VILLA ROMANA DEL CASALE
PARCO ARCHEOLOGICO DELLA VILLA ROMANA DEL CASALE E DELLE AREE ARCHEOLOGICHE DI PIAZZA ARMERINA E DEI COMUNI LIMITROFI
A unique inheritance for all
For the exceptional richness of its architectural and decorative elements, this late Roman structure has become of highly prominent importance within the programme for the safeguarding and valorisation of Sicilian heritage. It is managed by the Archaeological Park of the Villa del Casale and the archaeological areas of Piazza Armerina and of the surrounding municipalities, the Institute of the Regional Authority for Cultural Heritage.

The Villa, under UNESCO protection since 1997, belonged to a member of the Roman senatorial aristocracy, perhaps a Roman governor (Praefectus Urbi). Some scholars believe however that it was instead built and expanded on direct imperial commission. Due to its beauty and complexity, it can be considered one of the most important examples of a state residence among its contemporaries in the Roman West. The high profile of its patron is eloquently celebrated through an iconographic programme that was stylistically influenced by the art of the African mosaicists who were called to do the work and unfolds in rich compositions decorating an impressive number of rooms, both public and private in nature.

A long history
The late antique fourth-century residence was built on top of a rustic villa built between the first century and the second half of the third century AD. It seems that the archaeological finds and destruction layers found in almost all of the sectors of the villa, discovered in the excavations of recent years, belong to the latter period.

Over the course of the fifth and sixth century AD, the structures of the Villa were adapted to defensive purposes, following a specific fortification plan revealed during the excavation campaigns by the thickening of the perimeter walls at numerous points and by the closing of the surviving arcades of the aqueduct connected to the baths. This determined an initial process of abandonment and of the functional transformation of the rooms, which would be reoccupied in later centuries by new residential structures. These new structures were built on top of the destruction layer of the pre-existing walls and beyond the perimeter of the late empire building. The medieval settlement that derived from this development took the name “Palàtia”, Blàtea or Iblâtasah, as defined by Ibn Idris, the twelfth-century Arab geographer, until assuming the name Plàtia. Considered to be possibly one of the most extensive and articulated of its kind in central-southern Sicily, the settlement was destroyed in 1160-1 during the reign of William I and, two years later, a new fortified city was founded on the current site of Piazza Armerina. The persistence of highly-structured settlements in the area of the Roman villa is further evidenced in the fifteenth-century, by a small group of houses known by the name of Casale, from which the Villa’s name derives.
VILLA ROMANA DEL CASALE

Medieval excavation, plan of the rooms with indication of the different construction phases (source: P. Pensabene-C. Bonanno, L’insediamento medievale sulla Villa del Casale di Piazza Armerina, Galatina 2008).

Recomposed fragments of the alfabeguer vase (source: P. Pensabene-C. Bonanno, L’insediamento medievale sulla Villa del Casale di Piazza Armerina, Galatina 2008).

Area south of the Villa, the 2011 excavation indicated green late antique and medieval structures (P. Pensabene, excerpted from the presentation on the new excavations. Piazza Armerina, 12 October 2011).


Villa del Casale di Piazza Armerina, Galatina 2008).
The archaeological investigation
Over the course of time, the historical evidence found around the site occupied by the late antique villa increased the interest of many scholars, who began exploring its remains starting in the first years of the nineteenth century and then again in the first years of the twentieth century, with the excavations led by Biagio Pace and Paolo Orsi, up to the major excavation campaign carried out in 1950s and early 1960s by Vinicio Gentili, followed by numerous initiatives targeting the consolidation of the mosaics.

The discovery of such constituent richness immediately necessitated its protection, a need fulfilled by the design and installation of laminated plastic structures. This solution, considered innovative and effective at the time, was proposed by architect Franco Minissi who, inspired by Cesare Brandi, revisited the solution already implemented in 1941 by Piero Gazzola for the covering of the triapsidal hall.

Further systematic excavation campaigns were carried out in the successive decades, up until recent times, which unearthed the remains of an extensive medieval settlement next to the villa structure.

A new face
Since 2006, the site has been the subject of a systematic restoration and conservation programme, the guidelines for which were written by High Commissioner Vittorio Sgarbi and implemented by the Regional Authority for Cultural Heritage, with funding from the European Union, on the project devised by Guido Meli, Director of Works.

The intervention concerns around 3000 square meters of mosaic and opus sectile pavement in addition to numerous polychrome wall paintings, as well as the three-dimensional reconfiguration of the spaces. The formal and material methods that were adopted are different than those of the past, in order to better preserve and make use of this residence, considered one of the most prestigious monumental testimonies to antiquity in the Mediterranean.
Entrance and vestibule

The Villa welcomes visitors through a monumental entrance 11a, structured like a three-bay honorary arch, originally topped by round arches within which were the gates. The arch is decorated on each face with two pairs of fountains that are inserted in the pillars between the openings.

From here one enters a polygonal arcaded courtyard 11b from which, to the north, one accesses a small apsidal room, the so-called aedicule of Venus 15, which, through a passage room 1, leads to the bath structures, while to the east one arrives at the vestibule, a quadrangular room where guests were received 18. The mosaic decorating it is full of lacunae, but part of the central emblem has been preserved, featuring richly dressed figures crowned with laurel 14, which were probably part of a representation of the court that welcomed the dominus in his villa.

The peristyle and the baths

Once past the vestibule, visitors entered the great quadrangular peristyle 19, the space around which all of the rooms in the villa rotated. The mosaic pavement of the arcade is decorated with a series of animal heads framed by laurel crowns 13, while the walls along the main route of the south side preserve fresco fragments of a procession of armed figures carrying large shields, who accompanied the progress of visitors toward the reception hall. In the uncovered part of the peristyle, in the south-west corner, one finds the sacellum of the Household Gods 19a, a small apsidal room probably dedicated to the cult of the home’s protector divinities. On the west side, preceded by an antechamber 20, one finds the private lavatory 2, for the use of family members, with a mosaic pavement featuring a whirl of animals.

Proceeding to the north, one arrives at the bath complex, located in the north-west area of the villa. From the private entrance to the baths 21, which hosts a mosaic of domina accompanying her children to the baths or, according to other theories, accompanied by her servants (including blond slaves of Germanic origin) 12, one accesses a biapsidal hall 3 that probably functioned as a gymnasium, where one finds a magnificent representation of the Circus Maximus with a quadriga race 11. From this space one passes to the frigidarium 4, a large octagonal hall decorated with a mosaic featuring a marine procession 10; inside there are two pools for cold water baths and four small apsidal spaces (apoditeri) which contained benches for changing clothes before and after the bath, as depicted in their floor mosaics. Continuing on, one reaches the massage room 5 where one can see the representation of an athlete receiving a massage with oils from his attendants.

From here one arrives in the ‘warm rooms,’ specifically the tepidarium 6, where there are a few fragments of a mosaic that featured a torch race, the calidaria 7, 9, with tubs for hot baths and laconicum 8 for steam baths. The baths are also served by a large arcaded lavatory 14, located next to the entrance courtyard, originally covered by a roof topped by a semi-circular colonnade.

The numbers refer to the plan.
The rooms to the north of the peristyle

A series of rooms appointed for various uses gravitate around the quadrangular peristyle. Some of the rooms on the north side, 22-25 and 31-32, were dedicated to service functions and characterized by mosaics with geometric motifs E-F. One of these spaces preserves the remains of a medieval kiln, evidence of the reuse of these spaces even in later centuries. In the centre of the peristyle route, one finds the hospitalia, dining rooms and bedrooms reserved for guests 26-29, decorated with genre scenes and an extremely interesting dancing scene 27.

Next, and introduced by a pair of columns, is the room known as the “small hunt” 30 after the subject of its floor mosaic. This room was probably used as a living room or winter dining room. The mosaic features a series of realistic and lively hunting scenes with a scene of the sacrifice to Diana E6 and an open-air meal in the centre.

The “great hunt”

Proceeding to the east and climbing a few steps one arrives at a long corridor, the antechamber of the Basilica, called the corridor of the “great hunt” 36, for its exceptional mosaic representation of the ‘venationes’, hunts conducted for the capture of animals to be exhibited in circus spectacles in Rome. Thus a great geographical map of the Roman Empire unfolds in a single space, spanning from the furthest west to the furthest east. It is populated by a wide variety of animals, ranging from the ferocious, like lions E-H, to the singular, like rhinoceri, to the mythological, like griffons, and peopled with soldier hunters E-I, horsemen who direct the operations and attendants responsible for the transport and loading of the wild beasts onto the ships E-L.

The garden and the rooms south of the peristyle

Inside the peristyle, one finds an elegant roofless garden 19c, decorated with a three-basin fountain with an east-west orientation. In the central basin, above the surface of the water and above a black band, one can still glimpse a marine decoration featuring fish swimming among the waves.

Rooms 33,34, which are opposite rooms 31,32 on the north side, were dedicated to service functions and characterized by mosaics with geometric motifs. The second room, 34, also features a figured mosaic installed above the original floor, the subject of which, female athletic competitions E-M, has provided the room with the name “the room of the palestriti”.

Also on the south side, one finds the so-called diaeta of Orpheus 35. This is an apsidal hall, also introduced by columns, adorned with a remarkable mosaic featuring Orpheus playing the lyre underneath a tree, drawing around him and taming every kind of animal with his music. Located parallel to the “small hunt”, on the opposite side of the peristyle, it establishes a functional connection with it, since this room was probably used as a summer dining room or, considering its musical subject, a room for the enjoyment of musical entertainment.

The numbers refer to the plan.
Triclinium and ovoid arcade
In the south area of the villa there is another peristyle, oval in shape 46 (so-called Xystus), which terminates to the west with a semi-circular nymphaeum 46a. The arcade mosaic, which is for the most part lost, features animal heads wreathed by ornamental acanthus leaves. This was constructed with masonry balusters, presumably covered with a pergola, while in the open courtyard there were water displays created by fountains spurting from the mosaic pavement.
Three small rooms open up off the peristyle, on the north as well as the south side, used either for receiving guests or for service functions, decorated with scenes of putti harvesting grapes 47, 49 and fishing 51, 52. The ovoid peristyle therefore constitutes a spectacular introduction to the great hall that opens to the east, the luxurious triapsidal triclinium 57. Here one finds a magnificent mosaic programme, dominated in the centre by the representations of the enemies encountered by Hercules during his twelve labours. In the north apse one glimpses the apotheosis of this same hero, crowned by Jupiter, while in that to the east one finds the Giants En, with serpentine limbs, knocked down and in their death throes, having been struck by Hercules’ arrows. Finally, in the south apse, we see a representation of the myth of Lycurgus, who tried to kill the nymph Ambrosia, but was encircled by grapevines and attacked by a crowd of Maenads.

The private apartments
In the west section of the residence, one finds the private apartments which extend to the sides of the Basilica. Those to the south, which are larger in size, are articulated starting from a semi-circular arcaded atrium 40, which gives access, from the centre point, to a large apsidal hall 41 and, from the sides, to two antechambers 42, 44 that lead to a cubiculum with an alcove 43 and an apsidal hall 45. The latter are characterized by mosaics featuring competitions between children in a small circus with chariots drawn by birds or children hunting 43, in imitation of the adult activities represented in other rooms. The central apsidal hall 41 features a marine procession with Nereids Eo, Tritons and a wide range of animals, led by Arion, a mythological character who is riding a dolphin while playing the lyre. The northern apartment, which is the smallest of the two, is divided into three rooms: an antechamber 37, with a mythological mosaic featuring Ulysses offering wine to Polyphemus Ep, a small apsidal hall to the east, decorated with baskets of seasonal fruit 38, and a bedroom 39 with an alcove, to the north, which hosts the celebrated lover’s embrace Eq (probably referring to Cupid and Psyche).

The Basilica
The Basilica 58, located between the two apartments, is reached by walking through the corridor of the “great hunt” and climbing a few steps. An exceptionally elaborate mosaic introduces this space, which is an audience hall and the most official room in the residence. The hall is accessed through a grand monumental entrance divided by two tall columns of pink Egyptian granite. The richest decoration in the villa is found in this room: precious polychrome marbles coming from all over the Mediterranean Er, which were used to face not only the floor but also the walls of the grand apsidal hall. The finds discovered during the excavations lead to the theory that the apse vault was decorated with glass mosaics.

The numbers refer to the plan.
1st-3rd century  From the 1st century AD, a rustic villa was built on the slopes of Mount Mangone. This is evidenced by some remains of a wall found below the level of the fourth-century building.

4th century  This was the period of maximum development for the residence, which was enriched with an impressive decorative programme, sumptuous state rooms and a large bath complex open to the public.

5th-8th century  In the Byzantine period and early Middle Ages, a rural settlement was built on top of the late antique structure that modified the appearance of the villa, transforming it into a fortified settlement that included a space for Christian worship, created through the repurposing of the frigidarium in the baths.

9th-13th century  By the Arab-Norman period, the villa had become a large medieval settlement, divided into many different living spaces and areas for productive activity, but it suffered a major collapse in the second half of the 12th century and in the next century the site was abandoned.

14th-16th century  After the collapse in the late Middle Ages, the site became active again thanks to the establishment of a new agricultural settlement known as Casale, near the city of Piazza.

17th-18th century  With the abandonment of the inland areas of the countryside and frequent flooding, the ruins of the villa were submerged and forgotten.

19th century  The ruins emerging from Contrada Casale began to draw the interest of scholars and foreign travellers, as well as that of antiquities dealers and unlicensed excavators. In 1820, a large portion of the ruins and mosaic flooring was unearthed under the direction of Sabatino del Muto.

20th century  In 1929, archaeologist Paolo Orsi began a new excavation campaign and hired Rosario Carta to direct the archaeological investigation, which then continued under Giuseppe Cultrera and Domenico Inglieri. In 1942, superintendent Piero Gazzola proposed three different projects for the protective covering of the triapsidal triclinium, and from among these it was decided to use wooden elements and Sicilian roof tiles. The solution turned out to be inadequate however, since it provoked partial collapses due to the deterioration of the beams that were used.

From 1949 to 1956, archaeologist Gino Vinicio Gentili led the most complete project to unearth the patrimony of the Villa del Casale ever undertaken. After this, a competition was announced for the design of the new coverings and the project proposed by architect Franco Minissi was selected as the winner. He carried out the work between 1957 and 1967 and realized an innovative architectural solution that utilized iron uprights and trusses topped by sheets of plastic to cover the roof and enclosed the perimeter wall. This solution altered the microclimatic conditions of the site with conservation consequences in terms of physical, chemical and biological equilibrium and caused serious damage to the mosaic flooring. In the 1990s, vandals attacked the site, intending to damage the villa’s valuable mosaics and frescoes. These acts of vandalism were carried out in the “room of the palestriti”, the spaces in the triclinium and the corridor of the “great hunt”, and also disfigured the face of Cassio, a servant portrayed in one of the bath mosaics. In 1997, UNESCO honored the Villa Romana del Casale with a prestigious recognition, adding the site to the World Heritage List.

From 2000 to the present day  In 2004, a recuperation and conservation project was launched at the Villa Romana del Casale and the next year Vittorio Sgarbi was named High Commissioner of the Villa by the Government Council of the Region of Sicily. A cultural debate opened up over the planning, technical and formal decisions made toward resolving the conservation problems faced by the Villa. The High Commissioner elected to make use of the professionalism of the Regional Centre for Planning and Restoration in Palermo, and architect Guido Meli, director of the Centre at the time, drew up a general plan for the recuperation and conservation of the site.

During the same years, excavations were carried out in the area of the medieval settlement south of the villa, promoted by the University of Rome - La Sapienza, Department of the Science of Antiquity, in collaboration with the Museum of the Villa del Casale and the Enna Office for Cultural Heritage, under the direction of Patrizio Pensabene.

In 2007, work began with the contracting company Consorzio Stabile O.B.C. of Florence. The intervention was aimed at the reactivation of Minissi’s original idea, with the substitution of the materials used for protection with others better suited for conservation. The restoration intervention involved all of the mosaic flooring and the decorative fresco programmes of Villa which, through many different phases of consolidation and cleaning, were returned to their original expressivity.
Archaeological Park of the Villa del Casale and of the archaeological areas of Piazza Armerini and the surrounding municipalities

www.villaromanadelcasale.org
museo.villacasale@regione.sicilia.it

Offices
Palazzo Trigona
Piazza Duomo
94015 Piazza Armerina
Enna, Italy
+39 0935 687667
+39 0935 687362 fax

Guardhouse
Villa Romana del Casale
+39 0935 680036
+39 0935 687183 fax

coordination
Giada Cantamessa
texts
Giada Cantamessa
Ilaria Cremona

graphic design management
Michela Scibilia

Translation by
Sarah Elisabeth Cree
for New Speakeasy
by Micaela Antognini

Cover photo
Ugo Cavallo

route photography
Mario Noto

The graphic design and translations were made possible by the contribution of the Selz Foundation – N.Y.

© Region of Sicily. Councillor’s Office for Cultural Heritage and Sicilian Identity 2012.

how to get to the Villa

from the Fontanarossa-Catania airport > motorway A19 exit Dittaino > direction Valguarnera > Piazza Armerina
from the Punta Raisi-Palermo and Trapani-Birgi airports > motorway A19 exit Enna > direction Pergusa > Piazza Armerina
from Gela > road 117 bis > Piazza Armerina

The Villa Romana del Casale is located about 5 km from the city of Piazza Armerina, from which it can also be reached by shuttle bus during the summer months.

The Villa is open from 9 AM to one hour before sunset (schedule varies summer-winter), every day including holidays. Admission is free for citizens of the European Union under 18 years of age and over 65 years of age. For residents of the province of Enna, admission is 1 euro.

For schoolchildren, it is necessary to bring a list on school letterhead to be presented at the ticket desk.