

# The monumental centre of Herculaneum: in search of the identities of the public buildings

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*To the memory of S. R. F. Price*

Herculaneum is better known for its domestic buildings than its public spaces. While its domestic spaces can be known, thanks to the preservation of upper floors and organic material at a level of detail exceptional for any Roman city (even Pompeii), its public spaces are only partially explored and poorly understood. It thus inverts the usual state of knowledge of a Roman town, the countless examples of towns of which the public buildings and overall urban form can be plotted in detail, while domestic spaces have been explored only partially and cursorily. The reason lies in the history of excavation and the relationship of the ancient town to the modern settlement above (see section 1 below). But despite, or perhaps because of, all the difficulties of resolving even such a basic question as the location of the forum, Herculaneum raises important questions about Roman urbanism, about the typology of public buildings, and the grammatical rules, so to speak, of their positioning in relation to each other. I will argue that recent scholarship has been too keen to assign the buildings of Herculaneum to categories of which we have little understanding (especially in connection with supposed imperial cult institutions), and too slow to recognize a variant on standard patterns and layouts.

This paper arises from recent work on site, under the aegis of both the Packard Humanities Institute (PHI) and the Soprintendenza Speciale per i beni archeologici di Napoli e Pompei, particularly preliminary explorations in the area of the basilica designed to assess the feasibility of further excavation. It will focus on the problem of the identity of the three public buildings at the centre of the town mapped by the 18th-c. excavators, and the problem of the location of the forum. It forms a companion piece to the publication of the new work in the area of the Basilica by D. Camardo and D. Esposito (forthcoming in *JRA* 24)

## 1. The state of the question

The portion of Herculaneum visible today (fig. 1) was excavated in large part by A. Maiuri in the period 1927-1961: a narrow strip along the westernmost street, *cardo* III, had been excavated intermittently between 1835 and 1870, while the deeper strip that reaches the line of the ancient shore was to be the work of G. Maggi in the 1980s, with its extension as far as the Villa of the Papyri opened in the late 1990s.<sup>1</sup> The sequence of Maiuri's excavations was determined by the extension of the modern settlement of what was then known as Resina (renamed Ercolano in 1969). Open fields present far fewer logistical challenges than habitations, of which the expropriation was never easy, even in the name of 'risanamento' (slum clearance), while the resettlement of the population was always politically delicate. Hence, while most of the work was carried out with remarkable rapidity in the Fascist period, it was only in the 1950s, under a programme with the Cassa del Mezzogiorno, that expropriation and demolitions made possible the exposure of the N strip of the site, along the broad street named the *decumanus maximus* and towards the heart of the

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\* Throughout, *Ercolano. Tre secoli* = M. P. Guidobaldi (ed.) 2008b.

1 Maiuri 1958, 3-18, for the history of excavation. On the 1990s campaign, De Simone and Ruffo 2003.