

Diocletian's Palace

SO MUCH MORE THAN AN
EMPEROR'S VEGETABLE PATCH

When illness struck, Emperor Diocletian retired to his newly built palace, a lavish complex that today forms the heart of Split on Croatia's Dalmatian coast. **Vivian Grisogono** talks to **Radoslav Bužančić** whose excavations are revealing the hidden glories of this epitome of 4th-century Roman architectural chic.

When work began on Diocletian's Palace in about AD 295 at Aspalathos, a port in his native Dalmatia, the emperor was at the height of his powers. But, by the time the complex was finished two decades later, illness had prompted him to abdicate. Though he recovered, he shunned a return to power, preferring, so it is claimed, to grow vegetables in his kitchen garden. Whether this is true or not – it was reported by the Roman historian Aurelius Victor nearly five decades after Diocletian's death in AD 316 – this myth has coloured the interpretation of what remains of his sumptuous palace.

There are no known written records about the concept, design, or construction of the Palace. Today, much of what remains has been subsumed into a hotch-potch of dwellings following centuries during which people seeking refuge from marauding armies have made their homes within the safety of its walls. Today, the narrow streets hamper archaeological investigation and conservation work. But, as Split continues to thrive and grow, archaeological finds often are discovered by chance during modern construction work. However, because many buildings of historical significance in this area are privately owned, a balance must be struck between preserving heritage and allowing for 21st-century use.

TOP Diocletian's Palace in Split is engulfed by the houses that have grown up around it and within its defensive walls.

INSET Portrait of Diocletian from the frieze in his Mausoleum at Split.

Looking for clues

Most of the pagan artefacts and symbols that once adorned the buildings were either removed or destroyed after the temples were converted for Christian use. While significant sections of the core buildings remain, including the palace walls and towers, almost every trace of any associated structures built by Diocletian beyond the Palace enclosures is gone. It is no surprise, then, that for centuries,



IMAGE: Željko Bačić



LEFT A section of the aqueduct that brought water to Aspalathos.

INSET A sketch reconstruction of the aqueduct showing its construction.

Aspalathos lies close to a river, which, together with the extended aqueduct, ensured water was plentiful. It also had sulphur springs (close to where the fish market is today), and sulphur is an essential ingredient for the bleaching process. Perhaps the abundant supply of both water and sulphur influenced Diocletian's choice of location, for textile production was certainly extremely profitable and Diocletian made the whole purple-dyeing industry a state monopoly.

Another enigma has puzzled historians and archaeologists alike: what is the correct term to describe this so-called Palace? There was so little evidence to explain the use of its various parts, especially in the northern section. Moreover, it appeared to lack some of the attributes of a 'genuine' Imperial palace, such as those at Antioch and Constantinople. So should it even be called a palace (*palatium*)? Was it a military camp (*castrum*), or a country estate (*villa*)? ▶



IMAGE: Žilko Bačić, Radoslav Bužančić

Diocletian's Palace was overlooked by historians and travellers.

Attention, when it did come, concentrated on the tightly packed area within the massive walls that defined the Palace. Interestingly, the alignment of the Palace walls forms a trapezium rather than the typical square grid layout. Also, it appears that the site required major preparation before construction work could begin, due to the sharp downward slope on its south side. Clearly, the site was not chosen arbitrarily, so why did Diocletian pick this spot?

Salona, the capital of the Roman Province of Dalmatia, was supplied with water via an aqueduct from the spring of the Jadro River. It was built during the reign of the Emperor Augustus (27 BC-AD 14), and ran for 3,850m, channeling up to 12,000m³ of water per day. Diocletian enlarged the aqueduct and extended it 8km to Aspalathos, giving it the capacity to supply up to 129,600m³ per day. Thus Aspalathos enjoyed a greater water supply than the capital with its population of about 60,000. But why did he do this?

Water is essential for textile production and, in Diocletian's day, Aspalathos had textile workshops: the office of works manager (*Procurator gynaeccii Iovensis Dalmatiae-Aspalato*) is recorded in *Notitia Dignitatum*, a document listing Roman officials and their administrative offices up to the late 4th and 5th centuries.

FROM HUMBLE ORIGINS TO DIVINE STATUS

Born in Dalmatia, Diocles was a man of humble origins who rose to success in the military, before becoming emperor by army acclaim in AD 284, and taking the name Gaius Aurelius Valerius Diocletianus. As well as Augustus, he gave himself the titles *Sol invictus* ('Unvanquished Sun') and *Diocletianus Jovius* ('Son of Jupiter', the king of the gods).

In AD 285, Diocletian divided the Empire into East and West, appointing Aurelius Maximianus as Caesar in the Western Empire. In AD 293, he established the Tetrarchy with Maximian as joint Augustus, though Diocletian retained seniority as Son of Jupiter, with Maximian as Son of Hercules (Hercules was the son of Jupiter). They were joined by their deputies, the Caesars Galerius and Constantius Chlorus.



IMAGE: Radoslav Bužančić



ABOVE The depiction of the Palace by Ernest Hébrard (1875-1933), commonly used in tourist guides, is fanciful and inaccurate.

RIGHT Excavation along the waterfront revealed the exterior wall of the Palace was some distance from the water, and was fronted by another building, possibly a stadium.



IMAGE: Žilko Bačić; Zoran Alajbegić

Many early writers referred to it as a *villa*, and certainly there are similarities with the extravagant complex of Emperor Hadrian (ruled AD 117-138), which had more than 30 buildings at Tibur (Tivoli), 29km from the capital of the Empire at Rome. As well as the Imperial palace for the emperor and residential buildings for his courtiers, Hadrian's Villa included several temples, state rooms, baths (*thermae*), libraries, a theatre, and a mausoleum.

However, 'Diocletian's Palace' has for centuries been the accepted term for the whole complex within the fortified walls. It comprises three main sections: the northern part, whose functions have not been established; the southern part, which we refer to as the Imperial Quarters; and the *Temenos*, or temple enclosure, that lies between the two.

Palace secrets

Now, recent excavations at two sites beyond the Palace walls have shown that Diocletian's building project at Aspalathos was more wide-ranging than previously thought. In 2013, during construction work for a new shopping mall to the north of the Palace, the outline of part of a Roman amphitheatre was revealed. It dates to the early 4th century AD, and has a span of 50m. Further investigation revealed that the line of the aqueduct skirted around the eastern stands, suggesting that these two structures were planned and built in tandem. Though previous excavations had uncovered the remains of the stands, they had been attributed to a theatre or *odeon*. Now we realise they actually form part of an amphitheatre.

It was also long thought that the south wall of the Palace was built along

the water's edge – as seen in the popular image by Ernest Hébrard (above left), who depicted the Palace as a *villa maritima*. But excavations in 2006 and 2007 along the western half of the waterfront (*riva*) revealed this was not the case. In fact, there was an earlier wall a little more than 12m away from the southern façade of the Palace. A thick layer of concrete dating to Diocletian's time extends for about 180m along the waterfront – roughly a *stadium* (unit of measurement) – and as the sea level in Diocletian's time was nearly 2m lower than it is today, this concrete structure would have been above the water line.

We do not know how far the structure extends southwards into the sea, and speculation as to its function is ongoing. But the lower part of the Palace's south wall has no openings other than a single modest doorway, so it is possible spectator

BELOW Diagram reconstruction of the Palace core.

RIGHT Jerko Marasović's ground plan of the Palace, with modern findings marked in green by Vivian Grisogono.

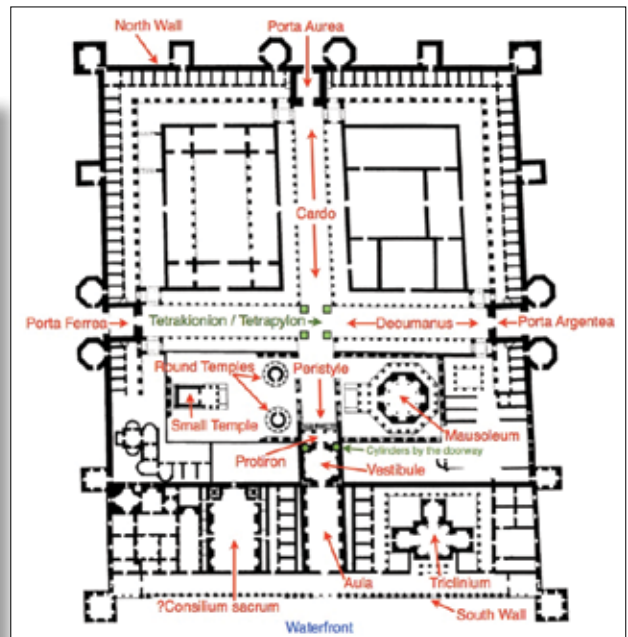
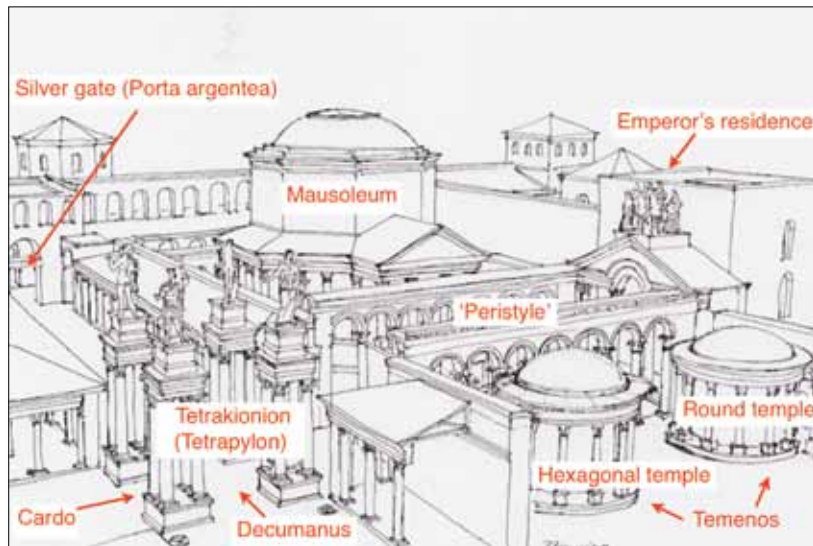


IMAGE: Radoslav Bužančić



LEFT The Basement beneath the Palace reveals a series of archways and galleries.

stands were banked against it, as one typically finds in a stadium. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that the majestic Serlian windows in the upper part of the south wall were accessible only from the Imperial Quarters – the central window, reached through a portico in line with the Porta Aurea, is now walled up – suggesting they were viewing points for important events in the area below on the seafront, reinforcing the stadium theory.

We will not be able to investigate this area further as, following excavation, all traces of the antique structures on the seafront were paved over. However, plans are now under way to excavate the eastern half of the waterfront. But whatever was in front of the Palace, the findings confirm that the difference in length between the south and north walls was no error. The north wall measured 175m, the south wall 182m, the west wall was over 200m, and the east wall slightly longer still. All three landward sides had sentry pathways, whereas the south wall overlooking the sea did not.

Exploring the Palace

As yet, there is no sign of the emperor's famous vegetable patch, nor, indeed, of any gardens. The area within the walls was divided by the main streets: the *cardo* running north–south from the main gate, known as the Porta Aurea (Golden Gate); and the east–west *decumanus* linking the Porta Argentea (Silver Gate) with the Porta Ferrea (Iron Gate). On the south side towards the sea and at the level of the Basement or cellars (*podrumi*), there was (and, indeed, still is) a comparatively modest entrance commonly, but probably incorrectly, referred to as the Porta Aenea (Bronze Gate). This was clearly a kind of service entrance.

The Porta Aurea, the main entrance leading directly from the Salona–Aspalathos road into the Palace, was ornate and grand, with strong double doors. It had five niches above the gate on its outer side, which probably once held statues of the Tetrarchs with, perhaps, a representation of Jupiter

or Apollo at the centre. The designation of metals for each entrance, if correct, usually referred to historical eras, and the Golden Age was a time of peace and plenty, symbolised by olives and beehives.

Both main streets were about 12m wide, and originally had covered walkways on either side that today are crowded by buildings. The southern end of the *cardo* was flanked by an imposing colonnade, as it is to this day, and is known as the Peristyle – though in the 18th century, when English architect Robert Adam made his drawings, it was called the Peristylum. It is generally accepted that the *cardo*, as a thoroughfare, ended where it met the *decumanus*, and that the Peristyle was more of a forum or gathering-place than a street. ▶



BELOW The Protiron with the east side of the Peristyle and the Mausoleum's entrance to the left.



PHOTO: Željko Bačić

ABOVE The Small Temple, now the Baptistery, is sometimes erroneously called the Temple of Jupiter.

The ground slopes away beneath the southern section of the Palace. An extensive series of archways and galleries known as the Basement supported the buildings above. The Basement was rectangular, by contrast with the trapezium above it. It is thought that one possible explanation for the asymmetry was the need to preserve pre-existing shrines – evidence of some of these structures has been discovered in the eastern part of the Imperial Quarters of the Imperial Residence.

Diocletian's private residence had winter and summer rooms built on either side of a dining area (*triclinium*). The Imperial baths

(*thermae*) lay on the western side, and there was a large hall (the *aula* or *salutatorium*) in the centre of the southern area. Between the *aula* and the *thermae* was a room that may have been a *consilium sacrum*.

Dominating the centre of the end of the *cardo* was the Protiron, a rectangular lobby supported on four massive red granite columns, and which was comprehensively restored between 2004 and 2012. The Emperor's processional path (*adventus*) led from the Porta Aurea along the *cardo* and Peristyle, terminating at the Protiron – a grand setting from which Diocletian could watch as the people gathered in the Peristyle below to pay him homage.

At the crossroads of the two main streets, excavations under the original Roman paving revealed a

construction base measuring 12.36m by 12.36m, with a cruciform ground-plan and foundations in each corner. During excavations in 1959/1960, it was thought this was the placement for a *groma* (a surveying instrument) for accurate alignment. However, the discovery of the true extent of the foundations, which filled the whole space of the *cardo-decumanus* intersection, suggested instead that this is the base for a *tetrakionion* or

RIGHT The sphinx with the head of Cybele sits at the entrance to the Mausoleum.

BELOW The original frieze around the upper section of the Mausoleum walls.

BELOW RIGHT The original floor of the Mausoleum, recently exposed, was constructed using the technique *opus sectile marmorum*.

tetrapylon, an imposing monumental structure positioned at the intersection of the two major roads.

At the centre of its base there was an isosceles cross marked out with pebbles set in a hard mortar, which was paved over during Diocletian's time, as it remains today. This symbol on the threshold at the entrance to the Palace signified transition into this sacred place.

Four temples

Temples sat on either side of the Peristyle, in the sacral area (Temenos) enclosed by walls separated from the Imperial Quarters by a trench – a common safety precaution in Roman times, especially against fire. The



PHOTO: V. Crisogono



PHOTOS: Željko Bačić

entrance to the Temenos on either side of the Peristyle was marked by four red granite columns, matching those of the Protiron.

Only two temples were still visible by the 16th century, but clearly there had been more: Thomas the Archdeacon in the 13th century described three temples, dedicated to Jupiter, Aesculapius, and Mars, while in the 16th century Antonio Proculiano mentioned four, dedicated to Janus, Cybele, Venus, and Jupiter. Even today there is confusion about which temple was dedicated to which god or gods.

A small round temple that lay to the west of the Peristyle, opposite the Mausoleum, is known as the Temple of Cybele – the Anatolian mother goddess adopted by the Romans as the *Magna Mater* ('Great Mother') and goddess of protection – though there is no proof that this attribution is correct. It was first discovered by chance in 1851 by Vicko Andrić, Split's first Conservator, during digging for a drainage channel. It was evidently considered unimportant, as there was no further mention of it in academic studies for more than 100 years, until it resurfaced during excavations led by Jerko Marasović in 1957. He revealed the remains of a coffered ceiling, which now can be seen in front of a restored part of the temple wall on the refurbished ground floor of the Skočibučić-Lukaris Palace, which opened in 2014. The temple's crypt was flooded sometime during the past centuries, and is still being investigated.

The 1957 excavations in the western Temenos also revealed the remains of another small round temple, north of the Temple of Cybele. This was attributed to Venus, and part of the temple floor is

preserved in the present-day Cafe Luxor on the west side of the Peristyle.

The rectangular structure in the west of the Temenos (now the Baptistry) is sometimes referred to as the Temple of Jupiter, but this is definitely wrong: it was most probably dedicated to Janus, the god with two faces who represented beginnings and transitions. Now usually referred to as the 'Small Temple', it is actually not the smallest of the four. The original intricate carvings around the doorway and the top of the external walls are still visible, as is the coffered barrel-vaulted ceiling of the *cella*.

We now know that the Temple of Jupiter is the Mausoleum where Diocletian was entombed, and which today is the Cathedral of St Domnius. It lies on the eastern side, and is the best preserved of the four temples. At its entrance sits a sphinx – there once may have been more – with the head of Cybele that formed the base for a statue of Jupiter.

“**DIOCLETIAN, AS THE 'SON OF JUPITER', EXPECTED TO ENJOY AN APOTHEOSIS AFTER HIS DEATH.**”



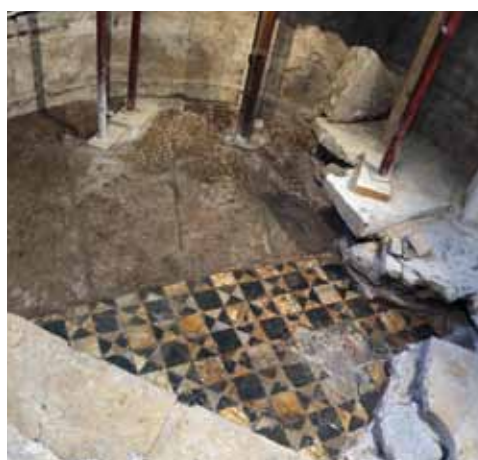
ABOVE The ornate decoration beneath the cupola inside the Mausoleum.

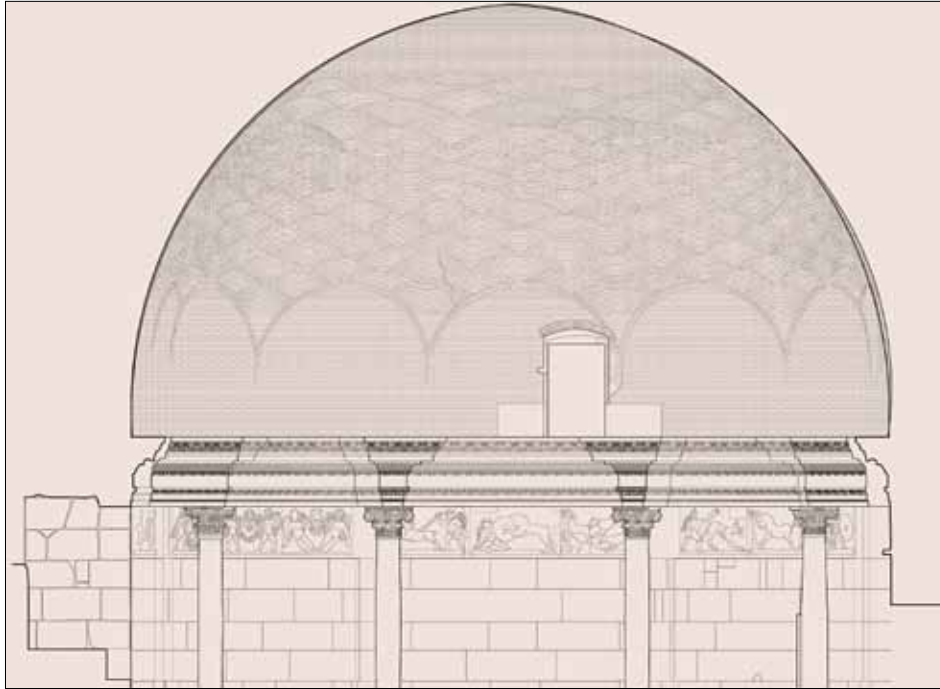
PHOTO: V Grisogono

Most of the pagan artefacts, including Diocletian's sarcophagus, were removed by the time the temple was converted into the Christian cathedral in the 7th century AD. But it retains the original pillars and carved capitals, along with most of the original frieze around the upper segment of the walls. The cupola remains, but without its mosaic decoration. Recently, part of the original floor was uncovered in front of a side altar dedicated to St Anastasius.

A statue of possibly Jupiter or *Sol Invictus* would have stood in a niche where there is now a window interrupting the centre of the frieze along the east wall opposite the door. To the right is a relief of Diocletian, to the left one of his wife Prisca. In the central medallion of the frieze on the west wall is a head, thought to be that of Hermes Psychopompus or Mercury, the god associated with leading people into the underworld.

Diocletian, as the 'Son of Jupiter', expected to enjoy an apotheosis after his death, and the Mausoleum was designed accordingly. It was built on an octagonal base, topped by a dome. The octagon symbolised transition from earth to heaven, with the eight points representing the solstices, equinoxes, seasons, and ▶





LEFT Cross-section of the Mausoleum cupola showing the change from the fish-scale vault to a simpler formation of concentric rings at the top of the cupola.

BELOW The sun streaming through the open *oculus* of the Vestibule. Note the two niches above the entrance: these would once have held statues.

cardinal and intermediate directions. The present octagonal roof is a later addition. When the Mausoleum roof was renovated, laser investigations showed that the original cupola had been lower and rounder, with a circular opening (*oculus*) at its centre. The open *oculus* would have allowed the sun to play over certain parts of the temple, particularly over the images in the frieze, and probably over the space designated for Diocletian's sarcophagus. The significance of sunlight shining through an *oculus* has been demonstrated in the Pantheon in Rome, and as this was such an important feature in the symbolic link between earth and the heavenly sun, it is probable that at least one of the round temples at Aspalathos was also open to the sky.

An eye for architecture

The one structure in the Palace that has retained the open *oculus* in its dome is the Vestibule. This structure stood behind the Protiron, in line with the Peristyle and the Porta Aurea. Its function has not been established, but it is believed to have been a type of lobby, leading into the *aula* or *salutatorium*. Its circular design was enclosed at ground level by square walls. Cylindrical structures in the spaces to the sides of the northern doorway, between the rounded sides of the Vestibule and the squared enclosing walls, suggest that there may have been machinery, possibly water-operated, to open and close the heavy doors. These would have been bronze, hence the name Porta Aenea.

Bronze represented Mars, the god of war and victory over enemies, and it is possible that these doors formed a ritual entrance (as we find in the palaces at Ravenna and Constantinople) associated with the cult of the emperor trampling on his subjects to make them well, or trampling on his enemies to subdue them.

The Vestibule was richly decorated with mosaics, fragments of which have been found. The interior of the dome was described as shimmering in gold by Marko Marulić (1450-1524), who referred to it as a fifth temple. In 2003 and 2004, Mladen Pejaković demonstrated the play of the sun's rays over the interior of the central northern niches during the solstices and equinoxes, leaving no doubt that the original building had a significant symbolic role.

Indeed, the Palace at Aspalathos was carefully designed to combine the earthly with the spiritual. While the northern section was probably planned for practical activities including administration, the southern part comprising the Temenos and Imperial Quarters formed a hallowed sanctuary where the gods were revered alongside Diocletian the demi-god.

The structures of the Palace were imbued with symbolism relating to the gods. Specific use was made of the effects of the sun's rays. The temples in the sacred area were designed as an image of the pathway from earth to heaven, with special emphasis on the Emperor's destiny to take his place among the gods after death.

It is perhaps ironic that, after his death, Diocletian's Mausoleum became a shrine to St Domnius, and its Crypt to St Lucy, two Christians martyred in his purges.

As excavation and investigations at Diocletian's Palace continue, we are beginning to understand more about the design, purpose, and symbolism of this remarkable building. What we can see already is that the results belie its long-held reputation as simply a luxurious retirement home where a humble former emperor quietly tended his vegetable patch. ■

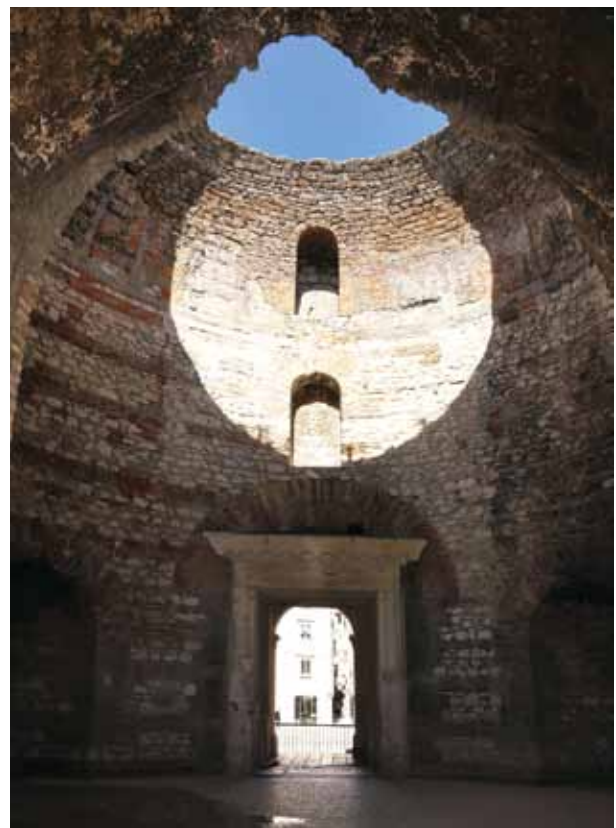


PHOTO: Žilko Bačić

SOURCE Dr Radoslav Bužančić, Head of the Croatian Ministry of Culture Conservation Office for Split-Dalmatia County.