

Introduction

Ostia Antica – it has been called Rome’s version of Pompeii, the capital city captured in miniature, a laboratory for the study of daily life in Rome. Grand travelers once walked its streets, traipsing across the landscape of nineteenth-century Europe in search of marbles and memories to take back home. Later, members of Italy’s Fascist government ventured to its ruins to inaugurate the construction of a new train line, one that would reunite Rome with the symbolic strength of the Mediterranean Sea. Even today, chances are that tourists also may have heard something about the idyllic town, located roughly sixteen miles down the Tiber River from Rome. Now an archaeological park named Ostia Antica, “Old Ostia,” to distinguish it from the beach town of the same name nearby, Rome’s ancient harbor has certainly hosted its fair share of visitors over time, from its long-vanished ancient residents to the modern workers who now staff its gates. Almost 2,300 years after the city’s foundation, it seems that we have never quite been able to erase Roman Ostia from our minds.

Today, Ostia’s ancient apartment complexes, taverns, baths, and temples – all situated proudly among the Italian pines – still offer us that tantalizing evocation of daily life as it once was lived during the prosperous years of the second-century CE Roman Empire. Indeed, like the ruins of Pompeii, Ostia affords scholars of ancient Rome the welcome opportunity to view history “seen from below,” through the eyes of all the workers, nonelite residents, traders, and travelers who once populated its streets.¹

¹ The Web site [ostia-antica.org](http://www.ostia-antica.org), created and updated by Jan Theo Bakker, Ph.D., provides an introduction with bibliography to many of these themes; see Bakker 2010, <http://www.ostia-antica.org>. Readers interested in learning more about any of the buildings or sites discussed in this book will easily be able view additional photographs and plans

As recent archaeological investigations have revealed, however, life at Ostia ended not with a Vesuvian bang but with a whimper. Substantial signs of life remained throughout the town and its environments through the ninth century. Only on the cusp of the Middle Ages did Ostia's remaining residents entrench themselves in a new, smaller settlement outside the ancient city walls, called Gregoriopolis by Pope Gregory IV (see Map 1, no. 19). Yet the "Pompeian fallacy" continues to persist, assuming that the majesty of Ostia's apartments and houses, the towering stature of its temples and taverns – in short, all the marks of a diverse social life at Rome's old harbor and all the evidence for the study of daily life in the Roman world – somehow vanished in an instant, along with its people, buried by a cataclysmic event.

Scholarly autopsy has long had its eyes trained on one or two blockbuster causes. Some have laid the blame with the so-called crisis of the third century. Others have assumed it was the dissolution of the empire that portended the town's fall, along with Rome's, sometime during the invasions of the fifth century.² Whatever the culprit, it is clear today that the sudden disappearance of life at Ostia owes more to our own modern assumptions about what the Roman and Late Antique city should have looked like at the end of the empire than it does to the archaeological evidence. A study of this milieu during the mid-third through eighth centuries, the period known today as Late Antiquity, is long overdue. Our understanding of Rome during the same dynamic period demands that we take a fresh look at this rich microcosm of Late Antique social life.

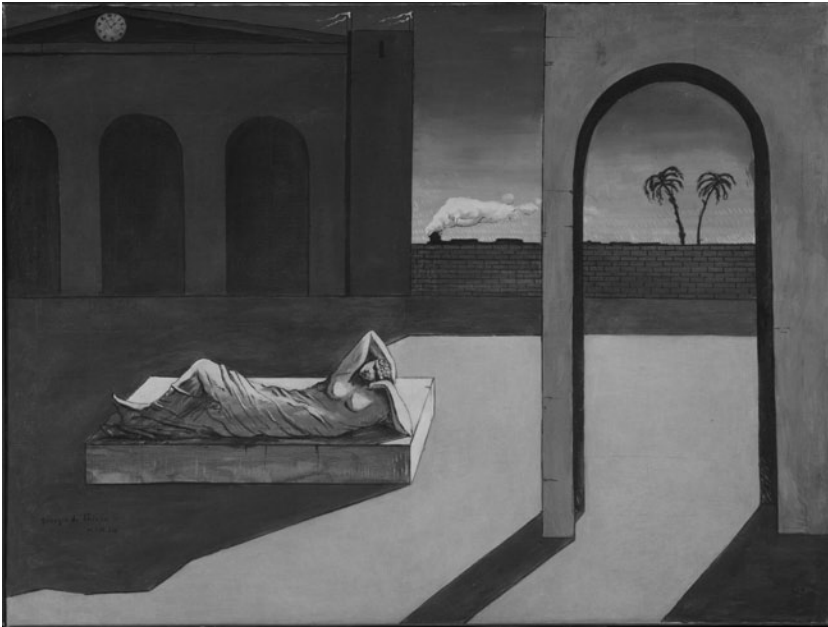
This period in Ostia's history is filled with intriguing historical questions, perhaps best evoked by the depiction of an enigmatic townscape, *The Soothsayer's Recompense* (Figure 1). Painted in 1913 by the Greco-Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico, it shares its subject with a series of similar paintings called *Piazze d'Italia*. We do not know for sure whether de Chirico ever visited Rome's old harbor town. What is certain is that his wife, a woman by the name of Raissa Gourevich, later became the

of them online. The discussion of all the evidence pertaining to this book, however, is based on my own research and may differ, either slightly or significantly, from information available online, depending on updates to the Web site and on my own interpretation of the evidence.

² For the third century, see Meiggs 1973, 83–85. For a crisis after 420, see Pavolini 1986b, 268–70.

Introduction

3



1. *The Soothsayer's Recompense* by Giorgio de Chirico (1913). From The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection. © Artist Rights Society, New York. Oil on canvas, 135.6 cm × 180 cm. The Philadelphia Museum of Art/Art Resource, New York.

foremost expert on Ostian statuary during her lifetime. Today, most scholars know her by the surname of her second husband, the Ostian excavator Guido Calza; and it was under the name Raissa Calza-de Chirico that she published some of her first work on Ostian archaeology. Only later did she sign her publications “Raissa Calza,” ultimately dedicating a book “to the dear memory” of her second husband, to whom Ostia, she wrote, owed “its second life.”³ One wonders whether she was praising Calza for having given her something similar. The point is not a tangential one. After all, the relationships between people and their pasts are complex and constantly intertwined, shaping different aspects of their identities in various times of their lives and in differing social settings. Perhaps for that reason, it seems emblematic to begin this book with them. The residents and sojourners of Late Antique Ostia faced many of the same issues of memory and identity. De Chirico’s painting offers an evocative point of departure for exploring the world in which they lived and the assumptions we have about the Late Antique past.

³ “Alla cara memoria di Guido Calza a cui Ostia deve la sua seconda vita,” Calza and Nash 1959, dedication page.

To a student of the High Roman Empire who is aware of the prosperity of the second century CE, de Chirico’s empty town square, shrouded in shadows cast from an unseen light source, suggests the sheer barrenness of urban life in Late Antiquity. Fragments of classicism, like the marble statue at the center of the Italianate piazza, are scattered throughout the landscape, like relics of a previous era. The city seems remarkably frozen, static. Only a small plume of smoke billows from a steam engine locomotive, entering the picture from the right. It is headed toward a building, at left, whose clock seems to suggest the rhythms of a time that are still vaguely familiar, even in an unfamiliar setting. There is much here to evoke the imagination. To me, for example, the train is a powerful image, symbolizing, in a way, the arrival of Christianity in towns throughout the ancient Mediterranean. How loud was the blast from this engine? How pervasively did it echo within the town walls? These questions beget still more.

When did the city center of Ostia, lorded over for centuries by the town’s majestic temples, perennially funded with imperial largess, fall into the state of disrepair we see today? Did it really happen in the fourth-century town with the so-called triumph of Christianity, as so many texts have implied? The absence of people even leads to some unsettling and often underappreciated areas of investigation. How did the ancient Jewish community negotiate this same period of transformation, when bishops gained stature with the civic authorities and Jews themselves were increasingly marginalized by imperial legislation?⁴ What can we hypothesize about the social identities and cultural interactions of the town’s inhabitants as they lived through this period of change – with one eye, as it were, on the classical past and the other on a society in transition? More important still, how do we keep our own eye on recovering the dynamism that drove this same period of transformation and change without falling prey to historical descriptions that presume or perpetuate the inevitability of “Christian triumph”? Christianity’s “victory,” after all, was far from an inevitable fact, but scholars have never before used Ostia, the mirror of Rome, to interrogate the process by which that happened. This book does just that.

Here, some context is important. For most of the modern period, scholars working at Ostia have been keen on arranging, or cataloging,

⁴ *CTh* 16.9.1. (336 CE), 16.8.7 (357 CE), and 3.7.2 (388 CE).

Introduction

5

the evidence, beginning with its foundation in the mid-Republic and continuing through the prosperous years of the High Empire. Consequently, most, if not all, examples of new construction in the third-, fourth-, fifth-, or even sixth-century town have been separated from any understanding of the durability of Ostia's built environment. These have had to bear the weight of speaking disproportionately for the town's entire Late Antique urban image. Not surprisingly, this limited, chronological approach has in some ways compromised our understanding of life in the Late Antique town, perpetuating a picture of Ostia frozen in time at the high point of the second century CE with little appreciation for how the past and present interacted in the Late Antique social environment. This static picture of daily life in Late Antique Ostia still predominates among scholars and public alike.⁵ Didactic material at the sanctuary called the "Area Sacra Republicanica" (Map 1, no. 8) frames the space solely in terms of its republican-era importance (Figure 2). Four buildings are labeled, all with republican foundations. A fifth-century CE building, however, erected within the walls of the sanctuary, is the only structure not labeled on the sign. The vanishing of a Late Antique building from the tourist sign, in favor of a careful construction of the republican past, speaks to the same impetus that drove the early twentieth-century excavations of Ostia.

As Guido Calza reported in 1938, during the years preceding the Esposizione Universale di Roma, "il Duce" himself, Benito Mussolini, had bestowed high praise on Ostia's excavators while they prepared the site aesthetically for its presentation to the public.⁶ The town they chose to portray was "Rome's first colony on the Mediterranean and the commercial center of her whole Empire."⁷ The image of modern Rome's grandeur, as refracted through the lens of its first ancient colony, merged nicely with Mussolini's plan to resurrect and glorify the past during the 1942 exposition. The Late Antique building activity at the sanctuary (1.15.7) was thus downplayed, if not erased outright, because it did not fit the carefully arranged and ideologically driven packaging of the

⁵ See, for example, the summary by Lançon 2000, 12–13.

⁶ "Il programma di scavo che ha avuto l'alta approvazione del Duce e del Ministro Bottai è stato da me formulato tenendo presenti sia gli scopi scientifici e culturali che si attendono da una più vasta conoscenza della città, sia le finalità di carattere estetico e turistico che con la visione quasi totale di Ostia si possono raggiungere nel quadro della Esposizione Universale di Roma," Calza 1938, 605.

⁷ "Ostia, colonia primogenita di Roma antica sul mediterraneo e suo emporio commerciale per tutto l'Impero," Calza 1938, 605.

site. The impact of these excavations cannot be overlooked because they fed a vicious cycle whereby Late Antique archaeological material went unrecorded, and the lack thereof was interpreted as evidence of Ostia's decline.

Correcting these imbalances and publicizing the kinds of Late Antique material that early investigators saw when they first began to excavate Ostia in the modern period is one of the tasks of this book. That task begins not in Late Antiquity but at the time of these earlier excavations. For it is the reports of those earlier campaigns – some impressionistic, others more substantial – that, I propose, give us a picture of life in Late Antique Ostia before the town was cleaned up and put on display as a poster child for second-century imperial Rome. A brief overview of how that history came to be established as the dominant one is thus vital at the outset of our project.

The first systematic excavation of Ostia Antica occurred in the first decade of the nineteenth century, directed on behalf of Pius VII by Giuseppe Petrini.⁸ As archival drawings from the period make clear, his research uncovered little more than the center of the town, the Capitolium, the Forum, and surrounding structures (Map 1, roughly no. 9). Continued papal excavations in the mid-nineteenth century, such as those conducted by the Visconti family for Pius IX, broadened our knowledge of Ostia's expansive reach into the surrounding territory. These excavations revealed the location and contours of such Ostian sites as the Campus of Magna Mater and the so-called Palazzo Imperiale (Map 1, no. 1 and no. 12).⁹ In 1870, however, the birth of the nation of Italy intervened, and the pace of work slowed. Only in the first decades of the twentieth century, under the leadership of Dante Vaglieri and others, did the streets and structures that formed the fabric of the urban setting begin to emerge, thereby stitching together a map of "Roman Ostia," as it became known in the scholarly literature.

Excavations expanded dramatically under Guido Calza as both new and old data were incorporated into a plan of the city, leading to a whirlwind of work in the 1930s. It was at that point that Mussolini, eager to retrieve elements of Rome's past for his own political gains, invested

⁸ "[U]n giovane erudito nell'antiquaria, e in altri studi, e pratico sopra tutto dell'arte di scavare," Fea 1802, 6.

⁹ See Spurza 1999a and 1999b; see also Marini Recchia, Pacchiani, and Panico 2002.

Introduction

7



2. Didactic material at the site of the so-called Area Sacra Republicanana and the so-called Temple of Hercules (1.15.5). Only republican-period buildings are labeled and discussed. Author’s photograph, 2007.

the excavations at Ostia with an urgency never before seen.¹⁰ A catalog of inscriptions from Isola Sacra and Portus, supplementing the Ostian corpus already compiled, increased the volume of material available for constructing an urban image of daily life at the Roman harbor.¹¹ This frenzy of labor culminated in the decade after the Second World War

¹⁰ Calza 1938.
¹¹ Thylander 1952.

with the publication of the first volume of the *Scavi di Ostia* series, replete with a diachronic analysis of the town and, among other data, a catalog of buildings and their remodeling, classified by Roman epoch.¹² A monumental presentation of decades of earlier work, the publication immediately inspired further work on all aspects of the Roman town. Three of these developments are important to a study of Late Antique Ostia. Reviewing them will provide an opportunity to anticipate some of the contributions of this book.

First, by analyzing and then arranging the architecture and the corresponding building repairs in chronological order, the editors of the *Scavi di Ostia* codified an approach to Ostian archaeology that has dominated to this day. This method has helped scholars sort through and make sense of the rich archaeological data and, in so doing, brought to the fore one of the first noticeable features of the Late Antique town. For not only were some important social, civic structures like town baths repaired in the Late Antique period; at some point in the third century CE, the evidence seemed to show, domestic trends in the working-class harbor town changed, introducing an entirely new cityscape of luxury houses. The residence known as the House of Cupid and Psyche (Figure 3; located near Map 1, no. 8) is one such example. Named after the eponymous statuary group found in one of its marble-clad rooms, the house was replete with a garden (*viridarium*) and elaborate *opus sectile* floors. The presence of wealthy residences like this one, identified throughout town, was one of the first signs that hinted at what daily life was like in later Ostia: It was much like a seaside resort.¹³ I will suggest, by contrast, that Late Antique Ostia had a much more heterogeneous urban composition than has been previously assumed (Chapter 2).

The second benefit of the *Scavi di Ostia* publication was a catalog of Christian symbols and possibly Christian buildings scattered throughout the town, providing a lens through which to study the town's religious transformation. An analysis of Christian sites, interwoven with a discussion of Christian textual sources like martyr stories, for example, now offered evidence with which to discuss when and where Ostia became "Christian."¹⁴ That topic, too, will be treated here in depth but on much

¹² See *SdO* 1 (Calza et al. 1954).

¹³ In particular, see Becatti 1969 and Pavolini 1985, with further discussion in Chapter 3.

¹⁴ Février 1958.

Introduction

9



3. House of Cupid and Psyche (1.14.5), marble revetment and *opus sectile* floor with a copy of the eponymous statuary group. Author's photograph, 2007.

different terms: The fact that Ostia became Christian at all is not something I have taken for granted as an inevitable feature of the town's history (Chapter 1). The result is a dynamic social world (Chapters 3–6) in which text and material culture interact, shaping the religious identity

of individuals and groups, playing an important role in the articulation of power. As I demonstrate here, it was largely through efforts at cultural accommodation and social assimilation, not through radical rejection of the Roman past, that Ostia itself became a Christian town: the outcome of a complex process that I locate in the sixth century, not the fourth, as traditionally assumed to have happened following the legislative “triumphs of the Church.”

Third and most relevant, the *Scavi di Ostia* series required a grand synthesis for an English-speaking audience. Russell Meiggs obliged, magisterially, publishing the first edition of *Roman Ostia* in 1960. A comprehensive presentation of Ostia’s local government, its preeminent families, and its importance for the study of daily life in the Late Republican Age and the Early and High Roman Empire, Meiggs’s *Roman Ostia* has guided a generation of scholars through the landscape of the harbor town.¹⁵ Even today, that work continues to lie in its breadth. It covers everything from the institutional history of the town to its economy to aspects of its social life. And yet, whereas as late as 1973 Meiggs declared, “[I]t is still too early to attempt more than a broad outline [of Roman Ostia] from the fourth to the ninth centuries,” today new evidence has made such a study possible at last.¹⁶ In fact, the urban image of Ostia has drastically changed, and those developments, too, now need introduction to a new generation of researchers (Chapter 2).

Drawing on previously known textual sources, incorporating revised archaeological material, and synthesizing new archaeological discoveries for an audience interested in the history of Rome’s “Pompeii,” this book marks one of the first steps in that process of putting Late Antique Ostia together again. Its subject is daily life, religious transformation, and urban change at the old Roman harbor town between the third and eighth centuries.

The scope of this book

There is a famous passage in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass* in which the protagonist Alice exclaims, “I declare it’s marked out just like a large chessboard! . . . It’s a great huge game of chess that’s being

¹⁵ Meiggs 1973; see also Pavolini 1986a.

¹⁶ Meiggs 1973, 583.