

# Archaeological research and enhancement of ancient Aquileia

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## Work in progress. The Fondazione Aquileia cooperating with the Universities

Aquileia was one of the greatest cities in the Roman times, with a stimulated population of around 50.000 people in the IV century A.D. The modern town has got today about 3.200 inhabitants. This means that wide parts of the ancient city still lie beneath the agricultural lands. According to the 2008 Agreement between the Ministry of Culture and the Autonomous Region Friuli Venezia Giulia, the Fondazione Aquileia is in charge of the management and the enhancement of the archaeological areas of State property (the Forum, the river Harbour, the so called "Sepolcreto", the Great Baths and the Teather, the late Roman Markets, the decumanus of Aratria Galla, the House of Wounded Beasts and so on). They extend over 200.000 square meters. Besides them, in the last years the Fondazione Aquileia has bought further 200.000 square meters of agricultural land overlapping the remains of the Roman city (including the Circus) and some buildings inside the modern town, the latter in order to regenerate and create infrastructures for students, scholars and tourists. In this way, half of the Roman city within the late Roman walls is now included in public property.

The archaeological research is one of the focal points of the Fondazione's Strategic Plan and, of course, the inescapable basis of any action for the enhancement of the archaeological areas. Five universities and other Insituts are involved this process in so far: Trieste, Udine, Padua, Venice and Verona. Each of them has signed an economic and scientific Agreement with the Fondazione Aquileia, under the supervision of the Soprintendenza archeologia belle arti e paesaggio di Friuli Venezia Giulia. The aims are not only the field training of the young archaeologists, but also the shared identification of the future plans for the enlargement of the visiting areas, their enhancement and infrastructuring, in order to give the tourists, the scholars, the students an increasingly precise image of the size and the importance of the ancient city in all its historical development.

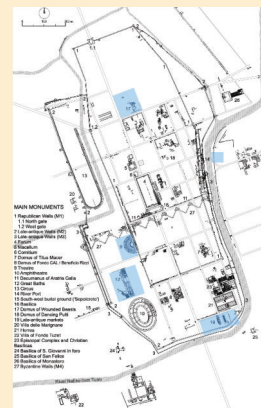


Fig. 1. Archaeological map of Aquileia: university excavation sites



Fig. 2. The excavation area of the Roman theatre



Fig. 3. The mosaic of the "putti danzanti" and the mosaic of the "tappeto fiorito"

## The research of the Universities of Padua, Trieste, Udine, Venice and Verona

In 2015, the **University of Padua** began the excavation of the Roman theatre (fig. 1, site 9; fig. 2). The aim of the research was to locate this public building, which had not previously been identified. Over the course of the investigations, the structures of a large theatre, with a diameter of 95 m, were brought to light. Unfortunately, structural remains are currently below the water table. Therefore, after thorough documentation, the structures were reburied to ensure their preservation. While this solution was appropriate from a conservation perspective, it limited the dissemination of research results. A turning point occurred in 2017, when the entire "Grandi Terme-Fondo Comelli" archaeological area was entrusted to the Aquileia Foundation. This made it possible to include the theatre area in the restoration project for an important sector of the ancient city, extending from the Forum to the Necropolis. As research activities continued, dissemination efforts consequently focused on two possible solutions: 1) the virtual reconstruction of the ancient building; 2) the reproduction on the ground of the layout of the buried theatre using hedges and lightweight structures, to recreate a sort of "green theatre" integrated into the archaeological site tour.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the **University of Trieste's** investigations in the large and luxurious "Casa dei putti danzanti" (fig. 1, site 17), which from the mid-4th century AD occupied the second insula east of the forum. Since the beginning of the research, multiple outreach and educational activities have been undertaken, in the belief that the public and educational dimension of archaeology is in itself a form of heritage enhancement. The 20th anniversary offers an opportunity to propose new strategies aimed at enhancing the value of the remains *in situ*. The appearance of the House and its individual rooms, with their refined decorative programmes, can be easily appreciated even by non specialists. However, this exceptional condition is counterbalanced by the vast extent of the area - which affects the requirements for conservation and maintenance - and by the fact that the excavation is not complete and lacks a scientific synthesis, a prerequisite for any enhancement plan. In both cases, the solution may lie in a flexible visitor route, adaptable to the progress of the investigations, allowing the public to approach significant sectors of the House. Among these, without a doubt, are the room with the well-known mosaic that gave the House its name, and the one with the "Tappeto fiorito", which belonged to the same context (fig. 3).

The large baths, known as the *Thermae Felices Constantianae* from an inscription, was situated between the amphitheatre and the theatre, within Aquileia's new western Late Antique walls. Centred on a luxurious frigidarium, the complex constituted an imperial building. Flanked by two large apodyteria, the frigidarium formed the focal point of the north-south axis (138 metres) of the building's central body. This axis was perpendicular to the 90-metre bathing axis (107 metres including the service rooms), the focus of the new excavations funded by the Fondazione Aquileia and conducted by the **University of Udine** (fig. 1, site 12). These revealed two apses at either end of the axis. To the west lies a smaller apse, heated by a hypocaust (*suspensurae*) and *tubuli*, overlooking the *caldarium*. To the east, a larger apse opens onto the *frigidarium*. These apses were completely excavated in order to begin restoration work quickly. Behind the *caldarium*, there are also service rooms and a large courtyard surrounded by rooms on the east side of the building. The Aquileia baths can be compared with the so-called Tetrarchic Kaiserthermen in Trier and Milan. Chronological data obtained from the analysis of an alder pole used in the construction of the frigidarium apse wall suggests that work began while Maximian was residing in northern Italy, prior to his abdication in 305. Constantine later completed the baths and took credit for them.

Since 2010, **Ca' Foscari University of Venice** has conducted systematic archaeological investigations along the eastern bank of the fluvial harbour of Aquileia (at ex fondo Sandrigo: fig. 1, site 4). The excavation, integrated with sediment cores extracted from the riverbed, has enabled a comprehensive reconstruction of the processes governing the formation, use, and subsequent abandonment of the harbour canal. These combined datasets also allowed the determination of its original width, which measured approximately 48 metres. Furthermore, investigations have clarified the settlement dynamics of the peri-urban district bordering the eastern bank. In the Late Republican period a *domus* was constructed on the site, subsequently converted to commercial/artisanal functions. In the second half of the 3rd century A.D., all structures were deliberately dismantled down to their foundations. This clearance created the conditions for the erection of a monumental warehouse (*horreum*), which remained in operation until the second half of the 5th century A.D. presents an opportunity to propose new strategies for the erection of a monumental warehouse (*horreum*), which remained in operation until the second half of the fifth century A.D. Research carried out is fully aligned with forthcoming initiatives aimed at enhancing the Fluvial Harbour Archaeological Park. Indeed, results provide the conceptual and infrastructural basis for the development of a new visitor itinerary that will enable the public to traverse the entire width of the ancient riverbed, thus allowing a bank-to-bank exploration of one of the most substantial fluvial harbours of the Roman world.

In the south-eastern sector of the town, excavations conducted by the **University of Verona** are revealing important structures that shed light on Late Antique Aquileia, most notably the inner and outer city walls (fig. 1, site 19). The latter was constructed around the mid-5th century AD. In the same area, a large commercial complex has been identified, dated between the late 3rd and early 4th centuries AD. This marketplace comprised six paved courts surrounded by porticoes, where fish, meat, vegetables, and cereals were traded. Furthermore, it was functionally connected to a large Tetrarchic *horreum*, located to the north of it (fig. 4). Goods reached the marketplace via one of the city's *decumani*, as well as by river, through a system of access points and ramps. The complex remained in use until the early 6th century AD, when extensive collapses of both the walls and the timber roofing structures occurred. Although much of the architecture has been progressively stripped over time, the highly monumental layout remains clearly legible. It will be made accessible to the public upon completion of the excavations. As part of the site's enhancement, visitors will enter via the broad, cobbled street that branched from the decumanus and passes between two of the best-preserved buildings.



Fig. 4: 3D reconstruction of the Late Roman markets and the Tetrarchic horreum behind them (NudeSIGN-Ikon)

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