

Investigations in the Villa Santa Caterina (Castel Gandolfo)

Preliminary report 2017-2018

This is a first preliminary report from a new international research project in the Alban Hills launched in 2017. The report is based on three short campaigns conducted in May 2-14, 2017, July 7-20 and September 4-15, 2018.

The project involves the collaboration between Aarhus University, University of Exeter, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, Accademia di Danimarca, and the Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per l'Area Metropolitana di Roma, la provincia di Viterbo e l'Etruria meridionale (SABAP). Both in 2017 and 2018 the Danish-Italian team was joined by a team from Technische Universität, Munich. The team measured the visible architectural remains along the 13th mile of Via Appia, important for contextualizing the late Republican structures in the Villa Santa Caterina. Danish, Italian, and German scholars as well as students and volunteers from Italy, Germany, Portugal, and Denmark participated in the fieldwork.

The so-called villa of Clodius on the Via Appia

Within the framework of the new project, the so-called Villa of Clodius has been investigated as a first case study. The ruins are situated inside the Villa Santa Caterina estate along the 13th mile of the ancient Via Appia. The site has always been recognized as a late Republican villa, and it has previously been suggested that it was a villa belonging to Publius Clodius Pulcher (93–52 BC). Cicero, Clodius's fierce opponent, mentions that Clodius – as many other members of the elite – had a villa in this area (*Pro Mil.* 46, 48, 51, 53). The identification of these ruins is still debated, but our recent investigations seem to exclude the interpretation as a villa

Previous research

During the 19th century two prominent topographers and archaeologists studied the ruin (Pietro Rosa 1852/1869 and Rodolfo Lanciani 1878), while in 1914 Giuseppe Lugli was the last scholar to have access to the site. He was the first to officially study the structures at Santa Caterina and to him we owe the first full plan of the site, still being used today.

Lugli's plan (main page Fig. 2) reveals a building on two terraces, built mainly in *opus reticulatum* and *opus latericium*, consisting of several distinguishable elements like a paved road with a semicircular space in front of a monumental entrance (B), an atrium with monolithic columns of Doric/Tuscan order of which four columns were re-erected (F), and three cisterns on the upper terrace. He furthermore noticed 19 peperino columns with Attic bases belonging to a rather large peristyle on a lower terrace (G). According to Lugli, some of the shafts of the columns were still *in situ*. Two rooms (R) opened towards the peristyle. He also described an extensive structure in *opus quadratum* (H). Lugli suggested that the ruins were those of a late Republican villa, and he

was the first to attribute the estate to Clodius. In 1946, however, he changed his mind, and suggested that the tribune's villa was inside the present-day Ville Pontificie.

Campaigns 2017-2018

Like the first short campaign in 2017, the work in 2018 concentrated on the cleaning and clarifying of central parts of the ruin. Several architectural remains are visible on the site owing to earlier excavation, and the actual investigations include documentation of the existent structures (cleaning and inventory), a preliminary registration of the finds (pottery, bricks and tiles, painted plasters, tesserae), and new photographic documentation. A geophysical survey of the site and its immediate surroundings was made in 2017 (P. Boila, Idrogeotec, Perugia), and a photogrammetric and updated survey and measurement of the entire site was carried out in 2018 (N. Bargfeldt, Aarhus University). Our metric survey in 2018 very interestingly reveals that the structure differs considerably from the plan published by Lugli in 1914, and the building has now for the first time been placed correctly according to the four points of the compass (Figs. 1-2). The new investigations required new designations different from those of Lugli. The investigations of the first three short campaigns profoundly changed our perception of the ancient ruin of which many features must be reinterpreted. A short report concerning the various elements follows below.

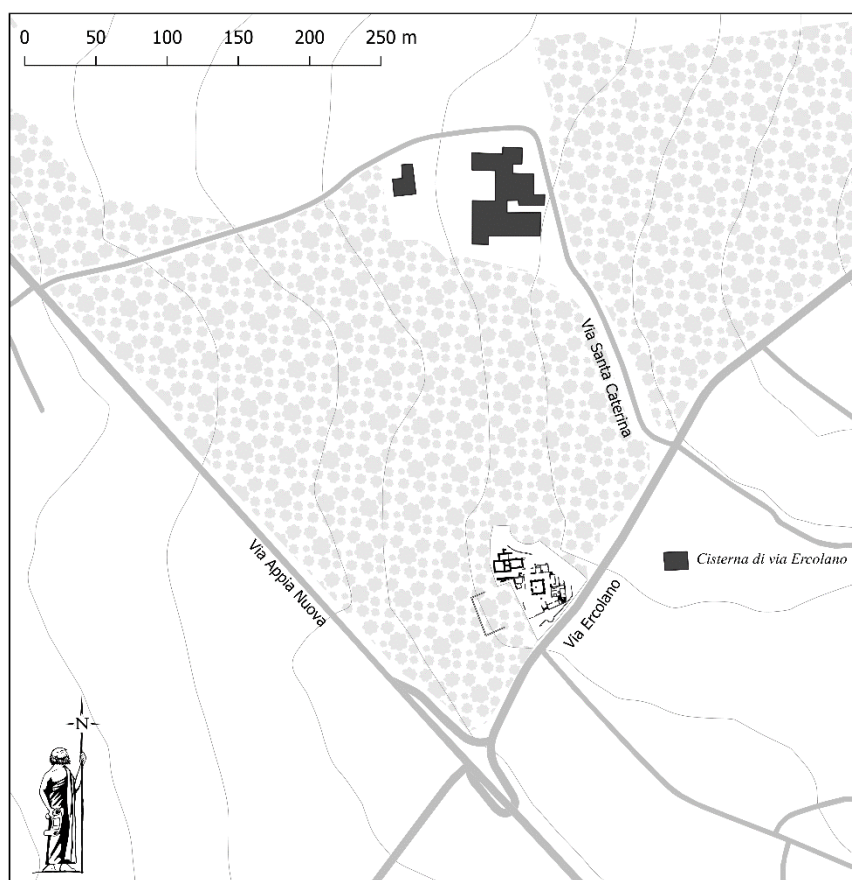


Fig. 1 Plan of Villa Santa Caterina with the ancient remains indicated (N. Bargfeldt 2018).



Fig. 2 New updated plan of the structures on the site (N. Bargfeldt 2018).

The road

The road (Fig. 3) to the south of the building has always been considered as an ancient *diverticulum privatum* leading from Via Appia Antica towards Castel Gandolfo, the site of the Villa of Domitian. In front of the entrance, the road forms a semi-circular exedra, and this feature was observed as something particular and exceptional in earlier presentations of the villa. However, a close study of the basalt blocks of the road shows that the road must have been reorganized in later periods. The blocks are definitely ancient but it appears that the wheel tracks are not coherent and also the blocks are placed in a highly haphazard way. The road was probably there in antiquity but due to the construction of a new drain, the Orsini family (?) seems to have taken up the road and placed the blocks at random and now including a small semi-circular place surrounded by a bench opposite the entrance (S) to the ancient building.

A further stretch of the road is visible a bit further downhill, preserved below a bridge (probably as part of the garden organized by the Orsini). This part was considered as ancient but investigations in 2018 showed that the basalt blocks have been reorganized also in this part. We hope that a future electromagnetic survey can clarify the connection to Via Appia.



Fig. 3 View of the road towards the east. The entrance (S) is to the left, the semi-circular exedra to the right (2017).

The building

The majority of the walls are built of Roman concrete, an almost regular *opus reticulatum* reinforced with small tuff blocks at the corners and openings (Figs. 2-3). However, the building in the NW corner (α - ζ) is constructed in ashlar of peperino. The new investigations and measurements confirmed that the rooms of the building were placed on two terraces and that the rooms were arranged according to two main axes. Whereas the rooms to the east and north as well as the building in *opus quadratum* to the NW were laid out according to the orientation of the so-called atrium (K), the rooms along the southern side formed an obtuse angle (C, D, E, S and U), evidently taking into consideration an already existing structure which could well be a road. The rooms (A-B) on the lower terrace facing the peristyle equalize the two different orientations, a feature not apparent in Lugli's plan. As for the eastern limitation, Passage L was cleaned and here the cleaning showed that the level of the natural rock was high and that a channel parallel to the eastern wall had been cut into the tuff embankment itself. The passage is limited by a further wall of *opus reticulatum* ca. 5 m towards the east. The building may therefore continue further uphill.

The entrance and the atrium

From the road, the building can be entered through a monumental entrance (S), 2.78 m wide, and approximately in the middle there is a large, slightly raised peperino threshold on which a double-leaf door opened. This leads to a so-called atrium (K) which is not in axis of the main entrance, but is oriented like the rooms to the east and north as well as the building built of ashlar. The columns were standing on large ashlar blocks of peperino forming a square with sides of 7.57 m with originally four columns on either side thus forming a Corinthian atrium (main page Fig. 4). Some columns were still standing on flat plinths, other column drums were lying in the atrium. The capitals are of the Doric/Tuscan order, all made of peperino. However, the recent investigations have shown that the two monolithic columns still standing are recent and probably also the placing of the blocks of the atrium. There is no doubt, however, that the peperino blocks and the plinths that make up the atrium are ancient. This appears among other things from the preparation for columns on the plinths – only they do not seem to be *in situ*. Every third block has been prepared for a column with a diameter of ca. 52 cm, but the blocks between them are of varying size, some quite irregular. None of the ancient columns are standing, but at least one capital seems ancient and the capitals of the more recent monolithic columns clearly imitate this one (Fig. 4). The porticos around the columns are proportionally very deep, 4.27 m on three sides, which is quite large for an atrium. One of the recent columns has a long inscription recording members of the Orsini family. At present, only preliminary measurements have been made but the upper level in the so-called atrium is 354.38 m asl and that of the lower level (Rooms A-B) is 351.35 m asl.



Fig. 4 Upper part and capital of presumably ancient column (2018).

The cisterns

Already Lugli observed four ancient ‘wellheads’ in the area of the atrium (Fig. 2, C1-C3 and I). During the campaigns in 2017-2018 it was possible to look into the spaces below two of the ‘wellheads’ (C2 and I), and it turned out that they covered very deep bottle-shaped cisterns cut out of bedrock and with narrow necks partly constructed of *opus caementicium*. They are about 7 m deep. Large cisterns are a usual feature in the villas in the Alban Hills, and further water installations were also reflected by the geomagnetic surveys carried out by Paolo Boila and his team in 2017.

Latrina and bath

In the obtuse southeast corner of the building appeared a small *latrina* (E) not indicated in the plan by Lugli. The small irregular room is clearly a latrine where both the drainage channels and the pavement (two levels of *opus spicatum*) are well preserved. The latrine has a trapezoidal plan due to the orientation of the southern wall and Passage L.

See 3D reconstruction of the latrine E (N. Bargfeldt).

Furthermore, some work was done in the area of the possible bath to the north of the atrium. It includes a characteristic room (N) with one rectangular and three semi-circular niches, all built in *opus latericium* (Fig. 2). The eastern half of the room was cleaned and remains of *opus signinum* floors could still be observed along the walls. No entrance to the room has so far been identified. This room clearly belongs to a later construction phase of the building.

The lower terrace and the two rooms towards the peristyle

In Lugli’s plan the two rooms (our A and B) appear open towards a large peristyle at the lower terrace (Fig. 2). These rooms create a terracing so that they open towards a peristyle about 4 m deeper than the upper terrace. Whereas the peristyle (Q) has still not been investigated, some work was undertaken in the two rooms, and in particular the northernmost room (A) (Fig. 5). On the floor of this room, the debris was ca. 1 m high and part of the room could be exposed until floor level. Remains of white tesserae along the wall showed that this room in origin had a floor mosaic that at some point had been lifted. Furthermore, the walls are preserved up to the beginning of the vault and they were originally covered in plaster of which only small parts remain indicating that the lower parts of the walls were red, the upper parts light blue. Another interesting observation concerns the technique of the wall plaster. In the walls, numerous iron nails can still be seen which originally fastened the grid of wood or straw on which the plaster was applied.



Fig. 5 Room A with remains of red and light blue plaster (2018).

See 3D reconstruction of Room A (N. Bargfeldt).

The structure made in *opus quadratum*

In the NW corner is an imposing structure containing at least six rooms (α - ζ). It is built in large peperino blocks, sometimes polygonal, and it is clearly different from the other parts of the building (Fig. 6). Lugli considered it as part of the terracing walls. This part of the ruin is covered in soil and only some walls could be cleaned more in detail and one further room towards the north (ζ) was identified. The finds found between the walls of this room primarily consisted of fragments of pottery, but some of these are of considerable interest in showing the early chronological range of the site. Among the finds were black gloss bowls with internal stamps that may be dated to the late 4th or early 3rd century. Other fragments stem from dolia, other large containers and cooking vessels, and together with painted tiles they point to a mid or late Republican date for the structure.



Fig. 6 The building *in opus quadratum* seen from the east (2017).

Conclusion

In short – much new knowledge of the site has been obtained from the first short campaigns. We now know much more about the former owners of the site of Villa Santa Caterina from the Orsini up to the present day. This is of considerable importance as to the understanding of the ancient structures on the site. Together with the three short campaigns in 2017 and 2018, it has now become increasingly clear that the Orsini family restored the ancient structure to be included in their huge park-like garden. They made considerable changes on the site, among other things, they removed floor mosaic and other finds. Some of these alterations relate to the plan of the building complex, and especially to those elements that, until now, were considered essential identifiers of the residential nature of the building like the so-called atrium behind the entrance, and the large peristyle on the lower terrace as well as the road made of basalt blocks. All these structures show extensive traces of 19th century reworking.

The recent investigations may suggest that the late Republican villa known as the ‘Villa of Clodius’ should perhaps rather be identified as the remains of the Sanctuary of Bona Dea that literary sources locate at the 13th milestone of Via Appia, where Clodius was murdered. This sanctuary was said to be situated in relation to the villa of Titus Sergius Gallus, an otherwise unknown person. Scholars have tended to locate the Sanctuary of Bona Dea on the other side of Via

Appia, at the Institute San Giuseppe. However, our investigations indicate that the building constructed of large peperino blocks (α - ζ) from the late 4th or 3rd century BC seems to have been surrounded by new constructions during the second half of the 1st century BC.

Parallels to identified sanctuaries of Bona Dea such as for instance the one in Ostia (V.10.2) show that these sanctuaries rarely have an actual temple but sometimes a minor temple-like structure surrounded by numerous rooms of varying size. Furthermore, water is known to have been an essential feature of sanctuaries of Bona Dea, and this would also correspond well to the findings on the site. The identification as a sanctuary is still to be proved by future investigations.

Main results

The fieldwork in 2017 and 2018 has defined the chronological frame of the site. Geomagnetic survey has given some idea of the extent of the building but more should be done.

- One important result of the recent investigations is a new updated plan of the ancient structures (by N. Bargfeldt), the first since P. Rosa (1869) and G. Lugli (1914). The metric survey reveals very interestingly that the structure differs considerably from the plan published by Lugli in 1914, and the building has now for the first time been placed correctly according to the four points of the compass (Figs. 1-2)
- Archival studies and investigations on the site have resulted in a better understanding of the ruin. It is apparent that former owners, and first and foremost the Orsini, made considerable alterations and restorations on the site
- The road to the south of the building has always been considered as an ancient *diverticulum privatum* leading from Via Appia towards Castel Gandolfo, the site of the Villa of Domitian. The ancient basalt blocks of the road must have been reorganized in later periods, perhaps during the ownership of the Orsini (?) and a small semi-circular place surrounded by a bench opposite the entrance to the ancient building was constructed (Fig. 3)
- The majority of the walls is made of *opus reticulatum* and it has become evident that the impressive building of *opus quadratum* in the NW corner of the ruin (α - ζ) is much earlier than the late Republican additions made during the second half of the 1st century BC (Fig. 6). A later construction phase (*opus latericium*) is found in the northern part of the building (N)
- The large Room G turned out to be of particular interest. It contained an ancient wellhead *in situ*. It had at least three entrances and seems to have been a central room – or perhaps a yard – of the building (fig. 2)
- The building contained a latrine (E) in the SE corner (Fig. 2)
- A detailed registration and description of all visible walls and floors as well as a photographic documentation is now available
- Comparisons with other sanctuaries of Bona Dea combined with the literary record make it probable that this is to be identified with the Sanctuary of Bona Dea mentioned by Cicero and other literary sources to be situated in the 13th mile of Via Appia. In any case, the structure in *opus quadratum* is definitely earlier than the surrounding rooms.

Funding and Support

We are grateful to Aarhus University and the Beckett Foundation for the financial support for the fieldwork in 2017-2018. We also sincerely thank the present owners of the Villa S. Caterina for giving the permission to work on the site and for their invaluable support. The preliminary results of the campaigns in 2017-2018 were presented at a workshop hosted by Villa S. Caterina, 30 October 2018.

For further information

N. Bargfeldt: nielsbargfeldt@hotmail.com

C. Manetta: consuelo.manetta@yahoo.it

B. Poulsen: klabp@cas.au.dk