



Centro Interuniversitario di Studi
sull'Edilizia abitativa tardoantica nel Mediterraneo

ABITARE NEL MEDITERRANEO TARDOANTICO

Atti del IV Convegno Internazionale del Centro Interuniversitario
di Studi sull'Edilizia abitativa tardoantica nel Mediterraneo (CISEM)
(Cuenca 7-9 novembre 2022)

a cura di
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ESTRATTO

ISSN 2352-5574
ISBN 979-12-5995-087-1
<http://dx.medra.org/10.4475/0871>



EDIPUGLIA
Bari 2024

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A vulgar display of power (?) Scenography and design in Lusitanian *villae*, with the example of Horta da Torre (Fronteira)

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Abstract

La provincia di Lusitania presenta diversi esempi di ville con caratteristiche monumentali, che mettono in mostra il potere e il prestigio dei loro proprietari. La grandiosità di questi edifici è evidente in vari aspetti, tra cui la disposizione dei percorsi, la spaziosità delle aree interne e i motivi decorativi che adornano pareti e pavimenti. Ogni elemento architettonico e ogni scelta decorativa riflettono uno sforzo deliberato per impressionare i visitatori. Particolarmente degne di nota sono le diverse soluzioni riguardanti i percorsi interni che i visitatori avrebbero dovuto seguire per accedere alle aree residenziali con caratteristiche più rappresentative. Le sale di ricevimento mostrano specifiche caratteristiche, e la combinazione dei materiali trasmette efficacemente immagini e messaggi per ottenere gli effetti desiderati. La villa di Horta da Torre, oggetto di scavi dal 2012, è un esempio eccellente delle soluzioni architettoniche più innovative. Situata in una regione con un'alta concentrazione di ville monumentali, dove ciascun sito mostra caratteri architettonici unici, evidenzia la creatività impiegata nella costruzione delle esclusive residenze rurali della Lusitania.

1. The *villa* at Horta da Torre (Fronteira, Portugal)

Identified in 1999, during the course of field surveys conducted for the Archaeological Map of Fronteira¹, the *villa* at Horta da Torre was considered to be in critical danger, having been the target of destruction motivated by agricultural work and by looters operating on the site (fig. 1). A small survey conducted in 2003/2004 confirmed the worst indicators, having identified structures that had been entirely destroyed. However, the long-term programme of excavations under way since 2012 has made it possible to rescue a heritage site of significant importance, nowadays considered among the great *villae* of Lusitania. Although spatially limited (no more than m² 1000 for an estimated m² 30.000 of built area), the open area excavation and its results have allowed interpretations of the spatial organisation of the site, thus enabling a vast bibliographic production². Located in a region that during the Roman period was densely populated with rural units, particularly many that can be interpreted as *villae*,³ Horta da Torre stands out for being a *unicum* in which the spatial planning and decorative solutions are unparalleled in the province of Lusitania.

In 2019, a general description of the structures in the area excavated up until that year was presented in the CIS-EM conference. As the on-site investigation process was



1. - Horta da Torre in the Iberian Peninsula. Map by Jesús García Sánchez.

paused in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the excavated area has not been significantly increased (fig. 2). As such, this analysis will focus on specific elements: the *stibadium* and the large peristyle serving as its ante-room.

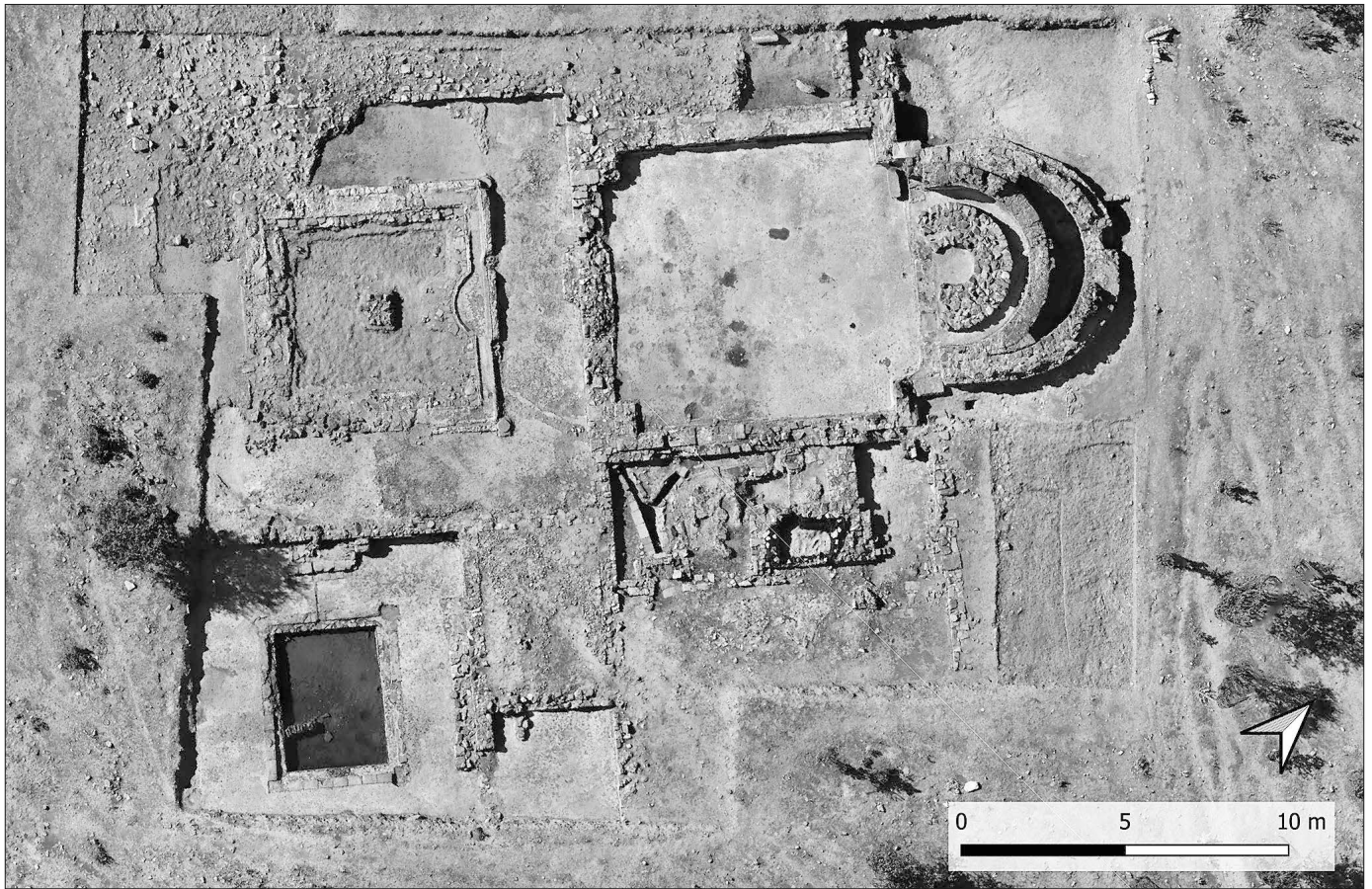
2. The *stibadium* and the two-apse room

The most relevant and unexpected element documented in the Horta da Torre excavations consists of an innovative and unique architectural design for the region: a two-apse room framing a *stibadium*. This prototype is the only available one of its kind in the region, as the reception rooms of the closest *villae* adhere to the model of a three-apse

¹ Carneiro 2005, n. 48.

² Field survey and georadar, see García Sanchez *et alii* 2020; most relevant excavation results in Carneiro 2020; Carneiro 2021; Carneiro 2022.

³ Carneiro 2014, I, 110-122.



2. - Horta da Torre excavation area in the end of the 2023 campaign. Drone photo by Jesús García Sánchez.

room, per the more conservative prototypes noted in Torre de Palma (Monforte) and Quinta das Longas (Elvas)⁴. Although examples of *stibadia* have been found in *Lusitania*, all known specimens are located in coastal areas. In the fields of *Augusta Emerita* (Mérida) and Extremadura, the nearest Spanish region (and the ancient provincial metropolis), as well as in the Portuguese central and lower Alentejo, no similar examples have been recorded. So, the Horta da Torre case is an *unicum*, with no known parallels in the area. It should, however, be reinforced that after the results of the extensive georadar surveys carried out as part of the collaboration with Leiden University (NED), which allowed for the documentation of a vast built-up area⁵, the room in which the *stibadium* was located was interpreted as a secondary room used only for summer banquets (*cenatio aestivalis*) held as part of the sumptuary consumption that characterises this built-up area. As such, the Horta da Torre case presents a relevant particularity: the *stibadium* is not placed within the main reception circuit and main room (which is yet to be excavated), but in a peripheral area only

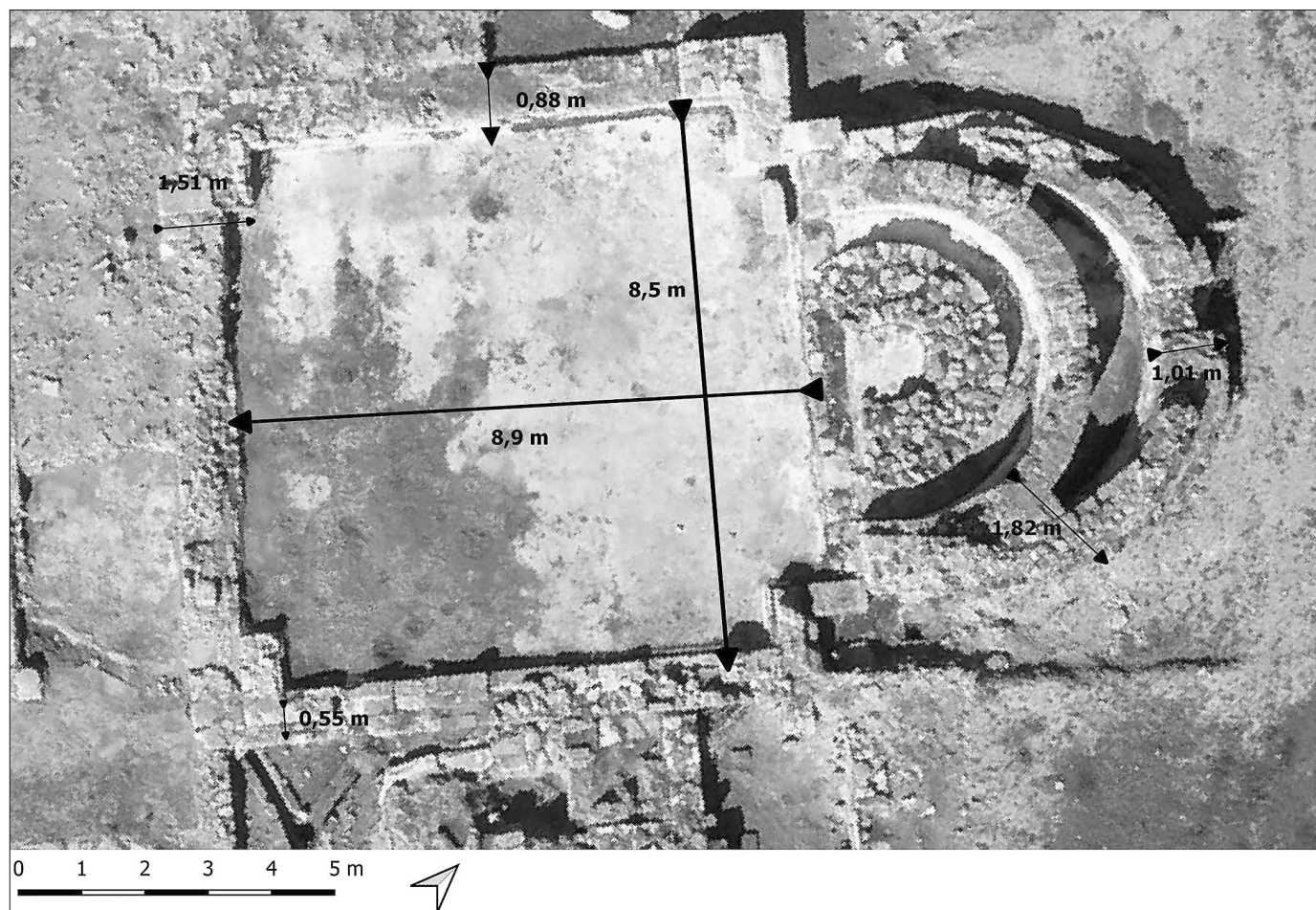
accessible to guests selected by the *dominus*, requiring a private access circuit used only by those hoping to gain access the location.

The two-apse room at Horta da Torre has a unique floor-plan in that all the corners are counter-cornered: the outer walls curve then counter-curve at 90°, with each angle reinforced with heavy granite ashlars, thus withstanding the force exerted on the walls at these points (fig. 3). This effect, of an opening of the interior plane, increases the angles that can be contemplated from the *stibadium*, creating a wider panorama, but also directing the gaze of anyone walking in its direction towards the *stibadium* itself. Behind the feature, the architectural design is founded in a two-apse structure that in the wall originally would develop into a shell shape, creating a scenario that would both protect guests and accentuate the scenography of the environment. The *stibadium* at the site in Fronteira is therefore unique when compared to other similar rooms, such as those registered in the El Ruedo villa in *Baetica* (Almedinilla, Cordoba, Spain)⁶ or another paradigmatic example for the interpretation of this type of dining room: the

⁴ Carneiro 2021, 529-530 with references.

⁵ Provisional results in García Sanchez *et alii* 2020.

⁶ Vaquerizo Gil, Noguera Celdrán 1997.



3. - Horta da Torre: Measures of the *stibadium* room. Drone photo by Jesús García Sánchez.

Faragola villa (Ascoli Satriano, Italy)⁷. Both of these locations contain single-plane walls – though admittedly, an artificial waterfall broke the linearity of the wall at the Baetican site – while the wall at Horta da Torre was semi-circular. Except for the obvious features, Horta da Torre is reminiscent of prototypes developed from the scenographic solutions composed at the Adriana villa in Tivoli (Italy), particularly its “Serapeum”, in which the verticality of the columns combines with the semi-circularity of the apse and, particularly notably, water is used as an element able to create multi-sensoriality and engagement⁸.

Thus, the use of water as a harmonising element within banquet rooms developed, of which the example at Horta da Torre is the most well-established in *Lusitania*. In this villa in Fronteira, the two-apse forms a shell shape behind the *stibadium*, with the two walls serving to overhang and support this complex design (which would likely have risen to a considerable height) on the one hand and to create an empty

internal space which functioned as a water container, on the other. The *opus signinum* wall cladding confirms that this gap between the walls served as a water reservoir, anticipating the moment when the water would be released, which would certainly have provoked general astonishment during any banquet. This water would have flowed into the room where the *convivium* was being held, via a small floodgate located behind the *stibadium* and positioned on the room’s axial axis, allowing water to run across the *opus signinum* flooring, covering the entirety of the room (fig. 4). For this reason, an *opus signinum* skirting board is positioned between the floor and the wall, protecting against any moisture seeping in and making it easier to clean the room after use. On the northern wall behind the *stibadium*, at a height of approximately one metre, a small hole can still be seen through which water would be projected, forming a small fountain. Another would have been located on the opposite side of the wall, though it can no longer be seen due to the destruction of the structure. This hole is located precisely at the point at which the stone and mortar base structure meets the higher section of the apse, which would have been built entirely using construction ceramics. Including

⁷ Volpe 2006.

⁸ For a general study see Salza Prina Ricotti 2001.



4. - 3D proposal made by Gonalo Lopes, Carlos Carpetudo and Andr  Carneiro.

this constructive device would have reduced the weight of the construction at the point at which the shell is erected, also facilitating the curvature of the vault. The internal side of the wall would undoubtedly have been clad, possibly with painted stucco, as a large sgraffito checkerboard can still be seen on the wall's mortar panels.

The use of this method to allow water to flow into the *stibadium* room is entirely unique to the known cases in *Hispania*. In the only other preserved example found in *Lusitania*, which is in Rabaal (Penela), the device can be found in front of the *stibadium*, with water flowing in through «five pipes, converging in the form of an isosceles triangle at the centre of the far end of the apse»⁹, which is why a mosaic could have been added to the room, placed in the area free from flowing water. This principle of a *stibadium* fountain was also applied in Faragola, with water flowing through holes in the structure positioned in front of the diners, similarly to that found in the *Utere Felix* residence in Carthage¹⁰. As for the case of El Ruedo, as is well known, the process was unique and conditioned by the adaptation of the *stibadium* to a pre-existing space¹¹, which led to it having some specific features, including the decentring of

the structure in the room, creating biased, scarcely canonical planes of contemplation of the peristyle. As a result, water flows into the room through pipes within the structure of the *stibadium*, creating a *lacus* effect similar to that found in Horta da Torre, with a reflecting pool filling the room but using higher, more visually appealing apparatus in the form of the water ramp behind the *stibadium*.

The closest parallels that can be drawn to the Fronteira case, to any significant extent, are those found in the capital of the Empire itself. In Rome, phase 3 of the *domus* located at via del Tritone-via Due Macelli¹² is an identical solution, albeit one with a central marble floor in the *cenatio*. On the north-eastern slope of the Palatine, near the Baths of Elagabalus complex, another *stibadium* dating back to the Severian period presents unequivocal similarities in terms of the spatial and conceptual layout of the room, with a *lacus* placed in front of guests, which also had a marble floor¹³. In both cases, conceptual solutions similar to those employed in the *villa* at Fronteira can be seen, with water flowing around guests as they enjoyed their *cenatio*, forming a reflecting mirror in front of the *stibadium*. In addition to providing coolness, an illusory scenario was

⁹ Pessoa, 2012, 123 [own translation from Portuguese]; reconstitution fig. 98a, p. 691.

¹⁰ Morvillez, 2007.

¹¹ Hidalgo Prieto, 2016, 214.

¹² Saviane 2017. I appreciate Jes s Garc a S nchez for noticing this example, providing me photos of the place.

¹³ Sagu , Cante 2015. My deepest thanks to Rafael Hidalgo Prieto for calling my attention to this example.

created that would transport those present to a natural, rural environment typical of this type of occasion (it is worth remembering the well-known mosaic *della piccola caccia* in Piazza Armerina, which depicts one of these occasions of outdoor *convivium* with no architectural surroundings), enhanced by *trompe l'oeil* decorations that provide a fragmented glimpse of the architectural and mosaic cladding that would have been used on the *stibadium* at Horta da Torre¹⁴.

As the room was able to contain a thin sheet of water, the entire floor is covered with *opus signinum* cladding that was both easy to clean and maintain. As such, and in contrast to the aforementioned sites, Horta da Torre would have had a more humble atmosphere, not having used mosaics or *opus sectile*, except in circumstances similar to El Ruedo. Our perception can, however, be deceiving, as an exuberant decoration painted on the floor can occasionally be glimpsed in the Fronreira villa on the preserved floor near the northeastern corner of the room. Hundreds of years of mortar and rubble deposition have led to limestone concretions forming on the floor. However, little by little, the presence of a red stripe running parallel to the northern wall and a blue and red painted chequerboard, which would presumably have covered the entirety of the room, have been noted. Thick marble slabs lined the wall skirting, which were connected to the floor using the previously mentioned *opus signinum* skirting boards. It can be determined that these marble elements were chosen intentionally as though the resources at the Estremoz anticline (less than km 50 away) were nearer, the marble chosen for the *stibadium* room comes from Trigaches, near Beja, over km 150 away. The refinement of the architectural and conceptual design of the room can be seen in this significant choice of material, as the higher granulometry of the marble from this quarry near Beja produced a more striking visual effect in creating the harmonious scenery of the *lacus* in the room. Finally, it should also be noted that the room being west facing meant that guests would have had a striking view at sunset, as the light would have shone through the door, reflecting off the water mirror on the room floor. This positioning of the *stibadium* at the zenith transcends the room's utilitarian design, which aimed to allow for the circulation of those serving food and to display the prestigious appliances in use in the *cenatio*.¹⁵ In the case of the Horta da Torre, it operated as a clear enhancer of the illusory sensations created by the *lacus*, which is in line with the literary references (particularly Sidonius Apollinaris), creating scenographic effects that conveyed codes and message¹⁶. Once again, the points of reference are the great monumental complexes such as

Hadrian's Villa, emulated in *villae* such as this, built in the fields of *Hispania* by cosmopolitan *domini*.

3. The large peristyle

Preceding the entrance to the two-apse room that frames the *stibadium*, the Horta da Torre villa features a peristyle of a significant size (fig. 5). The circulation space has a humble, functional floor similar to that found in the room within which the *stibadium* is located, consisting of *coccio pesto* made from crushed, trampled ceramics held together with mortar. This room would, therefore, direct visitors' attention towards the main room, with no particular ornaments hung on the walls or placed on the floor.

The large peristyle at Horta da Torre is of a considerable size, both in the horizontal and vertical planes, with three granite columns having been preserved *in situ*, while one is missing. The intercolumniations are also visible, employing quadrant bricks attached to a low wall that acts as the perimeter of the entire interior space. The low wall is edged in *opus signinum*, which allowed a thin layer of water to flow by means of gravity, entering the room through the northwestern corner of the structure, which still features the drain hole and pipeline below the floor at its southeasternmost point. Enhancing the visual effect produced by the water pipeline, the presence of semi-circular exedras can be seen, forming a shell effect facing into the open area, one of which has been perfectly preserved in the entrance to the *stibadium* room. The customary porticoed environment can therefore be found in this type of space, which, in Horta da Torre, is valued for the reflections provided by the water pipeline.

It can therefore be observed that the most common form of peristyle in *Lusitania* was not employed here, which features a channel running around the inner perimeter of the peristyle. These models can be observed in *villae* such as Monte da Chaminé (Ferreira do Alentejo)¹⁷ and, in a more exact parallel, in Frielas, Loures.¹⁸ In the latter, the similarity with the villa in Fronreira is accentuated because the peristyle also employs exedras - although in the villa near Lisbon, they are offset from the peristyle and significantly larger. However, it must be taken into account that in the case of Horta da Torre, the environment in question is peripheral, located at a distance from the main circuit of the building, and would only have been accessed by the *dominus'* inner circle. This circumstance also makes the villa at Fronreira different and with no direct parallels.

¹⁴ Carneiro 2021: 530 and fig. 5 with 3D reconstitution.

¹⁵ Hidalgo Prieto 2016, 213.

¹⁶ Volpe 2011, in particular the quote in Sidonius' *Ep.* 2, 2, 11.

¹⁷ I would like to thank Sara Ramos, archaeologist in the municipality of Ferreira do Alentejo, who invited me to visit the site, for her consideration.

¹⁸ Silva 2012. I would also like to thank municipal archaeologist Ana Cristina Oliveira for the guided tour of the site.



5. - The large peristyle. Drone photo by João Marques, @Geodrone.

Yet again, the province of *Betica* contains similar structures, therefore demonstrating the existence of some kind of inter-provincial circuit through which influences and ideas were exchanged. In fact, there are more similarities between Horta da Torre and some sites in that province than those recorded in nearby *Augusta Emerita*, compared to which it is relatively unique. For context, the inner perimeter of the portico with exedras is very similar to that of the Mondragones *villa* (Granada)¹⁹. In contrast, the villa at El Santiscal (Malaga) presents the exedras inserted in the perimetral canal²⁰. Recent advances in the *villa* at Salar (Granada) have uncovered evidence of a design similar to that found in Fronteira, although the environments in question were used for different purposes. Specifically, the exedra in the baetican case seems to have been used as the base for a statue,²¹ which could not be the case at Horta da Torre. The combined or isolated use of canals and exedras can commonly be found in the area, which is not the case in the region surrounding Horta da Torre, demonstrating, once again, the existence of prototypes that became regional fads as well as solutions that stood out for their originality, which would certainly have been sought out by some *domini*.

¹⁹ Rodríguez Aguilera *et alii* 2016.

²⁰ For a comprehensive analysis, see Hidalgo Prieto 2016; 2020.

²¹ Loza Azuaga *et alii* 2021, 10.

Horta da Torre therefore presents a prescribed, standard solution found in the *villae* of the region (the peristyle), and a *unicum* - the perimetric channel raised by means of exedra. The latter surrounds the interior space on all sides, which is believed to have been uncovered and not have contained any internal structure except for a central and isolated alignment of stones, the function of which has not been determined. This void, which would have been filled only with compacted sediment, points to the existence of a central landscaped area - a garden or *viridarium* - that differs from what would have been present in the contiguous area of the small peristyle, which contained a low tank or *impluvium*. This is the set-up most commonly seen in the region, as is the case in Quinta das Longas, where it functions as a reception area and for water containment. Where Horta da Torre is concerned, two different solutions can be identified: the small peristyle being used for water in addition to providing an ambience typical of a resting space, while the large peristyle housed a *viridarium*. Here, plants and water flowing through the canals would certainly endow the room with significant aesthetic and scenographic beauty. This type of solution can commonly be found inside built spaces, having also functioned as a place of meditation and contemplation²². No sculptural elements have been found thus far in Horta da Torre, but the small stone structure in

²² Morvillez 2014.

the centre of the peristyle could have functioned as the base for a sculptural adornment common to this type of space. Placed secondarily to the known building, the large peristyle would have been an eccentric environment compared to the traditional visiting circuit, used only to access the *cenatio aestivalis* room where the *stibadium* would have been located. As such, the peristyle is large but not monumental and has a robust, easy-to-maintain floor that functions as an *ambulacrum*, connecting select environments.

4. Horta da Torre: positioning in the framework of the monumental villae in Lusitania

Without the apparatus of mosaic decorations or large architectural volumes, the area excavated at the Horta da Torre villa so far documents the refinement and originality in the design of the rooms used for *convivium*. Creating an artificial backdrop in front of the *stibadium* through visual interrelationships played off between various decorative items, the *dominus* showcases the widespread circuit of inspirations present in the design of the spaces, as Horta da Torre contains a *unicum* that is unparalleled in the region, echoing references found in structures much further afield.

This is only natural. Throughout the fourth century, the promotion of *Augusta Emerita* to the capital of the *Diocesis Hispaniarum* during Diocletian's reforms (possibly from 297) attracted new people and ideas²³. During this period, «No city in Hispania, and very few in the West, bequeathed such a high number of historical figures whose names, and even biographies, are known»²⁴, giving rise to new centralities and dynamics and the redistribution of monetary flows. The presence of foreign bureaucrats certainly enhanced these new possibilities, as did the desire of landowners to emulate forms and prototypes employed in other provinces.

Admittedly, a persisting problem is the lack of self-representation of these land elites, which is a barrier to ascertaining who these characters and their circuits would have been. As noted, it is paradoxical that those who invested so much in erecting monumental constructions decorated with such impressive figurative motifs left such a notable void where their names and faces are concerned²⁵. While it is unknown how many statues, inscriptions or mosaics have been lost in the maelstrom of time, it is disturbing that such an evident absence remains despite the extensive excavations and study of these residences. In fact, the changing codes of representation produce paradoxical circumstances in which more epigraphic evidence is available about the *possessors* of *villae* recorded for the first/second century

than for the following centuries. However, almost no remnants of the original houses are available, with those that came later dominating both the landscape and archaeological research. As such, the owners of these structures, who conceived, idealised, built, and inhabited these monumental spaces that dominated the rural landscape throughout *Lusitania*, remain unknown.

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²³ Arce 2002, 18-19.

²⁴ Sastre de Diego 2016, 11 [own translation from Spanish].

²⁵ Chavarria Arnau 2007, 39-52.

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