerian coast, where there was an important Phoenician-Punic settlement until the time of Claudius. Then, it became a key Roman enclave during the annexation of the Kingdom of Mauritania by Rome (Sintes and Rebahi, 2003: 294-295).

Villa of Frescoes

This is a *domus* with a complete peristyle, *triclinium* and tripartite entrance with an orthogonal vestibule, which dates from the middle of the 2nd century AD, although this space underwent a major alteration during the Severan period (Rebuffat, 1969: 679). It is a large urban villa, which to some extent escapes the rigidity that we have seen in other African cities. As far as the entrances to this *domus* are concerned, only one of them connect to the dwelling itself, the other entrances corresponding to the *tabernae* are located to the west and would have been integrated into the building. The main entrance is once again marked by the presence of a vestibule that acts as a transit between the exterior and the peristyle. In this case, its wings consist of other rooms that seem to have been used as reception areas, so that the peristyle may have been used for more private functions.

The Villa of Frescoes also has a large peristyle, located in a central position in the *domus*, which is evidently marked by symmetry (fig. 6). It is a dwelling with a large, open space that covers 27.69% of the total area. This again shows the importance of this type of space, although proportionally it occupies a smaller area than the House of the Bronze Head.

TIMGAD

The city of Timgad, located in present-day Algeria, is one of the most characteristic examples of orthogonal and rigid African urban planning (Le Bohec, 2005: 116-117). The domestic architecture of the city is arranged in *insulae* of 400 m². This area could not be exceeded given that architectural expansion was delimited by the public road. However, the city underwent a process of restructuring in the 2nd century AD, which also affected the city's domestic architecture, as shown by *domus* such as the House of Hermaphrodite or the House of Sertius (Bouchareb, 2009).

DOMUS 70, 83 AND 90

There are several architectural structures in the Roman enclave of Timgad with a highly symmetrical layout, such as *domus* 70, 83 and 90, though they are no exception to the standardised floor plans of the city's urban domestic architecture. Of particular interest within this symmetrical axuality is *Domus* 70, which also has an oversized peristyle, covering 28.87% of the total area of the dwelling, highlighting the importance of this space. As far as access to the dwelling is concerned, there is a main entrance that connects with the peristyle through a vestibule, so we find yet another dwelling in which none of its entrances connects the road with the peristyle in a direct way (Rebuffat, 1969: 674).



CONCLUSIONS

From the 1st century, and particularly in the 2nd century AD, Roman domestic architecture in North Africa underwent an important development closely linked to the urban and architectural growth of this territory in those centuries. The orthogonality of Roman urban planning is evident in cities such as Volubilis or Timgad, where the *domus* were built around *insulae* marked by the roads of the cities. This forced the elites to settle in peripheral neighbourhoods in search of greater urban dynamism, and at the same time allowing them to escape from other factors such as noise pollution or bad smells. A very interesting example of this was Timgad, and its neighbourhoods devoted to textile work (Amraoui, 2011: 223-231; Magalhaes-de Oliveira, 2011: 60-62).

In Africa, as was interpreted for the Roman city of Pollentia, urban orthogonality encouraged the construction of dwellings with a floor plan marked by a certain symmetrical distribution. This would agree with the hypothesis put forward by Arribas and Tarradell for the House of the Bronze Head. As far as the peristyle is concerned, although *a priori* none of the examples presented had a proportionally similar area as that of the Pollentia *domus*, it is not improbable that they could have covered similar surface areas.

The absence of an Italica atrium in the African provinces has traditionally been understood, as in the case of late domestic architecture in Hispania, to have been substituted in its functions of reception and distribution by the peristyle. However, it seems that this space loses to a certain extent its role as part of the *pars publica*², exercised by vestibules, some of which had large dimensions, such as the one in the House of Amphitrite at Cuicul (Rebuffat, 1969: 672-673; Mahjoubi, 2000: 198).

If we start from Arribas and Tarradell's idea regarding their hypothetical reconstruction of the House of the Bronze Head, we must assume that the main access to the *domus* was located to the south and linked to some kind of via-peristyle transition room, be it a vestibule or entrance corridor. However, the problem lies in the fact that there is no other structure linked to the three or four entrances that directly connect the exterior with the peristyle. Thus, we theoretically presume the peristyle to be linked to residents' private lives or whose access was not open to all visitors to the *domus*. It is now worth considering hypotheses to justify the existence of a Roman house with so many entrances. It could be that they were not always in use, although there is no evidence to support this. Another approach could be that they were secondary accesses to the house, but they seem excessive given that they all connect directly with the open space of the house.

² In classical antiquity, there was no clear difference between the public and private spheres, so that in the domestic sphere various performative functions linked to the *domus* were conducted. Indeed, there was the importance and need to publicise the family, even in tasks that we would consider more intimate, as a strategy for social advancement. There was also an ideological element around the pater families that was deeply rooted from the Augustan period onwards (Bermejo Tirado, 2014).

A large number of accesses and the fact that they directly connect with the peristyle breaks with the classical scheme of this type of building and with the public liturgy linked to Roman domestic architecture. We must therefore reconsider our interpretation and open various possibilities that allow us, on the one hand, to reconsider the hypothetical reconstruction of this dwelling, the circulation, distribution, and spatial syntax and, finally, to rethink the very consideration of this architectural structure as a domus. However, at this point, we must consider the possibility that we are dealing with some constructions linked to a use as a meeting or association space, understanding these as places with very diverse functionality and which on occasions import models and architectural elements typical of private buildings.

From a planimetric examination, this type of building adopts quasi-domestic outlines, in many cases due to being ancient domus transformed. However, they present a diverse spatial framework, model and form that makes it challenging to circumscribe these constructions to typological criteria (Tran, Rodríguez, Soler and Goffaux, 2016: 14-21). Apart from this problem, in those buildings whose floor plan resembles or derives from a domus, the rooms are also articulated in front of a courtyard or open space. However, they present anonymous schemes in terms of accessibility and circulation. Examples in the context of the Iberian Peninsula such as the Domus of Likine in La Caridad, the Schola of Arucci or La Casa 101 in Ampurias (Cortes, 2016: 409-415; Bermejo, Fernández and Campos, 2016: 483-489; Rodríguez, Tran and Soler, 2016: 443-445), initially understood as private Roman spaces and reinterpreted as meeting or association spaces, open up an interesting field in which to continue working to define the model, form and function of this domus pollentina.



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