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# GUIDE

TO THE

# ROMAN VILLA MUSEUM

AT RABAT, MALTA

BY

T. ZAMMIT, M.D.

*Curator of the Government Museum.*

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## The Roman Villa at Rabat.



THE remains of this rich Roman residence were discovered and cleared in 1881, when a detailed report by Discovery Dr. A. A. Caruana was published.

The ruins were covered with the débris of part of the glacis around the fortifications of Notabile, the old Mdina.

The Romans held Malta for a long period; they took it from the Carthaginians in B.C. 216 and

kept it as long as they could stand the rush of the barbarians who overran Europe from about the year 500. At the time of the Romans the city of *Mdina*, or *Melita* as it was called in Roman times, occupied a much larger area, the fortifications extending as far as St. Paul's Church. The part of the town to the south of the *Mdina* was called *Rabat*. The name *Notabile* was given to the capital of Malta by the Aragonese Kings of Sicily, after the conquest of the island from the Arabs in 1120.

The fortified part of the city was from time immemorial called *Mdina*. At the time of the Order of St. John, after the building of Valletta, the *Mdina* became *Città Vecchia* (the old town).

When trees were being planted on the glacis of Notabile in 1881, part of a mosaic pavement was discovered, and the débris was thereupon removed for a considerable space around.

Before reaching the floor of the building, human skeletons were met with, some of them enclosed in stone coffins ornamented with oriental designs and a few of them with Arabic inscriptions. Those interments of the Arabic period show clearly that at the time of the Saracenic occupation (870-1120) this Roman palace was already in ruins, and covered with the soil in which the Arabs thought proper to bury their dead.

Arabic  
graves.

Fragments of the grave-stones bearing oriental designs and Arabic

inscriptions can be seen in the building.

When cleared out, the building proved to be in the style of a Roman house, the residence of a wealthy man of taste. It extended over a large area, and was richly ornamented with columns, statues, mosaic pavements, bronze and glass objects, marble inscriptions, etc.

Though undoubtedly erected under Roman influence, the building does not correspond to the arrangements of typical Roman houses, as found in other countries, and on closer inspection even the mosaics are not comparable with known Roman work. The whole building and its contents show a local Phoenician influence.

Character of  
the building.

Four large rectangular rooms, a peristyle and a portico have been traced out. The peristyle enclosed a compluvium surrounded by 16 columns. (*See plan at the entrance*).

**Pavements.** The pavements of the rooms and corridors were all covered with mosaic, and very tastefully decorated. Three of the rooms had ornamented borders, with masks at the angles of very fine workmanship.

Most of the mosaic in the rooms have disappeared, but bits of the several borders, nearly the whole surface of the compluvium, the pavement of a room to the west of the compluvium and two mosaic pictures, remain sufficiently well preserved to give one an idea of the magnificence and good taste of the building.

The pavement west of the compluvium is made up of white, black and green lozenges, tastefully arranged to give the appearance of relief. The white and black lozenges are marble, but the green is a kind of slate which is easily disintegrated, and has in fact suffered most through exposure.

In the right corner of this rich and tasteful floor we see that the marble lozenges which are wanting have been rudely replaced by irregular pieces of marble and by clay tiles. This shows that the place had fallen out of repair, and was occupied by persons who cared very little about preserving the rich ornamentation. When the roof fell in, the edifice must have been already in part dilapidated.

Complu-  
vium.

The pavement of the compluvium is made of a central piece of fine mosaic, representing two doves on the brim of a bowl, their heads being reflected in the water. This central picture is enclosed in a polychromatic meander, which is so arranged as to give a pleasant effect of solidity.

There were other mosaic pictures and centre pieces in other rooms.

Two are in good state of preservation, of a third, Mosaic pictures. only the stone frame in which the mosaic was embedded has been found. One of them, (No. 1.) the best preserved one, represents a struggling man who has his hands bound by a girl on the right, whilst another girl on the left pulls up his beard, which she threatens to cut with a pair of shears. The whole

scene is well depicted and the colouring is fine and elaborate.

The other mosaic (No. 2.) represents a young man with grapes and a pomegranate in his hands, a bird is flying towards the grapes and a duck is seen on the left of the picture. It is supposed to represent *Autumn*. The mosaic is damaged but there is enough to show that the work was good and well executed.

Samples of very elaborate borders can be seen on the left wall of the peristyle. The best (No. 10.) represents masks, around which festoons of fruits and leaves are beautifully hung. The composition is perfect, the design faultless and the colouring charming. The bits of mosaic are very small, and from a short distance

Mosaic  
borders.

the work has the appearance of an oil painting. Fragments of other borders, in geometrical and other elaborate patterns of a very pleasing effect, can still be seen set in various parts of the pavement.

On the wall, frames have been hung with fragments of stucco, marble, tiles etc. collected among the débris in the building. (Nos. 3 to 15). They give a good idea of the rich material used in the building and the great care taken to make it perfect to the minutest detail.

Large slabs of coarse mosaic, preserved in the museum (No. 17), were found close to the building and formed a large pavement. This pavement was made of a kind of concrete with bits of white marble

Coarse  
flooring

encrusted in it. The whole material, well smoothed, made an excellent flooring with a pleasing effect. To keep this floor dry, it was found that large clay jars (amphoræ) were laid side by side on a bed of mortar, and the floor came on top of the whole.

Jars used  
for damp  
coarse.

These empty jars kept the floor dry and gave it a certain amount of elasticity.

This floor was so resistant that the portion discovered under the public road was found whole and unbroken, although heavy guns had been dragged over the road some years before.

The jars thus found embedded in the mortar can be seen hanging all around the peristyle, and a piece of the mortar with the impression of the jar that lay on it has also been preserved. (No. 18).

Other pavements were made of small lozenge-shaped tiles of baked clay of a reddish colour. The clay lozenges were disposed in groups of six or more, and made a cheap and very efficient pavement. Samples of these lozenge-shaped tiles variously grouped have been preserved, and can be seen arranged in frames around the walls of the building. (Nos. 16 and 19 to 24).

From the richness of the pavement alone, one can easily imagine the grand style of the mansion. But the other remains found among the ruins testify also to its sumptuosity.

**Statues.** Fragments of very fine white marble statues have been found, and can be seen arranged along the walls. The

three larger fragments of headless statues, show very good workmanship. The fragment at the right angle of the eastern wall of the main room [No. 25] is remarkably fine, and compares well with some of the best work of the time. One bust also of white marble [No. 37] is of a lady of noble features, with her hair arranged in the manner of the Romans of the 1st century. It is a fine head though slightly damaged.

Remains of two colossal marble statues have also been preserved. One good head, two hands, one foot, one leg and several fingers of the large statues can be seen along the eastern wall and in the show-case E, as well as the pedestals and feet of at least three other statues of smaller proportions.

The whole building was found completely demolished, but from among the débris Doric pillars, cornices, architraves, etc. have been rescued. One column with <sup>Columns,</sup> base and capital and a <sub>etc.</sub> portion of the architrave and cornice was replaced in situ, and close to it a new column was placed, copied from the old one to give an idea of how the peristyle was surrounded by elegant columns.

Of the many works of art that certainly adorned this building only a few fragments were recovered from the débris. The best things were no doubt carried away when the building was destroyed, or perhaps even before.

<sup>Inscriptions.</sup> Numerous fragments of marble slabs were found, on which latin inscriptions were

cut, but the fragments are small and could never be so put together as to be read. The word "Decur" only could be made out. [*See case C*].

Coins. Bronze Roman coins were found in the building. Most of them are worn out or too far oxidized for recognition.

The following shown in case H. could be recognized :—

a small brass of Gordian  
(Marcus Ant. Gordianus Africanus)  
(A D. 238-243),

a third brass of Aurelian  
(Lucius Claudius Domitius Aurelianus)  
(A.D. 270-275),

a third brass of Constantius  
(Flavius Julius Valerius Constantius)  
(A.D. 323-361), and

a third brass of Constantine, Jun.  
(Flavius Claudius Constantinus, junior)  
(A.D. 317-340).

Among other things recovered from the ruins are common earthenware vessels of ordinary domestic use, such as jars, cups, plates etc. and fragments of many more. Most of the pottery is of the common Punic type, very little ornamented, though fragments of very pretty vessels can be seen preserved in the buildings. The fragments of a plate with animals painted upon it are very remarkable. (*See case E.*) Many types of lamps have been found in the building, varying from the coarse Phoenician saucer-shaped clay lamps, to the early Roman form of red clay, with one wick, more or less ornamented.

**Metals.** Fragments of metallic objects can be seen in the collection. [Case H.] It can be easily

understood that metallic objects were taken away when the building was ruined. What was found was either not worth removing or thoroughly buried in the débris. Remains of brass vessels can be seen, and fragments of a strong lead chest. A plate of copper or bronze is engraved with Roman letters, but the inscription cannot be made out from the few letters.

Objects  
found  
elsewhere. Many of the objects of the collection were not found in the building, but were obtained by digging at Rabat or Notabile and from tomb caves in the vicinity.

These are all separately labelled so as not to be mixed with the objects found in the building. It is interesting to observe, however, that

the specimens of pottery found in rock tombs, which are undoubtedly Phoenician, do not differ much from some of the common pottery found in this house. Maltese workmanship has left its mark on the objects of the different periods.

The objects in the cases D. F. and G. recovered from Phoenician tomb-caves are the furniture buried with the dead. These objects are quite common in Malta and their types vary but little. They belong to a period extending from the last century B. C. to the first century A. D. An extensive collection of these objects exists in the Valletta Museum.

The headless marble statue [No. 26] is undoubtedly of Phoenician workmanship. It was dug out in

the old Mdina, and for a time was placed in a niche at the entrance of the main gate of that city. The garments are quite oriental, and the ornaments on the breast and the tresses of hair, still visible, point to a Phoenician costume.

Large marble blocks Nos. 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, are preserved, being fragments of old temples or public buildings. They give a clear idea of the magnificence of the monuments, which compare favourably with the best architectural specimens.

They were found at Mdina or on the Mtarfa hill to the north of the city. We have historical records of a famous temple on the Mtarfa hill, which was known at one time as the temple of Proserpine, and of another temple at Mdina, known as

the temple of Juno. There was a time when Mdina was covered with marble fragments from these famous temples, and the portions of columns, capitals, and especially the two large fragments mentioned testify to the presence at a time of vast and rich buildings.

At the entrance of the Museum a marble block is preserved, which must have been the pedestal of a large statue. On it an inscription is cut, which was read as follows by Mons. Bres.

MUNICIPI MELITENSII PRIMUS OMNIUM  
FECIT ITEM ÆDEM MARMOREAM  
APOLLINIS CONSECRAVIT ITEM PRO  
PRONAO COLUMNAS III ET PARASCENIUM  
ET PODIUM ET PAVIMENTUM  
COLLOCAVIT IN QUOD OPUS UNIVERSUM  
LIBERALITATE SUA HS. CXDCCXII SOLVITQUE  
MELITENSIIUM DESIDERIUM OMNIUM  
ÆRIS CONLATIONE D. D.

The inscription may be translated thus :

*The first of all the Maltese of the Municipality consecrated the altar of Apollo, erected the Theatre of marble and four pillars of the vestibule, the stage and the low projecting basement of the same, spending 1792 sestertii, and in acknowledgment of his liberality the Maltese by a general collection of money erected to him a statue.*

This inscription was found at Notabile in 1747, between the monastery of S. Benedetto and the old Municipal Palace. It is important as it affords historical evidence of the existence of Municipalities in Malta at the time of the Roman occupation. The inscription dates from the age of the Antonines [96 to 180 A.D.]









