

13 : The archaeological site in Piazza Ferrari and the Surgeon's house



Here you are in Piazza Ferrari, in the centre of the city of Rimini. This is where an archaeological excavation of great importance is to be found, well-known throughout the world for the conservation of the structures unearthed and for the quality of the finds, among which a unique collection of surgical instruments.

The on site museum area, of more than 700sq.m., open to the public since December 2007, tells 2000 years of the history of the city. The excavations, started in 1989 by the Superintendent for the Archaeological Heritage of Emilia Romagna, have brought to light a domus of the Roman period, a late Empire period palatial residence, graves and traces of early mediaeval dwellings, and walls of late mediaeval and modern ages.

Excavation methods, finalised from the start as an on site conservation area, have privileged the reading of the most significant evidence of each phase without reaching the oldest levels of settlement. Only in certain cases have sections of flooring in opus signinum been brought to light, made of crushed potsherd fragments in which pieces of stone have been inserted to form simple decorative designs. The presence of these floors in the area of the late Empire building (easily visible looking down on the excavation) verifies the existence of a domus from the 1st century BC, a domus that suffered profound reconstruction in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. It was on the occasion of this last excavation that the building where the doctor lived in the 3rd century was brought to light through a partial opening to a large terraced garden. His was the extraordinary collection of surgical instruments that was unearthed in the excavations.

The visit to the excavations proceeds in an anti-clockwise direction. Go to the opposite side from the entrance to the site where the remains of the surgeon's house are visible.

From this position you can see the whole of the surgeon's house.

On the northern edge of the Roman city, not far from the coast, which was then about a kilometre further inland than today, the domus was positioned within the urban network close to the crossroads between a decumanus and a cardo. The latter is where the entrance to the house can be found, near the present day Corso Giovanni 23°. Make your way to that side to begin your visit to the domus, noting as you go that the outer walls of the building were made of bricks and tiles mixed with mortar while the room dividers were made of clay.

The entrance hall led into a small service room followed by an inner courtyard, a dining room (triclinium) and a long corridor connected to two living rooms and a bedroom (cubiculum). The rooms had frescoed walls and black and white mosaic floors, all except for the elegant polychrome mosaics in the living rooms. One of them depicts a honeycomb decoration with the mythical Orpheus taming the animals to the sound of his lyre, while the other is a refined, geometrical motif of stars and braids. The ground floor of the domus is completed by a latrine and a heated service room (as can be seen by the low pillars that supported the floor, under which circulated hot air). On the upper floor there would have been the kitchen and the pantry.

The dining room (triclinium), intended for banquets, is recognisable as such by the mosaic representing a large, handled vase for serving wine. The amazing, glass picture representing fish, on show in the Museum, would have hung on one wall. Lying on the floor you can see a heavy, iron grating, originally placed to protect a window that opened on to the street.

Turn your attention now to the taberna medica, the surgery of the doctor who was the last person to live in the domus. There are two rooms: the Orpheus room and the bedroom (cubiculum) next door, characterised by the broad white band on the floor where the bed was placed and where the plaster bearing the name of the doctor came from (maybe Eutyches). The two rooms, with a connecting door between, both opened on to the corridor; one was used as a study-cum-surgery and the other for operated patients. The

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surgical instruments that were found in the first room make up the richest collection of the Roman period, along with the equipment for the preparation of drugs: containers, small balances and large, stone mortars with their pestles, dispersed in the corridor, too, and now in the Museum together with the other ornaments. In his study, besides his instruments, the doctor kept a small bronze hand connected to the oriental cult of Jupiter Dolichenus, a god very dear to the army.

If the taberna reconstructed inside the Museum creates an attractive setting, the remains that we can see here allow us to grasp the beauty of the mosaic surfaces. The polychrome mosaic of Orpheus, in which marble and glass paste fragments compose the design and the subjects represented, is particularly valuable: Orpheus in the centre surrounded by birds, among which a parrot with brightly coloured plumage, a deer and a lion with a mane in pictorial tones.

Life in the domus ended all of a sudden on account of a disastrous fire, probably caused by raids involving the first Germanic tribes that descended on Italy around the middle of the 3rd century. The relationship between this destruction and wartime events is documented by the unearthing of a spearhead and a javelin point, weapons typical of the legions, on the floor of the doctor's study. The building collapsed burying all the furnishings and the objects under the rubble, a real treasure that has reached us almost intact.

The stretch of city wall right next to the domus on the sea side belongs to the defensive line set up chiefly in relation to the danger represented by barbaric tribes.

You must now leave the surgeon's house behind you and move on to the central footbridge to look at the large expanse of mosaic flooring of the late Empire building constructed at the beginning of the 5th century.

Following a long period of neglect, the area was redeveloped after the Imperial capital was transferred to Ravenna at the beginning of the 5th century. The proximity of the court of Honorius revived building work in the city where, alongside the splendid, new buildings, constructed on the model of the Imperial palace, remained areas in ruins or occupied by simple little cottages.

The visual impact of the mosaics renders the idea of the splendour on the inside of the building rebuilt and extended between the 5th and 6th centuries, at the time of Theodore, king of the Goths. The building occupies the area of the Roman domus on the decumanus side, sparing the taberna medica. Built with traditional, Roman techniques, it has brick walls and rooms heated by hot air made to circulate in the cavity below the floor.

The large, cruciform or apsed rooms, with composite patterns, seem even larger thanks to the decorative mosaic designs, rich polychrome flooring with complex, geometric motifs. Take a good look at the designs along the L-shaped corridor that defines two sides of the great central room, leading towards the reception rooms. In the centre of the building there was a garden enhanced by water features supplied by a nymphaeum fountain.

If you move on to the footbridge that crosses the area of the late Empire excavations, you cannot help but notice the graves that rupture the floors of the building. In the 6th century city torn by the war between the Goths and the Byzantines, the late Empire building was abandoned and destroyed, and eventually designated as a burial ground. There are more than twenty graves probably connected to some religious building erected on the same block. The wounds inflicted by the graves on the building and on the beautiful, mosaic floors are profound. They are poor graves, mere holes in the ground, at most covered by tiles, that provide evidence of the increasing habit of interment inside the city walls, prevailing over the Roman custom which banned the practice.

In the 7th century, the area returned to accommodating residential structures by now very different from the Roman style. Built in wood, clay and brick fragments, their roofs were held up by big poles, and the floors were simply beaten earth. All around there were

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courtyards and kitchen gardens. If you turn and look towards Via Giovanni 23°, you can see the large hearth with a surface made of re-used Roman bricks, that belonged to a house on the corner of the ancient streets that are still in use.

Life on the block continued with ever more modest structures that eventually ceased in the course of the 8th century when the whole area was occupied by vegetable gardens. It is not until the early Middle Ages that we can find new buildings rise here. Among the interventions of the modern age our attention is drawn to the great silos for preserving grain, constructed on top of the mosaics.