DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF RESTORATION WORK AT OSTIA ANTICA IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Valeria Montanari*

Keywords: archaeological excavation, consolidation, restoration, wall integrations.

Abstract: From the beginning of the last century and up through at least the nineteen-thirties, the archaeological site at Ostia Antica became a place where the latest advances in the field of restoration were applied through original approaches while, at the same time, new and intriguing working strategies were put to the test.

All this was the result of a conscious effort on the part of the directors of the excavations that were undertaken over time, starting from the first decade of the twentieth century. Employing the latest methodological developments in their field of study, they addressed topics previously dealt with only in part, such as expanding the concept of safeguarding individual monuments to include their entire surrounding context, or the importance of introducing specimens of vegetation to establish visual links between the various archaeological remains, as well as the resolution of issues having to do exclusively with aesthetics, such as the development of working techniques able to ensure the preservation of the jagged, uneven tops of walls, so as to avoid the decidedly unattractive 'box' coverings, or the attention focused on amalgamating the old and the new, in particular regarding the types of materials and the colours used for the newly installed portions. All these solutions have yet to be given adequate consideration by the literature on the subject, even though they constitute an undeniably unique development on the cultural panorama of the time.

Finally, the interdisciplinary approach that Giovannoni was so eager to see introduced, “regarding topics having to do with monuments”, was exemplified in Ostia Antica by the fruitful working relationship that joined the archaeologist Guido Calza and the architect Italo Gismondi. Of all the different operational successes obtained, one unquestionable achievement was the emphasis placed on understanding not only the volumetric composition of the architectonic remains brought to light by the digs, but also the process of development that transformed them over the years, as well as what proves to be an especially important consideration when viewed against the backdrop of the activities of the leading figures of that cultural epoch, and namely the relationship of the artefacts with their entire surrounding context, or the importance of introducing specimens of vegetation to establish visual links between the various vestigial remains, as well as the resolution of issues having to do exclusively with aesthetics, such as the development of working techniques able to ensure the preservation of the jagged, uneven tops of walls, so as to avoid the decidedly unattractive ‘box’ coverings, or the attention focused on amalgamating the old and the new, in particular regarding the types of materials and the colours used for the newly installed portions. All these solutions have yet to be given adequate consideration by the literature on the subject, even though they constitute an undeniably unique development on the cultural panorama of the time.

Rezumat: De la începutul secolului trecut și până în anii ’30, situl arheologic din Ostia Antica a devenit o zonă de aplicare a ultimelor progrese în domeniul restaurării prin abordări originale, în același timp punându-se în aplicare tehnici de lucru noi și interesante. Toate acestea au fost rezultatul unui efort conștient din partea șefilor de excavații, ce a fost depus de-a lungul timpului, începând cu primul deceniu al secolului 20. Folosind cele mai noi dezvoltări metodologice ale domeniului, ei au abordat problemele de la anterior au fost tratate doar parțial, cum ar fi extinderea conceptului de protejare a monumentelor individuale prin includerea lor în contextul lor, sau importanța introdusă de speciﬁcă vegetală pentru a crea legături vizuale între diferitele vestigii, precum și rezolvarea problemelor strict estetice, cum ar fi dezvoltarea tehnicilor funcționale de conservare a zidurilor, cu terminațiile lor derivate și neregulate, astfel încât să se evite acoperirile tip „cutie”, sau atenția concentrată pe amalgamarea de vechi și nou, în special în ceea ce privește tipurile de materiale și culorile folosite pentru portiunile noi instalate. Toate aceste soluții nu au primit încă atenția necesară în literatură de specialitate, deși constituie o dezvoltare negreșit unică pentru panorama culturală a vremii.

In final, abordarea interdisciplinară pe care Giovannoni și-o dorea atât de mult „privind subiectele legate de monumente”, a fost exemplificată la Ostia Antica de relația fructuoasă ce a avut lângă arheologul Guido Calza și pe arhitectul Italo Gismondi. Dintre toate succesele obinute, o realizare irefutabilă a fost emfaza pusă pe înțelegerea nu doar a compoziției volumetrice a vestigialor arheologice dezvelite de săpături, dar și a procesului de dezvoltare ce le-a transformat de-a lungul timpului, precum și ceea ce se dovedește a fi un factor foarte important în contextul activităților figurilor centrale ale acelei secole culturale, și anume relația între artefacte și mediul care le înconjoară.

Introduction

In an account of the International Conference in Athens, provided by Gustavo Giovannoni in the pages of “Bollettino d’Arte” in March 1932,¹ among the presentations judged to best express Italian efforts to “study, upgrade and restore” mention is made of the results achieved in the archaeological area of Ostia. Giovannoni is referring to the report “summarising recent restoration work” on archaeological monuments, both within Italy and in its colonial territories, given by Carlo Anti² on October 24th, 1931 as part of the “Italian Day” that fell “between the conclusion of the proceedings of the conference itself and the start of the

* “Sapienza” Università di Roma; e-mail: valeria.montanari@uniroma1.it

¹ Giovannoni 1932, pp. 408-420.
² Carlo Anti (Verona 1889 - Padua 1961) archaeologist, from 1922 professor at the University of Padua, leader of the Italian archaeological mission in Cyrene and in Egypt (see entry in the Treccani Encyclopaedia).