

The “Villa of the Antonines” Project 2010: The First Season of Investigation

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The so called Villa of the Antonines is located at the 18th mile of the ancient Via Appia, southeast of the Lake of Nemi, today included in the administrative territory of the modern town of Genzano. The discovery, in 1701 in a not precise area close to the ruins of the baths still standing today, of busts representing several members of the Antonine dynasty led to the attribution of this site to the family estate within the ancient Ager Lanuvinus that is referred to in the *Historia Augusta* as the birthplace of Antoninus Pius and Commodus. The busts found here, which portray among others Antoninus Pius, Faustina Maior and Marcus Aurelius, became part of the Cardinal Albani collection, which was acquired later by the Capitoline Museums, where they are still on exhibit. It is difficult to trace the history of the villa in detail, but after Commodus it apparently became part of the imperial estates and, following ecclesiastical ownership in the medieval period, during the 15th century it came into the hands of the Colonna family. Around a century later, the land was sold to the Cesarini family, and from the 17th century onward this area was known as “La Villa” from the presence of a Cesarini baronial mansion built in the vicinity.

The “Villa of the Antonines” itself must have spread over a considerable extent; however, some areas that belonged to it have been completely destroyed, especially as a

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consequence of the wild and uncontrolled sprawl of unauthorized urbanization during the 1970s. Nonetheless, parts of the baths are still standing and the rest of the complex is waiting to be unearthed and studied. Only 3 hectares are left apparently untouched: they are currently subject to the environmental umbrella (*vincolo*) for the preservation of the archaeological heritage, which prohibits alterations without the Italian government's authorization. From the 18th century until the middle 20th century, explorations of the villa were limited and not properly recorded, although apparently in 1826 and 1884 more systematic excavations led to the discovery, in areas not precisely identified, of portions of black-and-white mosaics, one of which represented two doves drinking from a cup, and of a portico with column shafts in porphyry, fragments of stucco and fresco decorations, fragments of moldings in Numidian yellow marble (*giallo antico*) and fragments of statues. The only proper, but limited, archaeological investigations at the villa occurred in 1989 and in 1996. The first was directed by Drs. Giuseppina Ghini and Nicoletta Cassieri, officials of the Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici per il Lazio. We would in fact like here to thank Dr. Ghini, who is in charge of the archaeological heritage of the territory of the Alban Hills, including Genzano, for her help and for giving us the opportunity to develop our project at the villa. The 1989 intervention was mainly a consolidation of the only still visible ruins of the villa, those of the baths, located close to the modern road. During this investigation Dr. Ghini and Dr. Cassieri were able to identify several of the rooms of the complex (*caldarium*, *tepidarium*, *laconicum* and possible *natatio*). On the other hand, the excavation in 1996, organized by the local section of the Italian ArcheoClub, explored the area immediately west of the *thermae*, and led to the discovery of a curved structure.

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Given the sporadic nature of the previous explorations, since the very beginning we envisioned our Montclair State University investigation of the site as a multi-year endeavor. We created a georeferenced map with micro topographic details of the area to be investigated, divided into squares of 10 by 10 meters, and we conducted geophysical surveys in the area west of the curved structure and north of the *thermae* in collaboration with the geologists Dr. Flavio Cecchini and Dr. Siro Margottini and Prof. Michele Di Filippo of the Dipartimento delle Scienze della Terra of the University of Rome “La Sapienza”. Furthermore, alongside the research component, the project was designed as a field school to provide participants with **instruction** and hands-on experience in all aspects of **excavation methodology**, field survey, mapping, artifact analysis, as well as geophysical surveys.

This first season of our excavation focused in particular on continuing the exploration of the curvilinear building partly already explored in 1996. This structure, preserved almost entirely at foundation levels, presents three concentric curvilinear walls mostly in *opus vittatum*; these are apparently arcs of circles of which the external one would have had a radius of 30 m, with intersecting walls that form a series of chambers almost identical in size. The two internal curved walls, only 50 cm apart, enclose a narrow channel; underneath this is a pitched-roofed *cuniculus* for the discharge of wastewater, accessible from a shaft located at the halfway point of the channel. Since their discovery, the presence of the *cuniculus* and the channel has suggested interpreting this structure as a monumental fountain, a nymphaeum, or a series of basins in connection with the bath complex immediately next to it. The 2010 exploration of the curved

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structure revealed several new walls; the ones in the northern section define a new chamber of the building, still at foundation levels, but slightly different from the previously known ones, since they present evidence of the springing of a vault. The archaeological stratigraphic units of this sector, like most of the area, have been seriously compromised, especially by roots and a modern cut, producing a significant decrease in the height of the foundations.

The artifacts retrieved during the excavation and the field surveys consist mostly of fragments of marble and single, scattered mosaic tesserae. A considerable number of them, in white calcareous stone or leucite, belonged to black-and-white mosaics. The majority of the tesserae, however, of smaller dimensions and found in great quantity, are of polychrome glass. These cover most of the chromatic spectrum, ranging, just to give an example, from dark blue to turquoise, orange, pink, white and gold. The marbles, both white and polychrome (including as porphyry, serpentine, africano, giallo antico), are of varying thickness, and, though fragmented, are clearly pieces of flooring or wall decorations: revetment slabs, moldings, or inlays of opus sectile. Ceramics represent roughly 20 percent of the total artifacts, and include not only pottery sherds, among which we have especially African red slip ware and Roman coarseware, but also fragments of architectonic elements such as roof tiles, tubuli and bricks. Some of the bricks, mostly out of context, carry stamps, but some are anepigraphic. Two fragments of the same stamp on two halves of bipedales that were incorporated in one of the cross walls of the curvilinear building carry the inscription OPVS DOLIARE EX PRAED(iis) FAVS(tinae) AVG(ustae) N(ostrae) CALVI CRESCEN(tis). This is a well documented type found in the surroundings of Rome, and is the product of an *officina* associate with

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the *praedia* of Faustina minor. The *officinator* appears to have been active from the reign of Marcus Aurelius to the early Severan period. Our study of the brickstamps is not yet complete, but the preliminary results, as well as the ceramic classes of most of the pottery, fit well into the second half of the second century. Moreover, the great number of tesserae found, especially the glass ones, reinforces the idea that we are dealing with a possible hydraulic structure such as a fountain. We have also considered the possibility that this building might have an analogy with the elliptical structure at the Villa dei Quintili, which is located in close proximity to the baths there. This structure is generally considered to have been built after the villa was confiscated from the original owners by Commodus.

Simultaneously with the excavation in the area of the curvilinear building, with the help of the geologists we ran a ground penetrating radar and a magnetometry survey with a proton gradiometer in two different areas: one in a restricted area on top of a modest hill north of the bath complex; the other one in an extended area west of the curvilinear building. The combined use of these two non-invasive techniques led to surprising results. While north of the baths no anomalies ascribable to archaeological remains were detected, in the second area, next to the curvilinear building, the geophysical surveys have indicated not, as we might expect, the continuation of the curved walls in order to form a hemicyclical exedra or even a circular/elliptical structure, but instead the presence of several segments of walls, perpendicular to one other, with an orientation NE-SW and NW-SE, in a not well-defined pattern.

We think that the 2010 excavation has been a profitable and promising season, and its outcome opens a new, intriguing chapter in the study of the “Villa of the

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Antonines". Among our other tasks, during coming seasons we aim to follow up the results of the geophysical surveys with targeted explorations of the foundations in the area west of the curved building in order to shed light on the nature and chronology of these structures. Ultimately, of course, it is also necessary to continue to investigate the baths in order to completely define their layout and their relationship to the other remains of this complex.