



Imperial Rome and Ostia

Ostia

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Ostia became one of the largest provincial cities of the Empire, with a population estimated at between 20 and 40 thousand. Many buildings have been excavated, mainly from the imperial period, and are fully representative of the kind of brick-faced concrete architecture practised in the capital itself at that time. This model of Ostia gives some idea of just how built up the ancient settlement probably was. The importance of river trade is apparent in the density of riverside building, and in its lateral spread. The layout of the centre is quite typical of the planned provincial Roman city. There were two main streets. The Decumanus Maximus ran parallel with the river in an east-west direction, and the north-south Cardo Maximus intersected it at the forum. The Decumanus Maximus was typically paved with blocks of volcanic basalt. An imposing brick and concrete temple, the Capitolium, was added to the Forum, which was rebuilt during the second century in the reign of the Emperor Hadrian. Later that century the Forum Baths were added nearby. These were the largest of the three public baths at Ostia, built during the reign of the emperor Antoninus Pius. The large window frames and the marble columns which survive among the concrete residue hint at their former splendour. The clustering of warehouses on the river front at the north of the city reflects the central importance of shipping and grain for Ostia. There is further evidence of its importance at the Piazza of the Corporations, an urban space dominated by the city's theatre. Originally the theatre was built at the very start of the imperial period under Augustus.

In front of the theatre is the so-called Piazza of the Corporations which had a double colonnaded portico on three sides. There is some dispute about the Piazza's function: either traders conducted business here, or they paid for the portico's refurbishment. Whatever its function, there are a number of black-and-white mosaic pavements in front of the colonnade's small rooms, from which much can be inferred about the system of trade in the Roman empire, and in particular, about the capital's grain supply. The modius, a container for measuring grain, is a common motif in the mosaics. Above this modius is a regular for levelling off the surplus grain. Thus ensuring a standard measure of grain for accounting purposes. The overseas origins of many of the traders are frequently indicated. Sometimes this is by an inscription here from the ship owners of Carthage, the most important port and trading centre of North Africa, one of Rome's richest sources of grain. This elephant could represent trade in ivory, or the import of animals for use in imperial processions. Here is a seagoing merchant ship, with a dolphin on its side. A storage jar, probably containing olive oil or wine, is being carried to a river boat with steering oars. Between two boats is the distinctive stepped structure of the nearby Claudian lighthouse based on that of the renowned Pharos lighthouse at Alexandria. The increasing traffic of large ships led to the construction by the Emperor Claudius of a large artificial harbour and canal at Portus, on the other side of the Tiber from Ostia. This was followed by an inner hexagonal harbour and new canal built in the second century during the reign of Trajan. These facilities meant that Portus increasingly replaced Ostia in the shipment of grain to the capital. This artificial harbour was a prime example of Roman ingenuity with concrete, exploiting its capacity to set under water.

The importance and activity of the harbour can be judged from this marble relief showing, amongst other symbolic imagery, the Claudian lighthouse behind the sail of the ship in the foreground.