

# Torre de Palma: Fact or Fiction ?

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## Abstract

The Directors of the archaeological excavations at Torre de Palma (1987-2000) offer their opinion regarding the recent publication by J. Lancha and P. André, *A villa de Torre de Palma*, 2 volumes, Corpus dos Mosaicos Romanos de Portugal. II (1) Conventus Pacensis, (Instituto Português de Museus Lisboa 2000) with collaboration of F. Abraços, A. Alarcão, D. Bédard, J.-P. Bost, J.-P. Brun, M. Macedo, R. Nunes, F. Real, C. Viegas.

The Directors observe that the work of Lancha et al., which was to be limited to a study of the mosaics, exceeds those limits dramatically, and with regard to the spatial and temporal analyses of the architecture, presents as firm conclusion a number of claims and opinions that are not supported by proper evidence. To the misfortune of interested scholars, these claims and opinions are often based on questionable evidence, and sometimes on no evidence at all. Many of the claims stand in stark contradiction to plain, physical evidence which is there for all to see, while still others can only be described as fantasy. Pierre André's architectonic contributions are riddled with unsubstantiated claims, such as:

- dates assigned to many structures without any justification or reason;
- buildings, roads and aquaducts identified where none exist (sometimes with dates!);
- plans that are shamefully inaccurate, and include imaginary buildings and roads that, if real, would simply destroy several of the structures on the site.

As the problems in André's presentation are so numerous, the article here mentions only a small sampling, rather than confronting each one on a case-by-case basis. Readers are warned to approach the architectural discussions in this publication with extreme caution.

Key-words: Archaeological Excavation. Roman Mosaics. Roman Villa. Torre de Palma (Monforte, Portugal).

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## Resumo

*As directoras da escavação arqueológica de Torre de palma (1987-2000) pronunciam-se relativamente à recente obra em dois volumes, de J. Lancha e P. André, A villa de Torre de Palma, Corpus dos Mosaicos Romanos de Portugal. II (1) Conventus Pacensis, (Instituto Português de Museus Lisboa 2000) com a colaboração de F. Abraços, A. Alarcão, D. Bédard, J.-P. Bost, R. Nunes, R. Real, C. Viegas.*

*Neste âmbito, consideram que o trabalho de J. Lancha et al., dever-se-ia ter limitado apenas ao estudo dos mosaicos, quando na realidade veio a exceder bastante esses limites. A análise espaço-temporal arquitectónica, apresenta como conclusões indiscutíveis, acepções que não serão mais do que uma série de opiniões e de reivindicações sem qualquer base factual. Para os estudiosos, infelizmente, estas pretensões e tendências têm como base provas que se afiguram questionáveis, ou mesmo destituídas de fundamento. As contribuições arquitectónicas de Pierre André carecem de suficiente credibilidade. Por exemplo:*

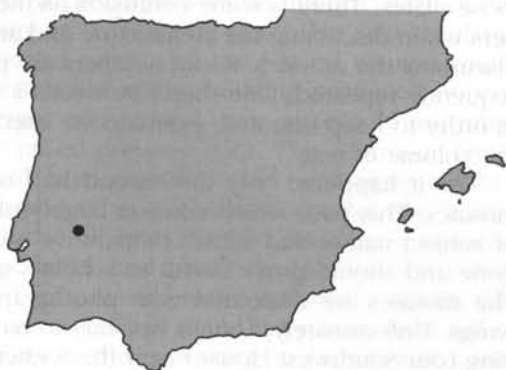
- *atribuindo datas a várias estruturas sem fundamento fidedigno;*
- *identificando estruturas, edifícios, estradas e aquedutos, inclusive datando-os, sem referência credível.*
- *apresentando plantas de evidente inverosimilhança, apontando para edifícios virtuais e estradas, que a existir colidiriam com várias das estruturas existentes.*

*Em função dos constrangimentos decorrentes da apresentação de Pierre André, as directoras limitam-se apenas a mencionar alguns exemplos em vez de os descrever detalhadamente. Os leitores ficam, deste modo alertados, tendo em vista a eventual discussão arquitectónica desta publicação.*

*Palavras-chave: Escavação arqueológica. Mosaicos romanos. Villa romana. Torre de Palma (Monforte).*

J. Lancha and P. André, *A villa de Torre de Palma*, 2 volumes, Corpus dos Mosaicos Romanos de Portugal. II (1) Conventus Pacensis, (Instituto Português de Museus Lisboa 2000) with the collaboration of F. Abraços, A. Alarcão, D. Bédard, J.-P Bost, J.-P Brun, M. Macedo, R. Nunes, F. Real, C. Viegas.

These two volumes present a study of the mosaics at the well-known Roman villa of Torre de Palma in the Alto Alentejo. They clearly supersede



Manuel Heleno's 1962 article in terms of detail and quality of reproductions. Along with Lancha's work on the mosaics the volumes include essays dealing with aspects of the villa such as wall paintings, coins, agricultural installations, and chronology.

Torre de Palma has now been known for more than fifty years. The only significant publications by early excavators of the site were M. Heleno's article "A 'villa' lusitano-romana de Torre de Palma (Monforte), in the elusive 1962 volume of *O Arqueólogo Português*, (n.s. IV, 313-338) and Almeida's "Torre de Palma (Portugal): A Basilica paleocristã e visigótica," in *Archivo Español de Arte*,

<sup>1</sup> Results of the 83-84 excavations suggested a 4<sup>th</sup> c. date for the original double-apsed church, a date which has now been revised as a result new breakthroughs in the <sup>14</sup>C dating of mortars.

45-47 (1972-1974). These relatively brief reports, covering more than a dozen years of a massive excavation project (employing as many as a hundred men year round), left many questions to be answered. To that end, in 1983 the University of Louisville began a meticulous re-excavation project of the Christian complex. While providing answers to some questions, the re-exploration of the basilica raised additional ones, most notably, why such a large and apparently early<sup>1</sup> church was built in association with a rural villa. Consequently, in 1987 the project was expanded to include the villa itself. Since the general plan of the villa was already well known, we decided not to publish a comprehensive report of any of our work until we could develop a thorough and well grounded understanding of the entire site and its chronology.

In 1990, Adília Alarcão, of the Museu Monográfico de Conimbriga, asked us if a team preparing a series on the mosaics of southern Portugal could study and publish the mosaics of Torre de Palma. Their project was to be limited to the mosaics and the house from which they had been removed. Since M. Heleno had removed the mosaics from the site long before we began our work and he had focused on them in his publication, we agreed.

This brings us to the second publication in the series on the mosaics of southern Portugal. It is beautifully and expensively produced with numerous illustrations, fine quality paper, and sewn bindings. In fact, the volumes are so beautiful that they could easily seduce the reader into believing they represent a work of solid scholarship. It consists of two parts, the text, and a collection of loose plates. There is some confusion as the authors use one set of room numbers when discussing the architecture and another set for the same rooms when discussing the mosaics. Room numbers are presented on one plate and not subsequently repeated. One therefore needs a large table to spread out the plates in order to keep oriented, examine the specific plate being discussed, and read the volume of text.

As it happens, only the second half of the book actually deals with the mosaics. This part, which consists largely of descriptive catalogue, a discussion of subject matter and some comparative analysis, appears to be generally well done and should prove useful to scholars of Roman mosaics and iconography. The mosaics are illustrated with photographs, color renderings, and line drawings. Unfortunately, Lancha appears to have overlooked the mosaic in a building (our Southwest House) near the western baths.

Some serious problems reside in the first half of the book, however, where various authors attempt to offer an overall interpretation of the site that is too often unsupported by archaeological evidence. André and Brun are especially culpable in this regard. It is tempting to point out errors one by one but to do so would require a book as large as the one under review here. Instead, we will concentrate on a few representative examples which, it is hoped, will serve as a warning to the reader exploring these volumes.

J.-P. Brun offers an interpretation of the large press building at the northwest corner of the main block of buildings that differs from the otherwise unanimously held opinion that this is an olive press. It was, he says, for the production of wine.

The press itself is at the north end of a long building with a series of pillars dividing it into aisles (Figure 1). The paved pressing floor itself (our room IV) measures approximately 6 meters square. The counterweight is approximately

1.6 m high and 1.2 m in diameter and is cut to hold the wooden supports for the large screw which would control the press beam. There is no archaeological evidence for an anchor for the beam so it probably was anchored in the east wall. The beam itself would have been at least 12 m. in length.

Brun discusses all of the various features of the press and points out they are not in themselves diagnostic since similar equipment may be found in both olive and wine presses. At Torre de Palma nothing remains of the *mortarium* and millstone needed for grinding the olives before pressing. However, Brun himself points out that they are often missing from olive presses in Africa and elsewhere (116). The buried vessel beside the press would, he argues, normally be there to receive the oil from the first pressing of olives, before hot water and oil from the second pressing was sent into the decantation tanks (*cubas* in Portuguese), but, he continues, such vessels are occasionally found associated with wine presses. The very large decantation tanks may also be found in both types of presses. It is therefore the large pillared building attached to the press that he finds difficult to understand in an olive press. Such a large space, he suggests, is not needed to store the oil produced by this press. Consequently he interprets the building as a winery with the storage of the wine in barrels. The pillars, he suggests, supported lofts over the aisles which would have held additional casks. He also argues that wine was certainly produced at Torre de Palma because pruning hooks for vines were among the finds from Heleno's excavation.

Indubitably, wine was a product of this villa. We have also discovered pruning hooks. There are, however, several problems with his interpretation of this building as a wine press with storage in barrels and casks. He says the large pressing floor could have held a second press with the second counterweight having been removed, but our investigation of the building produced no evidence for a second large counterweight ever having been present. In our interpretation, the *mortarium* shared the raised pressing floor. The enormous counterweight and very long beam would have exerted much more pressure than that needed to press grapes. The combination of elements present, the buried vessel on the pressing floor to catch the oil from the first pressing, a counterweight of extraordinary size, the large tanks, and a well<sup>2</sup> that would have provided easy access to the water needed for pressing make it virtually certain that this is indeed an olive press. The large aisled hall could have held *dolia* full of oil, extra *dolia* and *amphorae*, baskets of olives waiting to be pressed, carts, tools, and all manner of other things other than the animals to which Brun objects because of the foul they would have produced. If, as Brun suggests, the pillars did not extend beyond the lofts, the builders would have needed numerous beams about 15 m. long to span the entire width of the building. In our interpretation, the pillars provided intermediate supports for the roof.

Even if the building did serve as a winery, Brun's reconstruction with barrels and casks is inconsistent both with the archaeological evidence and with the ethnographic evidence. First, no barrel hoops or iron fragments that can be

<sup>2</sup> This structure had collapsed, been rebuilt, and partially filled with stones before our investigations of this building. Consequently we cannot be sure if this was a well or a cistern. Given its interior location immediately beside the retaining wall of the pressing floor, it is difficult to see how it would have been filled.

interpreted as part of a barrel hoop have been discovered at Torre de Palma, even though iron objects are plentiful from the site as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Second, traditional vintners in this part of the Alentejo employ *dolia* for the aging of their wine, not casks. Indeed, during the University of Louisville excavations an exceptional portion of the ceramics found in this building were *dolium* fragments. Since oil was also stored in *dolia*, their presence in this building does not provide conclusive evidence for either oil or wine production.

Let us set the problem of the press aside, because by far the most serious questions arise in Pierre André's chapter I-6, "Estudo Arquitectónico". In this chapter he presents twelve distinct phases with two additional sub-phases. He assigns dates to phases at an average interval of 35-40 years, most tied to the reigns of specific emperors, but provides no evidence for doing so. He presents his scheme of things as fact, as if there is no room for doubt and seems to expect the reader to accept what he says on faith. For example he encrusts the tiny temple (Figure 2) in the east court with marble based on a very fragmentary plan, a column base reused elsewhere, and a fragment of a marble architrave reused in a much later tomb. While the architrave could have been on this temple it also fits in several other places where its use is equally probable (in the peristyle for example, or even from another site altogether). The use of marble for supporting members need not necessarily be accompanied by marble encrustation. In fact, the only surviving evidence for marble encrustation at Torre de Palma is in the baptistery building where fragments survive *in situ*.

No wood is preserved at Torre de Palma yet, in his Phase XI (94) he tells us there were two additional presses built at that time and that "Todas estas adegas estão construídas com madeira importada..." Further, he tells us that Phase XIIIa is characterized by "Reparações no madeiramento da adega..." He tells us the columns in the Peristyle were first stuccoed brick (88, 98), and then changed to marble (92, 99), and then to painted wood (93) but does not tell us how he knows that to be true. In the last phase of the villa, he tells us, the central apse of the triconch on the east side of the *pars urbana* and the rooms flanking that apse were paved in brick (103) although absolutely no vestiges of flooring survive. In fact, Heleno excavated well below the original floor level in these rooms. Similarly unsupportable statements are found on every page.

We redrew André's Estampa XXVIII and laid it over the official IPPAR-University of Louisville plan which is tied into the national grid, eliminating details such as contour lines, elevations, etc from the IPPAR-UL plan in order to make it more legible, and omitting details such as column bases from André's plan for the same reason. Our names for buildings are used for convenience. Since the French team had their own survey done of the *pars urbana* we used that part of the villa as the base. It is there that, once the André plan has been rotated 13° counterclockwise, the two plans are in closest agreement. He claims his plan is based on the plans published by Heleno and Almeida and on the aerial photo published by Heleno but "muito aumentada." (84 n.116, 94).

<sup>3</sup> A member of the University of Louisville team, Ms Maia Langley, recently examined, catalogued and photographed all the metals from the Heleno excavations. She found no hoops or hoop fragments. Nor were any found during the University of Louisville excavations.

There are sufficient errors in his Estampa XXVIII alone to alert the reader to potential problems in the others. 1) In his plan he places Vaiamonte to the northwest of the Roman villa rather than to the northeast where it actually lies. Villagers who have spent their lives working in this area confirm that the road he indicates here has never existed. This error could have been corrected merely by examining maps of the area included in this same publication. 2) The size and placement of many buildings is incorrect. This is especially true of the North Barn, the actual remains of which André makes almost twice their actual size. He also orients the building incorrectly. This building does not appear on either the Almeida or Heleno plan so he must have measured and drawn it himself. 3) Some of the walls he records as actually existing do not exist, nor are they recorded on either the Heleno or Almeida plans. 4) André never takes into account the seasonal stream which runs through the site. 5) Much of the area in which André claims to be able to identify structures in Heleno's aerial photograph does not even fall within the area encompassed by that photograph. (Heleno's photograph is oblique. Consequently the area covered is not actually square.) Some of the buildings he claims to see which do fall within the scope of the photo lie beneath Heleno's refuse and work areas, clearly visible in the photograph as light areas. 6) If one rotates André's version of the North Barn and the impressive ranges of buildings which he says accompany it to match the actual orientation of the North Barn, the extensions he proposes would demolish the West Baths—a scenario for which there is no evidence and which even he does not suggest. 7) Some of his roads pose a similar problem. One of those would have run through a range of buildings on the south side of the villa many of which we published in 1996. 8) The only one of his many aqueducts for which there is any actual evidence is the one adjoining the south wall of the baptistery. 9) André watched us excavate in the South Field East and was explicitly reminded that our discoveries were not his to publish. Even though these buildings are not visible in the Heleno aerial photograph, they nevertheless appear in his plan.

While, by his own admission, André developed his plans on the basis of a plan and a photograph published in 1962 and a second plan published in 1974, he ignores our 1996 article in the *Journal of Roman Archaeology*. There we published a more recent plan and a new aerial photograph (taken vertically by the Portuguese Air Force in 1987) in which the North Barn is clearly visible and against which he could have easily checked his work.

The many misleading and erroneous assertions that fill the pages of the architectural discussions could have been avoided if the team had confined itself to its original purpose, that is, to the study of the mosaics.

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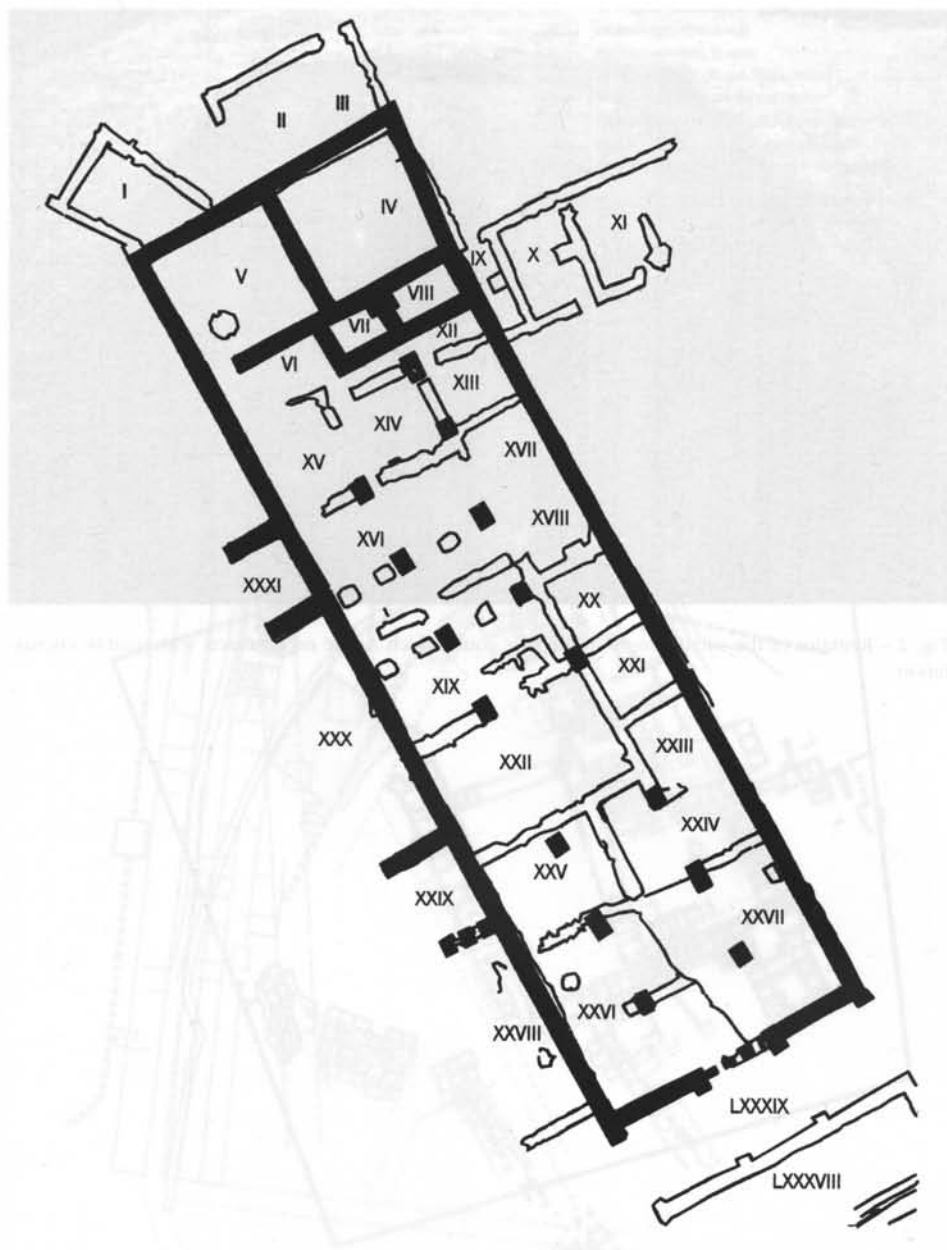


Fig. 1 – The Olive Press.  
The original form is in black.



Fig. 2 – Remains of the small temple in the East court which André reconstructs with marble encrustation.



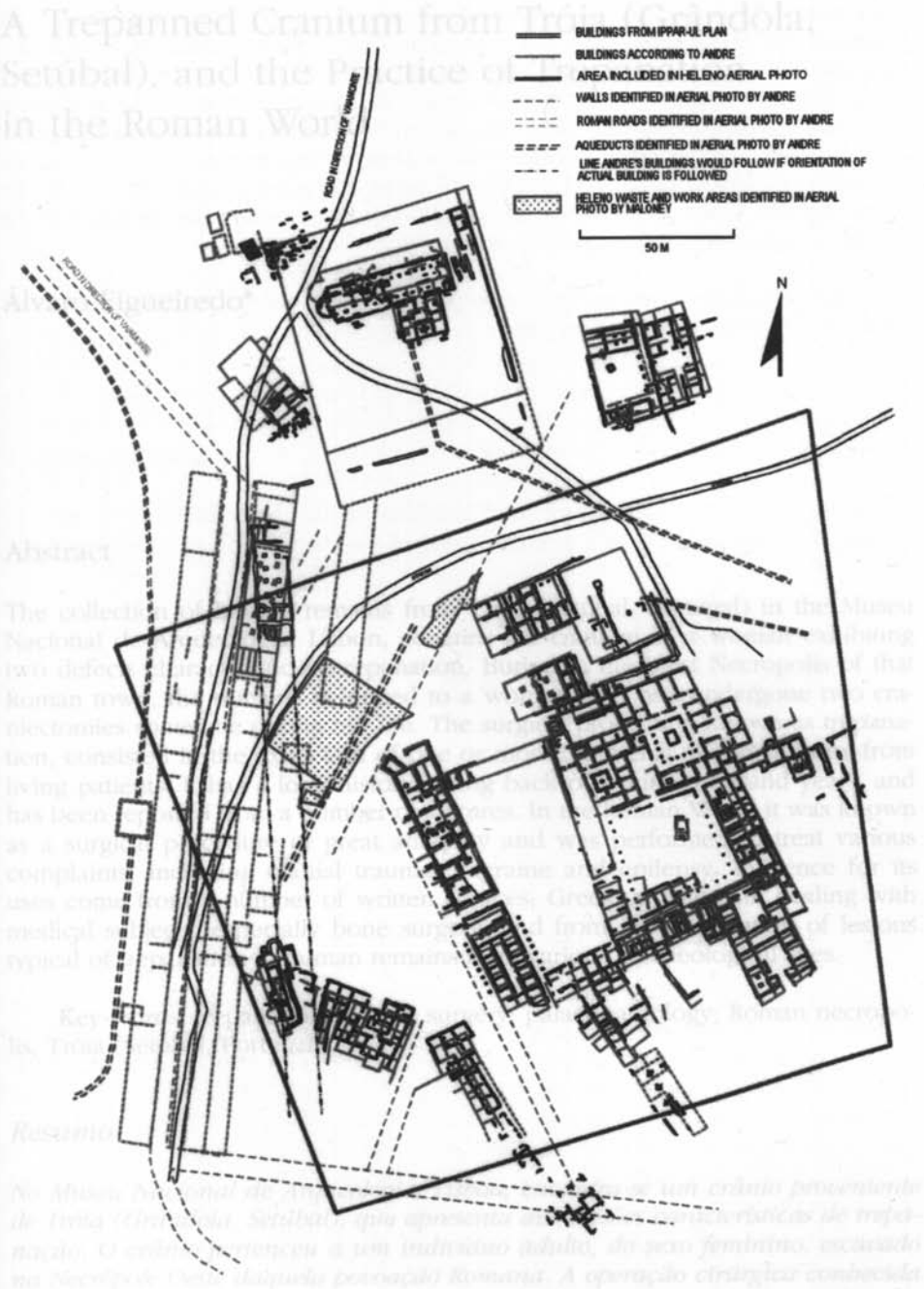


Fig. 3 – The roman villa of Torre Palma.

