Travertine cornerstones and centralized stones in Ostia and Portus

Some preliminary remarks

Centralized stones

Most centralized stones are found in long rows. There are a few isolated ones, of which I do not understand the function yet.

The rows are very close to each other. There is one in the east side of the Caseggiato dei Misuratori del Grano, running from north to south, that is from the direction of the Tiber quays to the Piccolo Mercato. There is another row in the north side of the Piccolo Mercato, running from east to west, that is from the Via Tecta to Horrea I,VIII,2. The north façade of the latter horrea has not been preserved, but may well have contained stones, because the next row is in the east side of the building to the west, the Terme di Buticosus. This row is running from north to south, from unexcavated ruins to Caseggiato I,XIV,9. The final row is in the interior of the building to the east of the baths, the Horrea Epagathiana et Epaphroditiana. Most of the stones in these horrea are in the brick piers surrounding the courtyard.

It must be significant that no rows are found in the rest of Ostia. They were created at various moments in the first half of the second century, in various buildings, so not during one building phase in a coherent cluster of buildings such as the Case a Giardino. Therefore they do not seem to reflect a taste or fashion, which is unlikely anyway, because the centralized stones are visually merged with the masonry that encloses them and are easily overlooked.

An obvious explanation is, that they mark a route from the Tiber quays to the Horrea Epagathiana et Epaphroditiana, and that the horrea were used by people arriving in Ostia by ship for self-storage of money and documents. We know that such horrea existed in antiquity (see JRA 2008, 133ff.). This might explain one of the key features of the horrea, namely the presence of locking devices in individual cellae, and perhaps also the marble plaque with the name of the building in the façade. We may infer that there was a specific place on the quays where inhabitants of Ostia provided information to visitors about the horrea and the stones, and more. This sounds quite modern, but makes perfect sense I believe.

Cornerstones

Many of the cornerstones have holes filled with metal: a lead plug in which an iron object was inserted. Most of these iron objects were broken off, but a few have been preserved in the centralized stones of the piers of the façade of the Terme di Buticosus. The iron objects were curved and rectangular hooks. The obvious explanation for these hooks is that chains or more likely ropes were attached to them, in the baths running from a low stone to a stone higher up in a pier. The piers in the baths have travertine socles. In the socles below the high stones are cavities, precisely below the metal objects. The obvious
explanation for these is, that the ropes were not always in use and could also be hanging down from the hook in the high stone, at the bottom tucked away in the cavity.

All other remains of metal are in cornerstones, not in centralized stones. I believe however, that the stones in the Terme di Buticosus had a double function: they were part of a route leading to horrea for self-storage, but had a second purpose, for which in the rest of Ostia cornerstones were used.

Close parallels for the situation in the baths are found in Caseggiati I,XII,7 and I,XII,10 - both much restored - to the west and east of the Terme del Foro. Here metal objects in cornerstones and cavities in travertine socles are found in the piers of a portico in front of shops.

The explanation that I have in mind for the ropes used in these three porticoes is, that they were used when people had to queue, that is, had to wait until they could enter the baths (compare the situation today in attraction parks and airports). The queue in Caseggiato I,XII,10 may have had an extension in the Portico dell’Ercole to the south-west, on the other side of the Cardo (stones not described yet). There seem to be more examples at the west end of Via della Foce, concerning the cluster of baths Terme dei Sette Sapienti, Terme della Trinacria, Terme del Mitra (stones not described yet). Now why would people queue for specific baths?

Many baths have been found in Ostia, and I would like to imagine that they were visited by more or less fixed groups of people from the neighbourhood at more or less fixed moments, to prevent waiting time. This pattern would however be disturbed by the arrival of sailors and merchants at unexpected moments during the shipping season (mare apertum). It is conceivable that the Terme di Buticosus were reserved for strangers, and that queueing was sometimes necessary because of a large number of arrivals. Note that the baths are opposite the presumed horrea for self-storage.

The Terme del Foro are a different case. These seem to have been (one of) the most luxurious sets of baths in Ostia. It seems unlikely that every inhabitant of the city could visit them, which would lead to a capacity problem. Perhaps a high fee had to be paid, or perhaps using them was the privilege of the local elite. In the case of these baths I would like to imagine that they were open for the general public during feasts. This would also take away a problem, namely the presence of queues in front of shops, blocking the shops. During the feasts the shops would be closed. I doubt whether the bathing rooms were opened for everyone. The two rows of cornerstones flanking the Terme del Foro end at an entrance leading to the south side of the palaestra. People may well have been queueing to view famous boxers and wrestlers.

The unexpected arrival of large numbers of visitors must have created more problems. For example, a crew about to leave Ostia when the winds were favourable might have bought a lot of bread in a random shop, leaving the locals normally using that shop without bread. Here we may have found the explanation of cornerstones to the south-west and south-east of Piazza dei Lari, opposite each other. The stones to the south-east seem to indicate the way to the stones to the south-west. The latter flank a
door leading to the heart of a bakery, the Caseggiato del Balcone Ligneo. It may well have been a pick-up point of bread, ordered the day before by the crew of a ship.

In the same building by the way are cornerstones in the interior. This is an exception to the rule: virtually all cornerstones are found in facades. In these stones are curious holes. See the online page for a description and possible explanations.

Behind the porticoes flanking the northern Cardo two doors, opposite each other, are marked by cornerstones. The area behind the eastern door is mostly unexcavated. The western door leads to the north-east corner of the Piccolo Mercato and may link up with the rows of centralized stones.

At the south end of these porticoes are “loggia’s” with cornerstones. These may be compared with two similar structures: the west part of the Caseggiato degli Aurighi and the Loggia di Cartilio (stones not described yet). I am still guessing why these “loggia’s” were marked out. Perhaps the two structures behind the Capitolium were the ancient equivalent of the modern tourist office, where visitors were informed about hotels, the location of guild-seats, how to get to Rome, etcetera. Many graffiti suggest that the Caseggiato degli Aurighi was some sort of market with a small hotel. Among other things, slaves were sold here. For an explanation of the Loggia di Cartilio we may look at its surroundings. Here are two monumental mausolea of famous Ostians from the first century BC: Caius Cartilius Poplicola and – probably – Publius Lucilius Gamala. Next to the mausoleum of Gamala is the Domus Fulminata, that may well have been used for the cult of the ancestors of this family. The façade of the Domus Fulminata is also marked out by cornerstones, and there are even a few in the interior. The presence of tourist guides comes to mind. These are documented amply in the Greek-speaking half of the Empire. Surely they were present also in Rome, and why not in Ostia? This guess-work sounds very modern, but generally speaking thinking of some sort of tourist office and of tourist guides makes perfect sense I believe.

The clustering of buildings with cornerstones, such as the Loggia di Cartilio and the Domus Fulminata, is not an exception by the way. Another example are the Domus sul Decumano and Schola del Traiano.

In Ostia there are hundreds of doors leading to external staircases, that is, staircases that were accessed from the street or a portico. Only a few are marked out by cornerstones. In my opinion it is most likely that these staircases led to hotels. Examples are found in Caseggiato I,XII,5, Caseggiato I,XII,9, Caseggiato I,XIII,5, and the Tempio dei Fabri Navales. I believe that the Caseggiato del Mosaico del Porto may be added to the list. The western façade has cornerstones with a pattern in the height, from north to south: low-mid / low, low-mid / low, low-mid / low. I do not think that there was a relation between the cornerstones and the shops (probably used by fishmongers). Rather the cornerstones drew attention to a door flanked by cornerstones and leading to a staircase, hidden in the shade of the south part of the portico. Without the cornerstones in the facade a stranger would have had a big problem trying to find the entrance to his hotel, at least on his first visit to Ostia.
Note that the cornerstones often have a deliberate pattern in height, such as low-high in one jamb and mid in the other. I have not researched the possible significance yet.

There is an abundance of cornerstones in the Caseggiato del Larario, both in the façade and in the jambs of the shops surrounding its courtyard. This is one of the few buildings in Ostia where one could think of a purely decorative function of the cornerstones. But because in so many cases the stones are clearly not decorative, I propose that here they are functional as well and that the decorative aspect was added. I am inclined to think that the building had a special significance for visitors of Ostia, in view of this added decorative aspect. It should also be kept in mind, that the building has a few small things in common with the Horrea Epagathiana et Epaphroditiana, such as holes in the cornerstones that are very smooth on the inside (perhaps the result of the action of a rope to which a watchdog was attached) and the way in which cult niches were decorated. Also, we should not forget the prominent location of the building, on the Decumanus, near the Forum. Again, I can only guess. But I would not be surprised if the Caseggiato del Larario was the ancient equivalent of the modern post office, the place where people could pick up letters from friends, relatives and business contacts, where scribes could write letters, and where the transport of a letter to a foreign destination was arranged.

I did not study (large) cornerstones at ground level, but did pay passing attention to such stones in and near the Caserma dei Vigili (see Portico di Nettuno). It could be that such stones at the south end of Via dei Vigili and in Insula II,VI indicated that passages should not be blocked by wagons or animals, leaving a free passage for the firefighters.

The last few buildings to be described (Caseggiato III,XVI,6 ff., including stones in utilitarian buildings in the Porta Romana necropolis and in Portus) contain further interesting details.

Inevitably there has to be speculation and guesswork. What I find really exciting about the stones, however, is that they force me to think about the way in which baths were used and overcrowding was avoided, how visitors of Ostia found a hotel and their business contacts, how letters were sent and received, and so on and so forth. This in itself might stimulate new research.

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22 May 2012