



Ownership in a Roman Polis. Real Estate Dynamics and Urban Landscape Transformations in Mid-Imperial Athens

La proprietà privata in una polis. Dinamiche immobiliari e trasformazioni del paesaggio urbano nell'Atene medio-imperiale

This study examines the role of property ownership in the transformation of the urban and suburban landscapes in Roman Athens. Through analyses of the Hadrianic quarter, the interventions of Herodes Atticus south of the Acropolis, and private estates near the Akademia, it demonstrates how imperial expropriation, aristocratic patronage, and private land management reshaped the city's landscape. Hadrian's projects inscribed new imperial ideologies on civic spaces, while Herodes Atticus leveraged familial wealth to imprint his commemorative and ideological programs onto the urban landscape. Epigraphic evidence from the Akademia further illustrates how suburban areas, including sacred sites, were incorporated into patterns of private agricultural exploitation. These case studies reveal the entanglement of land control with the redefinition of Athenian identity under Roman rule.

Keywords: Roman Athens, property ownership, Hadrian, Herodes Atticus, Akademia, urban landscape.

Questo articolo discute il ruolo della proprietà nella trasformazione dei paesaggi urbani e suburbani nell'Atene romana. Attraverso l'analisi dei quartieri imperiali di età adrianea, degli interventi di Erode Attico a sud dell'Acropoli e delle proprietà private nei pressi dell'Accademia, si dimostra come l'espropriazione imperiale, il mecenatismo aristocratico e la gestione privata del territorio abbiano modellato il paesaggio urbano. I progetti di Adriano iscrissero nuove ideologie imperiali negli spazi civici, mentre Erode Attico sfruttò la ricchezza familiare per imprimere i suoi programmi commemorativi e ideologici nel paesaggio urbano. Le testimonianze epigrafiche provenienti dall'Accademia illustrano ulteriormente come le aree suburbane, compresi i luoghi sacri, siano state incorporate in modelli di sfruttamento agricolo privato. Questi casi di studio rivelano l'interconnessione tra il controllo del territorio e la ridefinizione dell'identità ateniese sotto il dominio romano.

Parole chiave: Atene romana, proprietà privata, Adriano, Erode Attico, Accademia, paesaggio urbano.

Introduction

Following the Roman conquest of Greece, the identities of the Greek poleis underwent deep transformations, shaped by the interplay between imperial intervention, the restructuring of civic institutions, and the ambitions of influential local elites. Athens, despite its privileged status as a *civitas libera et foederata* within the Province of Achaia, was not immune to these dynamics (Cecconi 2023b; 2024c). On the contrary, the city experienced substantial interventions that reconfigured both the physical landscape and the social functions of its civic spaces (fig. 1). These processes intensified from the Hadrianic period onwards, particularly following Athens' elevation to the symbolic capital of the newly constituted Panhellenion (Cecconi 2024a). Among the multiple vectors of change, dynamics of property ownership and land management emerge as crucial factors. To elucidate the dynamics of urban and territorial transformation in Roman Athens, this paper will investigate three key thematic contexts.

First, it will critically assess the processes by which Roman imperial authorities appropriated public and private lands for the establishment of imperial estates. Particular emphasis will be placed on examining how these acts of expropriation reconfigured the traditional functions of civic spaces, altered their symbolic landscapes, and impacted patterns of accessibility and social interaction.

Second, the study will analyse the pivotal role of a prominent member of an Athenian family, Herodes Atticus, in influencing the development of the urban fabric through extensive real estate management and monumental patronage. It will explore how private wealth was mobilized to effect large-scale urban interventions that not only reflected individual and familial prestige but also actively reshaped the civic identity and topographical articulation of the city.

Third, the research will investigate the contribution of private property ownership to the transformation of the suburban landscapes surrounding Athens.

Through the construction of villa complexes, sanctuaries, thermal installations, and infrastructural projects, private initiatives profoundly modified the traditional rural environment, fostering new patterns of land use and settlement. This paper will contextualize such developments within the broader processes of Romanization, socio-economic change, and cultural negotiation that characterized Athens in the imperial period. By integrating archaeological, epigraphic, and literary evidence, the paper aims to demonstrate that land ownership, property management, and monumental patronage constituted essential instruments through which both imperial and local agents participated in the redefinition of Athens' urban and territorial identity under Roman rule.



Figure 1. Athens in the mid-imperial period. Red area: northern imperial quarter; blue area: southern quarter; green area: eastern imperial quarter (Cecconi 2024a).

The Imperial quarters

In the 130s AD, the northern districts of Athens were overtaken by a sprawling construction site (fig. 1, red area) –probably the largest the city had seen since the monumentalization of the polis during Pericles' time. It involved an area of about two and a half hectares located near the Roman Agora, and its realization required the planned demolition of a large residential neighbourhood made up of streets, shops, and, above all, houses of considerable grandeur (Greco 2010-2015, 1.3: 734 and 779-780). The sober maze of houses and streets, built with local stone walls and tiled roofs, was demolished to the ground to make way for two monumental buildings: a massive peristyle with a sumptuous entrance façade, lateral exedras, and enormous halls at the back, known as the Library of Hadrian (figs. 2-3) (Parigi 2019; Sarcone 2018a; Sourlas 2018; Kanellopoulos 2020), and a grandiose building, possibly a temple, discovered near Adrianou Street, probably to be identified with the city's Pantheon (Kanellopoulos 2019). The external façades of the two monuments were built with roughly hewn blocks of Piraeus limestone, evoking the masonry of Hellenistic fortifications (La Rocca 2014; Vitti 2018). This military appearance, reminiscent of military fortresses, concealed an extremely sumptuous and refined interior décor, characterized by columns, wall and floor coverings, ceilings, and sculptural furnishings made of precious materials and white, coloured, and multicoloured marbles (Kanellopoulos 2020). Their combination created a chromatic tangle that must have produced a striking effect for an Athenian of the time, accustomed instead to the more restrained colour palette that characterized the city's traditional urban landscape. The construction of Hadrian's buildings to the north of the Acropolis must therefore have involved the large-scale expropriation of the area, the relocation of residential and commercial units, a reorganization of the road network, and a transformation of the landscape. Such operations, given their scale and complexity, imply either a direct intervention by the imperial administration or a close collaboration with local authorities. In particular, the imperial administration could have coordinated with municipal institutions through the provincial governor or a *curator rei publicae*, who would have had the authority to initiate formal procedures for the transfer of public land or, where necessary, to implement the expropriation of private property, in accordance with the powers granted to imperial officials for projects of public utility. This type of intervention is consistent with other initiatives undertaken during the Imperial period, often marked by an emphasis on

monumentalization and the functional and symbolic redefinition of urban space (Barresi 2003; Rodríguez Neila 2009; 2021; Sánchez de la Parra 2023; 2024). In this context, one might ask whether Hadrian was acting primarily as an administrator or rather as an euergete, playing an exemplary role as a benefactor of the city (MacMullen 1959; Horster 2001; Cecconi 2023a). These two dimensions are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, imperial euergetism often operated through formal administrative channels, particularly in cases where the emperor's initiative implied significant territorial or legal transformations.

Hadrian's intervention north of the Acropolis, given the evidence of large-scale expropriation, displacement of residential and commercial structures, and the restructuring of the urban layout, should thus be interpreted not merely as a gesture of generosity or personal patronage, but as an imperial-driven urban redevelopment project, embedded within a broader political strategy. In this sense, Hadrian's role as euergete would have been fully integrated into the machinery of imperial governance, serving both to reaffirm his image as a restorer and benefactor of cities and to implement structural reforms that reshaped the physical and administrative landscape of the urban fabric. The intervention should therefore be seen not simply as the product of imperial munificence, but as part of a deliberate, institutionalized model of intervention, where benefaction, political messaging, and administrative control intersected in the transformation of urban space.

Evidence of these interventions has emerged from the excavations of the library (fig. 4). In the western sector, a street has been uncovered along which two *domus* faced: the first (House A) featured a marble-paved courtyard onto which several rooms opened, their walls richly adorned with decorative wall coverings; of the second (House B), large sections of the partition walls remain (Choremi Spetsieri and Tigghinanka 2008; Cecconi 2023a). Similar evidence, corresponding to a road layout flanked by late Hellenistic/ early Imperial buildings, has been found beneath the floor levels of the building on Adrianou Street (fig. 5) (Di Cesare 2018).

Similar considerations can be extended to the completion of the *Olympieion* and the construction of its surrounding peribolos (fig. 1, green area; fig. 6). The works required the dismantling of one of the ancient roads that passed through the area, as well as the demolition of the eastern section of the Themistoclean fortification wall, including a monumental gate (Kahrstedt 1950: 60; Tölle Kastenbein 1994: 171-172; Theocharaki 2011: 128-131). This action can be seen as conflicting with the intention to preserve the distinctive

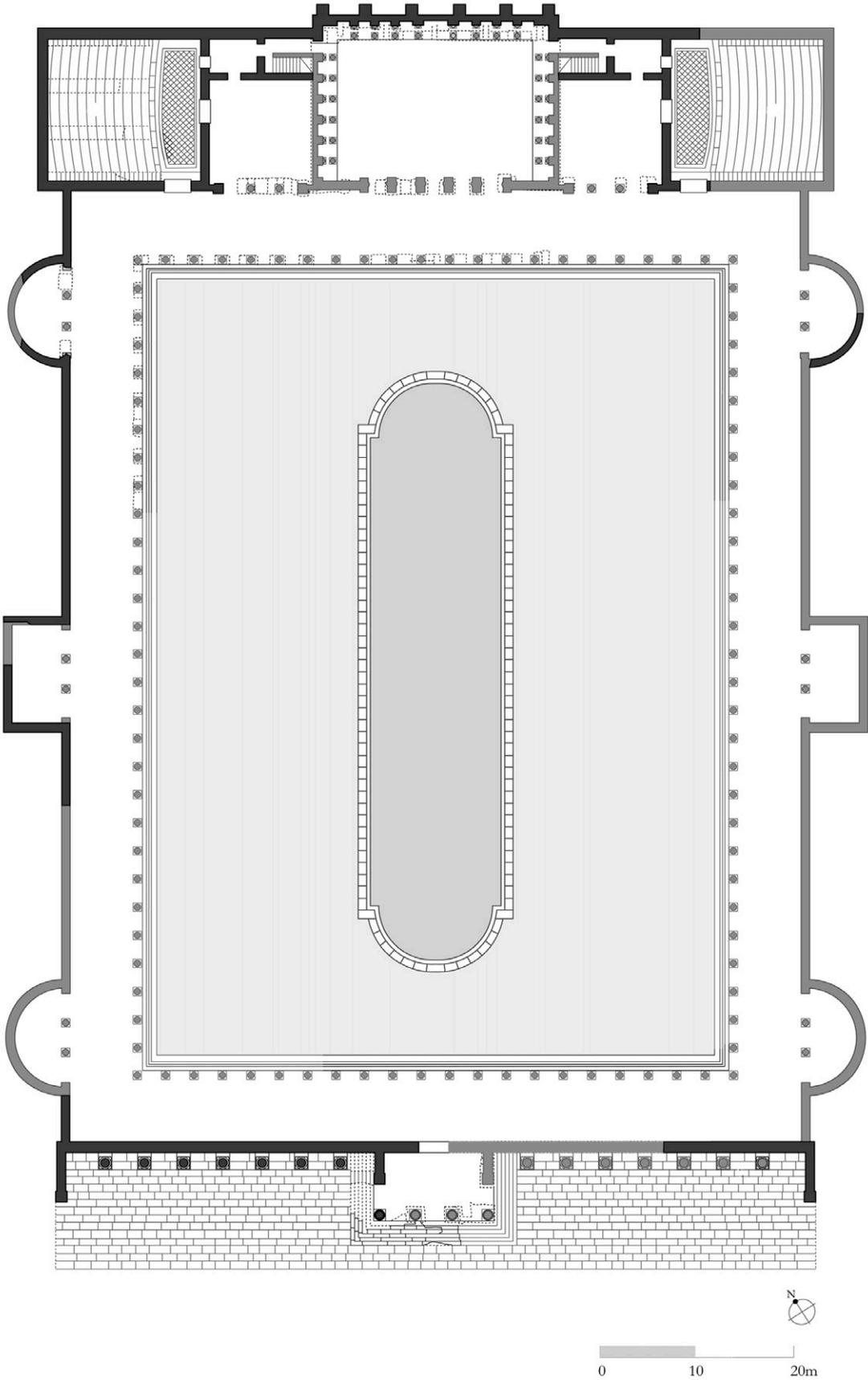


Figure 2. Library of Hadrian. Plan (Cecconi 2024a).

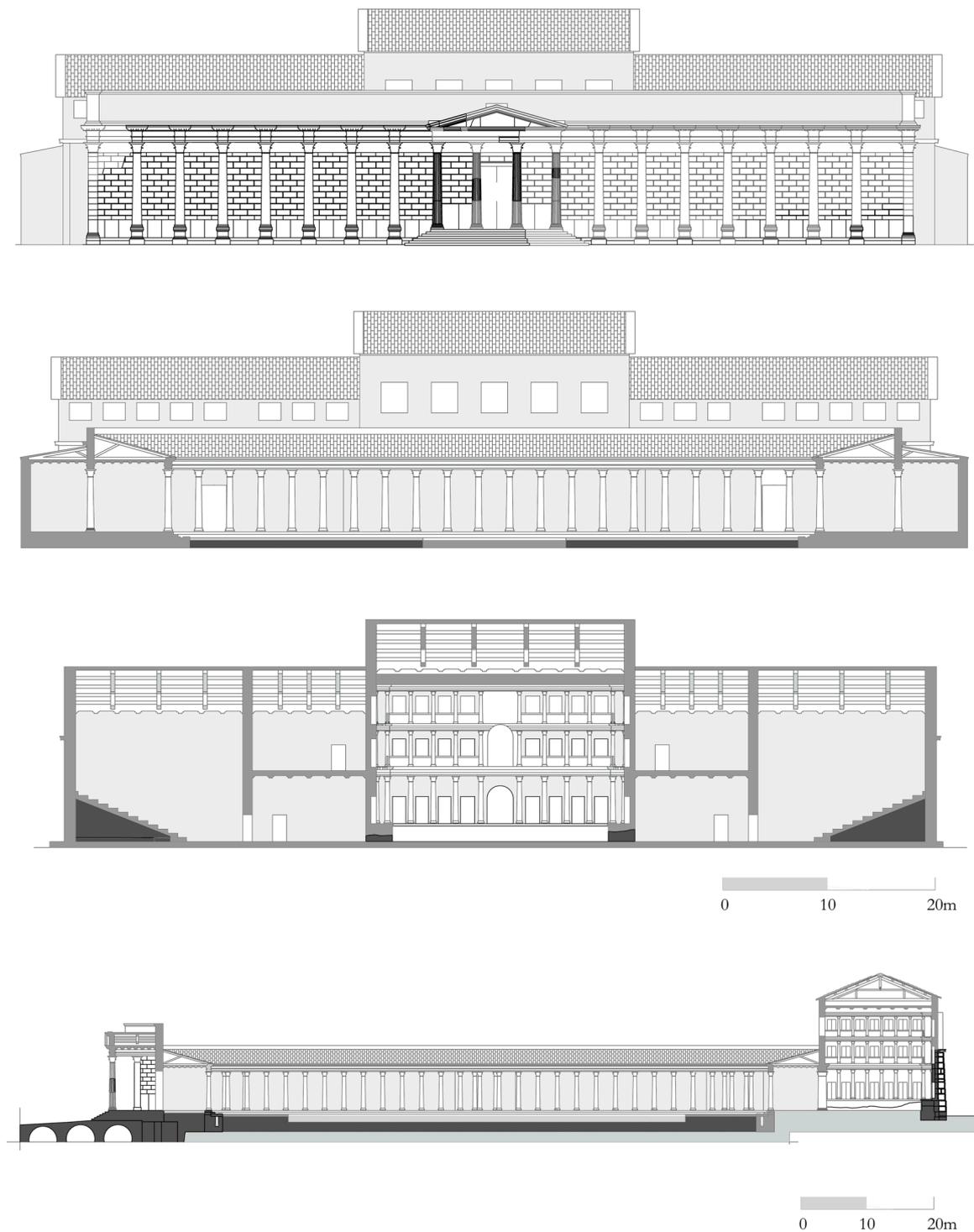


Figure 3. Library of Hadrian Sections (Cecconi 2024a).

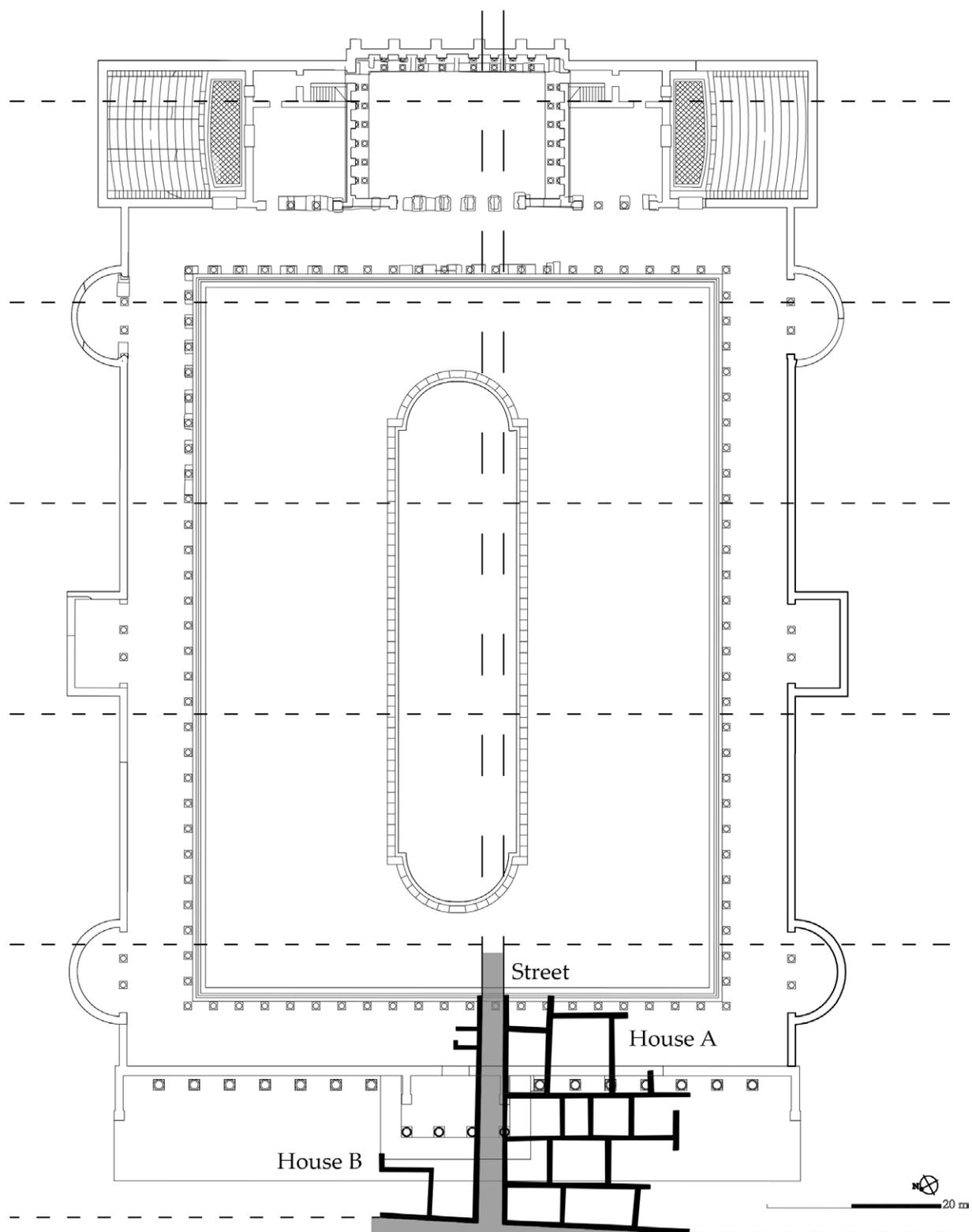


Figure 4. Houses under the library of Hadrian (Cecconi 2023a).

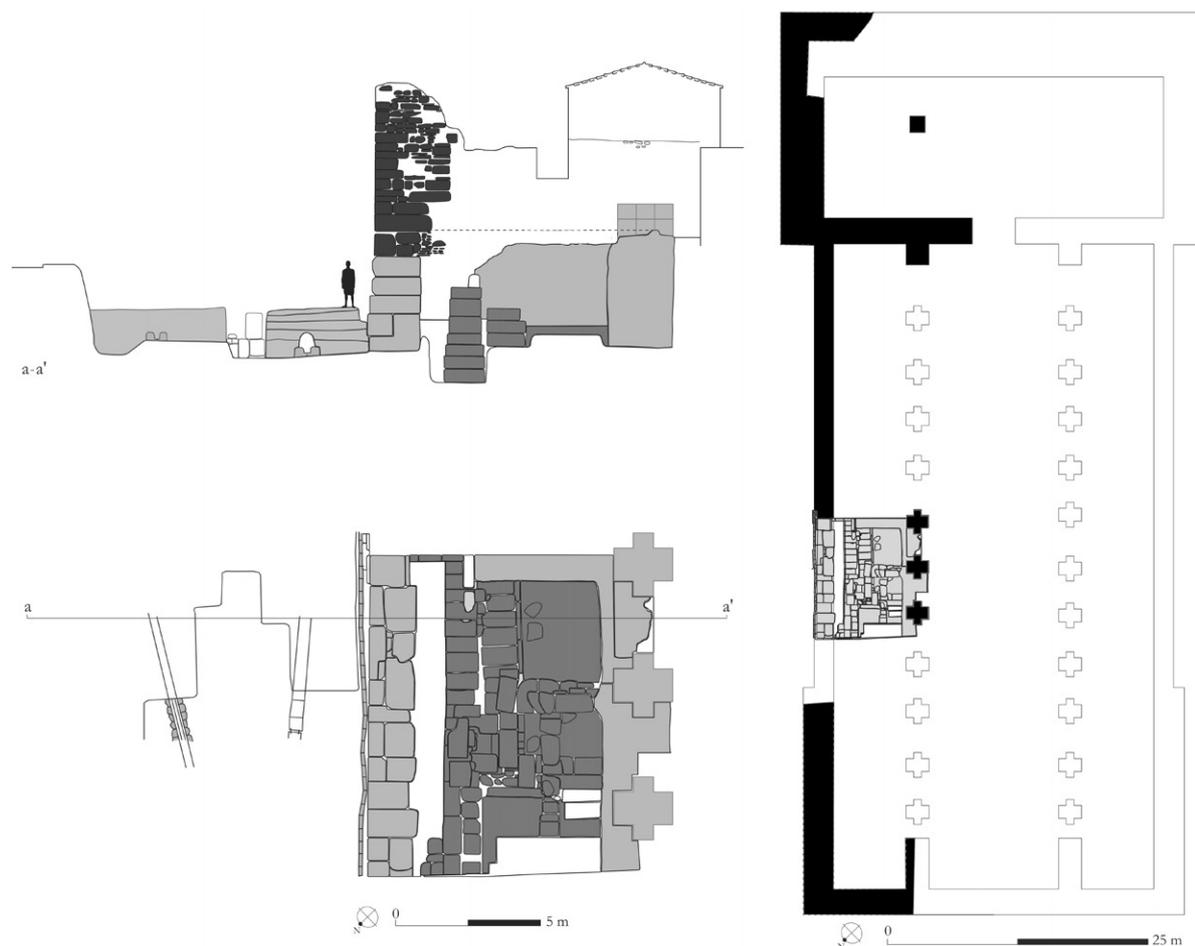


Figure 5. Houses under the s.c. Pantheon (Cecconi 2023a).

structures of the ancient city. This suggests that the imperial project, possibly promoted by Hadrian in coordination with local magistrates and institutions, showed little regard for preserving the traditional boundaries of Athens (Cecconi 2024c). The demolition of part of the eastern section of the city walls, which had remained largely intact since the Hellenistic sieges (Parigi 2019), allowed for the substantial expansion of the area designated for the *Olympieion*. According to both literary sources and epigraphic evidence, this expanded area corresponded to the parts of Athens that the emperor chose to name after himself (*CIL* III 549; *FGrHist* 257.F.19; *HA. Hadr.* 20,4; *Sch. Aelius Aristides* III 201; Graindor 1934: 226-228; Kahrstedt 1950: 61-62; Travlos 1971: 161, 253; Zahrnt 1979; Adams 1989; Willers 1990: 68-92; Calandra 1996: 94-95; Étienne 2004: 201; Galimberti 2007: 136; Kouremenos 2022). This area perhaps corresponded to the *Novae Athenae* mentioned on the architrave of the Antonine *nymphaeum* on Mount *Lycabettus* (*CIL* III 549) and was strikingly affirmed by the honorary inscriptions on the arch near the *Olympieion*, through which the dedica-

tors made an act of implicit usurpation explicit by inscribing: “αἰδ’ εἰς Ἀδριανοῦ καὶ οὐχὶ Θεσέως πόλις” (*IG* II/III² 5185). The construction of the honorary arch, in fact, when considered together with the inscriptions placed on it, the enlargement of the monument to the eponymous heroes to accommodate a statue of Hadrian, and the foundation of a new tribe named after Hadrian (Di Nicuolo and Pisani 2016), clearly demonstrates an explicit attempt to assign Emperor the role of a new *ktistes*, perhaps subtly alluding to Theseus, who until then was the first and unsurpassed Athenian hero.

Imperial initiatives had a transformative impact even in the area south of the *Olympieion*. The construction of the terrace intended to support the temple required diverting the river through an artificial dam, which irrevocably altered the idyllic and sacred landscape that had previously occupied an area characterized by a classical Doric temple and a late-Archaic building expanded during the Hellenistic period (Threpsiadis and Travlos 1961-1962; Cecconi 2021; 2023a; 2024a; 2024b). In the area of the Parilissia, in fact, the

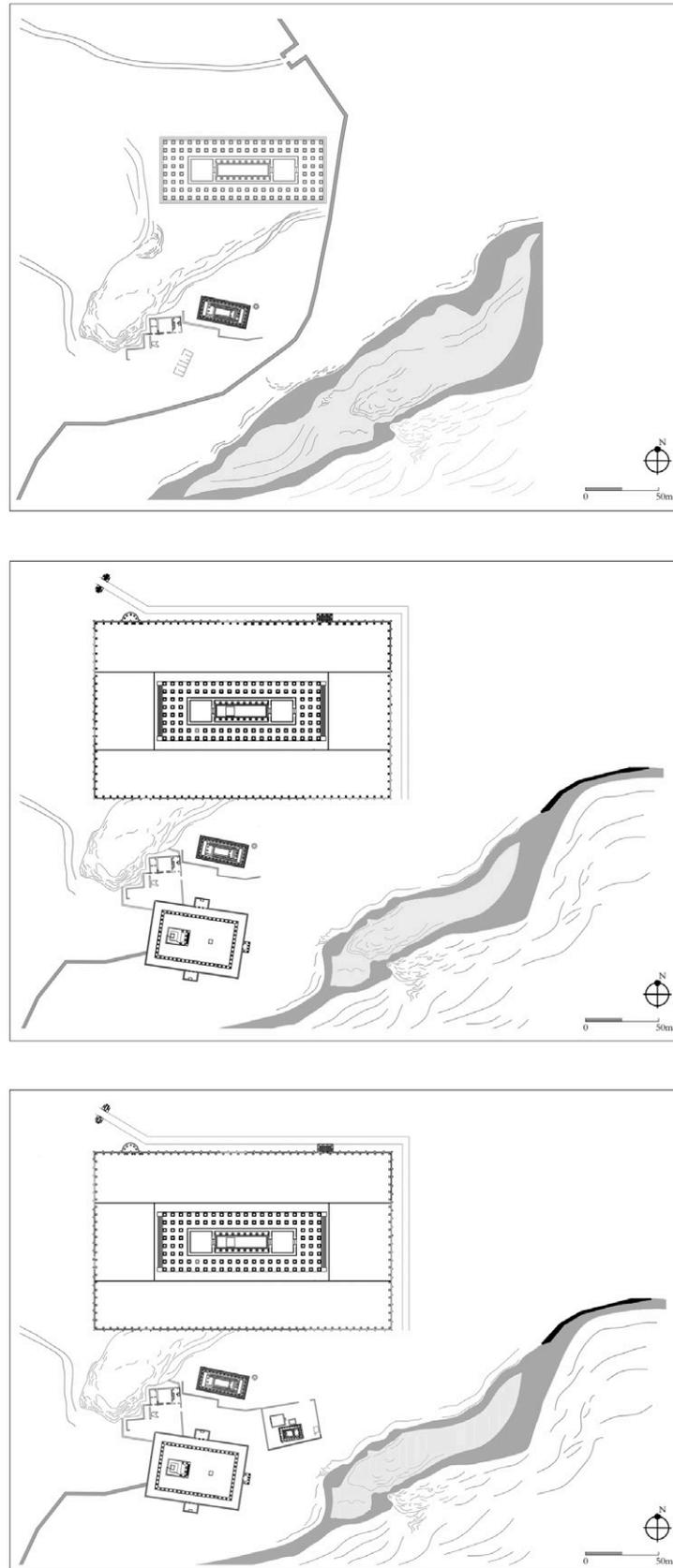


Figure 6. *Olympieion* area and Ilissos Valley. Transformations of the landscape. Early imperial period (above); Hadrianic period (centre); Antonine period (below) (Cecconi 2024a).

construction of the *gymnasium* near the Cynosarges necropolis (Sarcone 2018b), the building of the peristyle with a small temple, possibly dedicated to Hera and Zeus Panhellenios (Cecconi 2024b), as well as the subsequent creation, during the Antonine period, of a walled monumental complex with a peripteral temenos, a statue base, and a temple on a podium (Cecconi 2021), constituted radical interventions aimed at transforming a funerary and elegiac landscape characterized by rural places of worship, marshy lands, and large gardens, as described by Aristophanes in *The Frogs* and by Plato in the *Phaedrus*, into a monumental space.

Although we lack direct knowledge of how the inhabitants of Athens perceived the urban transformations instigated by Hadrian, it is plausible to assume that, in addition to garnering support, these changes likely provoked significant disapproval and dissent. What is indisputable, however, is that through these urban and territorial planning strategies, Hadrian effectively redefined Athens, reshaping it into a city that reflected an idealized Hellenic past while being strategically restructured with the principles of imperial ecumenical culture and the personal vision of a Princeps with a dynamic and assertive character.

The Herodes Atticus' quarter

In the southern sector of the city lies an important residential quarter (fig. 1, blue area). In this area, a significant architectural intervention, promoted by Herodes Atticus of Marathon included the construction of an *odeion* (fig. 7), which the sophist dedicated to his deceased wife between 157 and 160 AD (*Philostr., V.S., 2,551; Paus. 7,20,6*). The construction of the building was linked to the reorganization of the southern residential district, which began in the Hadrianic period but was carried out and completed during the Antonine era under the direction of Herodes himself. In this area, in the 90s of the 1st century AD, the houses of *Tiberius Claudius Atticus*, Herodes' father, were located, and in one of these the legendary treasure, which formed the basis of the family's wealth, was discovered (*Philostr., V.S., 2,547*). It is therefore plausible to suggest that part of the district was taken up by the residences and private estates of the Herodes Atticus family, whose considerable wealth likely enabled them not only to retain their properties but also to expand them (Tobin 1997: 55-56). Herodes' immense properties were continually increasing, likely because the euergete had the ambitious goal of restoring the legacy of his grandfather, *Tiberius Claudius Hipparchus*, whose landholdings, before their confiscation, were so extensive as to form

a special category in the fiscal system (Graindor 1930: 15-25; Tobin 1997: 16; Tomassi 2007: 171; Cecconi 2023b).

The *Odeion* would have found a fitting location on the land owned by the Herodes family, standing out as a central element in the "Nekropolen-Landschaft", the memorial landscape frequently found in Herodes' architectural policy (Galli 2002: 133-134). This landscape is also recognizable in the holdings at Marathon, *Kephissia*, *Eva/Loukou*, and possibly even in the Panathenaic *Stadium* and the small Metropolitan church in Athens (Lippolis 2020), where monuments were dedicated to honouring the untimely deaths of family members of Herodes (Cecconi 2024a).

The connections between the area south of the Acropolis and Herodes Atticus are highlighted by several archaeological findings (fig. 8). In the area near House X, known as House of Proclus, an apse-ended room was discovered, which may have been associated with a portrait of Polydeukion, the sophist's *trophimos* (Philadelphus 1920-1921: 126; Cecconi 2019). Additionally, a few meters south of the *Odeion* and near the Acropolis Museum, two residences from the mid-imperial period were uncovered, characterized by mosaic floors that bear comparison with those of the *Odeion*, both in terms of decorative patterns and the use of the tricolour scheme of red, white, and black (Cecconi 2020).

An exceptional case among the residential structures in the area is represented by the Corinthian *oecus* at the Misaraliotou street (fig. 9). This room belonged to a grand urban residence with a private bath (*balneum*), pavements in *opus sectile*, and walls painted and adorned with small panels in *opus interassile* depicting Dionysian scenes (Cecconi 2019). Just to the north, at the Angelopoulou plot, a structure from the 2nd century AD was found, featuring complex *opus sectile* flooring (Cecconi 2024a: 77-78). Nearby, at Karyatidon street, another bath complex was discovered, dating to the mid-2nd century AD (Cecconi 2024a: 78), comparable to the baths of the Egyptian deities' sanctuary at Vrexiza (Papaioannou 2018: 343-345) and the bathhouse at Oinoe, both of which are also attributed to Herodes Atticus' activities (Galli 2002: 197-202).

Based on these findings, it is plausible to suggest that, during the mid- to late-2nd century AD, the area south of the Acropolis experienced a flourishing period of construction, largely promoted by Herodes Atticus. During this time, an *odeion* with memorial, declamatory, and recreational functions was built, along with bath complexes and new residences, including one particularly luxurious building featuring a Corinthian *oecus* and possibly a private bath.

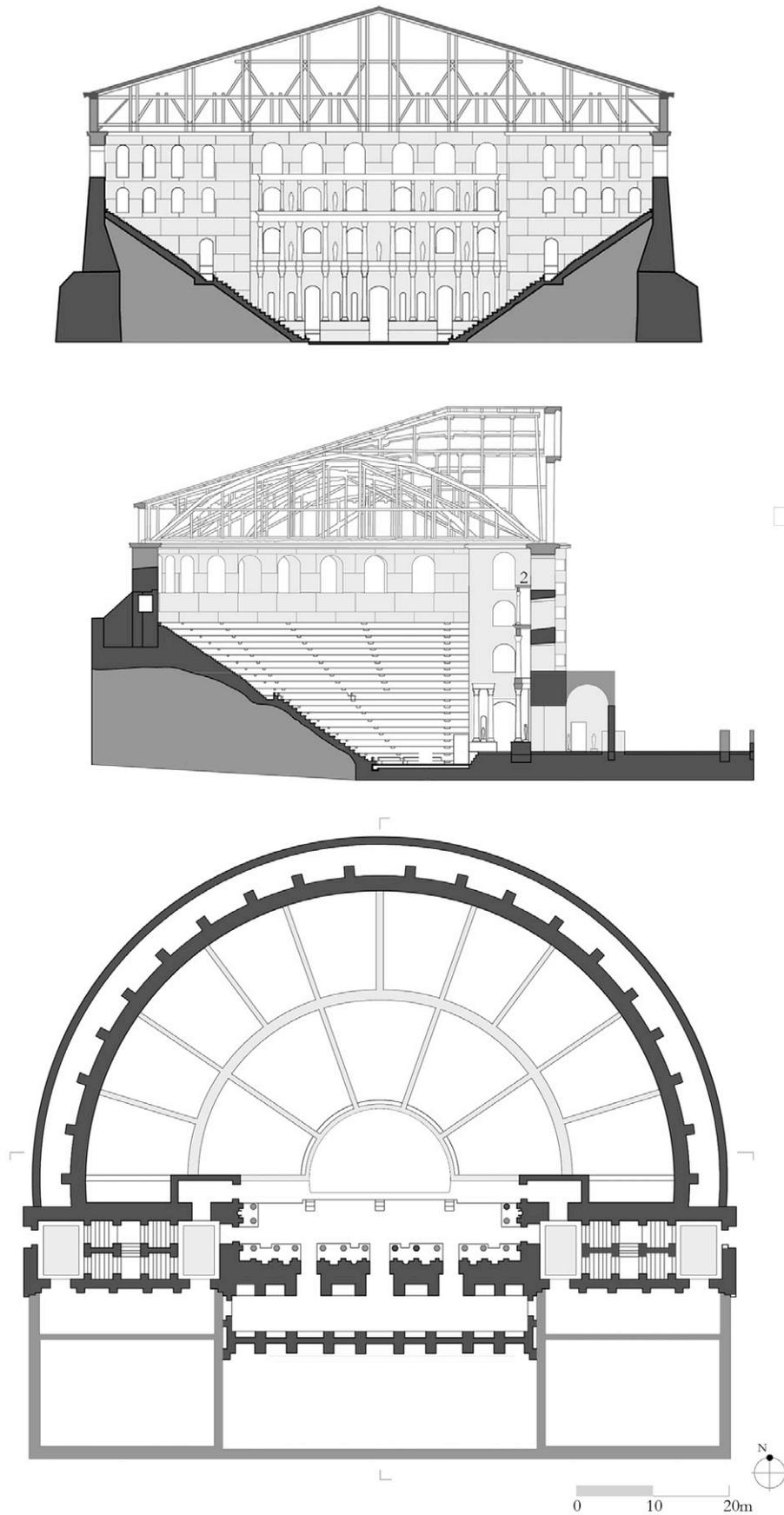


Figure 7. Odeion of Herodes Atticus (Cecconi 2024a).

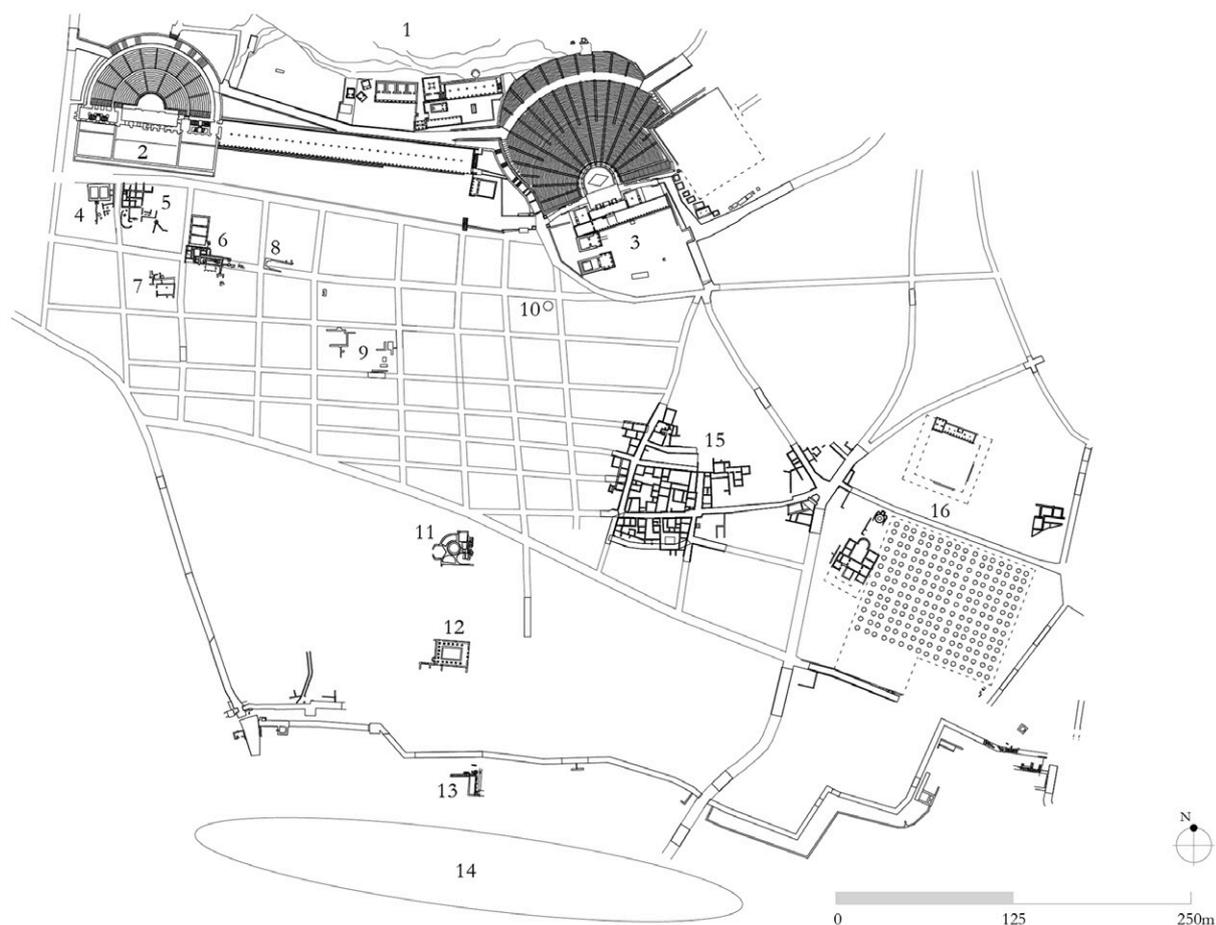


Figure 8. Southern Quarter of Athens. 1. Acropolis; 2. *Odeion* of Herodes Atticus; 3. Sanctuary of Dionysus Eleuthereus; 4. House 1 and cisterns; 5. House 2; 6. House 3; House Q and cisterns; 7. House 4; 8. Apsidal building under the so-called House of Proclus; 9. Building of the Angelopoulou plot; 10. Thermal bath; 11. Baths of Karyatidon street; 12. House of Misaraliotou street; 13. Facilities at Tsami Karatassou and Veikou streets; 14. Southern necropolis; 15. Makrygianni district; 16. Buildings at E of Makrygianni (Cecconi 2024a).

Private properties in the Akademia

One last case warrants particular attention, as it reveals how transformations driven by the management of private property affected not only the *asty*, the urban centre, but also the *proasteion*, the area immediately outside the city walls. An inscription discovered in the Agora (*IG* II² 2776; Graindor 1934: 182–191; Day 1942: 221–235; Miller 1972; Gray 2002: 66–67; D’Aco 2006; 2009; 2013: 450–451), dating to the 2nd century AD and related to honours bestowed upon *Tiberius Claudius Atticus* of Marathon and his wife *Vibullia Alcia*, mentions the existence of privately owned land near the Akademia, the site traditionally associated with Plato’s philosophical school.

The document records the agricultural use of several plots (*IG* II²/III² 2776, ll. 88–89 and 147–149). It notes that certain parcels in the vicinity

of the Akademia belonged to private individuals, including *Iunios* of *Diomeia*, *Iounia Euploia*, and *Iounia Philippe* (ll. 89, 146–148, 185–186), and were most likely used as fields, orchards, or gardens. It remains unclear whether these parcels lay within the confines of the Akademia itself or just outside its boundary. Caruso has attempted to correlate this information with archaeological evidence uncovered in the area (Caruso 2013: 152–153).

The reference to private property in a site as symbolically resonant as the Akademia invites a nuanced exploration of the complex interplay between cultural memory, aristocratic spatial strategies, and the management of urban land in imperial Athens, particularly regarding its agricultural use (Caruso 2013; Zoumbaki 2013). While the Akademia undoubtedly maintained its status as a venerable locus of philosophical heritage and Platonic memory (Caruso 2013), the evidence

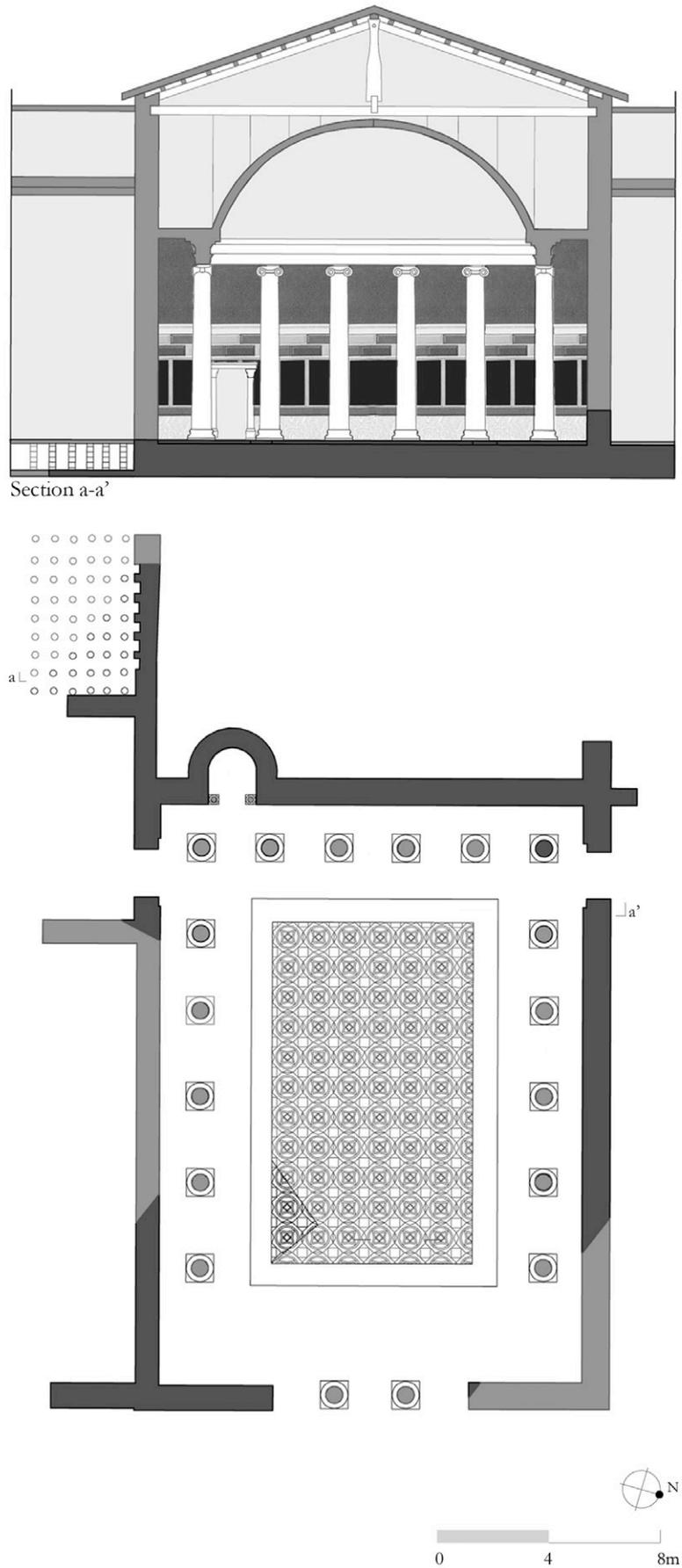


Figure 9. *Oecus Corinthius* at Misaraliotou street (Cecconi 2019).

reveals a process of spatial reconfiguration that situates it not solely, or even primarily, as a centre of intellectual activity (*paideia*), but increasingly as a multifunctional zone encompassing agricultural cultivation and elite residential interests.

This evolution must be understood within the wider dynamics of the gradual ruralisation of Roman Athens' suburban areas and the erosion of rigid distinctions between urban and rural environments, a phenomenon recently discussed by me (Cecconi 2024c), and traceable to antecedent phases of the city's development. The transformation of some around the Akademia, therefore, exemplifies how peripheral urban spaces were revalorized and repurposed in accordance with shifting socio-economic imperatives and the strategies of elite households seeking to consolidate their power and prestige through landownership and spatial control.

Moreover, the attestation of possible female landowners such as *Iounia Euploia* and *Iounia Philippe* in IG II²/III² 2776 is particularly illuminating. Their presence could not only underline the formal recognition of women's legal and social agency within elite familial networks but also gestures towards more intricate patterns of inheritance, property management, and gendered roles in the maintenance of aristocratic estates.

In conclusion, IG II²/III² 2776 transcends its immediate function as a record of agricultural land use; it serves as a critical lens through which to observe the reconfiguration of the Akademia and, by extension, the broader Athenian *proasteion*. This reconfiguration reflects the mutable nature of urban space under imperial rule, shaped by evolving relations of power, memory, and property that redefine the city's social and physical landscape.

Conclusion

In all these three cases, some fundamental aspects of the relationship between urban landscape and private property have been observed. It has been noted that expropriation and confiscation played a pivotal role in transforming private properties and public spaces into imperial domains, where large-scale architectural complexes could be constructed. These interventions, particularly when involving major urban restructuring, were likely implemented either through direct imperial authority or in coordination with local institutions via official administrative channels. These may have involved officials such as the provincial governor or the *curator rei publicae*, who were empowered to initiate the transfer of public land or to enforce the expropriation of private property within the

legal frameworks established for projects of public utility. Such actions reflect a broader, institutionalized model of imperial urban intervention, where political, symbolic, and administrative logics were deeply intertwined. It was noted that much of the district south of the Acropolis belonged to the *Claudii* family. The ownership of these lands allowed *Claudius Tiberius Atticus* and, above all, his son Herodes Atticus to build huge residences, baths and even an *Odeion* that changed dramatically the urban landscape of Athens. Finally, it has been noted that thanks to the epigraphic documentation, it is possible to highlight the non-marginal role that private property played in the transformation of the suburban landscape.

Concluding, this study has demonstrated how the dynamics of property ownership (whether through imperial expropriation, aristocratic patronage, or private land management) played a decisive role in reshaping the urban and suburban landscapes of mid-Imperial Athens. The transformations observed in the Hadrianic quarter, in the southern sector of the Acropolis under the influence of Herodes Atticus, and in the suburban spaces of the Akademia reveal a common thread: the profound entanglement between land control and urban identity during the Roman period.

Expropriations and state-led interventions under Hadrian not only reconfigured the physical structure of the city but also inscribed new imperial ideologies into the urban fabric, privileging monumental expressions of Roman power and revivalism. Meanwhile, the Herodes Atticus' interventions show how elite families, leveraging their ancestral wealth and political standing, could impose their own commemorative and ideological programs upon the city, blurring the lines between public and private spaces. Finally, the documentation of private properties in the Akademia underscores the more quotidian, yet no less impactful, dimensions of suburban transformation, suggesting that even the sacred and philosophical landscapes of Athens were subject to the pragmatics of land ownership and agricultural exploitation.

Looking forward, future research should aim to integrate increasingly sophisticated archaeological, topographical, and geospatial analyses to further clarify the extent and organization of these property holdings. New excavation data from the Athenian contexts, combined with more detailed studies of epigraphic and literary sources, will offer deeper insights into the socio-economic profiles of landowners, the mechanisms of property transfer, and the interaction between private initiative and imperial urbanism. Moreover, com-

parative studies with other poleis of the Greek East could illuminate whether the Athenian case represents an exceptional phenomenon or a broader pattern within the processes of Romanization and urban change.

Ultimately, a more nuanced understanding of property dynamics in Roman Athens not only enriches our knowledge of the city's imperial-era development but also provides a critical lens through which to explore the intersections of power, identity, and space in the ancient Mediterranean world.

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