

## The Archaeological Complex of the Loggia di Banchi<sup>i</sup>

### *Excavations for the Construction of the Museo della Città Genova. A Summary of Discoveries and Project Guidelines*



#### 1. ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES

Thanks to an initiative funded by the Ministry of Culture and promoted by the Segretariato Regionale per la Liguria and the Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio for the city of Genoa and the province of La Spezia, one of Genoa's most significant urban archaeological worksites has been established within the monumental Loggia dei Banchi since late 2021.

These excavations have revealed a complex, multi-layered archaeological site, pre-existing at the construction of the Loggia, which was inaugurated in 1595. Spanning 308 square meters, the site contains three distinct building blocks that display a series of structural modifications to the original 13th-century urban layout.

The archaeological analysis reveals the presence of buildings once belonging to two different *Alberghi* (a consortium of noble families, linked by blood ties or common economic interests, often living in neighbouring palaces): the de Nigro family near Piazza Banchi and the Usodimare family near Piazza Senarega. Over time, these buildings underwent numerous ownership changes between prominent families. The structures uncovered adhere to an urban planning model where clusters of buildings feature external facades along public streets, often lined with shops, while the inner grids contain more secluded spaces for social and ceremonial activities. These areas, including small squares, semi-private alleyways (*caruggi*), courtyards, and dead ends.

The significance of this central area, particularly in relation to the nearby harbor, is indisputable and dates back to Roman times. The oldest findings point to its use during this period, largely driven by mercantile activities (Phase A), offering tangible evidence of the area's role as a crucial hub linked to the harbor's commercial traffic.

Traces of an early medieval urban planning phase (Phase B) are incorporated into the substantial 13th-century building phase (Phase C), which was demolished at the end of the 16th century to make way for the construction of the Loggia. The medieval building layout is still largely discernible through the majority of the surviving structures, characterized by refined noble architecture, exemplified by the rusticated façade of the Loggia degli Usodimare. Urban development in this area also necessitated the creation of a drainage system, with the installation of sewer pipes beneath streets or between buildings, sometimes utilizing existing open sewers (*trexende*). This was

complemented by an intricate network of canals from different periods, channeling water southward toward the S. Anna stream, which began to be redirected as early as the 13th century.

Structural interventions in the 14th and 15th centuries (Phase D) are particularly evident in Building A, where the closing off of the loggia sections, the subdivision of interior spaces, and the installation of vertical insulation systems to counter rising damp can be observed. In Buildings B and C, the creation of window wells to allow light and air into the underground spaces necessitated the partial demolition of load-bearing walls, which in turn required the construction of new support structures to sustain the upward extension of the masonry. Room 6 in Building C, during this phase, underwent multiple modifications, including the installation of water-related structures.

The final interventions (Phase E), dated to the 16th century, mark the last stages of the buildings' use. In the Loggia (Building A), which had already been partially converted into a workshop with a goods "display" area, a counter was added facing the street. Clear traces of small furnaces, work equipment, and the widespread presence of slag, processing residues, a secure shaft, and artefacts related to the working of precious metals, confirm the existence of a goldsmith/silversmith workshop—significantly located in an area traditionally associated with this craft.

This phase is also defined by activities in the basement rooms of Buildings B and C. Access from the alley was made possible via a wide staircase, paved with highly fired bricks (*ferrioli*), which involved partially demolishing the roof vaults to allow entry to the basement. These rooms are interconnected by an opening and equipped with small rectangular walls (37x27x105 cm) designed to support wooden beams for storing goods, keeping them insulated from the ground.

Room 4 features a sort of counter, with polychrome basins embedded in the vertical supports at each end, likely used for work activities, possibly related to the textile production. During this phase, the water-related service structures from earlier phases in Rooms 5 and 6 were maintained. The deposit and usage layers from this final phase primarily consist of work residues and materials from routine maintenance, such as the accumulation of lime and sand for mortar production, as well as layers containing food remains and sewage deposits. Additionally, storage areas for unused materials were identified, including slate slabs, a bas-relief-decorated overdoor, and two millstones in Pietra di Finale.

The archaeological findings of Building D, towards Piazza Banchi, are located at a higher level compared to Buildings B and C, which pertain to a ground floor, of which only the pavement levels of the workstations (*scagni*) under the Great Portico (formerly Usodimare and later Imperiale's property) are preserved.

These floors are aligned along a north-south axis, arranged in pairs, and divided by orthogonal brick partitions. Beneath the last level of the shop floors, there is a rich stratigraphy of pavements that can be traced back to earlier usage levels, interrupted by some episodes of a series of fires that affected this part of the city starting from the 12th century.

The last phase (Phase F), which includes the demolitions that began in 1588 of the previous structures for the construction of the Loggia of Banchi, is characterized by a substantial deposit of rubble, rich in Ligurian majolica and ceramics.

In light of the abovementioned findings, it is clear that the Loggia di Banchi reveals a cross-section of the city's history, spanning from the Roman era to the 16th century. This offers numerous insights that can serve as the foundation for the narrative that the planned museum seeks to develop. At the same time, the Loggia itself should be highlighted and valorized, thanks to the wealth of material history preserved within it.

## 2. ONGOING ACTIVITIES BY THE SOPRINTENDENZA

Currently, the Loggia di Banchi is the focus of an extensive archaeological campaign led by the Soprintendenza, which is now ending. The archaeological findings, partially described in the previous sections, will require a crucial phase of data analysis and reinterpretation, which promises to be of great interest, especially regarding the artefacts uncovered.

Alongside the archaeological activities, a restoration of the uncovered structures is underway, including the necessary analyses of the structural elements of the masonry and structural inspections. A pilot project was also carried out in advance with a series of *in situ* intervention tests to define the guidelines for the restoration site.

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<sup>i</sup> The translation in English language of the original report *Il complesso archeologico della Loggia di Banchi. Gli scavi per la realizzazione del Museo della Città Genova. Sintesi dei ritrovamenti e linee guida per il progetto*, provided by MIC to the EAAE Conservation Network Scientific Committee, were drafted by using AI tools and Google Translate tools only for the IX EAAE Conservation Network Workshop purposes to facilitate work group sessions and study visits to the historic centre of Genoa. It will therefore be forbidden to copy and reproduce the contents in any form for purposes outside the IX EAAE Conservation Network Workshop activities. Participants shall refer to this content only in preparation of the Loggia dei Banchi study visit.