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malta

General plan for the arrangement of the National Archaeological Museum of Valletta

October-November 1967

by F. Minissi

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(A) Report on the Unesco expert's stay in Malta

I went to Malta on 22 October 1967 and was met at the Valletta airport by Professor Zammit, Director-General of the Antiquities and Fine Arts Department of the Ministry of Education of the State of Malta.

On 25 October, I began consultations with the officials of the Antiquities Department with a view to defining the exact purpose of my mission. On the basis of the general programme drawn up in advance by the local authorities, it was decided that my task would be to study a preliminary plan for the transfer of the National Archaeological Museum from its present building ("Auberge de Provence") to the new building assigned to it ("Auberge d'Italie").

During the next few days, accompanied by Professor F. S. Mallia and Professor Zammit, I carried out a number of investigations with a view to obtaining the necessary information for the study of the various problems pertaining to my mission. These included:

- (1) visits to the Museum in its present building;
- (2) visits to all the other State museums;
- (3) visits to all the archaeological sites;
- (4) inspection of the Museum's existing equipment;
- (5) inspection of the new building assigned to the Museum, and completion of the graphic surveys of this new building;
- (6) study and determination of the general chronological and topographical arrangement of the Museum;
- (7) study and determination of the equipment to be provided for the new building;
- (8) preliminary study of the work to be done in order to adapt the "Auberge d'Italie" to its future uses:
- (9) a rough preliminary study of the layout of the Museum in the new building.

After I had completed these investigations in full agreement with the local authorities, the programme of activities for my stay in Malta was drawn up. The Under-Secretary for Cultural Affairs of the Ministry of Education asked me to include in my report to Unesco a sufficiently detailed plan for the execution of the project.

I stayed in Malta nine days and during this time, as indicated by my general report and plan, I made a comprehensive and exhaustive study of Malta's general and special museographical problems (of which I already had some acquaintance) and, in the light of this study, drew up the programme for the first and undoubtedly most urgent phase of the work, covering the archaeological section. The next phase will deal with the history of art section and will entail the reorganization of the picture-gallery, which will continue to be housed in the "Auberge de Provence".

(B) Present situation of the Museum

The Archaeological Museum of Valletta in its present form is so small that, despite the care and clarity with which its collections are organized and presented it resembles not so much a museum as an antique shop which has no possibility of expanding and which completely lacks equipment needed for the fulfilment of its purpose. It is clear from the attached plan of the Museum's present building, that it would be quite impossible to house in it all the archaeological finds which have been acquired by the Antiquities Department (a list of these is attached) and which are at present kept in various temporary storehouses, let alone all the other material which is gradually being discovered as the result of various excavations or which will be brought to light by future excavations.

At present as shown by the attached plan (Table 1), the space available for the archaeological exhibitions is barely 340.65m², and the layout of the premises is such as to make it impossible to organize a logical itinerary so that visitors will see the exhibits in chronological order. Furthermore - and this is even more serious - there is not sufficient room for all the material which is to be kept in store-rooms, let alone for the material for the exhibitions reserved for specialists

In addition to this, the Archaeological Museum at present lacks almost all the technical, scientific and cultural equipment which a modern museum needs if it is to fulfil its social function adequately. The store-rooms are housed in unsuitable premises, so that they cannot be properly organized; the restoration laboratories are relegated to makeshift premises not easily accessible from the other sections of the museum; other facilities which are lacking include a room for lectures and the showing of films and slides, a specialized library, a room for permanent exhibitions, a department for preparing travelling exhibitions for schools, rooms for the developing and printing of photographs and for drawing, and all other equipment necessary for the independent administration of the Museum.

In these circumstances, the competent authorities considered it necessary that the National Archaeological Museum of Valletta should be completely reorganized on a satisfactory basis and they decided to use for this purpose a huge building in the town, the "Auberge d'Italie", which at present houses the Court of Justice. This decision will make it possible not only to solve the problems of the Archaeological Museum in accordance with rigorous scientific standards corresponding to the importance of its present and future collections, but also to place the whole of the "Auberge de Provence", where the Museum is now housed, at the disposal of the Pinacoteca Nazionale (National Picture Gallery) (1). The mere availability of a building large enough to meet the Museum's requirements obviously does not mean that the problem has been solved; for, in addition to providing premises for the exhibitions and administrative services it will also be necessary to ensure the training of a staff of technicians and specialists who will be responsible for organizing the Museum's services and capable of breathing new life into the Museum so that it will play an active part in the social and cultural life of the country. The proposed reorganization of the Museum, shown in the attached plan therefore gives a clear indication of the size and qualifications of the technical and scientific staff which will be required.

⁽¹⁾ The Pinacoteca cannot be reorganized until the premises at present being used by the Archaeological Museum as display rooms and administrative offices have been vacated.

(C) Description of the palace, "Auberge d'Italie"

Although it is often difficult to adapt an ancient palace to the special requirements of a modern museum, seeing that it was designed for completely different purposes, this is not true of the "Auberge d'Italie" owing to the fact that it is extremely spacious. There is no doubt that the total cubic space of the building would be vastly more useful if it could be differently arranged, but, as shown by the attached plan, it can be adapted in such a way that the Museum's collections would be able to be displayed, and its functional requirements met, quite satisficationally.

The "Auberge d'Italie" is a quadrangular building with a large central courtyard. There are four wings. The most ancient, on the Via dei Mercanti, has three storeys and a basement; each of the other wings has three storeys, of which . only two are suitable for use by the Museum; there is also a semi-basement under a part of each of these wings. Except for minor structural changes, the architectural plan of the building cannot be altered, particularly in the case of the main wing, which dates from the sixteenth century, and this combined with the excessive height of the rooms - from six to eight metres - makes the building difficult to adapt for use as a museum. As regards the distribution of the actual floor space, the attached plan shows that, with certain concessions and a good deal of ingenuity, it will be possible to organize a logical itinerary for visitors and suitably house the administrative services and various other services indispensable to a museum. offset the enormous height of the rooms, which might overwhelm the exhibits, which are of relatively small dimensions, and divert attention from them, it is proposed to split up the space (in the exhibition rooms only) by building new rooms as it were "inside" the existing ones. The plans indicate certain showcases grouped in such a way as to form "inside rooms" each dealing with a particular theme.

This arrangement, whereby the space is divided up by the grouping of the show-cases, will make it possible not only to ensure a proper balance between the exhibits and the size of the rooms, but also to group together or isolate the archaeological exhibits in accordance with the scientific character of the Museum.

Moreover, this arrangement does not preclude, but even strengthens, the possibility of fitting up whenever necessary, suspended galleries in various rooms as a means of increasing the available space for exhibitions. No indication of this is given in the plan, as the available space is, for the moment, quite adequate; but, later on, thanks to the size and height of the building and the proposed height of the "groups of showcases", there will be no difficulty, either as regards quantity or quality, in selecting the superstructures capable of increasing the usable area inside the building.

(D) Features of the plan

The transfer of the Archaeological Museum of Malta to another building is an operation which not only entails the adoption of modern display methods but also - which is even more important - raises the whole question of the criteria which should govern the organization and functioning of the Museum. The transfer of the collections to a building offering much greater facilities, particularly as regards space, than the present one, should provide those responsible with an excellent opportunity for setting up an institution able to carry out efficiently its cultural and social tasks and constitute an attraction for tourists.

To meet these basic requirements, a plan for the adaption of the new building has been prepared; its aim is to obtain from the building the best possible "output" compatible with its structural and architectural limitations, so that the Museum will be suitably equipped and able to:

- (1) provide adequate facilities for the display and preservation of the collections;
- (2) stimulate the visitor's interest in the Museum and its collections;
- (3) help visitors to understand the value and significance of the exhibits;
- (4) organize teaching and cultural activities.

As regards the display of the collections, the first step was to work out, in collaboration with the Museum's scientific staff, a general scheme for the chronological arrangement of the collections, from the pre-historic period to the Middle Ages; at the same time, the place where each object was found will be indicated.

In accordance with the said scheme, the various groups of showcases (see preceding section) were then installed in the spaces assigned to them, thus fixing the visitor's itinerary (see Table 5).

As regards the equipment required for the preservation of material not on public display, the plan provides for:

- (1) suitable store-rooms (temporary and permanent) for archaeological finds;
- (2) workshops with equipment for at least the most common operations for the restoration of clay and stone objects;
- (3) rooms for the developing and printing of photographs and for drawing, destined for the preparation of the surveys of archaeological sites and finds; these surveys should always accompany the latter, whether they be kept in the store-rooms or put on display. (See Tables 3 and 4).

With regard to the devices for stimulating the visitor's interest in the Museum and its collections, it is proposed to organize:

- (1) an introductory section designed to prepare visitors by giving them information concerning what they are about to see as well as concerning the geographical, historical, social, political, religious and economic aspects of the ancient civilizations which produced the exhibits on display(2). (This introductory section, containing captions, charts,
- (1) This arrangement, based on chronology rather than on topography, was adopted because in the case of the Maltese Islands, the question of topographical location is of secondary importance. As there are no cultural differences between the various parts of the islands, the islands as a whole are regarded, from the archaeological standpoint, as constituting a single topographical unit.
- (2) Only in this way, and by developing this section to the maximum, will it be possible to stimulate the visitor's interest and avoid giving the false impression that the Museum is an institution designed for specialists only or, worse still, a place containing only works of art, which in fact especially in an archaeological museum are few and far between.

photographs, full-sized and small-scale models, is arranged chronologically, in accordance with the general scheme, and corresponds to the sequence of the exhibition rooms.) In this way, visitors will be encuraged to link up the information contained in the introductory section with the explanatory notes attached to the exhibits on display (see Table 3).

- (2) A section for lectures and the showing of films and slides, designed for all sections of the public for highly qualified scientists and scholars as well as for the common people.
- (3) A section for temporary exhibitions to be organized not only on special occasions but as part of a permanent programme of "informative lectures" on the various subjects to which the Museum's exhibits relate (see Table 3).

As regards the equipment necessary for explaining the significance of the exhibits, it is proposed that, in addition to the measures outlined in the foregoing paragraph, a large amount of the space assigned to each group of exhibits should be reserved for the purpose of supplying all the requisite information about them: the place where they were found, the uses for which they were intended, the relation between them and objects found in other places and belonging to the same historical period, their technical and morphological development, etc. (all this will lend to make them "living" objects for the visitor, who will thus understand their true significance instead of viewing them as mere objects).

The special museum for students and scholars is arranged in the same general chronological order in the form of a "second devices" museum. Thus, although it is intended mainly for a "special public", there is nothing to prevent anyone desirous of obtaining a greater knowledge of a particular subject from visiting this specialized part of the Museum. (see Table 5).

As to the bibliographical services, they will be housed in the new premises which will become available when the third storey of the wing on the Via dei Mercanti, which is over 8 metres in height, is split into two. These premises will be completely independent of the Museum, though connected with the administrative offices, and their technical and functional equipment (lighting by means of large skylights, sound-proofing, and so on) will be such as to constitute a bibliographical section capable of doing more than simply cater for the limited, specialized requirements of the Museum. (see Table 7).

In addition to the above-mentioned general criteria, relating to the recorganization of the Archaeological Museum of Malta, certain special criteria pertaining to the Museum's "centralizing" function and, consequently, to its "arrangement" must be observed. By "centralizing" function we mean that it is desirable that the National Museum of Valletta should contain all the archaeological collections discovered in Malta(1), for owing to the fact that Malta is small in size and, as already remarked, constitutes, from the archaeologically standpoint, a single topographical unit, it would be illogical if the collections were scattered among the various local museums, and there would be serious gaps in the scientific arrangement of the National Museum's Collections. In this connexion, it is useful to say a few words about the Museum's function as an attraction for tourists, referred to at the beginning of this "report".

⁽¹⁾ With the sole exception of the Island of Gozo, which constitutes another centre with a fairly autonomous culture and which although requiring a museum of its own, should figure in the introductory section of the Valletta Museum.

It is considered that the Museum's centralizing function will in no way reduce the number of tourists visiting Malta's archaeological sites, but that on the contrary, thanks particularly to its introductory section, giving the location of these sites, together with all the requisite information about them, the Museum will become, as it were, a valuable centre of information on the antiquities of the entire island, and so encourage and help people to go and see them for themselves.

The adaptation of the "Auberge d'Italie" for use as an archaeological museum will certainly entail extensive work, owing to the nature of the building as well as to its present function (Court of Justice). This work may be divided into three categories: firstly, rearrangement (as far as possible) of the available space; secondly, improvement of the general facilities for visitors, and, thirdly, the fitting-out of the Museum.

It will, obviously, not be possible to define the three types of operations until the final plan has been established and is ready for execution. Only then, will it be possible to fix the budgetary estimates (individual and global) and draw up a time-table of work.

All that can be done for the moment is to make a rough estimate, based on the cost of previous similar operations, at the rate of 50-60 thousand lire per square metre which - for a total usable area of 5,000 square metres - would give a total expenditure of 250-300 million lire.

This estimate does not include the cost of any materials or manufactured articles which may have to be imported.

Professor Franco Minissi, Architect, Unesco expert, Author of the Plan

October-November 1967

(E) General scheme of the chronological and topographical arrangement of the Museum

Period	EPOCH	Main localities	
	CHAR DALAM	Ghar Dalam - Mgarr - Skorba - Santa Verna (Gozo)	
<u>Neolithic</u>	GREY SKORBA	Skorba - Santa Verna (Gozo)	
	RED SKORBA	Skorba	
	ZEBBUG	Ta'Trapna (Zebbug) - Mgarr - unknown origin - Santa Verna (Gozo)	
	MGARR	Mgarr - Kordin	

Period	EPOCH	Main localities
Copper Age	GGANTIJA	Ggantija (Gozo) - Kordin - Mgarr - Skorba - Kemxija - Bengemma - Bugibba - Mnajdra - Tarxien Hagar Qin - Hal Ginwi - Tal Qadi - Kaghra (Gozo) Santa Verna (Gozo).
	SAPLIENI	Saflieni Hypogeum - Mgarr - Tarxien - Mnajdra - Santa Verna (Gozo).
	TARXIEN	Tarxien - Skorba - Mnajdra - Xrobb il-Ghagin - Borg in-Nadur - Concezzjoni - Maghtab - Mgarr - Ggantija (Gozo) - Santa Verna (Gozo) - Borg li- Mramma (Gozo).
	TARXIEN CEMETERY	Tarxien - Skorba - Tal-Mejtin - Kappara - the dolmens of Malta and Gozo - Borg in-Nadur - Victoria (Gozo) The "cartttracks" (Malta and Gozo).
	BORG IN-NAJUR	Borg in-Nadur - Dingli Cliffe - Tas-Silg - Nuffara (Gozo)
	BAHRIJA	Bahrija - Borg in-Nadur - Tas Silg
Phoenician- Punic	From about 800 BC to 216 BC	Tas-Silg - Zurrieq - tomòs and necropolises - inscriptions - submarine finds (Malta and Gozo)
Roman	From 215 BC to about 400 A.D.	Roman villa, Rabat - Roman house, Rabat - round towers (Ta'Gawhar, Torrijet, Tal-Bukkari, Ta'Cieda etc.) - Chajn Tuffiens - Cacciatura - San Pawl Milqi - Tas - Silg - Rabat-Mdina (topography etc. of the Roman city) - tombs, necropolises and catacombs (Malta and Gozo) - inscriptions - submarine finds - (Malta and Gozo) - Villa of Ramla (Gozo) - Victoria and Gran Castello (Gozo) - Nymphaeum of Ras il-Wardjija (Gozo).
Syzantine	From about 400 A.D. to 870 A.D.	Tas-Silg - Catacombs (as at Abbatija tad-Dejr)- submarine finds

(F) List of archaeological materials which have already been acquired by the Department of Antiquities and which are to be included in the Museum's existing collections

Locality	Place of Origin	Epoch
Rabat	Roman Villa (excavations by the Italian mission)	Punic Roman Byzantine Arab Mediaeval
San Pawl Milqi	Village of Bur Murrad (temporary storehouse)	Punic Roman
Rabat	Roman house, Saqqaja (Museum storehouse)	Roman
Miscellaneous	Collections from the Vilhena Palace (Mdina)	Objects from Punic graves Objects from Roman graves
Skorba	Museum storehouses	Neolithic Copper age
Miscellaneous	Museum storehouses	Objects from Punic graves Objects from Roman graves
Mi scellaneous	Museum storehouses	Roman submarine archaeo- logical finds.

(G) Preliminary report on the reorganization of the collections and of the auxiliary services

Present situation

- (I) National Museum, Archaeological Section, Valletta
 - (a) three rooms containing material dating from the prehistoric period, from the Char Dalam epoch to the Borg in-Nadur Bahrija epochs.
 - (b) a room containing a variety of decorated architectonic elements, original models and reconstructions of temples, and other stone objects;

- (c) a room containing the alters and the lower part of the giant statue from the Tarxien temples;
- (d) two rooms containing pottery and other material from Phoenician, Punic and Roman tombs, inscriptions and two sarccophagi;
- (e) corridor with a display of models of various types of tombs and a small selection of Arab and mediaeval pottery;
- (f) corridor for "new finds"; at present, submarine finds are displayed there.

(II) Roman Villa and Museum of Roman Antiquities, Rabat

- (a) a room containing a display of various objects belonging to the Punic-Roman-Byzantine period; pottery from tombs and excavation sites; glass objects; sculpture; architectonic elements; inscriptions (all from different parts of Malta);
- (b) the peristyle and its passage-way, and two rooms from the Roman Villa with the original mosaics "in situ", together with objects found on the spot, displayed along the walls of the modern protective structure; there are also two showcases of objects from the Roman Tower at Ta'Gawar and the Punic-Roman site at Ras ir-Raheb.

(III) Museum of Gozo, Gran Castello, Victoria

Ground floor

(a) a room containing two inscriptions, a mortar, and oliva-press and other objects dating from the Roman period.

First floor

- (b) a room containing material from prehistoric sites, Punic and Roman tombs, also Roman pottery from Victoria and elsewhere, and objects from the Roman Villa at Ramla,
- (c) a room containing material found in the Roman ruins at Xlendi;
- (d) an exhibition room containing Carthaginian and Roman coins, pottery and a funeral stele (Arab period).

Shortcomings of the present situation

Prehistoric period

In both Malta and Gozo, the amount of prehistoric material on public display is much less than it could be if use were made of all the collections available in the Museum Department. Making a conservative estimate, it may be said that the amount of material displayed could be increased by fifty per cent and its standard considerably improved by drawing on the material which must still remain in the store-houses owing to the lack of space. Moreover, for the same reason, the exhibits are not accompanied by sufficient explanatory documentation such as diagrams, drawings and photographs, though these are now obviously an essential part of the equipment of every modern museum.

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Phoenician-Punic period

The Phoenician-Punic material is displayed partly in the National Museum of Valletta and partly in the Roman Antiquities Museum of Rabat, the latter occupying only the entrance room of the Roman Villa. This illogical arrangement is a consequence of the events of the Second World War and of the years immediately following it, when the archaeological collections were dispersed and the building, the "Auberge d'Italie" (Valletta) in which they had been housed in almost ideal conditions was put to other uses. In accordance with modern museographical methods, these two collections of objects relating to the same period should be united as soon as possible. Once this has been done, they will require twice as much space as they now occupy in order to be displayed to their best advantage.

Romano-Byzantine period

The foregoing remarks concerning the exhibits of the Phoenician-Punic period also apply to the collections of the National Museum and of the Roman Antiquitie. Museum, which though not identical, cover the same field, each giving no more than an incomplete picture of the period in question. However, this case differs from the preceding one in that it would be possible - indeed essential - to add a certain amount of relevant material to the Romano-Byzantine collections if they were united in the same building.

The new sites at Tas-Silg and San Pawl Milqi are also extremely important with regard to the Phoenician-Punic and the Romano-Byzantine periods. According to modern museographical standards, the finds from each of these sites should normally be exhibited on the spot in a suitable building but, under present conditions, the most that can be hoped for is that sufficient space will be made available for the display of a comprehensive selection of the most important material within the framework of a general exhibition of classical antiquities - Phoenician, Punic, Roman and Byzantine.

Arab and mediaevel periods

Remains from these periods are not very numerous, but they have a special significance which could be better illustrated if the number of exhibits were increased and presented in accordance with modern museographical methods.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Without going here more deeply into the problems outlined above, it is quite clear that the National Museum and the Gozo Museum not only fail to give a sufficiently complete picture of the national archaeological heritage but have reached a stage at which no further improvement of any kind is possible. The main problem, in both cases, is lack of space; once this is solved, all the other obstacles in the way of their normal development will disappear almost automatically. In the case of the Gozo Museum, the problem has always been that the whole of the existing building needs to be reserved for the display of the archaeological collection. It is to be hoped that, when the historical collections are transferred from the "Casa Bondi" to the new Museum of History, Art and Folk-customs (as proposed under the second five-year development plan), the necessary additional space will become available.

The most logical and rational solution to the more general problem confronting Malta, would be to hand back the "Auberge d'Italie" to the Museum Department. In the latter's spacious, well-planned premises, there would be ample room to enable all the archaeological collections (prehistoric, Phoenician-Punic, Romano-Byzantine, Arab and mediaevel) to be displayed in suitable conditions after their rearrangement on the lines suggested above and, at the same time, there would remain sufficient space for the various essential services (e.g. special exhibitions for scholars, lecture-rooms, facilities for schools, archives, a restoration and preservation workshop, a photographic laboratory and an office for the Inspectorate of Monuments), all of which are still lacking.

Professor Francesco Saverio Mallia

12 December 1966.

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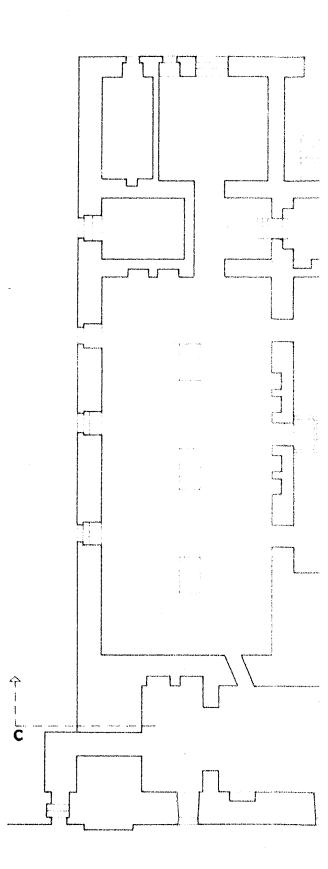
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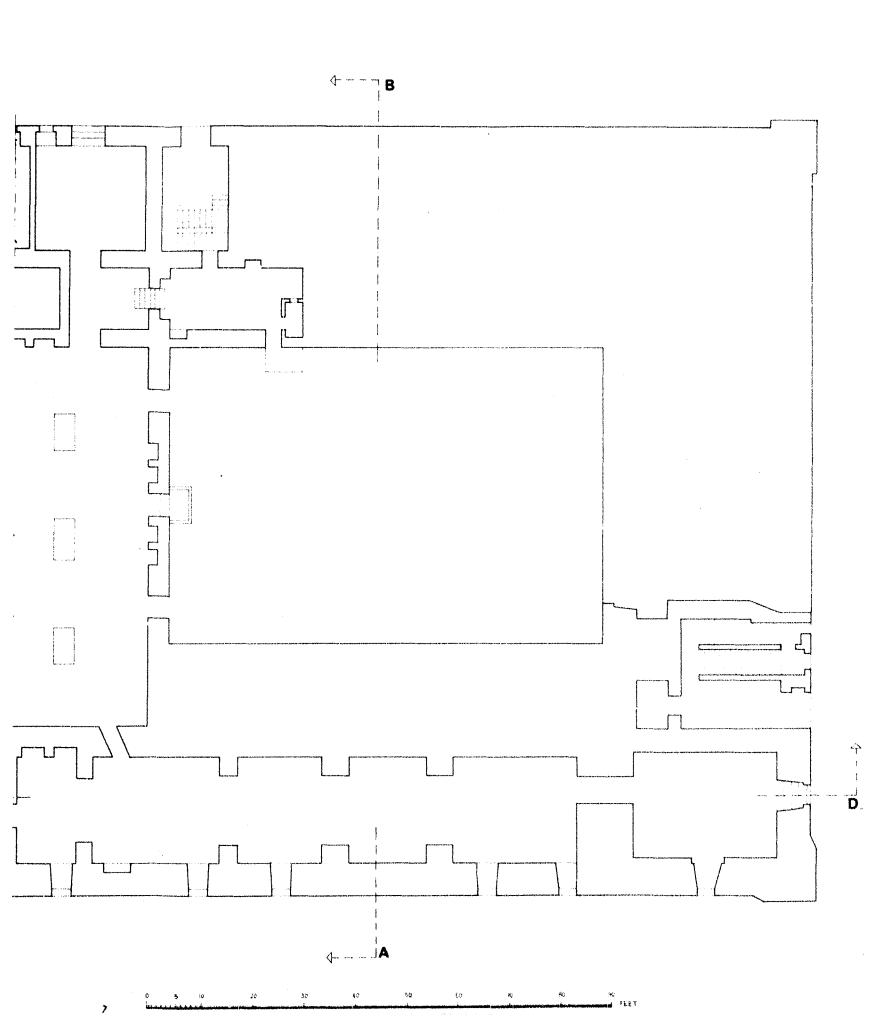
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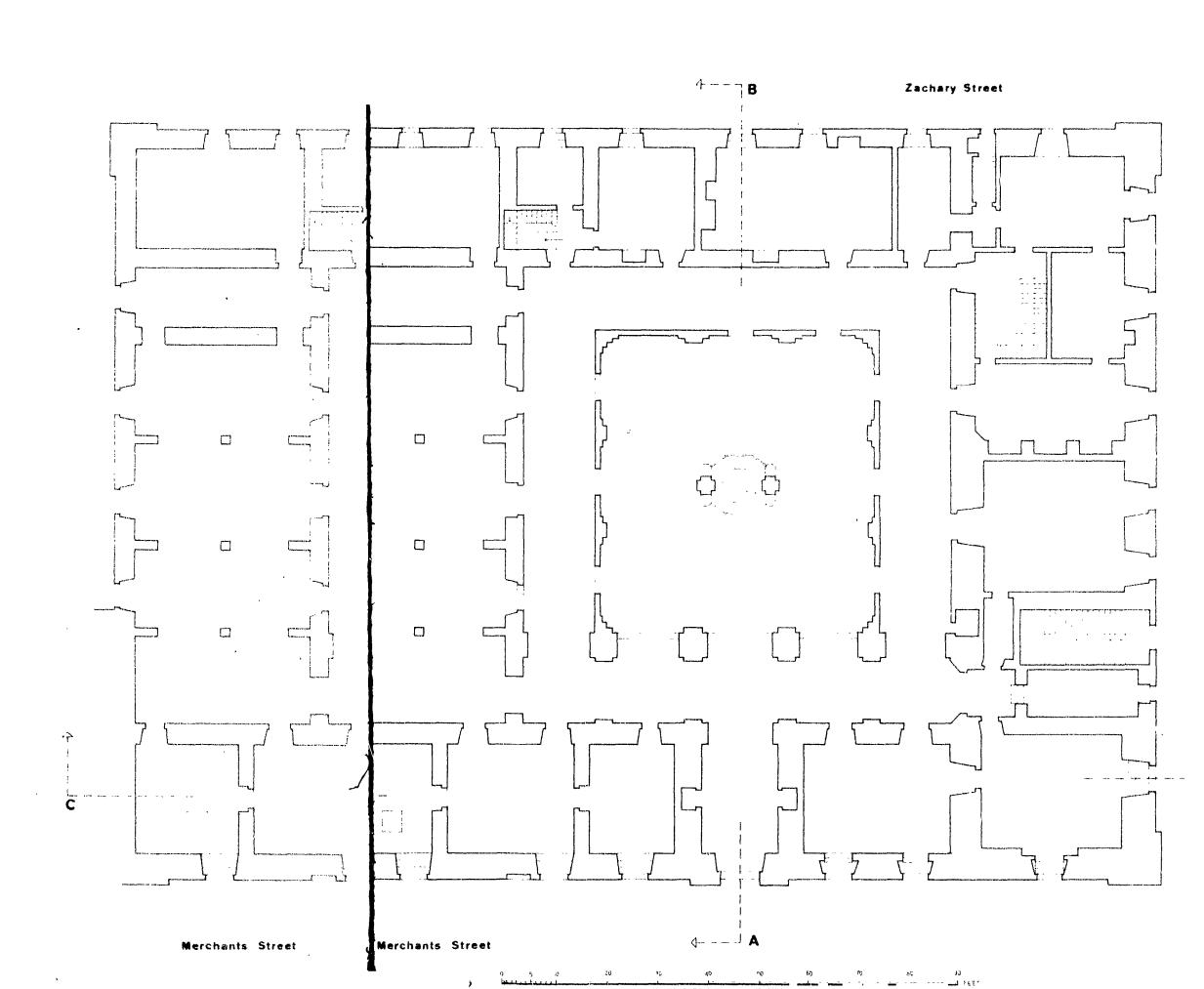


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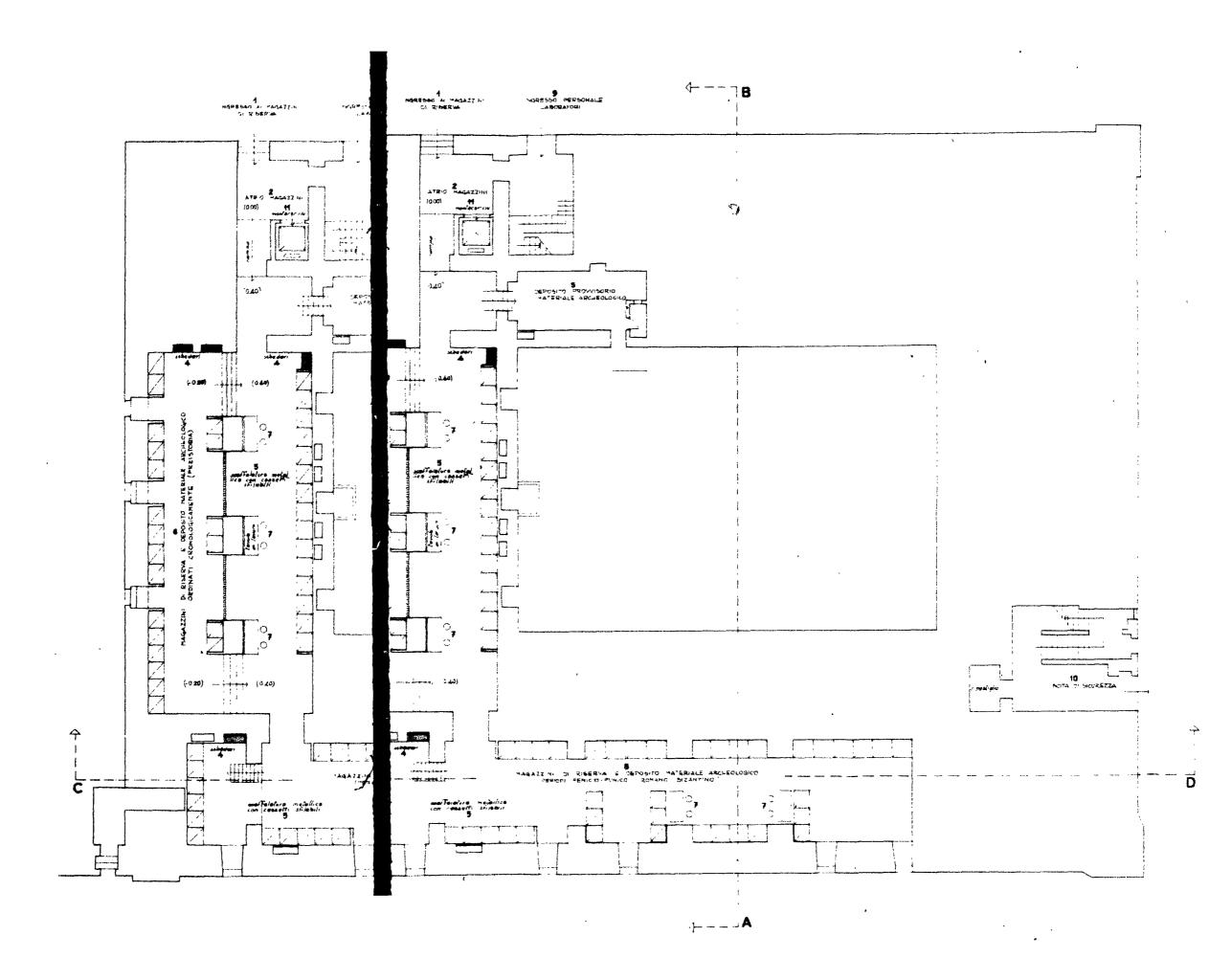
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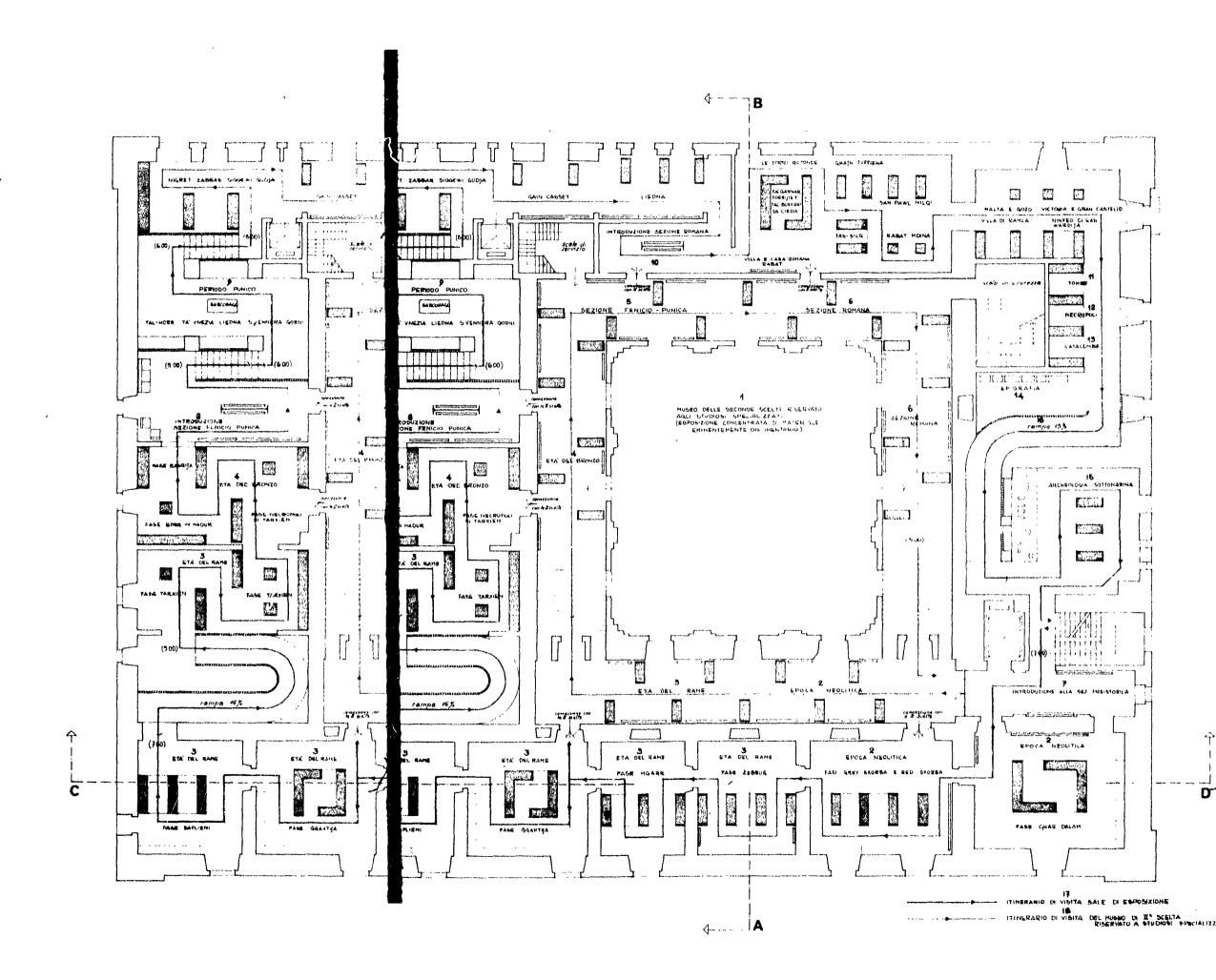
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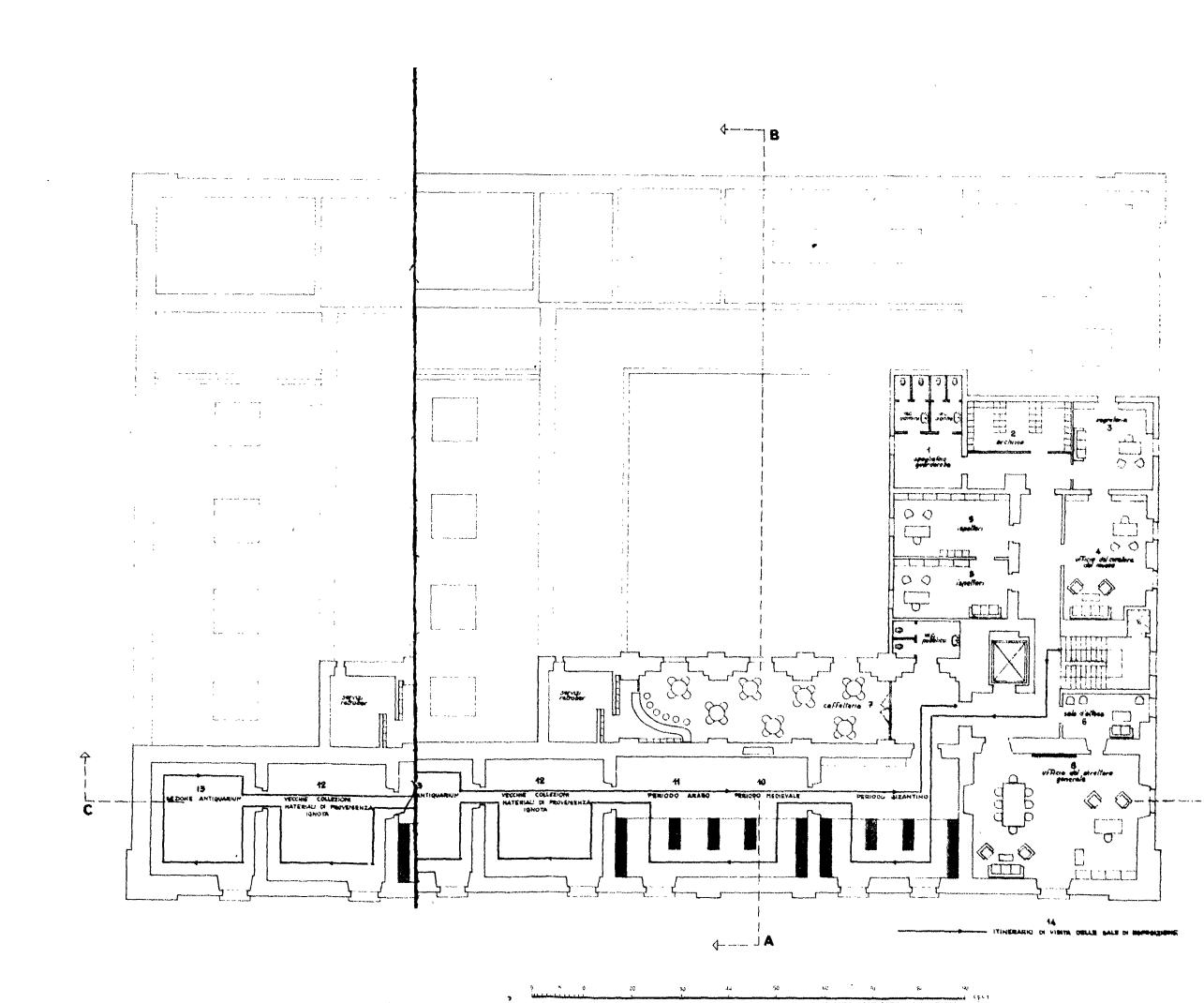
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