Revisiting the Roman *domus* in Rabat, Malta, through a consideration of its mosaic flooring

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Mosaics have a language of their own. Whether they exhibit figurative or geometric drawings, mosaics help to regulate the flow of movement within a building and often correspond to the function of rooms. Figurative mosaics were meant to be admired and discussed by the pater familias *and his guests, whilst geometric mosaics decorated passage areas that did not require waiting, such as corridors and service areas. Floor mosaics can offer valuable insights into the spatial organisation within a house. This paper considers the floor mosaics of the Roman* domus *in Rabat, Malta, and explores how their direction, decoration, and arrangement can help to gain a better understanding of the internal layout of the house.*

Mosaics from the Roman period in Malta have not been given the attention they truly deserve. Reasons for this may be related to the limited information related to their discovery and excavation. Throughout the years precious evidence and information about the structure of the *domus*, and especially its walls and the layout of the rooms have unfortunately and irremediably gone lost. The aim of this paper is to revisit the mosaics discovered in the Roman *domus* in Rabat (Malta), using a contextual approach in order to attempt an imaginary reconstruction of the layout of the *domus* and relate these "paintings in stone" to the possible function of the rooms uncovered by A. A. Caruana during his excavations in 1881 (Caselli 2002).

Following the first appearance of mosaic floors in the Greek world in the eighth century BC, it is only in the Hellenistic period and subsequently in Roman times that mosaics began to be considered as proper works of art just as painting and sculpture were (Ling 1998, 53). However, to be fully appreciated and understood mosaics have to be experienced within their original architectural and cultural context. They then acquire the power to convey messages to the viewer through geometric symbols and complex figurative designs. Therefore, it becomes necessary to visualise how these floors were perceived in ancient times, how a certain decoration was associated with the principal use of a particular room, and how this helped viewers, be they occupiers or guests, to find their orientation within a house.

Reading the layout of a Roman house

It is important at this stage to understand the ideal layout of a Roman *domus* – a house belonging to members of the upper class of the Republican and Imperial periods. The first-century BC Roman architect Vitruvius provides such a description in his treatise *De Architectura,* which gives an idealised and rather rigid description of Roman architecture (Vitruvius 6; Granger 1934). Vitruvius emphasises the role of the architect and hence portrays the Roman house as a building made to plan consisting of a set of rooms whose size, position, and function are clearly defined, reflecting the norms of Roman society. Inevitably such a normative description does not allow for functional and structural change, while the lived reality has to respond to inevitable architectural changes to which most of the houses of his time were subjected. In fact, the evidence from Pompeii shows that houses underwent frequent modifications: rebuilding, demolition, and addition of rooms, so that often old floors coexisted with new ones (Dunbabin 1999, 306). At the same time, however, archaeological

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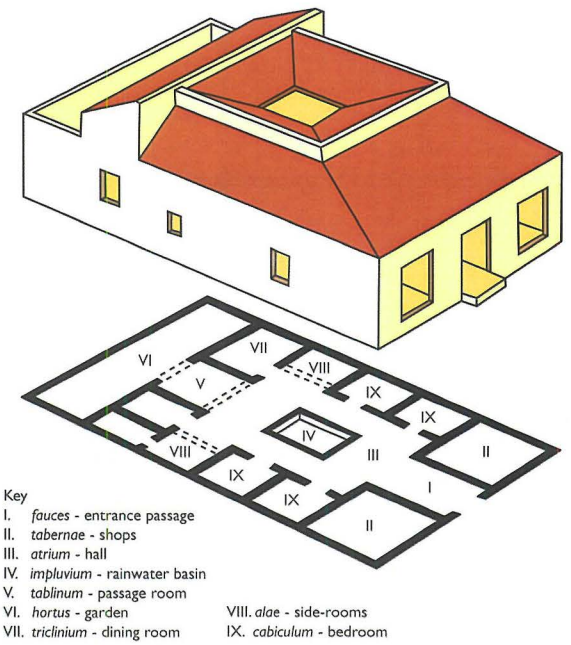

Figure 1. The typical Roman *domus* reconstructed in plan and oblique view (drawn by Maxine Anastasi).

evidence from Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Ostia suggests that most of the private buildings uncovered there do follow Vitruvian principles in their layout having a *fauces* (entrance), an *atrium* (main hall), a *tablinum* (reception hall/office), a *peristyle* (colonnaded courtyard), a *triclinium* (dining room), and several *cubicula* (bedrooms) (Fig. 1). Indeed, the first-century AD domestic architecture of Pompeii suggests that although preference was for an axial layout of rooms arranged in a sequential order (*fauces* – *atrium* – *tablinum*) as suggested by Vitruvius, this was not often the case since in practice the architect had to face several problems (Clarke 1991, 14). To obtain the *fauces* – *tablinum* axial alignment, architects had to deal with space restrictions, modifications, and new additions to the house, often coming up with new interesting solutions and compromises.

The original concept of having such a disposition of rooms was to make the person entering the house experience its extent to the fullest. This was achieved by having a complete view of the house from its *fauces* up to the *tablinum* at its far end, looking through the *atrium* (Clarke 1991, 75). It therefore becomes necessary to understand the layout of the Roman *domus* and how this was perceived by the patron and his guests. This can only be achieved and understood by considering the characteristics of Roman society. According to Wallace-Hadrill, 'social historians will want to know how the architect and decorator enabled the house-owner to articulate his social space along the *atrium* – *tablinum* axis [...] Once we can learn to recognise and read the language of differentiation, we will then be in a better position to comment on its social diffusion' (Wallace-Hadrill 1997, 58).

There seems to be consensus among scholars that the architecture of the Roman *domus* fitted the needs of a life centred on strong social rituals, while also satisfying the physical needs of the Roman citizen. The *domus* was the centre around which the public and private lives of the citizen rotated and interacted. It was perceived as a "private temple" where rituals, rites of passage, social, and daily events of human existence took place (Wallace-Hadrill 1997, 58). The *domus* became a physical embodiment of Roman culture and a means of displaying the large collection of symbolic manifestations that characterised the life of the ancient Roman (Wallace-Hadrill 1997, 58; Clarke 1991, 10). The presence of guests in the house became a pretext for the owner to transform the *domus* into a place to show off his wealth and state his importance in society. It was, as Wallace-Hadrill (1997, 55) has put it, 'a power-house [...] where the network of social contacts was generated and activated the underpinning for his public activities outside the house'.

To achieve this, the house was purposely planned to emphasise the status of the owner during the *salutatio*, a daily ritual that required visitors to pay homage to the *pater familas* to reinforce his social status and cultivate his economic position (Clarke 1991). A person passing through the *fauces* from the outside world entered into the microcosm of the Roman house. From here the visitor was able to see the inner depths of the domestic setting while certain parts of the house would still remain secluded from his eyes at the discretion of the owner. The latter decided which parts of the house would be accessible or out of reach for visitors. It was in the *atrium* that the person was received and then led into the *tablinum* to perform his *salutatio* (Clarke 1991, 4).

In the task of walking along the axial line running from the *fauces* to the *tablinum* the visitor was aided by architectural elements (columns and walls), lighting, and decoration (wall paintings and floor mosaics) in distinguishing accessible public areas from inaccessible private ones. In this ritualised practice, mosaic pavements played an important

role in guiding the visitor through the different environments within the *domus*.

Mosaics and room functions

Mosaics can help to identify the rituals or practices associated with specific rooms of a Roman *domus*. However, the choice of mosaic design, size, and shape were entirely subordinate to architecture, since these characteristics were respectively dictated by the size and function of the room to be covered. Only the most important rooms displayed figurative designs, like the "drinking doves", in the peristyle, whilst minor rooms had geometric designs, or consisted simply of beaten earth floors (Dunbabin 1999, 305). The patron therefore decorated such rooms with the best mosaics in order to flaunt his wealth and inspire a conversation with his guests through the themes represented.

The rooms placed along the *fauces* – *tablinum* axis were the most important ones from the perspective of the visitor. It was in the *tablinum* that the relationship between the patron and his client was emphasised, creating a more intimate relationship. The *cubiculum* was the private room *par excellence*, where no one, except members of the family, was allowed to enter. Its function varied from serving mainly as a bedroom or a private study where to relax, contemplating wall paintings and mosaics. In this room, as in the *triclinium*, the mosaic also marked the disposition of furniture and acted as a partition between different areas within the *cubiculum* itself. As Ling (1998, 116) has argued, 'The choice of floral and geometric motifs was dictated by the fact that these offered multiple viewpoints, which could be infinitely repeated and above all offered no opportunity to the viewer to stop to contemplate and so obstruct the passageway, as happened with figure mosaics'. Hence, geometric mosaics provided an implicit meaning of movement and fluidity which unconsciously "pushed" the person towards another room. On the other hand, figure mosaics imposed a single point of view and demanded contemplation. Such mosaics were therefore employed in rooms which were highly frequented by people.

The introduction of the Greek-type paved *peristyle* in Roman architecture was the outcome of contacts between Rome and the east during the second century BC. This new addition to the *domus* started as a fashion in appreciation of Greek culture. The paved *peristyle* would be transformed by the Romans into an attractive and secluded garden (Clarke 1991, 12). Evidence from Pompeii has shown that numerous houses were modified by Greek and Roman architects in order to incorporate this new foreign element without changing the original axial scheme. Modifications were thus made to accommodate the *peristyle* behind the *tablinum*, elongating the axial view (Clarke 1991, 12). However, whereas in Hellenistic Greece the peristyle was the "heart" of the house, placed as it was in the centre enjoying a commanding view of surrounding rooms, the Roman *peristyle* remained essentially foreign since it was secluded at the back of the house, outside the public sphere of social events which took place instead in the *atrium* (Dickmann 1997, 123). In a Roman context the Greek *peristyle*, characterised by a floor mosaic, was transformed into a garden, with fountains and small shrines. Its real use often depended on the taste of the owner of the house. In some cases it served as an *ambulatio*, a space used for walking or discussion with friends, often after a meal. In other cases, guests were guided through the *atrium* and *tablinum* to be received in the *peristyle* which was transformed into a proper reception area.

The *Domus* in Rabat as a case study

The Roman *domus* discovered in Rabat by A. A. Caruana in February 1881 (Caruana 1881), just outside the city walls of Mdina, is a fine example of a first-century BC architectural compromise between late Hellenistic and Pompeian styles, a building that is still the finest example of Roman domestic architecture ever discovered in Malta. The two excavation campaigns which took place in 1881 and 1925 respectively uncovered what must have been the entire extent of the *domus* (Fig. 2). Although no walls were preserved except for a few stone courses limited to some areas, a number of the richly decorated floors of the house survived. These allow us a glimpse into how the original building must have looked in its heyday. Moreover, the discovery of exceptionally well-crafted sculptures, portraying members of the Julio-Claudian imperial family, datable to the first century AD, suggests that the owner of the house was of high social standing (Bonanno 1992, 23-24).

Understanding the Rabat *domus* depends on a grasp of its life-history. Determining the phasing of the overall construction is an extremely difficult process,

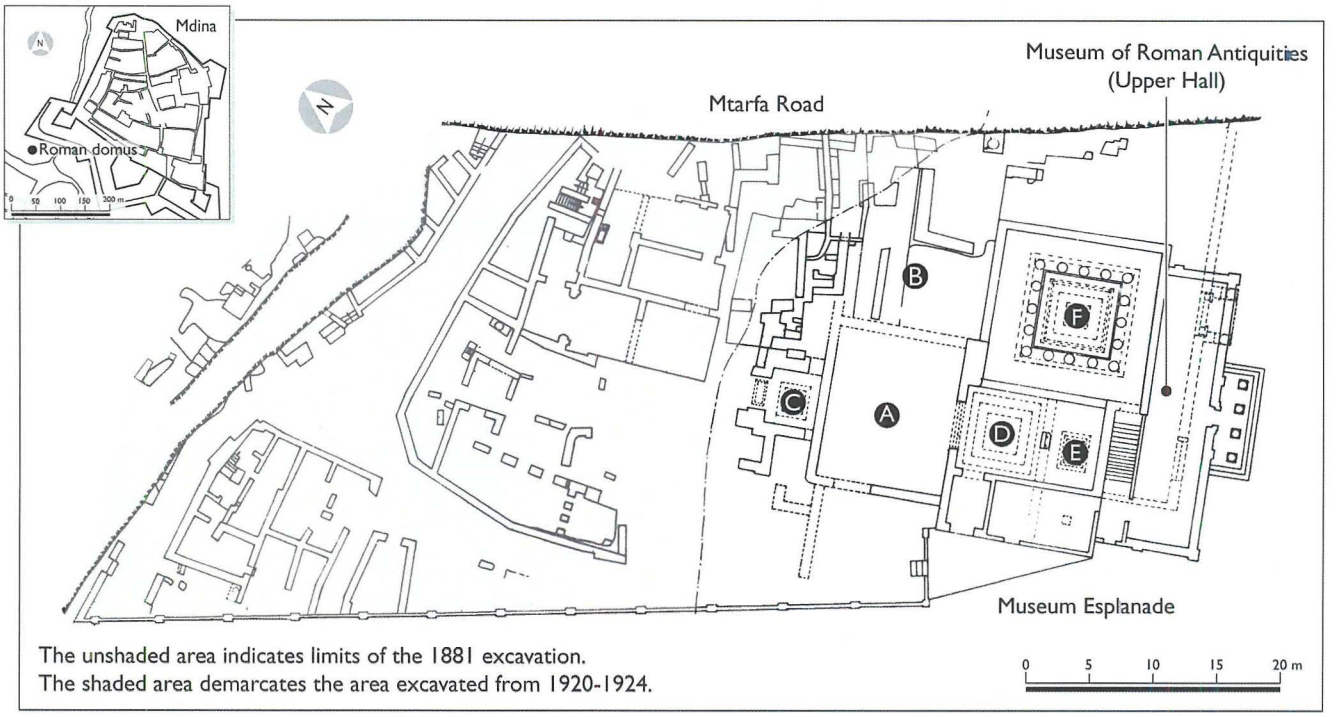

Figure 2. A plan of the remains uncovered in Rabat during excavation campaigns carried out in 1881 and 1920-1924 respectively (redrawn after Gouder 1983 by Maxine Anastasi).

since one must take into consideration all the changes which bring structural modifications to a house. Accessibility, the function of rooms, the perception of space, and the orientation of the building are all problems related to the different building phases of the house. Reconstructing the original aspect of the Rabat *domus* and identifying with certainty the function of each room would be an impossible task, since vital information, which could have been provided by a meticulous recording of the archaeological layers over the site, is simply not available (cf. Bonanno 1992, 24).

While we have to accept the limitations of the archaeological remains, an alternative approach based on the surviving original mosaic floors should be explored. In view of what has been said above, the assessment of the floor layout, especially its orientation and decoration, can shed light on the spatial organisation of the *domus* and hence allow us to understand the function of the rooms.

At first glance, the layout of the Rabat *domus* seems to have developed haphazardly without any pre-planning. Rooms seem to have no apparent orientation and their offset position in respect to the *peristyle* (room F) can hardly be explained (Fig. 2). Even more confusion is created by what look like substantial structural changes, which at a certain point must have changed the overall aspect of the *domus* and completely revolutionised the function of its interior rooms. Ample evidence of such works can be seen in room A and room B, where the mosaic floors, for as yet unknown reasons, were raised by about 30 cm. Traces of a second mosaic bedding can still be seen in the south-east corner of room A, lying over a previous one of similar manufacture (Fig. 3), while another room (C) was dug into the bedrock up to a depth of 1.5 m below the level of the adjacent room (A). It is very likely that after the house was abandoned towards the end of the second century AD, great parts of the mosaic bedding in rooms B and A were hacked through to reach the bedrock layer for supplying slabs for the Islamic cemetery almost a millennium later. Unfortunately, this quarrying

Figure 3. Successive bedding layers for floors inside room A (possibly the atrium) (photograph by Antonio Caselli).

destroyed any link which might have existed between this part of the house and the neighbourhood which developed to the north of the *domus*, the side facing Mtarfa Hill.

Surviving tracts of walls and thresholds, together with the orientation of the mosaics, allow us to understand the layout of the house and determine the function of different rooms. Galizia, the architect who had surveyed the remains of the *domus* in 1881, had already used the orientation of the "drinking doves" *emblema* in the peristyle to argue that the porch found along the east wall could not have been the original entrance because the doves gave their back to that entrance (Caruana 1881, 5). But no attempt was made to extend this line of reasoning to the rest of the rooms. A closer look at the surviving foundations of the *domus* shows that the thresholds and the design and orientation of the mosaic floors create a pattern of axial views which meet at room A (Figs 4, 5). In this room a visitor standing on threshold 1 would have been able to see into room B through its presumed door opening (threshold 2) and the *peristyle* (room F) through the door openings indicated by thresholds 3 and 4. Therefore, when approaching room A, a person would have got a commanding view over the two largest spaces of the house, a situation not dissimilar to the *atria* of numerous houses of Pompeian style. Hence, by comparison room A can be considered to have served an important function, comparable to the *atrium*. If this interpretation is correct, the adjacent space X could have served as a corridor or *fauces* linking the *atrium* to the nearby road, recognisable by a pair of cart ruts. Keeping in mind the axial alignment of the Pompeian houses where the *atrium*

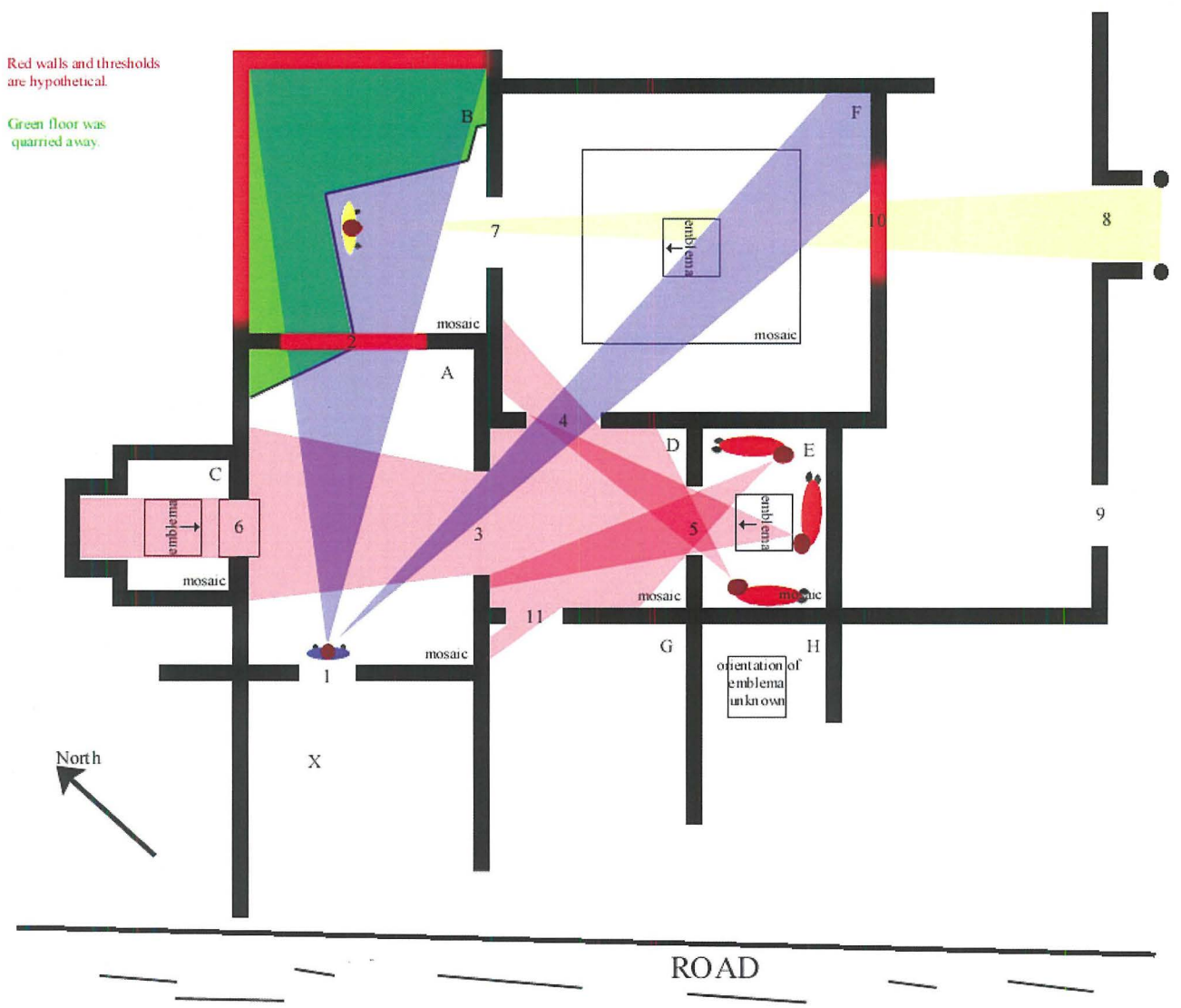

Figure 4. Plan of the Roman *domus* in Rabat with the representation of the main axial views (drawn by Antonio Caselli).

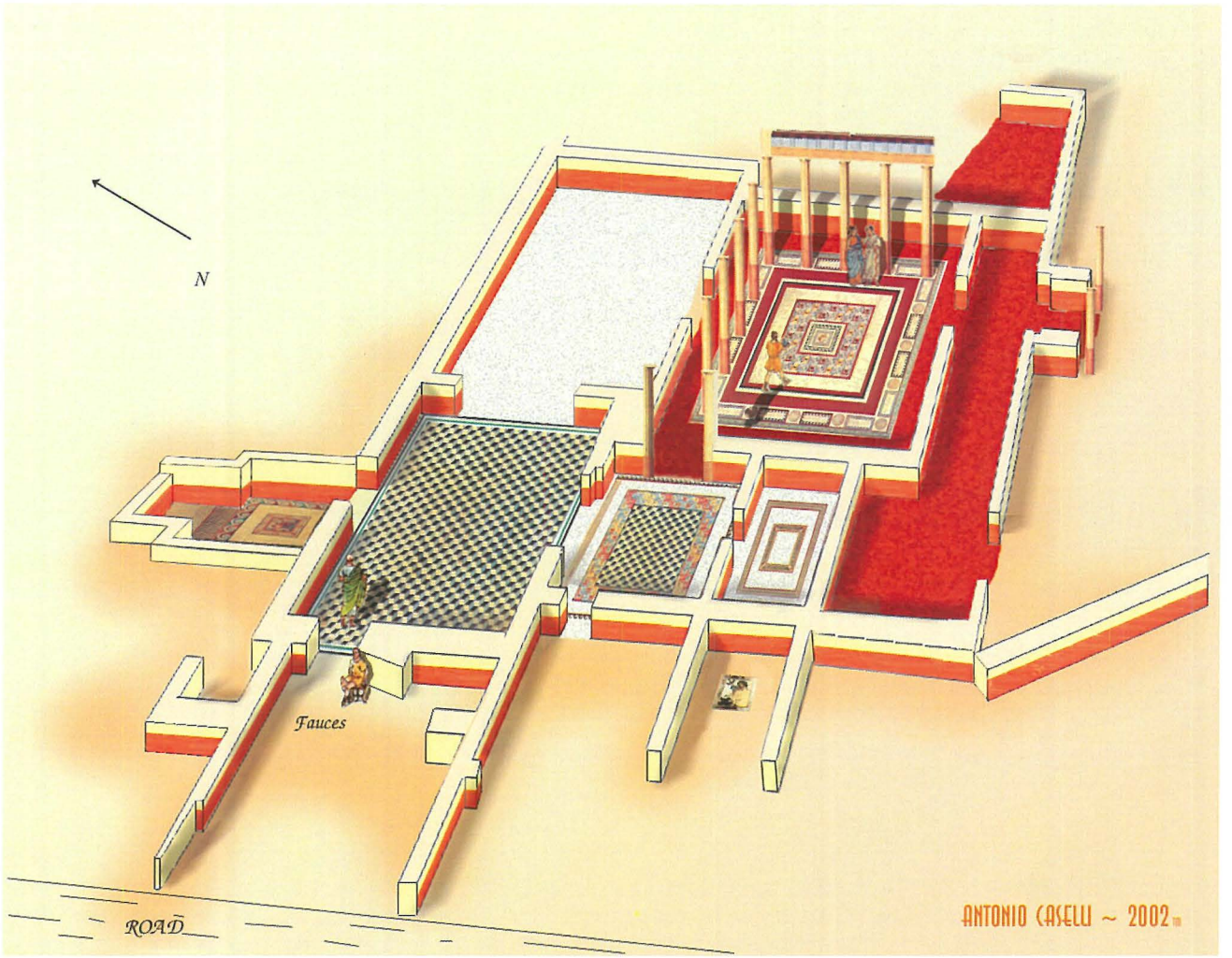

Figure 5. Reconstruction of the Roman *domus* in Rabat, first century BC (drawn by Antonio Caselli).

was followed by the *tablinum*, we could hypothetically assign a *tablinum* function to room B, although there are no other indications to confirm this, other than the existence of the thresholds.

The area being here proposed as the *atrium* of the Roman *domus* is covered by scanty remains of *opus scutulatum*, lozenges of different marble or stone and/or colour arranged in a pattern to produce the illusion of cascading or receding cubes. The presence of this type of flooring is confirmed by Gouder (1983, [10-11]) who reported a fragment of it from this room. This type of floor became very fashionable during the Late Hellenistic period among Greek and Roman cultures since it provided an abstract design which did not impose a forced point of view as *emblemata* did. One reason why the owner might have opted to cover the *atrium* with a geometric pattern rather than a figure mosaic might be suggested by the fact that the *atrium* was seen as a transition area, a dynamic space rather than a static one, which "pushed" the viewer towards more important rooms of the house.

The axial view may have continued even further beyond the *peristyle* through a hypothetical door (threshold 10), today missing. This is suggested by threshold 8 which is aligned with threshold 7.

Beyond the area being proposed as a *tablinum* was the *peristyle*. Its location is somewhat unusual as it is situated on the southern side of the *tablinum* and therefore outside the much sought visual axis described by Vitruvius (6.II.1; Granger 1934). No particular reason can be given for this, other than that this solution was seen as the most viable if the architect had space constraints or had to fit the *peristyle* as a later addition to the *domus*. However, the architectural arrangement of the *peristyle* still maintained the axial view by allowing anyone standing on threshold 1 to be able to see the central part of the *peristyle* through doors 3 and 4. The decoration of the peristyle floor

is characterised by a tessellated mosaic pavement with a colourful three-dimensional meander pattern, which frames a central *emblema* depicting a version of the famous "drinking doves" of Sosos of Pergamon, copies of which have been found in Greece, Pompeii, Sicily, and elsewhere. The *emblema* is oriented towards the north, facing threshold 7, thus indicating that the *peristyle* was very probably accessed from room B. A hypothetical guest would have entered the house from the *fauces* X, crossed the *atrium* A and performed the *salutatio* ritual in the *tablinum* B. If the person in question was an important figure or a friend there is a high probability that he was led to the more secluded *peristyle*, the "heart" of the private area of the house. In Pompeian houses this space became a walled garden, however in our case the *peristyle* was decorated with a mosaic floor, a characteristic of most Hellenistic houses.

Another interesting room which could have served a similar purpose is room C. This room was created by excavating a 5 x 5 m trench in bedrock on the northern side of room A. At the back of the room, a niche wide enough to accommodate a couch was also created. The room was then covered with a polychrome tessellated floor showing an unusual three-dimensional scroll pattern, framing a central *opus vermiculatum* depicting what is thought to be a scene of a *satyr* and two *maenads* (cf. Bonanno 1992, 21). A mosaic strip separated the polychrome floor and the rest, possibly a geometric mosaic known as *scendiletto* (similar to today's carpets placed next to a bed) that separates the space allocated to the bed from the rest of the room. The difference in height between this and the nearby floor levels is, however, too large to be explained as a result of structural alterations and reconstructions. Although the shape and flooring of this room recall Roman *cubicula* (cf. Clarke 1991, 12, 28), the rich floor decoration of the room and the presence of an axial alignment existing between thresholds 6, 3, and 5, seem to suggest that it rather served a more public function. Several uses could be assigned to a room with these characteristics: a study (*diaeta*) where clients were received for business purposes; an *ala* or waiting room; or a *museion*, a place where wall paintings, statues, family portraits, and mosaics were displayed in a sort of art gallery which was enjoyed by the owner and displayed proudly to his visitors. Whatever its function, the mosaic seems to depict a ritual that can be tentatively associated with Dionysus. Further comparative research on the matter is needed.

Room D is another large room connected to room A through a large threshold, 3 (Figs 4, 5). Its flooring in *opus scutulatum* is still well preserved and it must have acted as a visual connection with room A, decorated with the same box pattern.

Concluding remarks

It has to be accepted that the approach presented here can only offer preliminary results since the archaeological evidence would not support more. Based on a careful assessment of floor mosaics and door openings, the method allows a reconstruction of potential movement patterns and room functions. By comparing the idealised normative Roman *domus* as described by Vitruvius to the spatial sequences suggested by the floor mosaics and rooms in Rabat, a new understanding of the Rabat *domus* can be proposed, bringing the *domus* closer to the high-status Hellenistic/Roman house known from Pompeii and other centres of Roman culture.

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