THE JOINT AAR-DAI RESEARCH PROJECT AT OSTIA: 1998 AND 1999 SEASONS

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In 1999 the American Academy in Rome (AAR) began a three-year collaboration at Ostia with the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rom (DAI) designed to investigate the urbanistic development of the city (figs. 1–3). The joint project arises from previous work of the DAI. Between 1996 and 1998 geophysical surveys under Michael Heinzelmann, combined with the analysis of aerial photography, established a surprisingly detailed plan of the unexcavated parts of Ostia.[1] Therefore, trial trenches were dug in 1998, once again under the direction of Dr. Heinzelmann, in order to test the accuracy of the plan and to add a chronological dimension to it. When Archer Martin, then the finds expert for the project, was chosen as Mellon Professor at the AAR in 1999, it was decided to continue the project under the auspices of the two institutions, with Heinzelmann as the co-director in charge of field operations and Martin as the co-director responsible for the study of the finds. The goal of the project is both to obtain concrete dating for selected single structures and to elaborate settlement sequences for Regions III, IV, and V through limited trenching on the basis of the plan established. The results, combined with the geophysical and aerial photographic data, constitute in turn the basis for posing more ample urbanistic questions.

1. The 1998 Campaign

The 1998 campaign concentrated on a structure in Regio V that promised to be the long-sought Constantinian basilica identified as the episcopal church of Ostia.[2] This building appeared quite clearly on the plan elaborated from the geophysical and photographic data, on a plot on Via del Sabazeo just inside the city walls. It was possible to establish that the building was three-aisled, with an apse on the nave and an atrium. Furthermore, it was evident that the structure in question was superimposed on a preceding building, probably an insula with an interior court. Thus the first campaign was designed to verify the correctness of the plan

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[1] M. Heinzelmann, H. Becker, K. Eder, and M. Stephani, "Vorbericht zu einer geophysikalischen Prospektionskampagne in Ostia Antica," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung* 104 (1997) 537–548; M. Heinzelmann, "Arbeitsbericht zu einer zweiten geophysikalischen Prospektionskampagne in Ostia Antica," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung* 105 (1998) 425–429.

[2] F. A. Bauer and M. Heinzelmann, "The Constantinian Bishop's Church at Ostia: Preliminary Report on the 1998 Season," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 12 (1999) 342–353; F. A. Bauer, M. Heinzelmann, A. Martin, and A. Schaub, "Untersuchungen im Bereich der konstantinischen Bischofskirche Ostias. Vorbericht zur ersten Grabungskampagne 1998," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung* 106 (1999) 289–341.

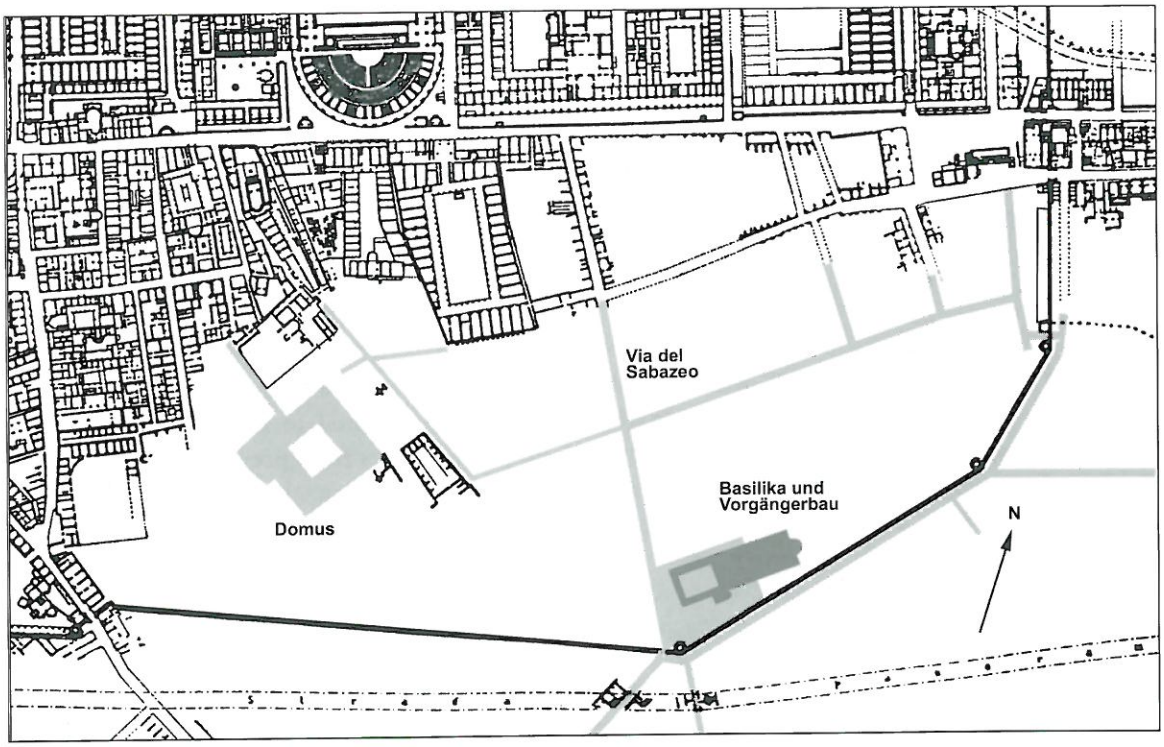

Fig. 1. Areas investigated in 1998 and 1999 (in gray) (Michael Heinzelmann).

and in doing so to establish whether the structure was indeed the Constantinian basilica and to investigate its relationship with the preceding building. One could also hope that evidence of the latest phases of the life of Ostia would come to light, as the area was untouched by the large-scale clearances carried out at Ostia earlier in the twentieth century. The six trenches placed at key points of the building's plan fulfilled our expectations.

The remains on the ground corresponded very closely to the plan, although much of the building proved to have been plowed out to below the level of the foundations. This indicated the plan's reliability. From the intercolumniation observed in one trench it was extrapolated that the church, probably with a stepped cross section, was supported by fourteen columns on each side. The original construction phase could be dated by finds from the fill in trench 2, in the right nave: the greatest part of the material could be dated to the third century, while a few amphorae sherds indicated a date of no earlier than the early fourth century, thus confirming a Constantinian date. It turned out that no walls were reused from the previous structure for the Constantinian church but rather that they were all carefully razed.

Further building activity took place in the area of the apse of the church, as attested in trench 1. Most of the material found in the fill layer here corresponds to that discovered in the fill of the original construction phase (i.e., late second to early fourth century in date). However, a few pieces must be post-Constantinian, particularly some fragments of Sicilian lamps to be dated no earlier than the late sixth century. The extent of the work is not clear: possibly it involved the installation of an apse podium, more likely the substantial rebuilding of the apse, for which differences in masonry technique speak.

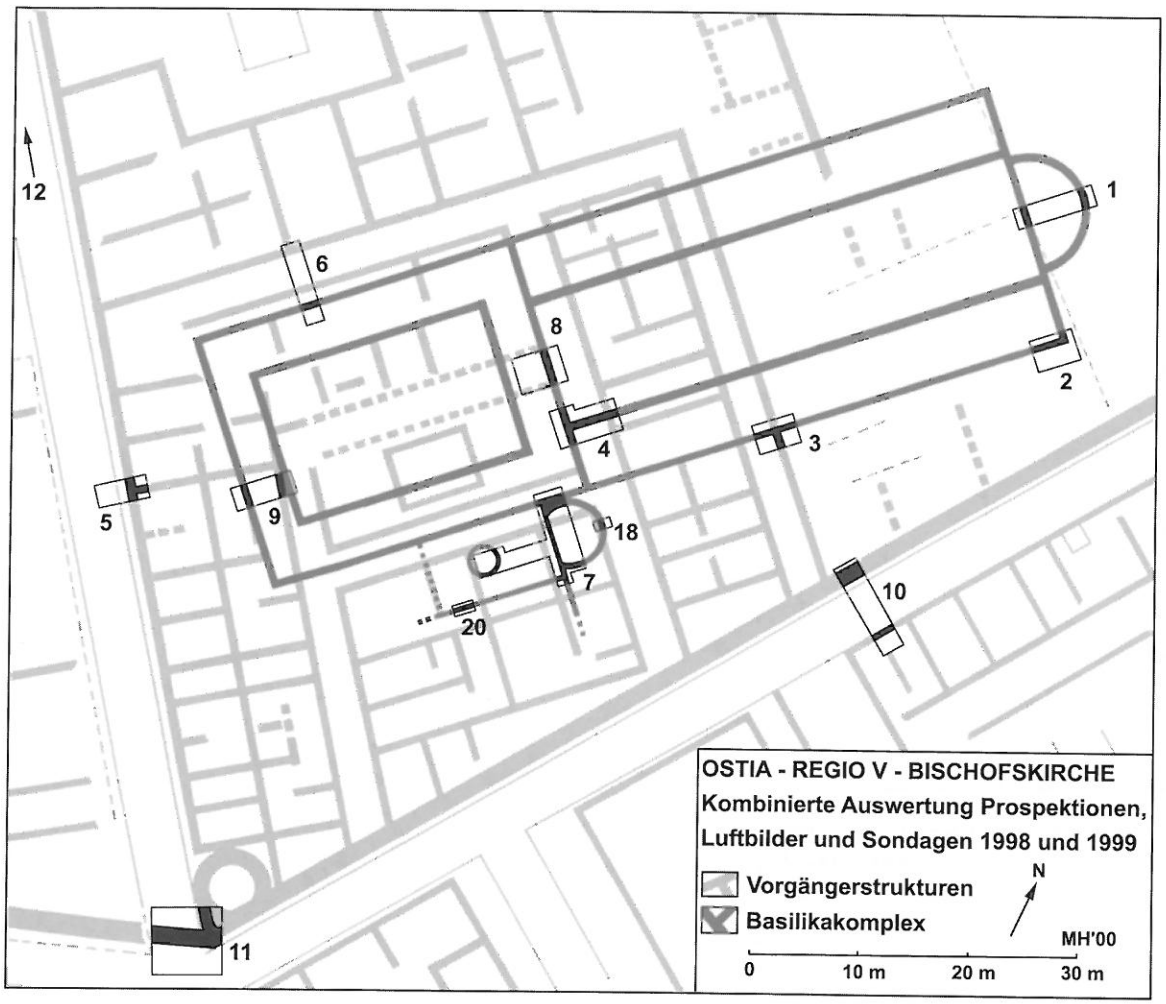

Fig. 2. Trenches in and near the Constantinian basilica (basilica complex in dark gray, preceding structures in light gray) (Michael Heinzelmann).

There is various testimony for late use. In trench 4, in the southwestern corner of the nave, two reused marble sarcophagi were found inserted into the floor through an undatable cut. Whenever these burials were made, the church was certainly still in use. In trench 3 a *Grubenhaus* (or sunken floor dwelling) was found leaned up against the outside wall of the south aisle, where a side entrance had already been blocked. There was found here an example each of African Red Slip vessels Hayes 104B and 109, the latter indicating a date no earlier than the early seventh century and the former the late sixth. Trench 6, in the north wing of the atrium, showed a similar situation: two hearths on a beaten clay floor associated with material (Hayes 104B) of a late sixth-century date. Thus one must postulate a more or less elaborate rebuilding taking place at the eastern end of the structure at approximately the same time as other parts were abandoned and given over to domestic rather than ecclesiastical purposes.

Trench 4 also gave evidence of the final spoliation of the church. Here the floor had been stripped before the south wall collapsed on it, as had the wall itself to judge by the lack of any decoration. The destruction layer contained several fragments of Forum Ware, the glazed

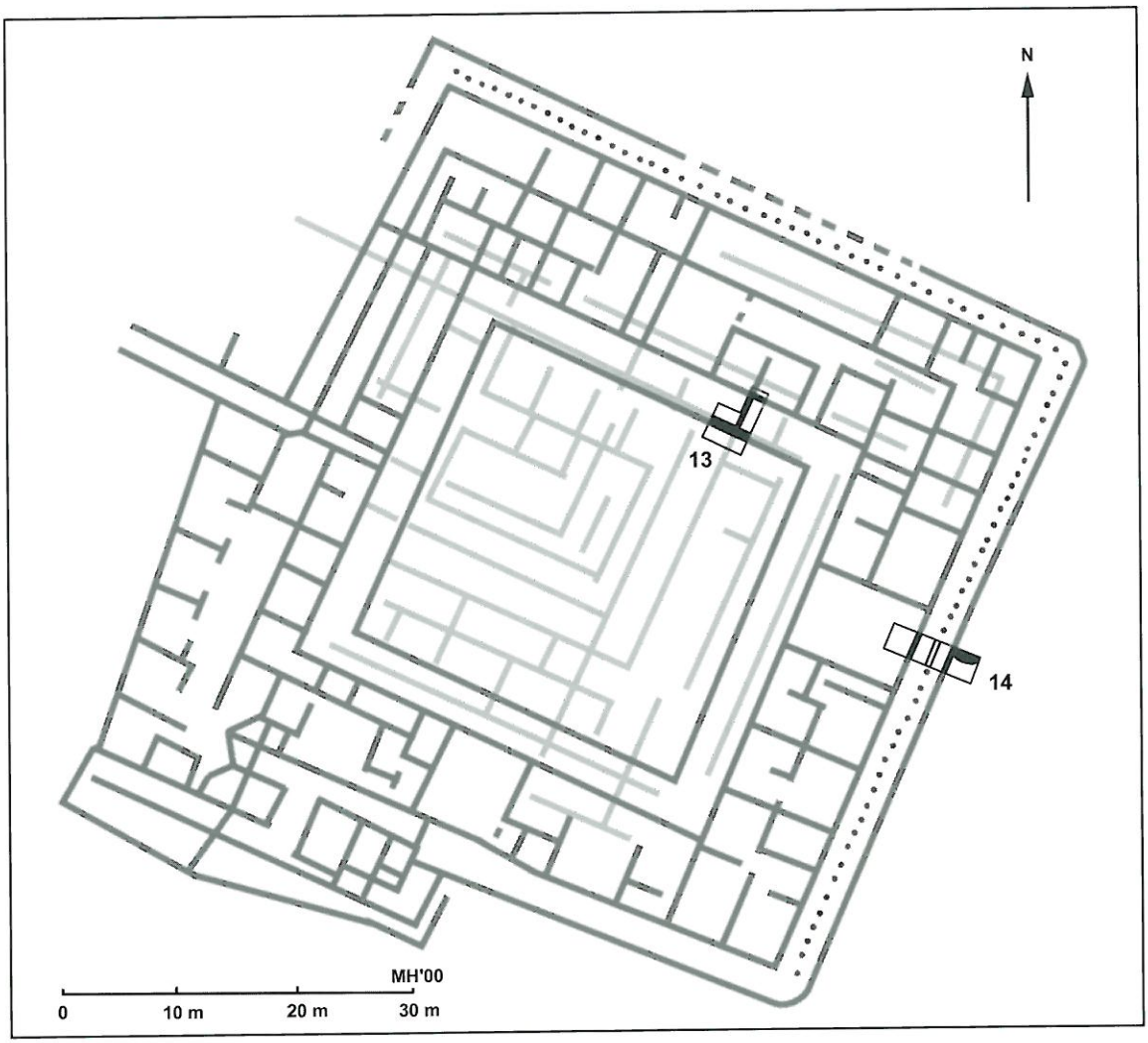

Fig. 3. Trenches in domus (domus in dark gray, preceding structures in light gray) (Michael Heinzelmann).

pottery typical of the Carolingian period. Such a date accords well with the sources, which speak of the foundation of Gregoriopolis under Gregory IV (827–844) to replace the ancient settlement, when the stripping of the church is likely.

2. The 1999 Campaign

The excavations in 1999 continued in Regio V, both in the area of the church and elsewhere.[3] The aims were to clear up some outstanding questions on the church itself and the preceding

[3] A more extensive preliminary report of the 1999 season is being prepared for *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung* 107 (2000).

structure (trenches 8 and 9) and to examine a building associated with the church (trench 7) as well as to investigate the nearby city walls (trenches 10 and 11), a large structure in the area on the opposite side of Via del Sabazeo (trenches 13 and 14), and the levels of Via del Sabazeo and a crossroad (trenches 12 and 16 respectively). For this preliminary report certain sequences have been evaluated with regard to their stratigraphic importance, and the relevant finds have been examined to establish a dating framework.

The further investigations in trench 8 showed that a more complicated situation preceded the construction of the church than had been perceived in 1998. There are at least two buildings on the site before the church. These consist of the insula with a four-sided courtyard, which had already been seen, and another building underneath, the existence of which is certain but whose plan cannot be understood. The earlier structure cannot have been built before the late first century A.D., as the underlying fill layers contained three joining pieces of a South Gaulish Drag. 29 with a festoon decoration that finds Flavian parallels, beside first-century Italian sigillata fragments. Excavation in this trench also revealed further sarcophagus burials in the atrium of the church.

The secondary building on the south side of the church, investigated in trench 7, proved to be the baptistery. It is a simple rectangular structure with a horseshoe-shaped apse on the east side. A round basin, originally clad with marble, was found in the western end with remains of a column and a cupola that indicate a ciborium. The baptistery must have been built after the church for structural reasons—its walls abut those of the church—but the pottery could provide no later date for it.

The data from geophysical research and aerial photography showed clearly the city wall, a parallel street along its exterior, and a row of small buildings (presumably tombs) along the southern side of the street. In the point chosen for trench 10 the ground reached 5.5 m above sea level, promising a good stratigraphic sequence for the wall, the street, and a tomb building. The wall was exposed for a height of about 4 m on its outer side, where it showed the technical characteristics known from earlier excavations elsewhere on its circuit: a rather uneven opus quasi-reticulatum that tapers by about 5 cm for each 60 cm of height. It is interesting to note that the foundation, which consists of rough pieces of dark red tufa with a cap of hard caementicium and projects 25 cm beyond the line of the wall itself, began at ca. 30 cm above sea level, about 50 cm lower than at Porta Romana: this indicates that the original terrain at Ostia was more uneven than could be expected for such sandy alluvial land. On the outside of the wall a layer of sand contaminated with potsherds and charcoal remains was found, whose surface served as the ground level for the original phase of the wall. Among the pottery was a tiny body fragment of Italian sigillata, a class that came into use around the middle of the first century B.C.; this is not an incontrovertible element for dating the wall, because the fragment in question could have been ground into the layer while its surface was walked upon. However, its presence, taken together with the clear mid- to late-Augustan date of the next highest layer whose surface constituted a ground level (a date guaranteed by the find of Italian sigillata rim sherds of Consp. 12.3 or 12.4 and 14.2 and of Dressel 7–11 amphora rim sherds), could be an argument in favor of the recently proposed Ciceronian date for the construction of the wall rather than the traditionally accepted Sullan one.

Trench 11 was placed in order to examine the relationship between the city wall and Via del Sabazeo. The plans of the prewar excavators showed this to be one of the few exits to the south, through a tower facing inward and therefore thought probably not to be original. Three

modern robbers' trenches had destroyed a late drain system under the uppermost surface of the street and disturbed the stratigraphical record but also allowed the excavation to proceed down to the foundations of the wall and virgin soil. Thus it could be established that the wall originally had no passage at this point but rather masonry in opus quasi-reticulatum similar to that discovered in trench 10, starting from foundations at 38 cm above sea level and reaching a height of ca. 20 cm. The wall was broken at the height of 60 cm above sea level, allowing construction of the gate. Here the first layer covering the break in the wall gave no datable pottery and the second an Italian sigillata fragment (Consp. B 3.16) that can be dated only generically to the first century A.D. The relatively low level of the first phase of the street suggests a comparatively early date in the first century A.D. At this level there was no tower to defend the passage through the wall; probably it had no defensive function because there was no evidence that the gate could be closed. A tower was discovered at ca. 2.7 m above sea level, which provided the gate at that level (and thereby the wall) with a defensive capability. The tower can be dated after 270–300 because of a coin found in the fill behind the threshold, but it must not be later than the first third of the fourth century because it is at the same height as the latest paving of Via del Sabazeo rather than in correspondence with any later and higher level. Evidently at Ostia, as in so many cities in the Roman world at that time including Rome itself, it was felt advisable to attend to defenses. As the gate in later phases was no longer operational, the need must have passed.

Trenches 13 and 14 were designed to investigate a large structure, measuring approximately 60 by 70 m, in part of Regio V on the other side of Via del Sabazeo from the church. This proved to be a domus built around a large central peristyle and decorated with opus sectile floors and late fourth style wall paintings. The construction of the domus has its *terminus post quem* in the mid to late first century A.D., given by the discovery of fragments of Italian sigillata in the layer whose surface constituted the ground level before building (Consp. 3, 20.4, and 23.2) and in the fill layer laid down in preparation for building (Consp. 20.4). It stood over an earlier structure dated to the mid-Augustan to Tiberian period (the date of a fragment of Italian sigillata Consp. 18.2 found in fill). Over time the domus underwent numerous transformations and finally a thorough renovation around the middle of the fourth century, when the level of the floors was raised by about 70 cm. This date is based on two coins of 347 found under the new opus sectile floor. The domus remained in use at least until the sixth century, the date of African Red Slip fragments found in the layer making up the latest identifiable phase (Hayes 104A and 99A), although by then it was in a state of extreme decay. The discovery of this domus is particularly important for the study of Ostia because it is the earliest known domus, going back to a time for which only insulae in the central part of the city were attested.

3. Conclusion

The first two seasons have given much information about the urbanistic development of Regio V. The first building operation in the area appears to have been the construction of the city wall, perhaps rather later in the first century B.C. than traditionally thought. Regio V seems to have been left undeveloped for some time. In the course of the early imperial period it was gradually built up. On the domus site, closer to the city center, a first building was erected as

early as the mid-Augustan to Tiberian period, while the somewhat more distant area under the basilica was occupied only in the second half of the first century. In both places occupation continued until late antiquity. The discovery of the domus gives rise to the speculation that the outlying areas of the city may have contained such extensive housing for a more prosperous portion of the population at the same time that the middle of the city was being given over to the intensive model of insulae. It must be noted, however, that the insula under the church indicates that dense housing could exist in the outlying areas as well. The level of Via del Sabazeo in the middle of the Regio was raised several times, while the changes in level to the east and west occurred very differently; this argues against the theory that rises in level were public initiatives carried out over whole neighborhoods of the city. The late third and fourth centuries saw various building activities in Regio V: foremost, of course, the building of the church but also the renewal of the domus and the construction of the tower on the city wall. It has long been known that Ostia at this time was able to erect and maintain prosperous private dwellings. Here it can also be seen that it could match Portus in public operations. The fifth and sixth centuries show a growing poverty in the area: the abandonment of parts of the church to hutlike dwellings and the restriction of maintenance to the eastern end; the renovation of parts of the domus (with operations of poor quality), while walls in other parts collapsed; the abandonment of the gate in the city walls. Evidently the remaining population lived only in pockets of the settlement throughout the previously continuously urbanized area. When complete abandonment occurred is not clear. There are no occupation levels dated securely later than the first half of the seventh century, although it must be said that it would be difficult to find good evidence from layers characterized by declining and pauperized use and also that it is still not easy to recognize ceramic wares of the late seventh and eighth centuries. The latest indication of activity comes from the church, where the destruction level contained Carolingian pottery.