



VILLA ROMANA DEL CASALE

PARCO ARCHEOLOGICO DELLA VILLA ROMANA DEL CASALE E DELLE AREE ARCHEOLOGICHE DI PIAZZA ARMERINA E DEI COMUNI LIMITROFI



Regione Siciliana
Assessorato
dei Beni Culturali
e dell'Identità Siciliana
Dipartimento
dei Beni Culturali
e dell'Identità Siciliana



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Villa Romana del Casale
inscribed on the World
Heritage List in 1997



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 mosaics 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 Iblàtasah, as defined by Al-Idrīsī, 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, 1950s (photo from the Archive of the Enna Office).



Detail of the gymnasium mosaic: the charioteer of the green faction leads his quadriga to victory (photo by Mario Noto).

Praefurnium of the baths transformed into a kiln in the medieval period (photo by Mario Noto).



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Medieval area

The remains of a medieval settlement were discovered in the area south of the villa. The archaeological excavations, carried out starting from 2004 by the Department of the Science of Antiquity of the University of Rome - La Sapienza and under the direction of Patrizio Pensabene, in cooperation with the Museum of the Villa del Casale and the Enna Office for Cultural Heritage, unearthed a series of rooms that date to the two principal construction phases, between the tenth and twelfth century, and a minor one between the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth century.

The masonry defines rooms rather large in size, irregular in disposition and generally facing onto open courtyards. These spaces must have served a variety of functions, not simply residential but also work-related: the remains of small bread ovens are of particular interest.

Some of the houses probably had an extra storey, but in general the main site for domestic work was the ground floor, where animals were also often kept, while small arcades outside the rooms served for storing work materials.

Also notable are the ceramic finds, such as a number of large amphorae for food storage and many examples of glazed crockery for use at the table. Of major interest are some fragments of alfabeguer vases, decorated on the edges with a series of meanders with floral motifs. These vases have an unusual shape since they were made for keeping basil plants (called alfabrega in Castilian, derived from the Arabic).

In 2008, the discovery of an apsidal room datable between the fourth and fifth century AD, later identified as a bath area, confirmed the presence of structures nearby the villa and from the same period. The 2011 excavation campaign, conducted by the same team, unearthed further significant remains, including mosaic fragments that can be linked to those of the late antique villa.

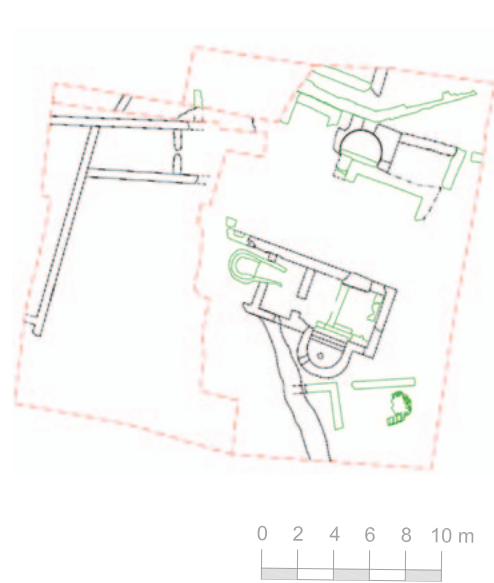


Recomposed fragments of the alfabeguer vase (source: P. Pensabene-C. Bonanno, L'insediamento medievale sulla Villa del Casale di Piazza Armerina, Galatina 2008).

- rustic villa phase (1st -2nd? c.AD)
- late antique phase (4th-5th c. AD)
- 1st medieval phase (10th-11th c. AD)
- 2nd medieval phase (12th c. AD)
- 3rd medieval phase (12th-13th? c. AD)
- Post-medieval phase



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)



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

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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.



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Above:

The floor mosaic of the peristyle: phases of restoration for a laurel garland with a wild animal protome.

Phase 1 Cleaning of the background, recovery and selection of the tesserae.

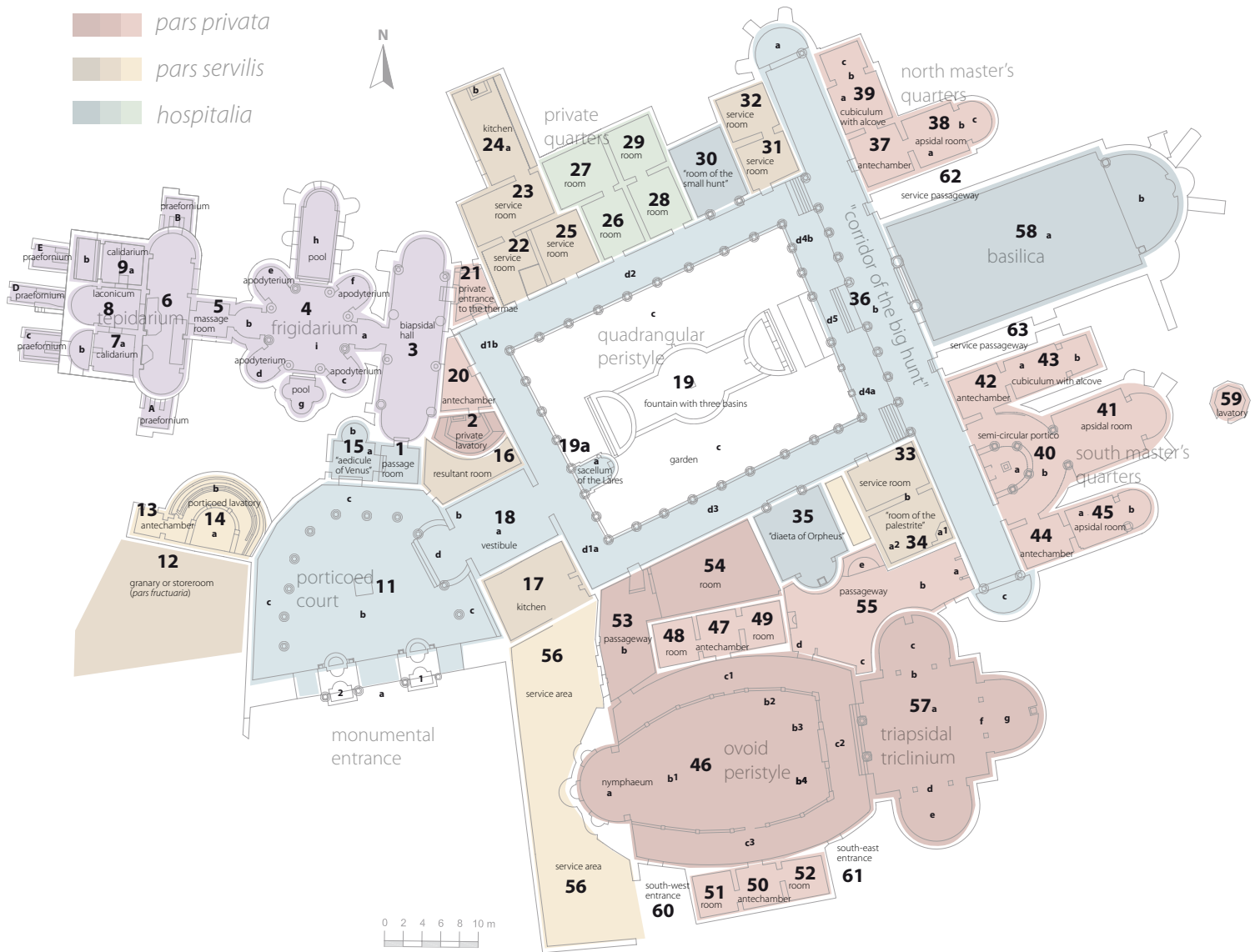
Phase 2 Realization of the basic design and reproduction of the design on the background.

Phase 3 Remounting of the tesserae on site.

Rendering of the working project for the new coverings for the basilica: view of the interior of the basilica (by AED ingegneria and Zerouno, Giuseppe Cascino, architect).

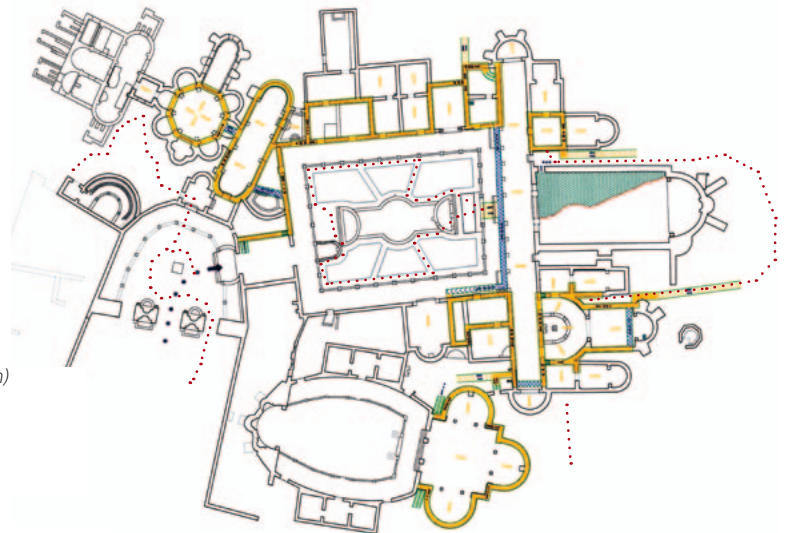
plan

- thermae*
- pars publica*
- pars privata*
- pars servilis*
- hospitalia*



visit itinerary

- connection ramps (width: 120 cm)
- new routes (width: 90 cm)
- level route
- direction of route
- orientation of mosaics





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 **aedicle 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 **■A** which were probably part of a representation of the court that welcomed the *dominus* in his villa.

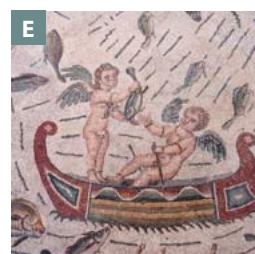
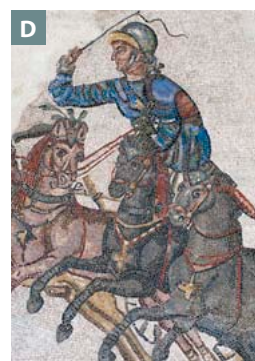
The peristyle and the baths

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 **■B**, 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) **■C**, 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 **■D**. From this space one passes to the **frigidarium 4**, a large octagonal hall decorated with a mosaic featuring a *marine procession* **■E**; 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.



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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** ■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** ■G and an open-air meal in the centre.



The “great hunt”

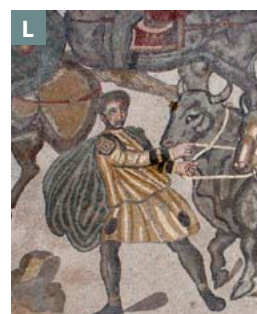
Proceeding to the east and climbing a few steps one arrives at a long corridor, the antechamber of the Basilica, called **the corridor of the “great hunt”** **36**, for its exceptional mosaic representation of the ‘venationes’, hunts conducted for the capture of animals to be exhibited in circus spectacles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



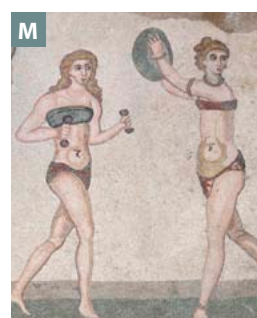
The garden and the rooms south of the peristyle

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** ■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.



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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 triaspidal 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 ■N**, 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.

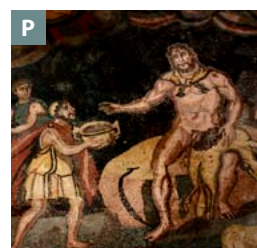
The private apartments

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 ■O**, 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 ■P**, 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 ■Q** (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 ■R**, 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.

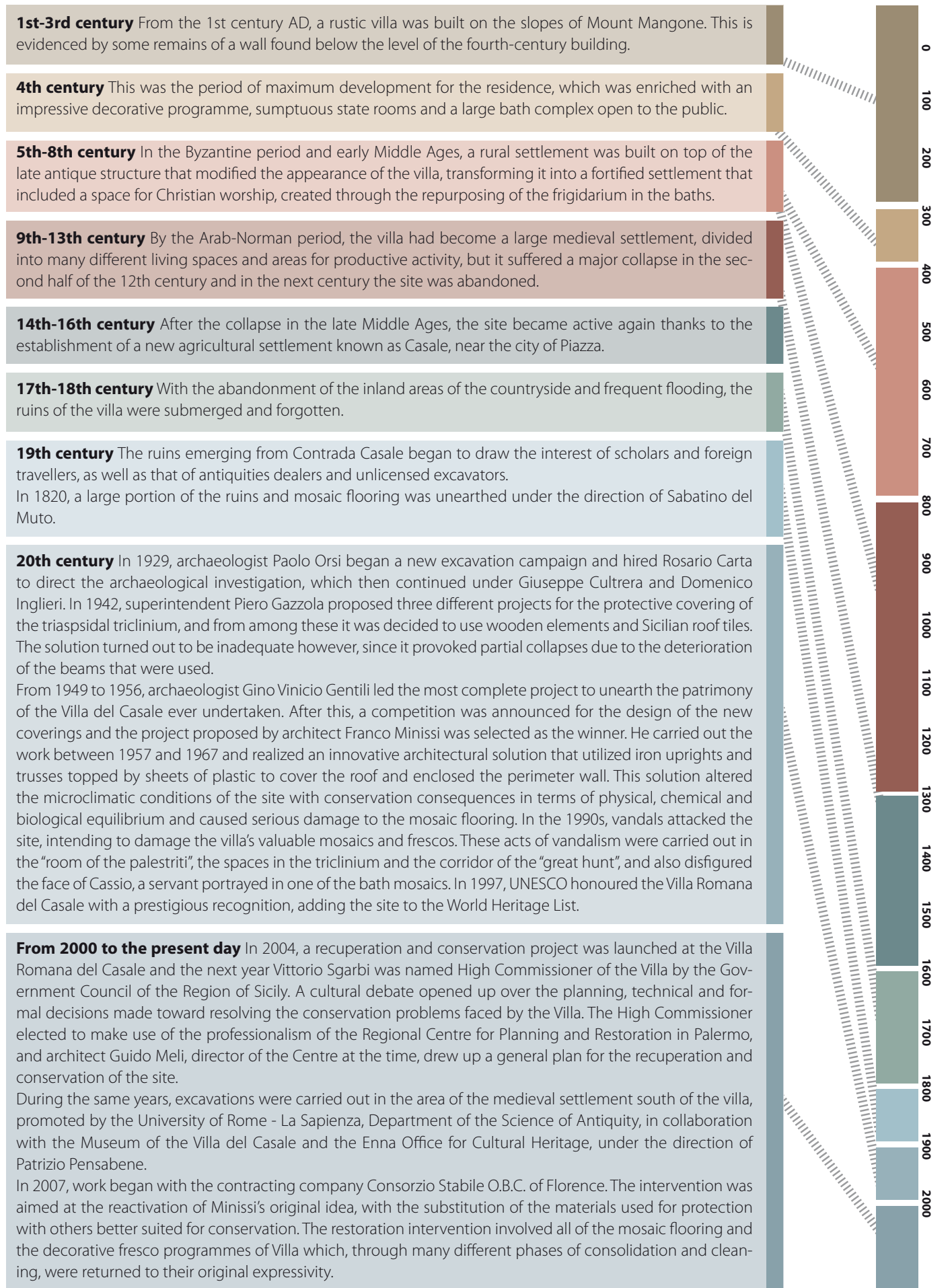
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chronology



**Archaeological Park of the Villa del Casale and of the
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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.



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