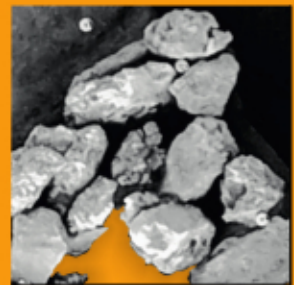
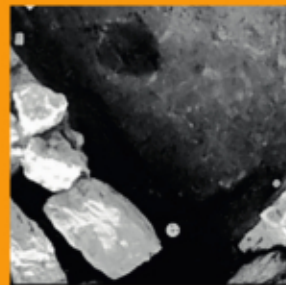


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How the floor-plan of a Roman *domus* unfolds

Complementary observations on the Pâture du Couvent (Bibracte) in 2016

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Abstract

In 2016 we had the chance to make some complementary observations on the site Pâture du Couvent, which is located in the oppidum of Bibracte (France). Not just the floor plan of the Augustan domus could be completed but we also found structures belonging to the earlier construction phase, the early Roman basilical complex. These important discoveries provided important informations on the internal organization of the domus and proved the effectiveness of the earlier geophysical surveys.

Introduction

In the spring of 2016 we had the opportunity to make some new observations on the Pâture du Couvent (Bibracte, Mont Beuvray, France) in the zone where the team of Miklós Szabó and the Eötvös Loránd University is engaged in the excavations since 1988. Some years ago a series of progressive conservation works commenced on the site and a protective shelter was erected over the eastern half of the excavated zone on the central insula. As the refurbishment of the masonry structures reached an advanced stage on the western part of the insula (west of the permanent shelter), the remaining part of the site had to be prepared for the conservation works. In the zone near the monastery, over some rooms of the *domus* there was no opportunity so far to explore the floor levels of the latest occupation phases, therefore our group consisting of two archaeologists had the task to remove the backfill and record the eventual archaeological vestiges above those floorings.

On the opposite side of the permanent shelter over the vestiges of the courtyard identified as forum¹ we also had the occasion to open a small test pit in order to verify the results of the geophysical surveys. The present article focuses on the vestiges of the Augustan *domus*, all the other details and considerations were published in the excavation report.²

The zone of the forum (test pit S2/2016)

Concerning the basilical period we only have a small but extremely important discovery which will be mentioned here, but the consequences will be drawn in a future publication.

1 SZABÓ ET AL. 2007, 392.

2 TIMÁR – MEUNIER 2016.

In the last years, the successive geophysical surveys on the Pâture du Couvent have revealed the traces of a number of structures.³ East of the basilical complex the surveys of both Z. Czajlik and P. Milo showed the same structures, but the last survey made by the team of P. Milo proved to be slightly more fruitful and the signals received there showed more clearly the rectangular feature on the forum resembling the traces of a porticus.⁴ As the results of the ground penetrating radar are subject to several factors (including weather and soil conditions), it is very apparent that multiple surveys have to be carried out on the same area for obtaining the best results.⁵

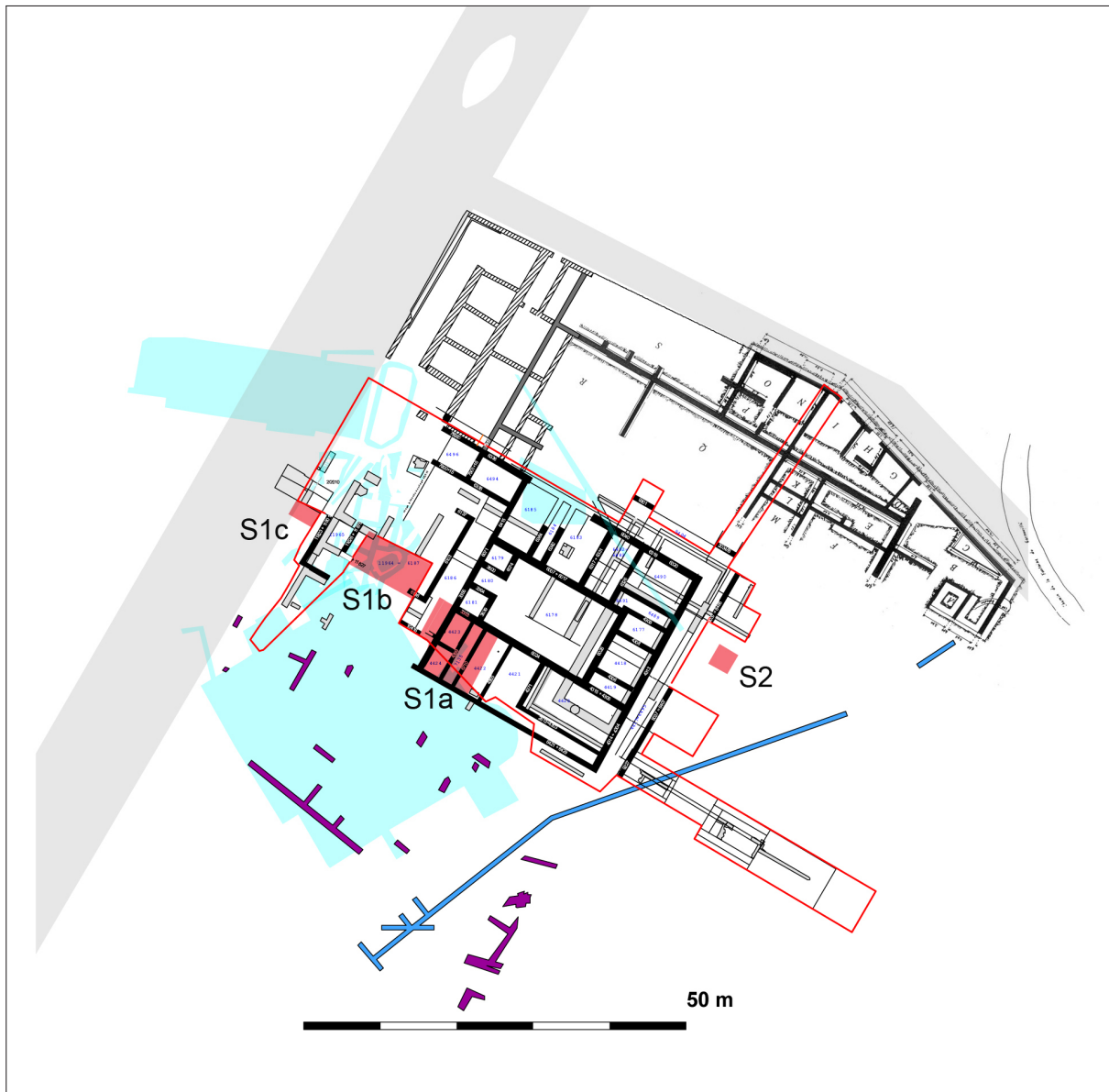


Fig. 1. The localisation of the test pits in 2016.

We had the opportunity to open a small test pit S2 (Fig. 1) and make some observations in the northern corner of the forum, where we could expect a corner according to the signals. In the test pit of 4x4 metres we found an almost homogenous backfill over the Antique remains.

3 CZAJLIK ET AL. 2013; CZAJLIK ET AL. 2014; MILO 2015. See also TIMÁR ET AL. 2013; TIMÁR ET AL. 2014.

4 MILO 2015, p. 31, ill. 7.

5 See also: TIMÁR – MEUNIER 2016, 242.

The thickness of this backfill was around 2 metres which corresponded to the calculated depth derived from the GPR data.

Exactly at the place indicated by the GPR survey we have discovered the angle of two joining stylobates masonries ([12559] and [12561]) which were made of stones laid in mortar (Fig. 2). The emplacements of two column or pillar bases ([12560] and [12656], diameter: 60 cm) were also well visible on the stylobates, and the intercolumnium between them measured approximately 260 cm (between their centerpoints).



Fig. 2. The stylobates in the forum's corner.

On the northern side of the stylobate (inside the porticus), we have observed a layer of argile ([12571]), similar to the one ([9107]) that was discovered in 2004 in front of the steps ([8530]) leading to the forum and identified as a flooring.⁶ In the eastern corner of our test pit we found flat stones and voussoir bricks laying on this argile layer. Although the small size of this feature did not allow us to make precise observations, as far as we could understand, it was a sort of pavement on the argile layer.

The presence of the porticus in the courtyard is a definitive argument for its identification as a forum. We have already mentioned that this 'compact' form of a basilica and a joining forum was already known in Italy (Lucus Feroniae, Saepinum) and there are also slightly younger examples from Gaul (Ruscino, Laudun).⁷ Our reconstruction of the forum, however, must be revised and we also have to remark that the relationship between the roofs around the forum and the understanding of how they join to the basilical complex became highly difficult in the light of the new discoveries (Fig. 3).

6 SZABÓ 2004, 112 and 114.

7 SZABÓ ET AL. 2007, 404–406.

The western part of the *domus* (test pits S1a/2016, S1b/2016 and S1c/2016, Fig. 1 and Fig. 4)

A number of structures belonging to Medieval drains and water supplies occupied the upper layers of this zone, but the majority of them was already excavated in the 1990s and the former excavation trenches were backfilled.⁸

In test pit S1a/2016, over the flooring of room XXIII there was an almost uniform dark brown layer mixed with modern debris.⁹ After its removal we found an opus signinum floor ([12516=6042]) which was mostly deteriorated. The top layers of wall [6710] were found earlier¹⁰ but it became apparent now that it is a secondary construction. Its stones were laid into a low quality mortar and although it was carefully built, it had no foundation. It was placed on the signinum floor and it had no continuation towards north (Fig. 5). In our earlier publications we supposed that there was a corridor between walls [6710] and [4399] which proved to be not true as room XXIII and corridor XXIV were not separated by this short masonry, therefore room XXIV should be treated as a non-existing feature.



Fig. 5. Wall [6710] built over the signinum floor [12516].

Beside the wall [6710] we also had the opportunity to record a rectangular feature (Fig. 6) made of roof tiles ([12514]). This feature was contemporary to the signinum floor [12516] and the roof tiles were laid in mortar, with the exterior tiles' ridges facing outward. The dimensions

8 For the principal Medieval structures: TIMÁR ET AL. 2005, 18, ill. 4.

9 For the designations of the rooms: TIMÁR ET AL. 2005, 24–28, and ill. 7.

10 SZABÓ 2000, 75.

of the feature are approximately 80 × 80 cm and it is apparent that it had a superstructure perhaps similar to the fireplace of PC1, which would also explain its function.¹¹

In the adjacent rooms (VIII and IX) we found different floorings. Room IX had a yellow-brown terrazzo floor ([12532]) while room VIII had a white terrazzo ([12508]). Both of these floorings had a *runderatio* consisting of larger stones.



Fig. 6. Rectangular structure [12514].

Only one door opening could be identified (Fig. 7). It was between rooms IX and XXIII, defined by trench [12530] that was obviously made to recover the threshold. The junction of walls [3356], [3629] and [3630] (junction nr. 31) was extensively destroyed by a Medieval pit but one can suppose that the doors of these rooms were there because all the walls around rooms IX and VIII were well preserved over the floor levels.

We also had the opportunity to find some Antique destruction layers above floors [12508] and [12548] consisting of roof tiles and mortar. Floor [12548] is a dark red terrazzo floor without *runderatio*, and it belonged to the porticus of the peristyle. We have already noted that floorings in the peristyle (room II) and the *atrium* (room XI) seemed to be of lower quality.¹²

How could we then describe the hierarchy of the rooms? The pavements tell us that peristyle and *atrium* had one common type of flooring, the rooms in the forward part of the *atrium* had signinum floors while the rest, that is, rooms XV, XVI, XVII, XX, XXI and XXII were covered with terrazzo (Fig. 8). Room XIX should have been the *tablinum* and room XVIII should have

11 TIMÁR – MEUNIER 2016, 235.

12 TIMÁR ET AL. 2005, 36–38, ill. 12.

been a representative one as well, but no part of their decoration survived. Room XXI is the largest of all, an oblong chamber with a proportion of 1:2 regarding its sides. On the account of Vitruvius it would be hardly anything else than a triclinium. Its floor was a simple terrazzo and it is hard to assess whether it was finished.¹³



Fig. 7. Trench [12530] indicating a removed threshold between two rooms.

In PC1 of Bibracte we find mosaics in rooms B and J, signinum floor laid in mortar in room CB and signinum floors laid in silt in rooms BN, X,BT, CA and BS. The latter three rooms form the corridor which is parallel to the *atrium*¹⁴, thus it can be considered as a service area. Room BO has a signinum floor without rudus which is also the case in the peristyle D-II of our *domus*. In the Maison des Nones de Mars corridor S38 is paved with terrazzo¹⁵, contrary to its *atrium* (S30) that has a mosaic flooring.¹⁶ Although 'le Prétoire' of Lyon also had signinum floors, we do not know from the preliminary report which rooms were paved with them.¹⁷ These few examples tell us the same what could have been observed in Pompeii regarding the wall paintings, that if service areas had any decoration, it was significantly different from that of the representative areas.

13 TIMÁR ET AL. 2005, 37.

14 PAUNIER – LUGINBUHL 2004, 111.

15 LOUSTAUD 1992, 36.

16 LOUSTAUD 1992, 30.

17 DESBAT 1998, 254.



Fig. 8. The floorings of the *domus*.

If the *signinum* floors of the *domus* des Grandes Forges represented the final floor surfaces and no other pavements were added to them, they would have to be associated with secondary functions. It is also worth mentioning that the nature of our *signinum* floors corresponds to the Vitruvian nucleus, an intermediate floor layer, and its execution is clearly the same that we find at Vitruvius (*De architectura* VII, I, 3.), with the exception of the thickness (approx. 2 inches instead of 6). And again, we face the problem that we do not know if the *domus* was ever finished. Did the builders have the intention to make *signinum* floors in some rooms and terrazzo floors in the others or they just completed the *rudus* in all of the rooms and proceeded with the preparation of the *nucleus*, but they had to leave the site after finishing the layers in some of the rooms?

In the western corner of the room D-XXI we found plaster on the wall [4371] and we were also able to study how it is related to the terrazzo floor. The plaster on the wall was relatively thick (approximately 5 cm, but we have to note that the stone masonry had an irregular surface) and it consisted of two layers. The terrazzo floor butted against the masonry and not against the plaster, which means that the floor was prepared first. According to the commonplace sequence, the plastering would have been preceded the finishing of the floor. Perhaps the terrazzo we found there is just an intermediate surface that corresponds to the *rudus*, which would be the only logical explanation for this.

The functions of the *domus*

Some researchers pointed out that the placement of the *domus* over the basilica could have been controversial because the two buildings had different juridical status and therefore it would be likely that the basilica could have had a private function.¹⁸ Although this would be logical from one aspect, we have to remark that the floor-plan of the basilical complex has many parallels among the small Italian and provincial basilicas, as we noted before¹⁹, and the identification of a *basilica privata* is anything but straightforward.²⁰ The presence of the recently discovered porticus inside the courtyard identified as forum, which is now very similar to the forum of Ruscino, is a further argument against a *basilica privata*. The forum complex of Ruscino has similar dimensions as this one in Bibracte.

After the destruction of the basilical complex, the *domus* was erected over its remains. The identification as a *domus* is derived from its floor-plan which is almost fully identical to the Vitruvian standards. Since the *domus* itself is a building of private character, one can assume that the owner of the plot changed. Nevertheless, one could also conceive that the house with the floor-plan typical to a *domus* was perhaps a special public building.

The recently discovered rectangular structure [12514] is the first trace that refers to the utilization of the *domus*. It would have been rather unusual if the *domus* would have had no fireplace at all, which perhaps could have been interpreted as a proof of its public function. But we have to mention here that the presence or absence of appliances related to cooking is not decisive. Public buildings of the same size as the *domus*, the *collegia* and *scholae*, were also intended to house banquets and sometimes a number of servants were living between their walls, therefore big fireplaces were not exceptional.²¹ Baths, sanctuaries and underground rooms were often featured in the *collegia*, as well as some degree of monumentalization in the form of big *vestibula*²² or Rhodian peristyles.²³ The most significant feature of this building type is the deep entrance porch or *vestibulum* where sculptures and inscriptions were displayed.²⁴ According to our knowledge *collegia* consisted of rooms built around a peristyle and there are only a few exceptions, most of them resembling to other public buildings.²⁵ Although some *atrium* houses were suspected of having a public character, their identification was not supported by decisive, namely epigraphical, evidence.²⁶ According to our present knowledge it is highly unlikely that our *domus* was a public building.

18 MARC 2011, 312–313, FICHTL 2012, 48–50

19 See footnote 6.

20 See GROS 2004.

21 BOUET 2001, 250.

22 BOUET 2001, 275.

23 BOUET 2001, 249.

24 BOLLMANN 1998, 122.

25 For the types see: BOLLMANN 1998, 58–121.

26 BOLLMANN 1998, 157–158.

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