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Agrigento: Archaeology of Residential Spaces in Hellenistic and Roman Periods

Giuseppe Lepore[*]

The excavations conducted by the University of Bologna in the Archaeological and Landscape Park 'Valley of the Temples' in Agrigento have led to a series of considerations on residential spaces in Hellenistic and Roman periods. The investigations of House M in the third block of the so-called Hellenistic-Roman Quarter have brought to light a very rich dwelling from Hellenistic period, which in the early 1st century B.C. was acquired by a Latin-speaking dominus and was ritually demolished at the end of the 2nd century A.D. for reasons open to interpretation that could allude to a form of damnatio memoriae.

The space of habitation in the Greek (or Hellenised) world is a theme that has only recently been approached scientifically and in-depth, partly due to its complexity[1]. Indeed, this space is the one that most often undergoes renewal (certainly with each change of owner) and changes according to the internal furnishings, both movable (which often leave no archaeological trace) and immovable (floors, paintings, lararia, or other structural appendages), which we are better able to perceive in their archaeological evidence. Thus, despite the analytical challenges, domestic space represents a "social product" and a place of self-representation within ancient cities[2]: this is the perspective of the research being carried out by the University of Bologna since 2016 within the Archaeological Park of the "Valley of the Temples" in Agrigento.

Akragas was one of the great cities of the ancient world: covering approximately 400 hectares, it had numerous areas dedicated to residential spaces (at least five as of the current state of research), used intermittently throughout the life of the large *apoikia*[3]. Sources mention a population of at least 22,000 in the middle of the 5th century[4], though these estimates are difficult to believe, as a large portion of the population likely resided in a more or less permanent manner in the *chora*, from where they could better manage economic activities (agricultural or productive). Undoubtedly, based on the interpretation of the sources, we can expect large homes with significant social representation: according to *Diodorus Siculus*, Tellia could accommodate up to 500 people in her house[5]. Archaeology now also confirms the presence of large residences (over 1,000 square meters), especially in the Hellenistic-Roman Quarter,

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[1] Regarding the Greek house, reference should first be made to Pesando 1989, followed by Malacrino, Cannatà 2018 and Pesando, Zuchtriegel 2020. Among the most recent works, see in particular: Nevett 2023; Bradley, Nevett 2022.

[2] The social representativeness of the domestic space appears to increase exponentially during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, whereas in the Archaic and Classical periods, the investment of the polis was directed more towards public buildings, particularly sacred ones. For a discussion on the social representativeness of private spaces, see Trümper 1998 and 2005, as well as Nevett 1999 and 2007. A synthesis of the historical events of Sicily in the Roman period can be found in Soraci 2016.

[3] This house, whose overview of the living spaces in Akragas-Agrigentum is provided in Lepore 2024.

[4] Sources on population density include: Timeo, FGrH 566 F -84, 3- Jacoby.

[5] Diodorus XIII, 83-84.

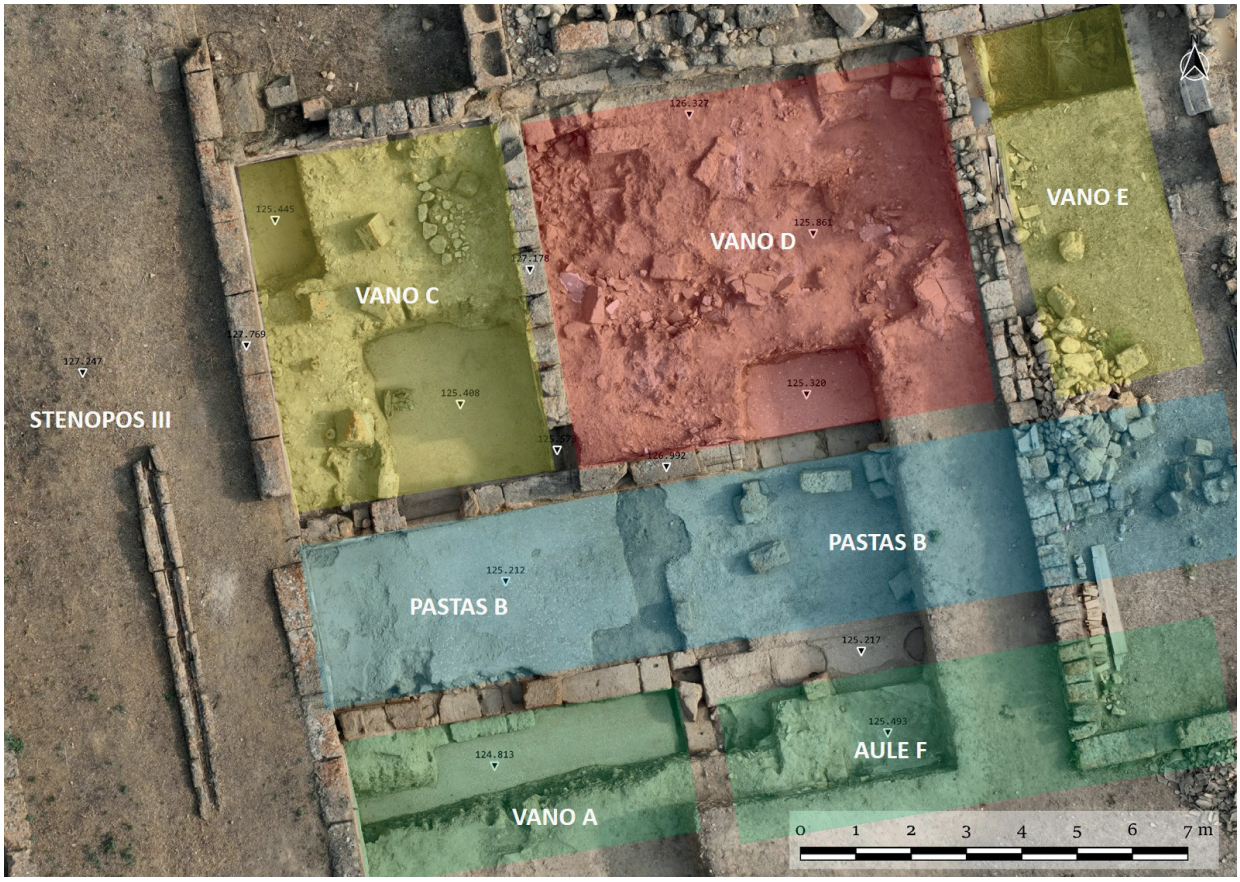


Fig. 1. Plan of House III M (elaboration by Vittorio Mirto).

which the Agrigento Park has assigned to the University of Bologna as a case study, with a particular focus on the third block of this sector[6].

The Hellenistic-Roman Quarter holds a special role both for the area it occupies (four *insulae* covering around 25,000 square meters) and for the chronology it encompasses, ranging from the early stages of its foundation in the first half of the 6th century B.C. to the 8th century A.D.[7]. Within this Quarter, House M of Block III is the one on which recent research has focused. Since it was found untouched by the last century's excavations, it allows us to appreciate a closed context that spans from the end of the 3rd to the early 2nd B.C. (a period when the entire Quarter was being remodelled and redefined in more monumental and scenographic forms) until the end of the 2nd to the early 3rd century A.D., when a sudden event led to the collapse of the structures and the abandonment of the residential lot[8] (fig. 1).

The documentation gathered in these years shows us a dwelling that defines its forms in the Hellenistic period (a canonical *pastàs* structure, well-attested elsewhere in the Quarter) and, at the beginning of the 1st century B.C., undergoes a change of ownership, being occupied by a dominus of Latin language and culture (v. *infra*). The excavation data gathered so far also allow for a

6 The insula III was entrusted by the Park to the University of Bologna under an agreement signed in 2016, which is still in force. As a result, seven survey campaigns and investigations have been carried out so far, published in an extensive monograph (Lepore *et alii* 2019) and numerous articles, among which Lepore *et alii* 2020 in the journal "Sicilia Antiqua" is especially notable.

7 *Insula* III was entrusted by the Park to the University of Bologna under an agreement signed in 2016, which is still ongoing. As a result, seven survey campaigns and investigations have been carried out to date, published in an extensive monograph (Lepore *et alii* 2019) and numerous articles, among which Lepore *et alii* 2020 in the journal *Sicilia Antiqua* is particularly noteworthy.

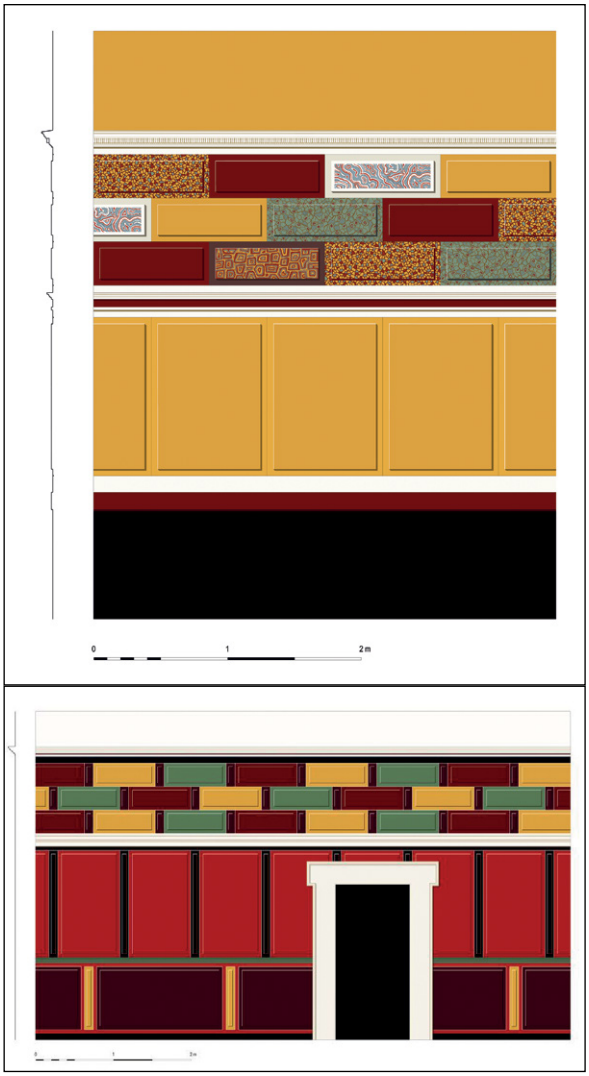
8 On House III M, see Lepore 2019A, particularly 325-326.

Fig. 2. Reconstruction of the northern section of House III M (elaboration by Paolo Baronio).

very detailed reconstruction of the elevation of this house, including the upper floor and its roof[9] (fig. 2).

Moreover, the excavation data have allowed the virtual reconstruction of wall paintings, stuccoes, and floors, which now await thorough restoration and permanent musealisation[10] (figs. 3 and 4; 5 and 6).

Within the limits imposed by the space available in this publication and beyond the excellent state of preservation of the wall paintings and floors of the dwelling, we can summarise the two main novelties that have emerged from the excavations, corresponding to two different lines of research: on the one hand, the analysis of residential types, which is closely linked to social prestige and representation within the city. On the other hand, the study of the sudden end of the dwelling, which, based on the data documented so far, can be placed at the end of the 2nd or the beginning of the 3rd century A.D. due to "political" reasons that led to its confiscation and subsequent demolition.



Figs. 3-4. Reconstruction of the painting systems on the upper floor of House III M (elaboration by Paolo Baronio, Clelia Sbrolli, and Riccardo Helg).

Residential types and social prestige

All the residences in the Quarter are contained within the limits set by the *stenopoi* and *ambitus* (where present)[11]. There are a total of 27 residential units, and if we attempt a simple list of the main residential types documented[12], we can observe that the Quarter includes ten *peristyle* houses (five of which possess a peristyle of considerable size[13]), eight *pastàs* houses, and nine houses with a

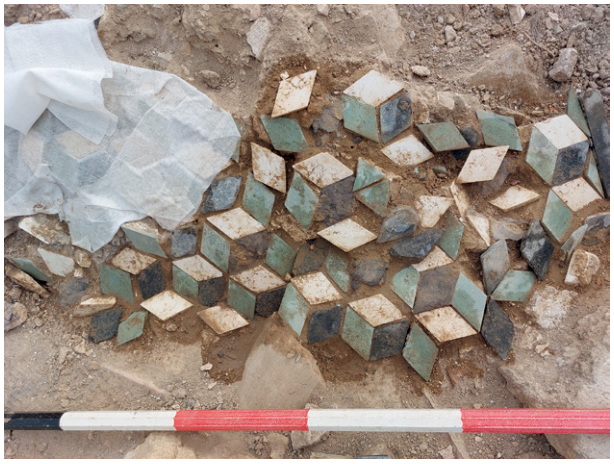
9 The reconstruction drawings were made by Dr. Paolo Baronio: Baronio 2020 and Lepore, Baronio 2024.

10 Some parts of the paintings and stuccoes have been incorporated into the permanent exhibition dedicated to the Hellenistic-Roman Quarter at the Regional Archaeological Museum "Pietro Griffo".

11 The *ambitus*, in fact, is not found throughout the entire length of the *insulae*: in the first, it is preserved only in the northernmost section, in the second it is visible over approximately half of the block's extension, whereas in the third, the ambitus defines the entire extent of the residential space.

12 The residential units are 26, identified by De Miro (De Miro 2009), to which House III M, identified in 2017 by the investigations of the University of Bologna, is added.

13 These include House I A, covering 1400 square meters, and House II A, covering 1230 square meters, with peristyles measuring 15.30 x 17.60 m and 14 x 17 m respectively: De Miro 2009: 36-47 and 131-173.



Figs. 5-6. Details of the perspective cube floor (left) and the collapse of wall paintings (right) from Room D of House III M (Archive of the Archaeological Mission in Agrigento).

simple internal courtyard. If we then observe the topographical location of the individual residences, we will notice that the larger *peristyle* houses are located in the first and second *insulae* (only one is in the third), those in closer (even visual) contact with the public area of the city located in the western sector. The *pastàs* houses, on the other hand, are located in the second and especially in the third *insula*, while the courtyard houses seem to be distributed between the second and third *insulae*. Similarly, at the dimensional level, we can observe this distribution: the *peristyle* houses easily exceed 1,000 square metres, while the *pastàs* houses range from 500 to 400 square metres (half the size of the former), and the simple courtyard houses have an average extension of 300 square metres or less.

The sudden end of House III M

Regarding the final stages of the life of the house, the dismantling of the collapsed structures, though partial, has revealed at least two series of clues, the integrated reading of which seems to support the hypothesis of a deliberate destruction of the dwelling, possibly following an expropriation. The materials recovered from the collapse so far do not date beyond the end of the 2nd to the beginning of the 3rd century A.D.: they primarily consist of transport amphorae crushed by the collapse of the roof, along with other ceramic fragments from the same chronological horizon[14]. This data could be disproven as the work progresses, but if confirmed, we would be looking at a dwelling that, despite its importance and proximity to the public area (about 300 metres to the west), may have been confiscated and deliberately demolished. It is also likely that the levelled debris was not occupied for a long time, almost as if it became a "negative monument" to a punishment for an offence that remains unclear at present[15]. The first structures to reoccupy the area are some tombs, placed at a much higher level, surrounding a quadrangular structure (a small church?), dated to the 6th-7th centuries A.D.[16].

The hypothesis being developed, therefore, is one of a residential lot that becomes an "urban void" and was not used for significant constructions for almost four centuries (we cannot exclude lighter uses such as garden or orchard space). These preliminary indications are further supported by the detailed excavation data from the collapse, where "signs" of ritual activity connected to the dismantling of the house are emerging. The first clues, in chronological order (actually the last to be excavated), are a series of ritual acts conducted directly on the floor. At least two contexts have been identified where small burnt areas containing fragments of ceramics, glass, animal bones (mainly young pigs and sheep/goats), and charcoal have been found[17] (fig. 7).

14 Scalici, Cappuccino 2019: 91.

15 The topic is addressed in Roller 2010: later, some scenarios will be proposed that seem to explain this particular context.

16 Rizzo 2015 and Di Giuseppe 2015.

17 This concerns US 131 and 177, deposited on either side

Fig. 7. Objects used during the abandonment ritual conducted on the floor of House III M (Archive of the Archaeological Mission in Agrigento).

Additionally, the material found in the area corresponding to the dismantling of the large threshold leading to Room D, which must have taken place before the final collapse and evidently required the implementation of a specific ritual, adds to this evidence[18]. Subsequently, some usage floors were identified within the debris, which yielded the same concentrations of materials, often within small pits: animal bones, ceramic fragments, shells, and fragments of metal objects (iron and bronze). Among these deposits, the most notable is the high-level deposition of two animal skulls (one bovine and one sheep/goat) along the western perimeter of the house[19].

The emerging picture, which undoubtedly requires further investigation, is that of a context that was intentionally abandoned following a precise ritual procedure, likely aimed at "repositioning" the deities who had once "protected" the house. At the end of this ritual, which, from what we can see today, also involved the removal of "sensitive" elements (certainly the thresholds, and not only for the intrinsic value of the material from which they were made) and a series of decommissioning rituals carried out first on the flooring surfaces and then during the collapse of the structures, the complete obliteration of the context occurred, as previously mentioned, between the end of the 2nd and the beginning of the 3rd century A.D.

of the step leading to the *pastàs*. Detailed data can be found in Lepore 2023. For an overview of Roman religious practices, see Scheid 2011.

18 This refers to material found at the location of the threshold removal: once again, the deposition consists of animal bones, charcoal, ceramic fragments, and iron (nails) and bronze objects.

19 A preliminary report can be found in Benfatti 2023.

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