

Room I I

The discovery and the excavations

"citra Placentiam in collibus oppidum est Veleiatium"
on the hills at South of Piacenza there is the town of Veleia and his citizens
(Plinio, Nat. Hist. VII 163)

The existence of the roman city of Veleia has been certified by ancient sources but any further information, including the area where it was built, had been lost soon. In 1747 the dean of the Macinesso Parish Church found the fragments of a bronze inscription and, unaware of its great value, sold them to the nearby foundries. Fortunately, it had not been destroyed thanks to a scholar (of that period) that recognised its artistic value and, together with Antonio Costa, canon of/in the Cathedral of Piacenza, bought the missing fragments.

Two years later, two scholars, Ludovico Muratori and Scipione Maffei, identified the Tabula Alimentaria traiana, the institution established by Nerva and developed/pushed ahead by his successor, Trajan.

Muratori also realized that the place where they had found the inscription was the site of the ancient Veleia.

After this remarkable discovery, the Duke of Parma don Filippo I di Borbone, aiming at competing with his brother, the Duke Carlo III, that was exploring at that time the roman site of Pompeii, officially started the excavations and, a few months later, founded/established the Ducal Museum of Antiquities, now the National Archaeological Museum of Parma, in order to receive the findings.



A view of the Archaeological Excavations of the Roman town of Veleia

From 1760 to 1765 almost the whole of the ruins of Veleia were unearthed: in 1760 the excavations unveiled the forum and the surrounding portico; in 1761 the basilica disclosed twelve marble statues portraying members of the Julio -Claudian Family; then, the excavations reached the upper terraces, that revealed the thermal centre and the surrounding houses.

The excavations in Veleia came to a first stop with the death of the Duke, and started again in 1800, first with the Duchess Maria Luigia, then under the control of the directors of the Museum. In 1876 Giovanni Mariotti found the ligurian necropolis with the cinerary urns in the north-east area of the roman settlement.

The efforts of the following directors were focused above all on the restoration works of the buildings. During the last research, in the 1960s, the employment of new scientific methods allowed the chronologic distinction of the different building phases and the correct interpretation of some buildings, such as the castellum aquae (the water tank or reservoir) that, correctly recognized in 1763, was then misinterpreted as the amphitheatre and as such restored at the beginning of the XIX century.

The history

The Roman city of Veleia was founded after the defeat in 158 BC of the Ligures Veleiates who fought against the Roman expansion, with the aim of controlling and managing a huge mountain area between the Taro and the Trebbia Valleys. The most ancient burials, which were discovered there in 1876, belonged to a pre-existing local settlement.

Shortly after the first half of the I century BC it became a Roman municipality, acquiring the right of citizenship, and witnessed a season of development with the construction of monuments and buildings: the marble statues of the Julio-Claudian cycle discovered in the basilica and the huge number of monuments are evidence of the important relations held with the imperial family. But this state of prosperity did not last long: in the first half of the II century AD the concession of the Alimenta, the Institution founded by Trajan, showed the interest afforded by the central authority to the economic crisis of the city, where the landed property was under the control of a few rich landowners and many lands were taken up by woodlands or used for pasture, with the obvious consequence that there was a large number of poor people among the small landowners.

The study of toponymic and onomastic data clearly shows that Veleia was a Roman city in a never completely Romanized context: besides the Latin names, we can find names and surnames of Ligurian origin, such as Ligurinus and Ligus, as well as Celtic elements, such as Noviodunos (from the Celtic novio = new and dunos = fortress).

From the III century AD on the crisis is clear: life in the city is witnessed until the V century AD at least. The end of Veleia can be placed in the general trend of depopulation of that time, after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, when a lot of Italian cities were abandoned.

A parish church devoted to Saint-Anthony (the "Pieve di Sant'Antonino") has been erected on the area of the ancient Veleia, now completely buried.

The Roman city

Veleia looks like a typical mountain centre, with its buildings placed on a terraced hillside, partly natural and partly artificial, and the structures for the religious, social and civil life (the latter belonging to the most powerful families) organized around the forum.

The forum of Veleia was formed by a square, paved by slabs of sandstone, closed on one side by the basilica, where justice was administered and public functions carried out; it was surrounded on the other three sides by a portico, with the tabernae (the shops). In the main room of the basilica, statues of marble from Luni, portraying the members of the Julio-Claudian family, were aligned on a podium against the back wall.

In the second half of the I century AD, on the northern side, facing the basilica, a monumental entrance with columns on two sides was placed to connect the inner portico with a new one, probably planned for public use.

On the upper terrace, overlooking the basilica, there are the ruins of the bath (thermal spa), belonging to the Imperial period, and the built-up southern district, including the Domus del cinghiale, a clear example of a Roman house with atrium.

The present appearance dates back to the Imperial period but traces of more ancient times have been unearthed in different areas of the town.



Ruins of the bath (thermal spa) - Archaeological site of Veleia

The bronze items

The bronze items, produced mostly by workshops in the North of Italy, are artefacts of a high quality. Among these, the most remarkable are a head of girl (end I century BC), a head of emperor (room 4), probably the portrait of Antoninus Pius (138-161 AD), a winged Victory (I century AD), certainly part of a commemorative monument, and a votive statuette representing a drunken Hercules (II century AD).



Left: Winged Victory (I century AD) - Right: Drunken Hercules (II century AD)

Room III

The Julio-Claudian cycle of marble statues

The twelve statues of marble from Luni, portraying the members of the Julio-Claudian family, were aligned on the podium of the basilica for clearly commemorative purposes and represent today the political propaganda of the imperial family in the North of Italy. They probably all had dedication plaques, but only five of them still survive. In the case of Veleia, the link with the imperial court is represented by L. Calpurnio Pisone, patron of the city and Julius Caesar's brother-in-law.

The religious significance attached to the cult of the imperial family is witnessed by the high number of togaed figures and statues with veiled heads (in latin, "velato capite" statues).

The cycle seems to have been realized at different moments: the first group, under Tiberius's rule, consisting of Tiberius himself (headless), Augustus and Livia (Tiberius's mother), the two Drusi, Major and Minor (brother and son of the Emperor) and the realistic portrait of Lucio Calpurnio Pisone Pontifex, who most probably commissioned them. The statue of L. Calpurnio Pisone follows the classical representation of the pontifex with veiled head, modelled on the portrait of Via Labicana, Rome. The identification of two headless statues with the figures of Augustus and Livia was possible thanks to their corresponding dedicatory plaques.



Marble statues of the Julius-Claudian cycle from the Basilica of Veleia

The second group was formed by Caligula, whose head had been replaced after his damnation memoria, that is the condemnation of the figure depicted, his sister Drusilla and his mother Agrippina Major.

In the third group there is the statue of Claudius, whose head replaces Caligula's, together with his last wife, Agrippina Minor, and her little son, Nero.

Finally, a loricate statue, whose identification with Domitian or Germanicus is still controversial among scholars. In any case its head was used again afterwards, probably in honour of Nerva.

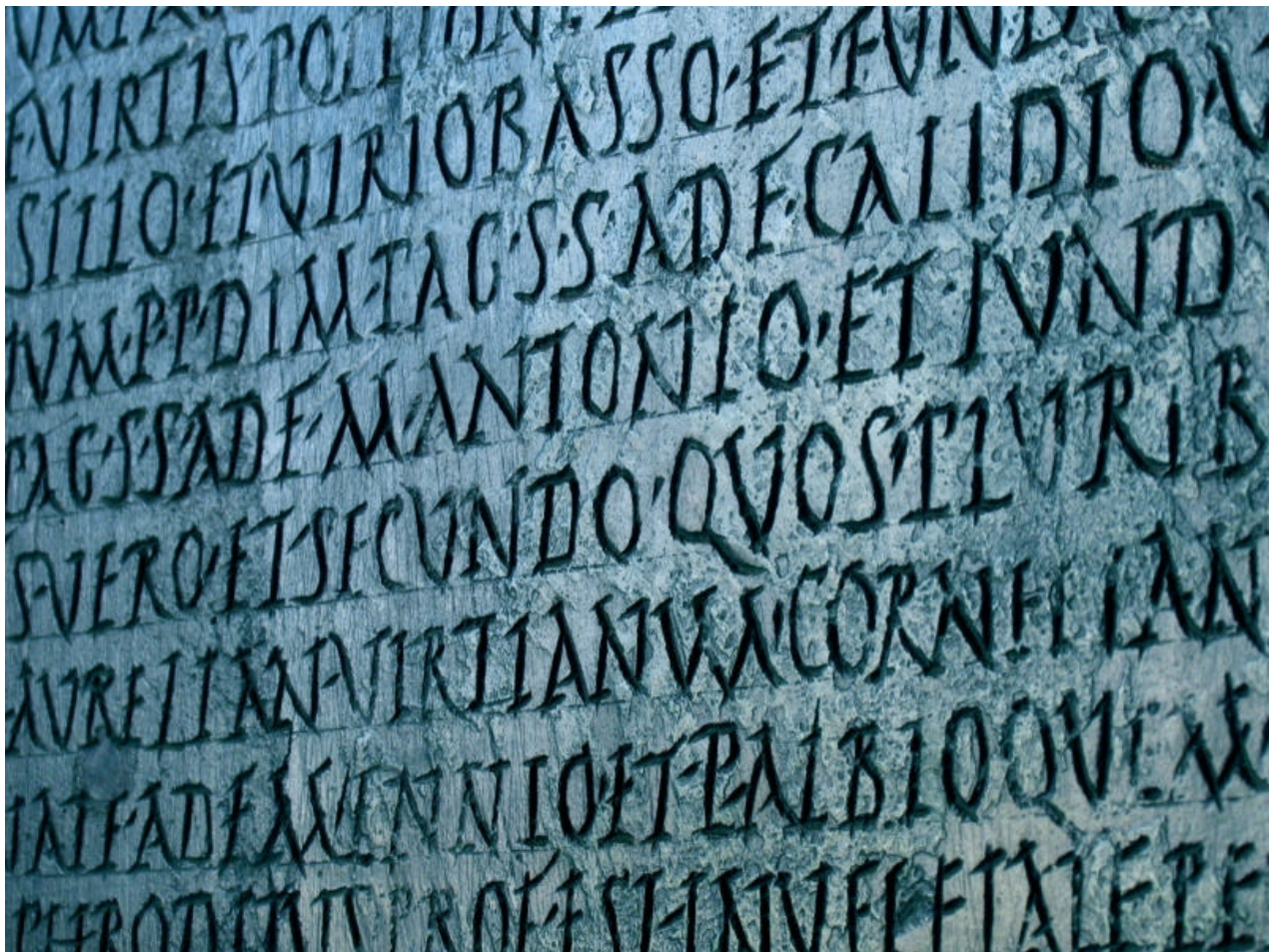
Room IV

The Tabula Alimentaria

This wide inscribed bronze table (m 1,38 x 2,86), found in 1747 in the site of Veleia, represents a document of great value since it witnesses the institution for the city of the alimenta, a mortgage loan granted by the Emperor to the landowners of that area, and whose interest was allocated for the maintenance of poor children. It was a great financial action established by the Emperor Nerva (96-98 AD) and developed by his successor, Trajan, in order to support young people who could guarantee to the Empire future generations of soldiers and officials of Italic origin. The emperor's main purpose was to prevent the fall in population and the economic decline of Italy at the beginning of the II century AD. The Tabula Alimentaria showed the Emperor's instructions (ex indulgentia optimi maxime principis) for the institution of a indefinite mortgage loan on lands (obligation praediorum), directly paid out from his private coffers (fiscus). The loan was divided into two consecutive disbursements in sestertii and the interests, at a rate of 5% per year, were allocated in sestertii or in kind (wheat) to 245 legitimate sons and 34 legitimate daughters, plus an illegitimate son and a daughter. This grant corresponded to the essential minimum sum a person could survive on.

The loan was granted to Veleia and to some neighbouring cities, such as Piacenza, Parma, Libarna and Lucca, in proportion to their landed properties. The landowners were listed in more than six columns, indicating their names, the name of the intermediaries, the estimation of the properties (aestimatio) and the sum of money paid out. Then, the name of the land (vocabulum) and of two neighbouring lands at least, its use, its structures (farmhouses, sheepfolds and furnaces), and its location in the district (pagus) or in a village (vicus).

This inscription offers undoubtedly a cross-section of the condition of the Apennines near Piacenza at the beginning of the II century AD, revealing the gradual building of landed properties, despite the prevalence of pastoral activities that consequently brought about a limited exploitation of the land, and the coexistence of the local people together with the Roman citizens, through the study of toponymic and onomastic data.



The Tabula Alimentaria (particular) - Archaeological National Museum of Parma

Public areas

The forum represented the centre for commercial, social, legal and political activities: besides the essential civil buildings and the surrounding shops, it also contained the most important commemorative monuments of the city.

The bases of two equestrian statues, dedicated to Claudius (in 42 AD) and Vespasian (in 71 AD) respectively, are still recognizable, as well as a cippus of red marble from Verona for the emperors' worship and the bases of two other statues, one dedicated to Tranquillina, Gordianus Pius's wife, and Probus, and the other to Aurelian (III century AD).

Then, a series of inscriptions, both political and religious, that had to be manifested publicly, such as the Inscription in honour of Coelio Festo, The Tabula Alimentaria, and a smaller bronze tablet found in the ruins of the portico, bearing part of the Lex de Gallia Cisalpina (49 BC), were displayed there; the Lex is an invaluable text which gives information about Roman civil procedure and regulates the authority of Roman magistrates who had the faculty of judging cases not exceeding the value of 15.000 sestertii.

The forum also permitted the display of monuments and inscriptions in honour of some deserving citizens who had accomplished or renewed public works.



The Veleia's forum

The fragment of wall painting, in third Pompeian style, portraying a garden enclosed with trellises (beginning I century AD) was discovered in the northern area of the portico.

Private areas

Elements of house furniture and crockery, ornamental objects and glassware found in Veleia, allow us to reconstruct the high level of wealth reached by the city (showcase 1).

First of all the settlement had a complex network of pipes (fistulae) to supply water from a huge reservoir (castellum aquae) to the built-up area below.

Windows were closed with wood-framed panels, while a heating system was found in the bath and in other public buildings.

Both indoors and outdoors, the houses reflected the Roman concept of the living area as a private and official space, where the expression of power and wealth was at the basis of the social relationships between the leading classes, the "patrons" (patroni) and their subordinates, the "clients" (clientes). It was precisely in these official rooms that mosaic floors and fine furnishings, such as bronze oil-lamps, used single or like candelabra, were more often employed. Terracotta oil-lamps were used by common people for everyday life.

The high-quality bronze material discovered in Veleia was not manufactured in this area; for instance, the female bust within circular clypeus, the scone with the warrior bust, and the furniture base with the warrior in combat, were Cisalpine productions; the pelike, a bronze jug, damascened with silver (I century BC) was a Southern Italian production, and the sconces with bust of Silenus and juvenile bust, supports of a triclinium bed, came from the eastern Mediterranean.

The comfort of everyday life is certified by the large number of objects used for body care (showcase 2): glass unguentary vases and balsamaria (balm vases), strigils, used to wipe sweat and dust off after gymnastic exercises or to remove oils and unguents after bathing; spatulae, tweezers, beauty products and toiletries. Then, fibulae, rings and pins represented the essential ornaments for clothes and hair.

In every Roman house, whether rich or humble, small altars (larari) were devoted to the worship of ancestors or household gods, the lares. A small statue, portraying a veiled head offerer (first half of the I century AD), represents the transposition of the official religion and the emperors' cult in a domestic location. In the middle of imperial age, the diffusion of the cult of Isis, the Egyptian divinity, frequently identified with the Goddess Fortuna, reached its peak throughout the Roman world.