

The New Excavations in the Bath House Complex near the Forum of Ammaia.

Preliminary Report 2008



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Introduction

The new excavations in the so-called “Termas do forum” in the very centre of the town site of *Ammaia* are a collaboration of the University of Evora, Ghent University and the Foundation Cidade Romana de Ammaia. A first campaign, under the direction of C. Corsi (UEvora) and F. Vermeulen (UEvora/UGent), and with terrain supervision by archaeologists J. Carvalho and S. Borges (Foundation Cidade de Ammaia) and D. Taelman (UGent), took place from July 7th 2008 for a period of three weeks. About 20 students, from the universities of Lisboa, Algarve and Gent, took part in the fieldwork, as part of their field training programme.



Fig. 1 General location of the bath complex SE of the forum of *Ammaia*. The bath complex is cut by the Portalegre road

The main aim of this research, in the same area of the earlier excavations in this sector¹ was to map and study in more detail and over a larger surface, the complex of (possible public) baths, located directly south of the forum. Not only is it necessary to have a better understanding of the whole plan of this bathhouse (which was partly destroyed by the construction of the road to Portalegre), but also is it essential to date its prominent phases of construction, use and eventual abandonment. The complex could be a crucial element in the urbanisation and more monumentalized Romanisation of this central part of the city, and needs therefore good stratigraphical excavations. Furthermore, is this an area of the archaeological site which can be further developed as a key sector for open air museum display and a good reference point in the future development of the archaeological park of Ammaia, especially in relation with the monumental forum area.



Fig. 2 The team at work in July 2008.

As strategy of research this first year it was decided to continue first in the “quadrados”, which were already partly excavated in earlier years, but to join these individual blocks into one “open area” excavation. Digging the intermediate banks would give additional insight into the stratigraphy of the area, while the more open aspect of the site after this and further campaigns would give the general public a better overview of the (preserved) archaeological structures. At the end of the campaign an extension towards the south was also dug (see further).

Numbers of *Unidade Estratigraficas* have been assigned to all the layers already brought to light in the former excavations (including walls) and a “ficha de US” has been filled for each of them. The numbering of US has been kept updated with the progresses of excavations.

¹ Between 1996 and 2003 several small scale excavation campaigns have been carried out in this sector south of the road to Portalegre. The digs were organized mostly under the auspices of the Foundation Cidade Romana de Ammaia and only a short preliminary report on this work was published: BORGES, S., A cidade romana de Ammaia as termas do forum (notícia preliminar), *Ibn Maruan*, 12, 2003, pp. 85-97.



Fig. 3 General plan of the excavated architectural structures with indication of the sectors of excavation (ambiente= Amb.)

AMB. A

One of the main features excavated during the earlier digs was a bath basin situated in Ambiente A. Its context and relation with other features could now be studied more in detail. After the phase constituted by Amb. B (see further), the basin Amb. A was built partially destroying the wall US 31. It is very likely that at the moment that the wall US 23 was built, room "B" was filled at least until the upper remaining level of wall 23, as is proven by the rough technique of the outer side of the wall, which was clearly built against some kind of earthwork.

The original amb. A was delimited by walls 23, 17 and 28, but we have no clear ideas about the original western wall, at the moment constituted by the wall US 25 and the bench or staircase US 27, which leaned against the second phase addition of mortar ("cocciopesto") revetment (US 80).



Fig. 4 Connection point of walls US 28, US 31 and US 22-23 between Amb. A and B.

This first phase basin was plastered with "cocciopesto" (a type of *opus signinum*) (US 18), as is visible also on wall US 28. On the northern wall (US 17) a revetment of marble slabs has been carefully displayed (preserved height: +/- 60 cm).

It is not clear whether the "cocciopesto" (US18) and the marble slabs originally reached the corner between US 17 and 23. Surely, in a second phase, the slabs have been partially taken away to facilitate the building of wall US 22. The latter has been interpreted as a system to reduce the capacity of the basin or eventually a wide bench to lie on.

The wall US 22 has been plastered with a new layer of "cocciopesto" (US 20), partially covering the marble slabs US 19, but also covered by other slabs (one is probably sandstone) that could be reused.



Fig. 5 View of the basin with steps/seats in Amb. A

Probably to this second phase belongs the upgrade of the walls US 17 and 23, with the walls US 24 and 81. This upgrade has been done together with an additional thick layer of "cocciopesto", that has been laid down in the NW corner (US 80), covered with marble slabs (these too likely reused).

Against this slab, the western wall US 25 has been built, with the bench 27, both plastered with "cocciopesto" (US 26). The surface of this bench/step US 27 is made

with rectangular bricks, whose sizes are 42 x 14 x 5 cm. The latter covers a fragment of a marble slab of the flooring at the SW corner of the excavated area, indicating the possibility that the building of this western wall has to be really interpreted as a third phase.



Fig. 6 View of the basin with preserved marble plates and wall US 22.

The water of the basin was evacuated via the channel US 53 (covered by US 6). This channel, built with blocks of granite into the stratigraphy of Amb. C, breaks the wall US 8/9.



Fig. 7 Evacuation channel US 53.

Under wall US 17 the water is conducted into a lead fistula, opening into a hole in the marble slabs of US 19.



Fig. 8 The evacuation channel breaking through wall US 8/9



Fig. 9 The lead fistula.

AMB. C

The "corridor-like" space defined Amb. C is delimited by walls US 8, US 9 (in common with amb. B), US 15 and US 44 (at a lower level) The walls US 8/9 and US 15 are similar qua building technique, but in US 15 there is a more abundant use of compact mortar. It is anyhow likely that they have been built together. The wall US 9 proved to be built in a wide trench, which could not immediately be seen on the surface, but is

now clearly detectable in the section of that part spared by our excavation on the western side of the wall (not to make it fall). The blocks of stone, smoothed on the outer surface, have been built, in a tidy way, in this trench. It is not clear whether the walls US 12 and 15 have been built with the same technique, because the former excavations had already taken away the stratigraphy that surrounded them.

The interesting thing is that the stratigraphy in the north-western side of Amb. C (US 3-4-5) proved to be sterile, although it consists of clayey earth intentionally brought there, maybe for terracing purposes. In this scenario, we could envisage for wall 12 not only the function of buttress, but also of possible staircase to access basin "A".

We do not exclude the option that the walking level in the eastern part of this Amb. C was lower than what is visible/excavated now: in the small section exposed on the southern side of wall US 44 many lumps of mortar are still visible, proving that a walking level can be still reached by deepening the trench during a future excavation campaign.

When Amb. C was already filled with the stratigraphy US3-4-5, wall US 12 has been built, itself aligned with the eastern side of wall US 9. Its function is still unclear, but we suggest that this could be a reinforcement of wall US 23 and eventually US 24, to support these walls. This kind of buttress would then be likely in connection with the similar wall US 55 on the opposite side (on the southern side of US 28).

In this same stratigraphy, interpreted as an intentional filling very poor of materials, channel US 53 has been dug, in connection with Amb. A. At the time, it was possible that wall US 15 was already cut (topped actually) at the actual level.

At the present state of research, given the fact that a deeper level has been reached in the former *Quadrado* 1409, without detecting any flooring level, we cannot determine which the original disposition was of this space. On the southern side of wall US 44, where the stratigraphy inside the Amb. C (US 36) has been artificially cut to put into evidence wall US 44, abundant lumps of white mortar can be seen in the "exposed" section: we cannot exclude the possibility that these are traces of a preparation layer for flooring. At the beginning of the 2008 campaign we started the excavation of the bench between *Quadrados* 1409 and 1309. A layer consisting of a compact mixture of pebbles and reddish earth has been exposed (US 34). The excavation was provisionally stopped here because we are hoping to recuperate the connection with the stratigraphy of the new areas (H and I).

AMB. F

The so called *natatio* has been built with big, well squared blocks of granite, well connected to each other (US 70 and US 82). The blocks are refined only on the front and lateral sides: the back is rough and is meant to amortize in the huge *caementicium* nucleus US 60. The big construction leans against the broad walls US 62 and US 71. The interior of the pool has been plastered with "cocciopesto" (US 73). In the northern corner of the excavated area, two sections of the filling of this *natatio* are still exposed.

Only the northern one has been cleaned and reinterpreted. The pool was initially filled by a natural layer of fine, clayish silt that deposited when the upper line of granite

blocks of US 70 were already robbed (looted?). At the bottom of the pool, a big heap of debris has intentionally accumulated (US 76). The two layers have been later covered by other layers: some of which (for instance US 79) seem to be of natural formation, others (e.g. US 75, composed only of flakes of schist) seem more due to human action.

At a time when the higher levels of granite blocks of US 82 were probably already taken away, a strange "structure" of stones linked with abundant mortar has been built, partially above US 82 and against US 60 (for the nucleus: see fiche US 84).

This "nucleus" of mortar can be paralleled to US 85, a small "nucleus" of *caementicium* with the same characteristics on the other side of the *natatio* corner. We have the impression that this US 85 could be the only portion of a bigger "nucleus of *caementicium*" left after the former excavations. The interpretation is therefore still open: the stratigraphic relationship with the lower line of granite blocks is clear on the northern side (US 84 covers US 82) but it is possible that the upper line of blocks was less thick, and in this case the "nucleus" would just lean against it, representing a "restoration" phase.

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Fig. 10 Edge of the swimming pool with large granite blocks of the inner wall (US 70) and remains of stucco and marble reused in its construction.

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Fig. 11 Outer wall of the *natatio* (US 60).

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Fig. 12 Remains of the stratigraphy within the natatio.

AMB. D

What we called amb. D is a big space composed by the former quadratos 1109, 1209, 1110, 1310 and part of 1309, and it includes at the moment everything north of walls US 15 and 44 and everything south-east of the *natatio* delimited by *nucleus* US 60.

The first activities have started here with the abolition of the benches between squares 1309 and 1209, and between 1109 and 1110. Still, the interpretation of the section on the east side of the bench between 1109 and 1110 has discouraged us from continuing this activity (fig. 14).



Fig. 13 Upper part of the bench between quadrados 1309 and 1209 (amb. D)



Fig. 14 Bench between quadrados 1109 and 1110 (amb. D)

In fact, the enormous layer of destruction US 47 composed of parts of *suspensurae*, big blocks of "cocciopesto" and of adobe, has been cut by the channel cover with US 67 and, therefore, we decided to excavate the latter first (see further).



Fig. 15 Destruction layer US 47



Fig. 16 Remains of suspensurae in destruction layer US 47.

The actual situation of this big space (amb. D) remains unexplained at this stage. The original walking levels (for instance, those connected with the foundation of walls US 15 and US 16), completely disappeared and no any trace of them seems to have been recognized during the former excavation campaigns.



Fig. 17 Wall US 15, delimiting amb. D on its SW side.

The interpretation given by earlier excavators of this area is that an enormous destruction has taken place here, in the course of which all frequentation levels have been erased. At the bottom of this stratigraphy, a kind of fireplace? (kiln? oven?), US 45, would have been constructed. This destruction would have almost completely cancelled the traces of what was formerly here. According to the big heap of debris that has been spared by digging activities, this space was paved with a thick layer of "cocciopesto" and elevated with *suspensurae* traditionally built with large bricks (*bessales*).

The destruction would have taken away also part of the channel paved with schist slabs (US 38 = 42), now still preserved in cuadrado 1310. What is lost here, however, is the stratigraphy this channel has been dug into and the walls of the channel itself. A portion of the stratigraphy was preserved in the bench between cuadrados 1310 and 1210. Here, we started to take away the higher US 1, a heap of adobe blocks and floor fragments leaning against wall US 15. Part of these blocks of adobe preserves clear traces of a polished surface. The presence of this kind of material is very peculiar (and very abundant): several of these "blocks" have been reused also in the "rearrangement" of the walls of channel US 66/67. Its original use is still unknown: adobe could also be used in upper parts of walls or as flooring material.

In this heap of rubble, or at least in the remaining part of it (US 47), the trench to built the southern side of the channel covered with the schist slabs US 67, has been dug (see plans 2008/10 and 2008/13). This big channel, likely a sewer, has been built using as northern side the foundation US 66 of the wide wall US 71.



Fig. 18 The channel south of the natatio retaining wall

The techniques of the two sides are, in fact, different: US 65 uses a lot of reused materials including drums of columns, bricks, schist, marble slabs, and so on, while the foundation US 66 is composed mainly of granite blocks of middle size, smoothened on the front. Still, at the moment that wall US 65 has been erected, some repairs on US 66 have been done, using the same reused building materials (for instance: adobe).

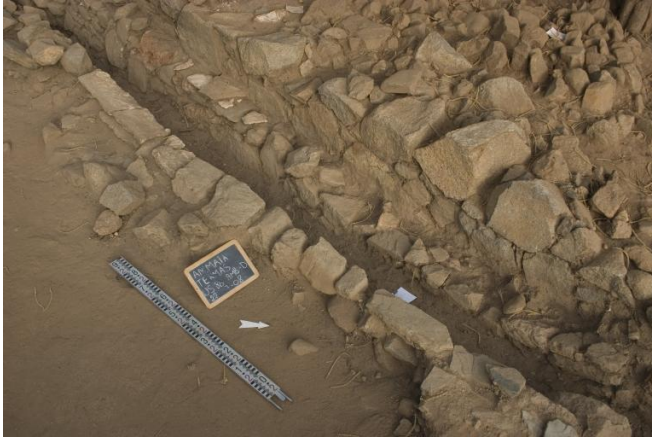


Fig. 19 The channel south of the natatio retaining wall (detail).

There is an option that the part of the walls US 66 and 71, in proximity of the limit of the excavations, at the border with the modern road to Portalegre, has been going through a "restoration" in a much later phase: six bricks of "modern" production have been arranged in four lines. They are likely connected with the disruption of the nucleus US 60.

This Roman channel was originally covered mainly with slate slabs of medium/big dimensions, while an in situ squared block of granite shows that also more robust blocks were used as cover (see plan 2008/10). The western part of the cover of the sewer was already removed during the past campaigns and the content of the channel dug out, while the eastern part of it has been excavated during this 2008 campaign 2008. Inside the channel, mainly two different layers have been individuated (US 69 and US 86). The average depth of the foundation US 66 of the wall US 71 is some 60 cm. It protrudes on average 15 cm on the facing line of the wall. There are no indications of internal plastering with mortar nor of calcareous incrustations due to its long use. At the eastern corner of the walls US 60/71, where the channel finishes, a few granite blocks appeared inside the channel: as they are placed somewhat higher (+/- 15 cm) than the bottom of the sewer, they could be interpreted as a reinforcement of the corner of the foundation of the same wall US 66/71.

In the very corner of the sewer, where the channel turns 90° North, the only structural element of the sewer flooring has been found: it is a big *tegula*. This roof tile is positioned slightly sloping down towards the east and is made of a strongly over-fired clay.



Fig. 20 Detail of the corner of the channel with tegula-flooring.

AMB. B

This “room” is only a part of an originally much larger and probably rectangular room, whose western part was in a later phase taken in by amb. A. Its northern (US 9) and eastern walls (US 3) are more or less intact, apart from some disturbances and an important destruction due to the presence of a still standing chestnut tree. The walls, of an average width of two feet (some 60 cm), are essentially built with granite blocks of an irregular cut, positioned with a very small quantity of mortar. In wall US 31 we can observe also a strange (irregular) fragment of tile or brick. The facing of the inner sides of walls US 31, 30 and 9 is enough regular, which seems to indicate that they were originally seen above floor level.



Fig. 21 Amb. B.

At the moment only one line of granite blocks is standing on the outside facing of wall US 30. Here, where former excavations have reached a lower level (ex quadrado 1409), the foundations (US 33) are visible: they are made up of a not very deep layer of pebbles and fragments of schist, thrown in a trench without mortar. This is the only indication of the walking level in the outside "corridor" C.

The walking level of this amb. B remains unknown. The actual filling (US 29) consists of a very sterile layer of clay and pebbles and some dispersed bigger stones. We are convinced that this filling was intentionally brought here to heighten the level, possibly in preparation of the construction of basin "A". So, it remains possible that a kind of pavement or floor is preserved on a lower level, considering the fact that the "base level" of wall US 30 on the outside is 25 cm lower than the actual level inside Amb. B.

The new sectors

To comprehend better the planimetric disposition of the complex, to have a better view of the modalities of implantation of the thermal rooms on pre-existing buildings, to collect more data about the chronology of these processes and to verify the elements

deduced from the geophysics survey conducted in the vast area south-west of the Termas, we decided to open new sectors of excavations, south-west of amb. B and C.

The new area, about 30 mq, has been delimited with a provisional fence. Only a superficial cleaning of the surface has been done until now: still, under very few centimetres of agricultural humus, the surface of several connecting walls has been brought to light. Therefore, it has been possible to distinguish new sectors (H, I) and make a first plan of the prolongation of the structures US 35 and 44 in these sectors.

The summer drought and the presence of many roots and vegetation have made the excavations in these sectors especially hard. At first evaluation, these structures appear to delimit quite big spaces that respect perfectly the orientation of the already known structures. Even if the superficial layers are very poor of archaeological finds, and no dating elements can be presented at this stage, our opinion is that these buildings are older than the thermal installations. Their function cannot at the moment be connected with a thermal use.



Conclusion

The new excavations in the forum *thermae* of Ammaia have procured a series of new elements of particular importance. First of all there is a more precise proposal for the general chronological framework within which this thermal building flourished during the first two centuries of our era (see pottery report Quaresma). It remains however unclear what the purpose was of a series of building structures which seem to pre-date the high life of the public bathhouse, while also difficult to understand is still the fate of this area from the 3rd century onwards.

A few new and interesting elements have been found connected with the evolution of building techniques, the phasing of different parts of the complex, the water-provisioning and water-evacuation and, via a series of nice objects (such as gemstones) also about the users of these facilities. It is however clear that continued excavation, preferably in connection with geophysical survey is absolutely necessary to begin to have a more total view of the plan and evolution of this urban complex.