



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

Portus

Duration: 0:05:03

START AUDIO

(Music)

Female: Portus was the principal port of the ancient city of Rome. It was the gateway to the Mediterranean for most of the Imperial Period from the 1st century BC until the 5th century AD.

The port played a key role in supplying food, slaves, animals, marble and all manner of luxury goods from across the Mediterranean, North Africa and beyond to the citizens of Rome. It was vital to the success of the Roman Empire and the only real transport hub serving the city.

The AHRC-funded Portus Project is the largest and most extensive excavation ever to take place at Portus. Led by academics from the University of Southampton, the Project also involves an international collaboration between the British School at Rome and several other UK and Italian institutions.

The Project has been using a wide range of virtual imaging tools to interpret and present the site, both as it is now and as it is believed to have looked in the past. These computer animations make the site easier to understand by presenting archaeological findings in a visual and historically-accurate format, making it accessible to scholars and the general public alike.

Some of the most exciting finds of the excavation include the remains of a large Roman warehouse and an amphitheatre. The team has also uncovered what has been identified as an imperial palace, which is likely to have played host to renowned emperors such as Hadrian.

Prof Keay:

Portus must be one of the most important archaeological sites in the world. It must be up there with Stonehenge, with Machu Picchu, with Angkor Wat; major sites, unique sites like that.

There was only one ancient Rome and Rome only really had one imperial port. Portus was that port and the great thing about Portus is that much of it has been preserved. Most of it has been preserved and there's an awful lot of more work than can be done there.

Even though great archaeologists like Lanciani and others have looked at it and drawn plans and so no, no-one's ever actually excavated this port. So records going back to the 19th and 18th century are fascinating because they tell us all about the discovery of statues and inscriptions and columns; but we don't know where they've come from, we don't know what the palace itself looked like.

So there's really when we started this Project there was a sense of trepidation. What are we going to find? And I must say what we've found is really helping our staff to re-interpret the palace and, by implication really, better understand the whole port.

Something which we had not expected to find, which was a large oval building, which we've interpreted as an amphitheatre. And while you expect to find amphitheatres in towns or outside of towns, military camps, finding an amphitheatre at a port, right down by the harbour side is a little bit more unusual.

Dr Earl:

So a lot of the techniques that we use we're borrowing from other disciplines. A clear example might be architecture. Architects are interested in how people move from one space to another, particularly when they're given a particular task. It's how to make optimal use of the building.

What we do is apply the same kinds of models based on people being roughly the same size and shape, and giving them specific tasks that are appropriate to the past. So move all the materials from a harbour

side here, through the building and move them outside to be shipped somewhere else.

So what we can see is how virtual people move around in an environment using technologies that are designed for making buildings today. What we then have to do, because we're not working in the present we're working with people with very different motivations, probably very different kinds of social interaction, is think very carefully about the models that are produced. But at least doing that modelling gives us a new starting point, more than you get simply from the archaeological remains that we have available to us.

Prof Keay:

This has a great story to tell. There is so much more to know. When you consider that 90%, *grosso modo*, of Portus is effectively unexplored. And what we've found in the work that we've been doing is that even in this small area that we've been working—which isn't so small, it's getting up to 450 sq m—that the archaeological sequence is incredibly complex. And that reflects a fantastic dynamism of development. An awful lot was going on at this port.

(Music)

END AUDIO