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Address / Adres:

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Faculty of Art and Sciences / Fen Edebiyat Fakültesi

Department of Archaeology / Arkeoloji Bölümü

16059 - Görükle / BURSA - TURKEY/TÜRKİYE

Tel : + 90 224 2941891

Fax : + 90 224 2941892

E.mail : mosaicsjournal@gmail.com

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The Athena Domus at Apollonia (Albania): A Reassessment

Apollonia'daki (Arnavutluk) Athena Domus'u: Yeniden Değerlendirme

Elda OMARI – Paolo BONINI*

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Abstract

The city of Apollonia, located to the South-west of modern Albania, was founded in 588 B.C. by Corinthian and Corcyrian people, and was later described by Cicero as an admirabilis urbs. In 44 B.C. when Augustus and Agrippa were studying rhetoric in Apollonia, they got to know of the killing of Caesar and were helped by the local people to return to Rome and take the power back.

The city, located on the right bank of the river Aoos, only 12 km from the sea, was a crossroads and a filter for different cultures: Illyrians, Macedonians, the Greeks and the Romans have inhabited the territory over the centuries.

The domus, dated between 2nd and 3rd century A.D., represents the connection of the “residential fashion” present at the East and West of the Adriatic Sea. The domus is known in the literature as the “Athena house” because of the statue discovered by the archaeologists inside of it, but also as the “D house” because it was unearthed in “Sector D” of the excavation.

The first goal of the research is to analyse the architectural and decorative aspects of the house to understand the tastes of this site. The second goal is to understand the needs of the customer's social and economic self-representation and the skills of the craftsmen who worked there.

Keywords: Apollonia, Albania, domus architecture, mosaic, Roman Period.

Öz

Arnavutluk'un güneybatısında yer alan Apollonia kenti İ.Ö. 588 yılında Korinthliler ve Corcyrialılar tarafından kurulmuş olup, daha sonraları Cicero tarafından “admirabilis urbs/hayranlık uyandıran” olarak tanımlanmıştır. İ.Ö. 44 yılında Augustus ve Agrippa Apollonia'da retorik/söz sanatı üzerine çalışırlarken, Caesar'ın ölümünü haber almışlar ve Roma'ya dönüp iktidarı yeniden ele almak için yerli halkın yardımını almışlardır.

Kent, denizden 12 km uzaklıktadır ve Aoos Nehri'nin hemen sağ kıyısındaki konumu ile farklı kültürler için hem bir kavşak hem de bir sınır niteliği taşımaktadır: Illyrialılar, Makedonyalılar, Yunanlar ve Romalılar yüzyıllar boyunca bölgeyi iskan etmişlerdir.

Domus, İ.S. 2-3. yüzyıllara tarihlenmektedir ve Adriyatik Denizi'nin doğusunda ve batısındaki “konut modası'nın” bağlantısını yansıtmaktadır. Arkeologlar tarafından odanın içinde bulunan Athena büstü nedeniyle domus literatürde “Athena Evi” ve kazı sırasında D kısmında bulunmuş olmasından dolayı da “D Evi” olarak bilinmektedir.

Bu araştırmanın ilk amacı evin mimari ve dekoratif öğelerin analiz edilmesiyle kentin beğenilerinin anlaşılmasıdır. İkinci amaç ise ev sahibinin sosyal ve ekonomik olarak kendini temsil etme ihtiyacını ve burada çalışan zanaatkarların becerilerini anlayabilmektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Apollonia, Arnavutluk, domus mimarisi, mozaik, Roma Dönemi.

* Elda Omari, Archeologa e Storica dell'Arte. Specialista Area Adriatica e Balcanica, E-mail: eldaomari9@gmail.com
Paolo Bonini, Accademia di Belle Arti di Brescia SantaGiulia, E-mail: paolobonini@inwind.it

1. The site of Apollonia

Apollonia is one of ancient and modern Albania's better known sites. Nowadays, the whole area of the ancient city is protected and organized by the Government as an Archaeological Park with a small Museum, where objects and materials discovered during the excavations are exposed (Fig. 1).

With its long history the city was an important economic and cultural centre. According to Strabo (Strab. VII, 7, 4) this city was founded in 588 B.C. by a small group of Corinthians and Corcyrians that were escaping from their lands; according to Stephanus of Byzantium (Steph. Biz. 'Απολλωνία) when the settlers arrived in *Apollonia*, they found there the indigenes belonging to the Taulant tribe. On the other hand, *Pausanias* (Paus. V, 22, 3-4) writes that the founders of the settlement had previously consulted the oracle of the temple of Apollo at Delphi, erecting a monument with an inscription in honour of the deity Apollo, the patron of the exiles, and named the town *Apollonia*.

Archaeological research conducted on the eastern wall of the city has opened a great debate among scholars on the date of the founding of the city. The pottery discovered inside of the wall, dating back to 620 B.C., leads us to think that the first settlement dates about thirty years later than the date supplied by Strabo (588 B.C.), which means that *Apollonia* should have been founded only seven years later *Dyrrachium*. The question is still open (Ceka 2005: 8).

The reason why the settlers from Corinth and Corcyra chose the hill of *Apollonia* of Illyria /Epirus and near to the Adriatic coast is given by its geographical position. The city was built on a hill overlooking a fertile plain, not so far from the sea, and was a safe route to the commercial traffic. The original position was 60 *stadia* (12 km) from the Adriatic Sea and 8 *stadia* (1,6 km) from *Aoos* river, which flows to the south of the hill, making of *Apollonia* a safe river port, with easy access both from the sea and the hinterland (Ceka 2005: 7-9).

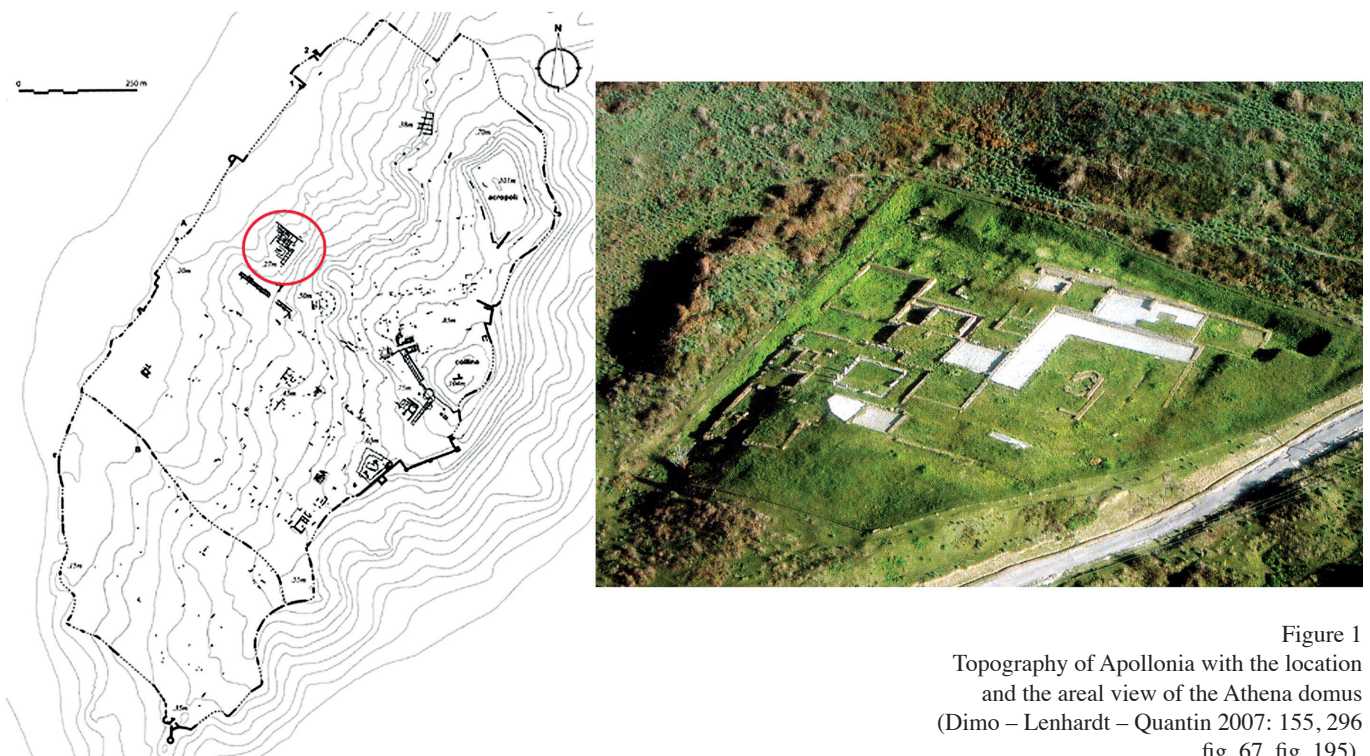


Figure 1
Topography of Apollonia with the location
and the areal view of the Athena domus
(Dimo – Lenhardt – Quantin 2007: 155, 296
fig. 67, fig. 195).

Over the centuries, *Apollonia* went through periods of peace and war, sometimes reaching a great economic and cultural development, in particular in the 4th century B.C. and then from the 2nd and the 4th century A.D. This last period corresponds to the era when the city was part of the Roman Empire. Rome puts her legions from the Illyrian wars (229 - 146 B.C.).

In the 1st century B.C. native people helped Julius Caesar in the war against Pompey, and Caesar, who knew the city well, sent his nephew Octavian, the future emperor, to study rhetoric there. Octavian and Agrippa were here when Caesar was killed and the two men with the help of local government return to Rome to retake the power. When Octavian became emperor, grateful for the support received, confers independence to *Apollonia*, which means the exemption from the taxes to Rome (Mano 2006: 33-34; Omari 2009: 45-48).

Under the Roman domination the city enjoyed a long period of peace and freedom, during which the wealth and prestige of the city grew also thanks to the building of the *Via Egnatia*. According to Polybius (Polyb. XXXIV, 12, 2-5) this road led to Rome on an ancient route and started from the two most important Albanian cities, *Apollonia* and *Dyrrachium* (Durrës). The *Via Egnatia* connects East with West and brought to the city merchants, artisans, soldiers, emperors, peoples with different traditions and languages that blended in with the locals (Braccesi 2014: 169-171). An example of the fusion of those different cultures is the Athena *domus*, which was later described from both the architectural and decorative points of view. Investigating the choices made by the customers and artisans helps us to understand the tastes displayed here. At the same time, by investigating the influences of the various cultural traditions we can make comparisons between this *domus* and other similar constructions in Albania, Greece and Italy.

E. OMARI

2. The history of the excavations and of the studies on the site

In the 4th century B.C. the inhabited area of *Apollonia* stretched for more than eighty hectares and was enclosed by walls for four km occupying all the western side of the hill. The area featured two hills: one to the north, where the acropolis with the Zeus temple was situated, and one on the south, where the Apollo temple used to stand (Ceka 1958; Ceka 2005: 10; Dimo – Lenhardt – Quantin 2007: 3-23).

From the printed materials published until now it is possible to understand that *Apollonia* developed like all the other Balkan cities. Inside protection walls in the heart of the settlement were the *agorá* with the public structures (the *stoà* with two floors, the *prytanéion*, the *themenos*, the theatre) and the private structures (the houses, the shops, etc.). Some years later, as was said at the beginning, the roman structures were built on the Hellenistic buildings, thus changing the city planning slightly. Nowadays in the *agorá* there are other public Roman buildings i.e. the library, the *odeion*, the *buleuterion*, while in the surrounding areas entire neighbourhoods were built with shops and large residential *domus*, with indoor gardens or a peristyle.

How was *Apollonia* discovered? Based on the descriptions by the ancient sources, in June 1436 the humanist *Ciriaco d'Ancona* made the first archaeological “inspection”, followed in the 19th century by many other curious travellers, such as the French F. Pouqueville and the British M. Leake. Thanks to the books with

their descriptions and impressions we have a valuable record of the still visible ruins (Dimo – Quantin – Vrekaj 2007: 25-26).

The first archaeologist who drew the map of the city and some sculptures was the French L. Heuzey, in 1861. In 1904 the Austrian archaeologist K. Patsch wrote a more complete book on the site, thus providing the first archaeological investigations in 1914-'18 directed by C. Praschniker. During the excavations Praschniker identified the Athena *domus* and the excavations were edited in the text "*Muzakhia und Malakastra*" (Praschniker 1922-24: 23-63). In 1924 a second excavation campaign started, this time by a French team led by L. Rey, which did not last long, because a few years later Italy occupied Albania and the management of the excavations were passed on to C. Sestieri. He enlarged the investigated areas and identified the *gymnasium* to the south of the byzantine monastery.

The systematic excavations took place in 1947 with an expedition of the Archaeological Institute of Tirana under the direction of the Albanian archaeologist H. Ceka e S. Islami (Ceka 1959). There followed an international mission of Albanians and Russians directed by V. Bllavatski, who carried out a two-year massive campaign (1958-60). These excavations led to the discovery of the Diana temple in the agorá, a small part of the city walls, the Roman district with the road and the houses and the Athena *domus* (Bllavatski – Islami 1960: 67-81).

Albanian archaeologists continued the researches alone until 1992, when the cooperation between the Institute of Archaeology of Tirana and some French universities started: Xth of Paris and Grenoble directed by N. Ceka, B. Vreka e P. Cabanes e J. L. Lamboley. Nearly twenty years of research and excavations have been now collected in the first Archaeology and History Atlas on the site of *Apollonia* (Dimo – Lenhardt – Quantin 2007). One hundred years and five generations of archaeologists have followed each other to highlight only five per cent of the ancient city. As rightly argued by Ceka, the Latin saying *ars longa, vita brevis* suites well to *Apollonia*. For this reason, in this study it was decided to analyse only one private building, the Athena *domus*, which up until now has been excavated and only partially studied. The discussion of the history of the development of private buildings in *Apollonia* will not be dealt with here.

E. OMARI

3. The architecture of the Athena domus

In the western sector of the city, not far from the theatre, the hills that characterize the cityscape of *Apollonia* descend in a gentle slope, suitable to be regularized, without great effort, to erect private buildings.

A urban plot of *hippodamian* flavour used to overlap this area already in the Hellenistic period, with intersecting right-angle streets forming large rectangular blocs of 60x120 m (Ceka 1994: 280-281; Dautaj – Lenhardt – Quantin 2007: 341-345). Here the Athena *domus* was built (Fig. 2), the largest house discovered in the city, but only a part of it, 2500 sq., has been brought to light so far (Prendi – Skënderaj 2007: 294). Other spaces are concealed below the ground, and it is likely, therefore, that they occupy, at least, half of a block (Ceka 2005: 66-67).

The chronological dating of the house seems to be supported by the results of a survey conducted on the masonry wall that borders the square block to the north-east, along the public way. The archaeological materials found inside of the wall,

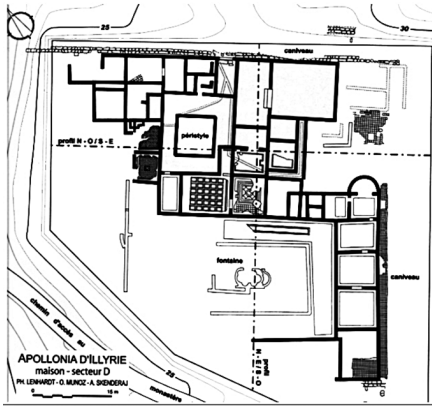


Figure 2
Plan showing the Athena domus
(Dimo – Lenhardt – Quantin 2007: 295
fig. 194).

among which black painted pottery, ensure that the outer perimeter wall was not raised before the 3rd-2nd century B.C. (Blawatsky 1962: 284). However, the wall fragment preserved within the structure that has undergone extensive renovations over time must have been almost entirely reorganized in the Roman period. The *opus quadratum* characterizes only the perimeter wall, while the techniques of other structures vary: *opus incertum*, *opus mixtum*, bricks and vestments (with reused materials). Although Altin Skenderaj has carefully examined each of these techniques and has initially proposed to assign them different construction phases, in reality a stratigraphy does not exist which could substantiate this hypothesis and provide support for a cogent chronology. Conversely, all the three techniques, different from *opus quadratum*, can be generally traced back to the Roman period, as Skenderaj admits in the conclusion of his meticulous research (Skenderaj 2004: 312-313 and 316). After all, in the imperial age it is common to find different techniques used at the same time in the same building, especially in buildings belonging to high-social-level people, and therefore characterized by a large number of rooms, as it was demonstrated by the Roman houses in Greece (Bonini 2006a: 158).

On the basis of these considerations, it is not clear why this courtyard should be dated back to the Hellenistic period, while it is rational to bring the organization of the spaces of the house of Athena, as can be appreciated even today, to a unified design of the Roman imperial period, where not even the subsequent changes at the 4th century A.D. upset the setting (Prendi – Skenderaj 2007: 297-299). They are limited to marginal interventions, such as the fragmentation of the larger rooms and the partial closure of the porticoes of the peristyle, according to a well-known dynamic which is present in many large houses of the Late Antique period (Ellis 1988: 567-569).

Hence our review of the architecture of the Athena *domus* in the imperial age will be the object of the discussion, to comprehend the extent to which the apollonian aristocracy is faithful to the Hellenistic tradition, in what measure and what the typical ideas were adopted from the Roman world.

In fact, in Illyria and Epirus the residences focused on a plurality of perystyles are uncommon, such as the house of the “two peristyles” of *Phoinike* (De Maria – Gorica 2012: 67-71). This is so because the main category in the Hellenistic period accords to the classical model, which involves a single courtyard, monumentalised by columns, as evidenced in the houses “A” and “B” in Byllis (Čeka – Muçaj 2005: 35-37 e 58-59) and the house 8 in *Antigonea* (Budina 1972: 316-318). This is a common tendency all over the Hellenistic world, which, however, started to change when the customers began to feel the need for a larger home, not only to improve their lifestyle, but most likely to accept the challenge of the Roman aristocracy that used the house for the purpose of social competition since the Republican age.

The organization of the house around two courtyards allowed for the separation of the domestic spaces in different blocks. Where the rooms are aggregated around its own courtyard, this solution enabled one to increase the room numbers, to adequately ventilate and light them up, to develop the various functional areas of the house with fewer constraints, with the clear advantage of offering more articulated fruition paths in a representative fashion.

Also the Athena *domus* of Apollonia fully meets these purposes and can be put at the same level as the homes of the urban élites in the Roman provinces. Here, the substantial narrowness of the main peristyle (8x8 m) stands out which is

much smaller than the *peristyle* of the Roman houses in Africa and in the East (Blawatsky 1962: 284; Meyer 1999: 107). Similar data, about peristyles, are also found in the Roman houses in Greece, which, therefore, seems to be a Balkan peculiarity (Bonini 2006a: 52-53). Typical of the Hellenistic tradition is also the modesty of the lining of the façade of the home situated on the public way, where a series of rectangular rooms of various sizes are located. Here, the access routes for fruition are not entirely clear, but it seems reasonable that these undecorated modest rooms were used as service areas and, in a few cases at least, as workshops independent from the rest of the dwelling (Ceka 2005: 67). The position and the size of the two largest rooms, located in correspondence of the Eastern angle of the block, make us hypothesize their destination as a barn, shed or warehouse of carts (Bonini 2006a: 102-104; De Maria – Gorica 2014: 192). In this way the architect intends to exploit the economic potential of the view on the road and at the same time ensure greater tranquillity to the residential rooms, located towards the centre of the building lot. This is a trick which was already often present in the classical era in the Balkans and the Aegean (Hoepfner 1999: 561-575; De Maria – Gorica 2014: 190-192), extensively widespread in the entire Mediterranean (Wallace Hadrill 1994: 134-142; Hirschfeld 1995: 98-99; Bonini – Rinaldi 2003: 203-207). The entrance to the house does not present any sign of monumentality on the facade, and although due to its size it is potentially habitable, it actually acts as a simple passage, as it used to in Greece from the Classic to the Roman age (Bonini 2006a: 48-49). Such a narrow space can hardly have been the scene of ceremonies for the reception of *clientes*, which was common in the houses with peristyle in Western Mediterranean areas, where the entrance halls in small part performed the functions of the *atrium* of the house in the age of the Roman republic (Thébert 1986: 269-270; Meyer 1999: 108-111). However, it is not possible to think that patronage and its rituals did not exist in the culture of the Hellenistic province. It is the very sources that deny this idea (Plu., *Mor.*, 94A-B; Rouland 1979: 499-578; Alcock 1993: 114-15). In contrast, it is rather likely that such ceremonies were held elsewhere, probably in the main courtyard of the house, as Plutarch writes explicitly (Plu., *Mor.*, 814D-E). The *peristyle*, although of no exceptional size, is the physical and functional heart of the home. As already noted above, the courtyard expresses a “public” value, the capability of receiving guests and clients in programmatically performed luxury, well beyond the owner’s common decoration of living spaces previously reported, and exhibits a “public” value, suitable for the reception of guests and clients. The arcades were decorated with polychrome frescoes and stucco, as indicated from the abundant remains found by the archaeologists, while elegant marble statues were proudly displayed including one of Athena, which gives the name to the house, one of Apollo and a statue of a magistrate (Blawatsky 1962: 285). Also the architectural setting looks elaborate, because it presents a round of Ionic pillars on double order which implies, at least for this portion of the building, the existence of an upper floor. In the end, a special drainage channel prevents the stagnation of the rainwater in the open area of the courtyard, which was perhaps improperly defined *impluvium* (Prendi – Skenderaj 2007: 296). This term is absolutely misleading as it refers to the italic model of the *domus* with *atrium* that has nothing to do with the courtyard of the house of Athena, or with the morphology or distribution of the environments.

Indeed, the representative rooms are not located along the axis that starts from the entrance, but in both sides of the courtyard, according to a centralized system, rather than an axial one, which is typical of the eastern Mediterranean sea (Gros 2001: 214-215). It is not clear where the entrance to the rooms situated

further south around the second *peristyle* was, which was bigger than the former (23x13 m) and had arcades and mosaics (Prendi – Skënderaj 2007: 296). It is definitely the residential sector in the dwelling, where the living environments of the owner's family are situated, including several rooms, currently very damaged, heated by means of hypocaust typical of the Roman period (Ceka 2005: 67).

While it cannot be excluded that the duplication of the courtyards found its roots in the tradition of *gynaikonitis* as a separate space, as already discussed in regard to the house with two peristyles in *Phoenike*, it is difficult to think that in the imperial age the house of Athena at *Apollonia* (and Greek house in the world in general) presented a strict separation, which already in classical times was fading away (Nevett 1999: 154-155; Ceka 2005: 67; De Maria – Gorica 2012: 71). It is possible to think that the duplication of the courtyards is carried out by the architects to give more privacy to the representative rooms, which is a consequence of the progressive necessity even in the Greek world to use one's own dwelling as a self-representation.

Moreover, the entire area of the second peristyle has a distinctly Western flavour, as also reflected in the garden of the discovered area and the ornamental fountain which is similar to the one found in the House of Antonino at Nicopolis (Bonini 2006a: 131). The introduction of plants in the heart of the residence, denies its functional value to the courtyard, which for centuries had characterized the Hellenistic tradition, thus transforming it in an amusement area along a style that is spreading in the Greek provinces brought by Romans (Bonini 2006b). Therefore, also the Athena *domus* reflects the trend already outlined for Roman Greece in the imperial age, where the owners have a growing need for space and for displaying their wealth. This departing from the Hellenistic tradition can be explained by the search for greater comfort. However, it cannot be denied that the upper classes are beginning to assign a key role to the house for social competition, according to a logic which is now far from older and traditional habits and according to a typically Roman use. In the East like in the West the notables who aspire to an important social promotion and have the financial ability to attain it need to share a codified system of signs which enables them to assert their prestige in front of their subordinates. In this way they show their adherence to the empire and participate in its management in the local area, be it real or presumed. In private buildings these signs are traditional in form, but are used in a representative logic that develops and is accentuated because of the influence of Rome. This gives rise also in Illyria to a peculiar architectural style of the privileged classes, which almost act as a bridge between East and West, and whose culture and imaginary could perhaps be better investigated through the analysis of the decorations.

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4. The floor decorations

As we can see from the description of the architecture, the *domus* is a landmark building with two peristyles around which thirty rooms are located, where in some cases floor decorations are preserved. To summarize, the current situation is as follows: ten *opus tessellatum* floors, two flagstone floors, one *opus sectile* floor and one brick floor. Based on data collected from the edited and archived material, in this house the floor decorations are mainly with united coverage, which means that the coating covers the space of the floor evenly, without architectural and decorative partitions. Only one of the floors contains more

decorative units. It is an apse that constitutes an architectural division which is functional to the use of the room.

Now, it goes without saying that the room with rich decorations (columns and statues) and static decorations (mosaics and frescoes) are prestigious environments for the house, and play an important role in the development of the dwelling inside of the structure. Another element for the identification of the function of the rooms, beyond the dimensions of the compartment, is the decorative technique that has to be functional and representative. We know that mosaics are conceived to remove moisture from the houses, but over the centuries they have become important elements to identify a given social class which flaunts its wealth and its culture (Dunbabin 1999: 65-68). This is also reflected in the Athena *domus*, where the floor mosaics, like the architecture, are an expression of the culture of the customer, who stressed the distinction between public and private representative rooms (both luxuriously decorated) and the room of service through the floor decorations.

Once the entrance is passed, it is possible to access the first peristyle (15x12.5 m) where the open area still preserves the fragments of paved marble, maybe in white colour, as is the case of the room located in north-west of it. The archive pictures, taken in black and white during the excavations of the 1958-'60, do not allow us to give a definitive opinion on the colour of the floor decorations and the marble sizes (Omari 2009: 103-107) (Fig. 3).

Not surprisingly, the larger environment of the house (9.10x7.75 m), which is the only room decorated with *opus sectile* marble slabs of various colours and size, faces exactly this peristyle. The pattern used has been defined by the scholar Guidobaldi: “great criss-cross pattern with simple elements”, identified with the acronym “SD” which means Square with Disc. This type of decoration, as explained by the researcher, is known thanks to three very important constructions in Italy: one at the Trajan’s Forum in Rome (Basilica Ulpia and North-East *exedrae*), one at the Pantheon and one in Pompeii (Sanctuary of the Public Lares) (Guidobaldi 1985: 174-177).

Without any doubt it follows that for the owner of the Apollonia house this room is the display room par excellence in the *domus*. Additionally, also the room located in the eastern side, besides being of significant size (7.25x7.25 m), it presents fragments of wall decorations with *opus tessellatum* marble and polychrome floor decorations. This means that the decoration, as we mentioned

Figure 3
First peristyle and porticoes with the rooms paved with marble, looking east (Courtesy of Archaeological Institute Tirana).

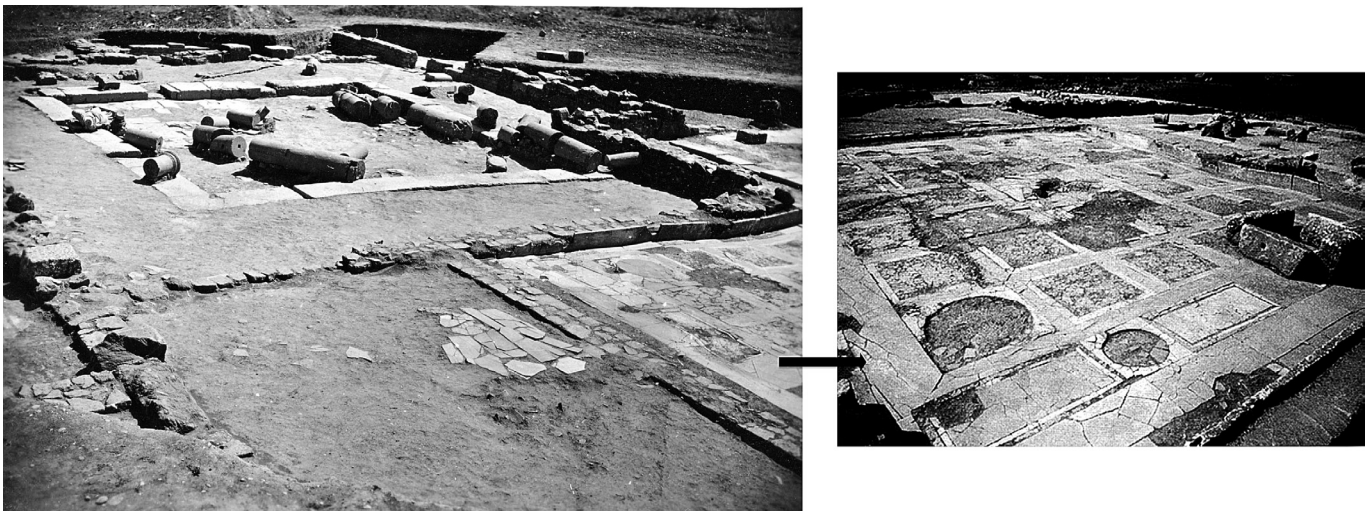




Figure 4
View of the room, looking south, and Nereid mosaic (Courtesy of Archaeological Institute Tirana).

above, was conceived as a single carpet within the same frame, but with two juxtaposed panels, according to a typical taste in this historical phase in both the Greek and Roman traditions (Dunbabin 1999: 38-52).

Despite the lack of sufficient elements to define the function of the environment, this room was probably the *triclinium* of the public part of the *domus*. Although the size of the room was significant, it does not necessarily allow a strict functional differentiation, because these environments can be configured either as *triclinia* spaces or as receptions. In our case, given the general tendency in the 3rd-4th century A.D. to magnify the reception environments and given the composition of the mosaic, it is possible to consider it as the room used for receptions and banquets. This statement is supported by the decorative themes: the first carpet in front of the entrance is a geometric, long and narrow panel with an orthogonal composition with adjacent squares; the second carpet is a geometric-figurative panel with marine elements (hippocampus and a Nereid on a dolphin) surrounded by wide edges on which the *clinai* were placed (Fig. 4).

In Albania, where studies on the matter are lacking, it is difficult to find private areas where the identification of their function is carried out through the analysis of the floor decoration. This is testified by the *domus* with double peristyle in *Phoinike* and the house “B” in *Byllis*, both of which date back to the Hellenistic period which, while undergoing renovations in the 3rd century AD do not identify the *triclinium* (Omari 2011: 677-680). However, in the Aegean and Adriatic area the testimonies are many, both for the Roman houses in Greece (at Athens and Delos) and in Italy (at Aquileia and Cisalpina) (Bonini 2003: 212; Ghedini – Novello 2009: 117-122).

Continuing with the description of the floor decorations in this courtyard, other rooms built in the east and in the west of the first peristyle preserved polychrome mosaics with geometric themes, made with care and in a “rigid” style and ordered like the Roman tradition, i.e. with edge and inside of it the carpet which is sometimes interrupted by a pseudo-emblem (Fig. 5) (Dunbabin 1999: 66-68).

In the absence of the precise identification of the function of these rooms we cannot but say that these rooms are generally connected to the public life of the *dominus* and to his working activities. A clue is found in one of the mosaics where the four seasons are represented (Fig. 6), perhaps to highlight the customer’s work activities which take place throughout the year, during all the seasons. This hypothesis also originates from the location of the rooms, placed immediately after the structures considered by archaeologists as environments related to trade (shops, warehouses, stables, etc.), close to the house direction and open

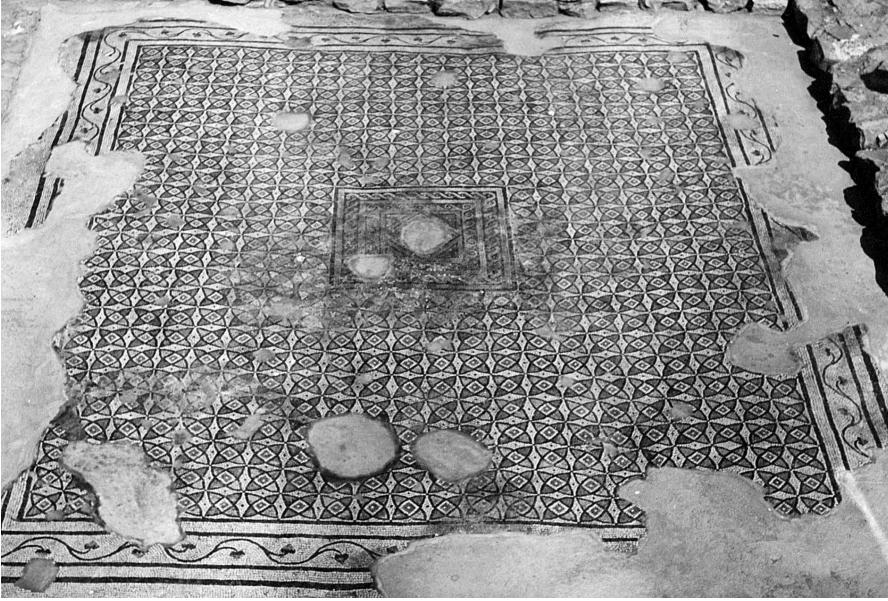


Figure 5
The geometric mosaic
with pseudo-emblem
(Courtesy of the Archaeological
Institute Tirana)

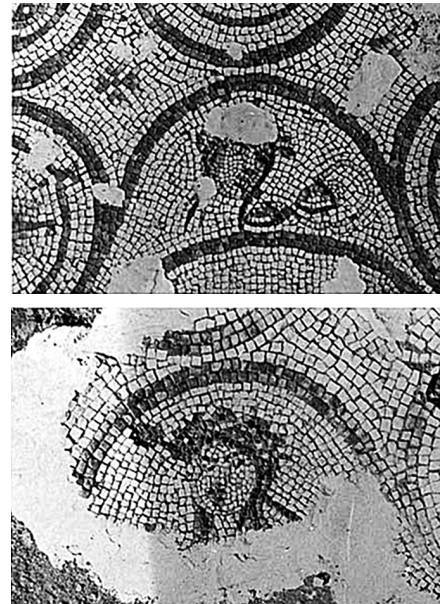


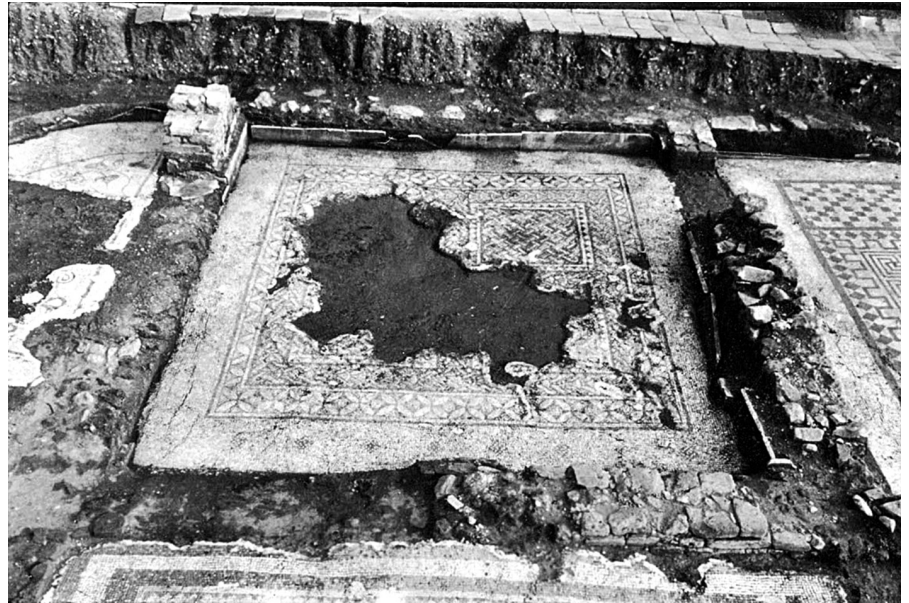
Figure 6
The geometric mosaic
with seasons (Courtesy of
Archaeological Institute Tirana).

to the street. The analysis of the floor decorations enables us to confirm that the first peristyle and the environments around it performed the “public” function of receiving guests (Skënderaj 2004: 311-316).

Moving on to the rooms overlooking the second courtyard with the fountain, we see that they were intended for private use and were the places where banquets were held with the family and the most intimate guests.

Even in the absence of reliable indications regarding access to the second peristyle rooms, located to the southeast of it, on the basis of openings doors found in the walls of the rooms (Fig. 2) and the analysis of the dimensions and the mosaics, the paths inside the *domus* stand out clearly. In this part of the house it can be seen that all the rooms face the only one apsed room and permit the flow to it. This apse was discovered and described for the first time in 1914 by Praschniker. Its floor is slightly higher than the floor of the square room which faces it (5x5 m), and is decorated with a mosaic with a white background presenting a cantharos from which were born and developed ivy branches (Fig. 7).

Figure 7
The apsidal room
with mosaics floor
(Courtesy of Archaeological
Institute Tirana).



During the 3rd-4th century throughout the empire A.D. it was fashionable to expand the traditional spaces with apsed endings that articulated their volumes, thus providing a more sumptuous setting for the ritual associated with the owner's self-representation. This is typical of Roman culture and is known in Albania in relation to the Triconch Palace in Butrint, as well as in Italy and in the provincial area (Ghedini – Novello 2009: 177-119; Bowden et al. 2011: 14-19). With most probability our costumer could not distance himself from this tradition. Whether the room with apse was the *cubiculum* of the house is hard to tell.

All the other rooms located to the south of this room have the same dimensions (4.80x5.20 m), and only one, which lies half way through, presents a figurative mosaic. Archaeologists call this room the "Achilles' room", because of the mosaic carpet scenes represented there of the battle between Achilles and Penthesilea (Amanali – Adhami 1974: 22-25; Ceka 2005: 67-70; Çikopano 2006: 174). The iconographic theme has a long tradition both in the archaic-classic pottery and in the mosaics of the Mediterranean area (Ghedini 1997: 58-61; Pushimaj 2012: 232-235).



Figure 8
The Achilles mosaic
(Courtesy of Archaeological
Institute Tirana).



Figure 9
The geometric mosaics of the second
peristyle of the Athena domus
(Courtesy of Archaeological
Institute Tirana).



Figure 10
Service room of the private area
of the *domus* with brick floor
(Courtesy of Archaeological
Institute Tirana).



In the mosaic representing Achilles the figures are arranged at the sides of the carpet following a centrifugal trend and according to the Italic black-and-white mosaic tradition, while in the other parts of the carpet, which was found in a very fragmented state, there appear scattered weapons (Fig. 8). As claimed by the archaeologists, in this mosaic the craftsman wanted to focus the viewer's attention on Pelide's gaze, which is turned towards his dying beloved, and not towards the battle which is taking place behind him, as commonly represented in the iconographic tradition. This variation is rooted in the Attic archaic-classic pottery iconography, and also in this case we have a mix of cultures, i.e. a subject dear to the Romans of the Late Antiquity is revisited following oriental patterns. Just like in the archaic-classic iconography, in which gazes meet, also in this case the craftsman and the costumer looked at and took inspiration from both the East and the West. In this part of the house the peristyle and the rooms are decorated with polychrome geometric mosaics, so as to emphasize the costumer's wealth and their representative importance (Fig. 9). In addition to the spaces for reception and residence, the Athena *domus* offers a readable element of the utilitarian spaces that made up the necessary equipment for the family life and that were characterized by the different kinds of fruition. The service rooms are recognizable because of the utilitarian character of the flooring, for their dislocation inside of the house and for the presence of infrastructure related to their use. The service room, which was functional to private banquets, is surely the one located to the south of the second peristyle end is paved with bricks (in orange colour and 10x10 cm in size), as it used to be customary for kitchens in the Hellenistic and Roman age (Fig. 10) (Guidobaldi – Gregori 1996: 247-260).

However, in our case what is not clear about the typical service rooms is the identification of the thermal bath. Three are the reasons why it was not discovered: the thermal bath is probably still lying under the ground waiting to be discovered; maybe it was destroyed over the centuries; near the house there might have been a public, not yet identified, thermal bath.

Moreover, it seems possible that in this house a thermal bath was present, especially on the basis of the rich architectural and decorative elements and of the fact that in this period (3rd-4th century A.D.) it was common among the Roman aristocracy in Italy and in the province to build a thermal bath inside of the *domus*. In Albania this practice is reflected in the Triconch Palace of Butrint,

in the *domus* of Vrina and Diaporit, all dated between 2nd and 4th century A.D., not to mention the rest of the empire where the examples are many and varied (Bowden – Përzhita 2007: 102-104; Bowden et al. 2011: 33-37; Greenslade 2013: 129-138).

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5. Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that the study of the Athena *domus* in *Apollonia* has enabled us to identify some of the characteristics of Roman houses in the Balkan area. This has confronted us with various types of problems. The *domus* under investigation is an architectural structure that has provided indications about the organization, the functionality and the static structure of the rooms, and about the construction techniques and the materials used. The analysis of mosaics has made it possible to open a window on the economic and cultural level of the customer, as well as to identify, wherever possible, the use of the rooms.

The Athena *domus*, like all the houses in the imperial age, was the scene of the owners' social and private life, and provides an insight into the contemporary society. The present research has allowed us to learn about ancient engineering in the Illyrian-Epirus area and about the development of this structure, the customer's trade and economic capacity, and about his willingness to conform to the solutions which were popular in Rome and in the rest of the Empire.

From the architectural point of view, the way the dwelling is set up continues and also enriches the Hellenistic house building tradition, which is characterized by houses centripetally ordered around a peristyle. However, there are distinctly Western solutions, an example of which is the garden with heated rooms, which confirms the master's adherence to a fully Roman lifestyle.

The decoration of the rooms, be they on the walls or on the floors, denote two artistic trends that influence the customer: the Roman tradition with mosaics that are well organized in their layout, and the Greek tradition characterised by walls and flagstone floors. From the Augustan age to the late antiquity, this latter technique became fashionable throughout the empire and developed into what is known with the term *opus sectile*. Such decoration, although very expensive because of the raw materials that have to travel on land and water to reach their final destination, is required by private people who want to show off their wealth.

Although many floors in the Athena *domus* have disappeared or are kept in very bad conditions, what remains of them leads us to interpret this building as a structure belonging to a wealthy customer. He is embedded in the local Balkan tradition, but at the same time looks at Rome to learn about the fashions of the capital city. He tries to interpret them, and gives directions to his craftsmen as to how to build his home as the "mirror" of his life and culture. The artisans have the task to execute the customer's choices with great meticulousness and mastery.

The fact that *Apollonia* is a city located halfway through the East and the West enables us to hypothesize the presence of craftsman from abroad. This assumption is supported by several elements, for example the architecture, the mosaics and the sculptures that are the result of the exchanges and relationships in the city, that is one of the most important centres of the political and economic life of the Empire. It is in the light of this central role that the need of the local élites should be interpreted, namely the need to adjust their residences to the more meaningful models to achieve social and economic self-representation.

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