

Domus of The Boy on the Dolphin

Exhibition of archaeological materials found at the Roman House of Lucca.

Doing archeology in an urban center like Lucca is never easy. The archaeological datum is by definition below ground and when there is an active city above, with its rhythms and its daily life, it is easy to understand that digging for purely scientific purposes is a source of discomfort.

Conversely, whenever excavations are required in the same city for construction sites, maintenance or services, there is a risk of damaging what the land may have preserved.

In 1982, the Superintendence for Archaeological Heritage of Tuscany issued a declaration of important archaeological interest over the entire area included in the Renaissance circle of Lucca and, with rare sensitivity, in 1996 the Municipality incorporated this declaration in its Building Regulation, requiring that anyone, private or corporate, who would carry out excavations within the walls, had to notify the Superintendence and submit to its requirements.

This shared protection has allowed numerous and significant discoveries over the years, which have bit by bit added to the history of the city by integrating and sometimes correcting what is reported in written sources.

The Roman Domus of Lucca (in Via Cesare Battista, 15) is a clear example of the effectiveness of this instrument. When excavations began in 2010 for the reconstruction of the cellars, it was precisely the archaeological assistance that allowed the finding and scientific documentation of the different phases of occupation of this sector of the city, already interesting for the presence of the medieval church of Sant'Agostino and the remains of the ancient Roman Theater. The environments brought to light then retrace a long historical period, also visible in the stratigraphy of walls: from the Renaissance, witnessed by the brick vaults and beautiful fragments of plates decorated in majolica etched with bright colors, it goes down to the medieval period, visible in the wall pebbles and common tableware. Finally, the Roman period is documented by the remains of perimeter walls that define residential environments, and by the numerous relics linked to the building, such as tiles and bricks, painted plaster, colored mosaic tiles, and the daily life of the inhabitants of the house, such as tableware, coins, toiletries. Particularly significant is the finding of traces of a rite celebrated in the first century. B.C. The central portion of an amphora situated in a horizontal position was placed in a hole containing an entire globular jar of good workmanship and a bronze fibula in perfect state of conservation. These are objects intentionally deposited in the context of a domestic ritual, which has been reproduced in one of the exhibit showcases. Giving importance to the exhibition is a Roman architectural terra-cotta with the image of a Gorgon flanked by children riding dolphins. This gave the site its name and has been given worthy attention by an original display solution.

The importance of this exhibition lies not only in the evident scientific interest of the findings, but also in the results of enhancement and protection achieved through the collaboration of public and private entities. The opportunity to exhibit the material in the very place of its discovery makes its meaning more accessible. This was made possible by a dialogue started many months ago, involving Bulleri SaS, who made the rooms and staff available, the Superintendence of Lucca, and the Museum Complex of Tuscany, which lent state-owned archaeological material.

The exhibition has been curated by the archaeologist Dr. Elisabetta Abela, who also participated in the excavation phase of the area, under the scientific supervision of Dr. Neva Chiarenza, an official of the Superintendence of Archeology, Fine Arts and Landscape for the provinces of Lucca and Massa Carrara. The architectural project of the exhibition is by the architect Simona Velardi, who directs the site together with Dr. Giuseppe Bulleri.



Frieze of *The Boy on the Dolphin* at the Domus Romana

Symbol of the conjunction between human and divine worlds and possible evidence of Giulio Cesare's presence at the Domus

In the classical world there was a strong bond between man and dolphin. The dolphin was considered a divine creature, so the Frieze of the Boy on the Dolphin symbolized the maximum expression of the bond between men and gods.

Similar decorations have been brought to light in various places: Sagunto (Spain), Argo (Greece), Leptis Magna (Libya), Catania, Stabia, Lucca (Italy).

The Frieze of the Domus, still today the only specimen discovered in the Tuscan Region, is the most valuable archaeological finding of the excavations. Due to its uniqueness, the site has been given the name *Home of the Boy on the Dolphin*.

The remains of the terra-cotta depict two dolphins mounted by two children who face with victorious expressions towards a Gorgon's head. Divine and human elements: the divine creature, the dolphin, protects men in life and after death, accompanying the soul to the world of the blessed; the child represents life, the Gorgon evil. Two forces, Good versus Evil. The metaphorical interpretation of the Frieze can fundamentally be read as the Triumph of Good over Evil.

From historical analysis of the decor, two important aspects emerge: its allegorical meaning and the importance that it gave to the Lucca Domus, considered worthy of being decorated with the Frieze and its divine symbol, reserved for great events and prestigious buildings.

It is plausible to intuit a correlation with Julius Caesar's presence in Lucca, where in 56 B.C. he established his long-time headquarters, and where with Pompey and Crassus he sealed the Luccae pact, later known as the First Triumvirate.

The Frieze at the Domus, therefore, is a testimony of the Triumvirate, a seal to the pact favored by the will of the Gods, and a celebratory sign of Caesar's divine origins. We can speculate that this was a memorial to the possible presence of the Divine Caesar at the Domus itself, which was built adjacent to the Theater, in the center of Roman Lucca. Quite plausibly he would have carried out his public functions in this place.