

# Investigations in the Villa Santa Caterina (Castel Gandolfo)

## *Preliminary report 2019*

This is the second preliminary report from the international research project on the Alban Hills launched in 2017. The report is based on a short campaign conducted in July 15-26, 2019.

The fieldwork involved the collaboration between Aarhus University, University of Exeter, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, Accademia di Danimarca, Technische Universität, Munich, as well as the Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per l'Area Metropolitana di Roma, la provincia di Viterbo e l'Etruria meridionale. Scholars as well as students and volunteers from Denmark, Italy and Germany participated in the investigations.

### **The so-called villa of Clodius**

Within the framework of the new project, the ruins of the so-called Villa of Clodius have been investigated as a first case study, now 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). The identification of these ruins is still debated, but the recent investigations have questioned the former interpretation.



Fig. 1 New plan of the investigated building incorporating also the results from 2019 (N. Bargfeldt).

The work in 2019 was limited to two weeks and it was decided to concentrate on the cleaning of the eastern part of the building and Room ζ in the NW complex as well as the registration of finds. The investigation further substantiated our theory that the building should not be identified as a villa but rather as structures surrounding the important NW building of *opus quadratum* (α-ζ). A short report concerning the various elements follows below.

### ***The rooms towards the east***

In 2019, work was concentrated in Rooms F, G, M, T, U and C. All walls in this part of the building are made of *opus reticulatum* sometimes standing up to 1.30 m above floor level which is about 354.70 m asl. The majority of the masonry structures is in a ruined state of preservation, and except for the latrine, the original function of these rooms still remains unclear.

### ***Room F and T***

Room F is a rather large rectangular room measuring 4.5 x 3.5 m. It has a door that opens to Room T to the south. The walls only had remains of plaster on the lower parts, and merely the inner layers were preserved. The pavement had been removed and there is no evidence for tesserae, only parts of the crude sublayers in *opus signinum* have been preserved. During the cleaning, small fragments of coloured plaster were found together with some pottery. In the NW corner of this room was found a tile with a stamp: C NAEVI[US] ASC[LEPIADES], that can be dated from ca. 50 BC to the Augustan period, and this may well have been the time for the construction of the structure surrounding the *opus quadratum* building. The anteroom, T, was cleaned and it became clear that a door from this room to Passage L did not exist. Instead, Room T was connected to the trapezoidal Room U. No remains of plaster or floors were visible.



Fig. 2 View of Room F and T from the south (2019).



Fig. 3 Tile with stamp: C NAEVI[US] ASC[LEPIADES] (2019).

### ***Room C and U***

Only a preliminary cleaning of these two rooms could be made. The oblong room (C) adjoining the wall towards the road turned out to be almost empty. Sublayers for a floor, partly ruined, were found. The actual entrance to the room from the north could not be precisely located. As for Room U, the first cleaning showed a somewhat confusing situation with a floor made of some huge peperino ashlar. It is doubtful if these are *in situ*.

### ***Room M and G***

Through Room M, the larger and interesting Room G has a direct access from Passage L. More detailed work on Room M was postponed until later. Instead, Room G was investigated more thoroughly, and this is so far the only room to have been measured in detail. It measures ca. 6 m north-south and 5.50 m east-west. The room had three entrances and could be entered not only from Room M, but also from T/U to the south and from X to the north.



Fig. 4 Plan of Room G, 1:25 (M. Holm 2019).

Similar to many of the other rooms more building phases could be observed but the really surprising discovery was that of a well-preserved ancient wellhead of peperino, diam. 1.50 m, unnoticed until now. The wellhead covers a well more than 7 m deep like the three other cisterns discovered in 2017-2018 (C<sub>1</sub>, C<sub>2</sub> and I) already indicated by Lugli.



Fig. 5 Room G, view towards SE (2019).

Part of an *opus spicatum* floor in the NW corner was later partly covered by an oblong structure of *opus caementicium* (ca. 1.10 x 3 m) along the northern wall. A similar structure of *opus caementicium* was – perhaps at the same time – placed in the centre of the room, 2.40 x 1.80 m. This covered an earlier structure to the south built of smaller ashlar blocks of peperino, measuring ca. 2.20 x 1.90 m. Inside this was found an extremely interesting destruction layer with a large number of tiles and a small domestic vessel, a jug, with a coin placed inside it (the coin still awaits cleaning). The discovery of the cistern completely changes our perception of this room that may have been an inner yard or only partly roofed.



Fig. 6 Destruction layer with domestic jug containing a coin (2019).

### **The NW building in *opus quadratum* (α-ζ)**

Only very little work could be carried out in this important building in 2019, and further work in this area cannot be undertaken until some of the lofty pines can be removed. But it was possible to do some further cleaning in Room ζ. Due to masses of soil, it could only be excavated in its western part, but the size can be determined from the top of the walls. It is a small room, ca. 2.5 x 2.5 m of which only the lower courses built in large ashlar of peperino have been preserved, but evidently all *in situ*. There is no evidence for an entrance to the room or possible connection to the other rooms. Clearly, the building continues further towards the north and east, but excavation can only be undertaken if huge masses of soil and a recent wall can be removed. The first cleaning of this room in 2018 brought to light much material (fragments of painted tiles, dolia, domestic and black gloss pottery) datable to the late 4th or early 3rd century BC. The cleaning in 2019 did not change this chronological frame.



Fig. 7 View of Room ζ from the east (2019).

### **The study of archives and the Orsini**

Archival research has been essential to the critical reassessment of the ancient remains of the Villa Santa Caterina, of the dynamics of its previous investigations, and of the new interpretation of the site. It confirmed that the most significant archaeological discoveries and alterations of the site occurred during the 19th century, a period of Orsini-Torlonia ownership. Prince Domenico Orsini acquired the estate with the dowry of his wife Maria Lusina Torlonia (1830-1899). Soon after the purchase, and in 1842, 1856, and 1859, Domenico Orsini ordered construction works that involved both the villa and the vineyard. Possibly ancient structures came to light during these works, for Pietro Rosa's map (made between 1869 and 1891) of the area shows for the first time the ancient

ruins on the premises of Villa S. Caterina, a “*Villa Albana dei Cesari*”, the walls in *opus quadratum*, that we relate to Bona Dea, and an ancient road. No longer visible, this road passed through the entire length of the Villa Santa Caterina estate, in the sector of the park to the east of the present-day swimming pool. We cannot exclude the possibility that its stones (*basoli*) were removed and reused in or outside the estate, as was usual at that time. As studies by I. Della Giovampaola have revealed, Rosa was in contact with Domenico Orsini, and it appears that the topographer already had access to the estate between 1849 and 1852, and again in May 1869. In 1869, in particular, construction works concerned the SE corner of the property, i.e. the area in which the ancient ruins are situated. As revealed by the family’s private correspondence, Rosa served as an archaeological consultant regarding the antiquities that were discovered at the site. He even made a watercolour plan of the discoveries made that year. Archival documents also confirm that at least one statue and two mosaics were found during this period, and that these antiquities were moved to the Roman residence of the Orsini family, namely the Palazzo Savelli in the Theatre of Marcellus.

Rosa was not the only archaeologist who visited the ruins in the 19th century. In 1878 Rodolfo Lanciani also visited the site. Maria Luisa Torlonia gave him Rosa’s autograph of the plan, and he himself made a sketch of the visible structures now preserved at the Vatican Library. The Orsini also invited him to their residence at the Theatre of Marcellus. There, Lanciani saw a black and white mosaic with geometric patterns that had been discovered at S. Caterina in August 1869. Surprisingly, however, Lanciani never published the data he gathered in the Villa Santa Caterina, but a note taken by Lanciani on the occasion of his visit at the Palazzo Savelli in Rome, adds a most significant detail to the identification of the ruin. The note says that an inscription on the marble slab which frames the ancient mosaic describes that this mosaic was discovered among the ruins of the Temple of Bona Dea at the XIV milestone of Via Appia. The inscription is clearly modern, but reveals that the Orsini took for granted that the ancient structure at Villa S. Caterina belonged to the Sanctuary of Bona Dea. To date, scholars have surprisingly ignored this information, but the question is how the Orsini knew this.

As already mentioned, the Villa Santa Caterina is located near the site on Via Appia where Clodius was allegedly murdered, in front of or near the Sacellum of Bona Dea. However, by the second half of the 19th century no antiquarian had ever proposed to locate the Bona Dea sanctuary in this very spot of Via Appia. So, one may wonder what kind of archaeological data or discoveries at Villa Santa Caterina had made the owners so sure about the identification of the site. Furthermore, it seems very strange that Rosa and Lanciani did not publish an exceptional discovery like that. Both our fieldwork and new archival research have confirmed that all the ancient structures at Villa Santa Caterina show extensive traces of 19th century activities and restorations. Unlike Lugli, who in 1914 surprisingly ignored all these alterations, it can now be proven that they relate to the archaeological discoveries of 1869, perhaps also to the burial of some members of the Orsini family within a chapel beside the Church of Santa Caterina which was included in the estate and after which the property was named. They probably started between 1873 and 1874, when peperino columns with commemorative inscriptions were erected in the so-called peristyle as well as in the atrium, beside and in perfect imitation of the ancient ones.



Two inscriptions are, for instance, engraved on the shaft of the same column in the so-called atrium (K). The first (Fig. 8a) is dated 3 July 1874, and commemorates the departed Domenico Orsini, who died in April of that year. The second inscription (Fig. 8b) was dedicated on 6 September 1874, when the remains of Paolo Giordano Rodolfo, Domenico's grandchild, were brought to Santa Caterina. It seems that the members of the family buried in the Villa Santa Caterina were also commemorated within the park among the ancient ruins, which the Orsini may have perceived as sacred, as indicated above.

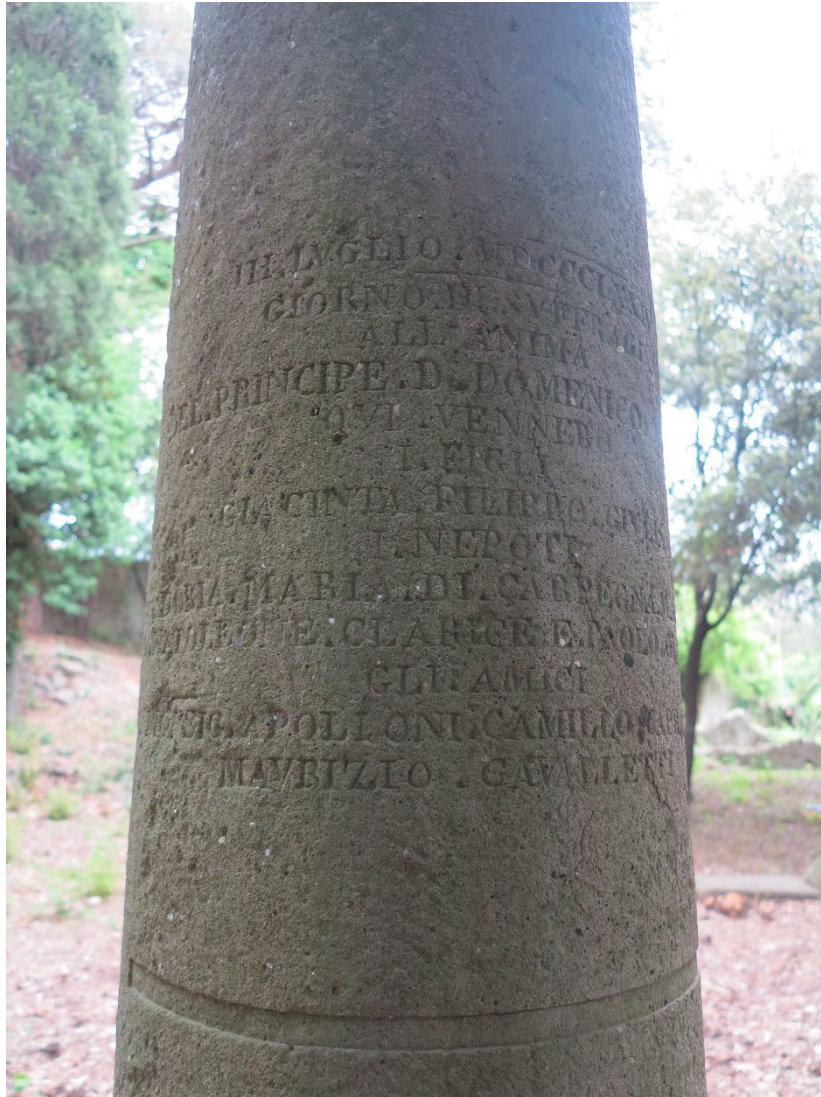


Fig. 8a So-called atrium, column with commemorative inscription A: IL III LVGLIO MDCCCLXXIV/GIORNO DI SVFFRAGIO ALL'ANIMA DEL PRINCIPE DOMENICO ORSINI/ QVI VENNERO /I FIGLI /GIACINTA FILIPPO GIVLIO/ I NEPOTI/DORIA MARIA DI CARPEGNA/ ANNABELLA/ DOMENICO NAPOLEONE/ CLARIGE E PAOLO GIORDANO ORSINI/ GLI AMICI/ MONS. APOLLONI/ CAMILLO CAPRANICA/ MAVRIZIO CAVALLETTI (2019).



Fig. 8b So-called atrium, column with commemorative inscription B: NEL GIORNO VI SETTEMBRE MDCCCLXXIV/ QVI GIVNSERO LE SPOGLIE DI/ PAOLO GIORDANO RODOLFO ORSINI/ NATO IN ROMA IL DI/VII NOVEMBRE MDCCCLXXII/MORTO IN CASAMICCIOLA IL III SETTEMBRE MDCCCLXXIV (2019).

## Conclusion

The short campaign in 2019 resulted in a much clearer impression of the eastern part of the building and not least the interesting Room G. Furthermore, much new knowledge of the later story of the site has been obtained, not least from the archival studies. They have given important information about the former owners of the site of the Villa Santa Caterina and in particular that of the Orsini family. This is of crucial importance to the understanding of the ancient structures on the site, and 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 mosaic floors and other finds and brought them to their other residences.

As presupposed in the previous report on the fieldwork, we maintain that the late Republican building known as the ‘Villa of Clodius’ should perhaps rather be identified as the remains of the Sanctuary of Bona Dea, that literary sources place at the 13th milestone of Via Appia. The recent archaeological investigations show that the building constructed in large peperino blocks existed from the late 4th or 3rd century BC and that it seems to have been surrounded by new constructions at some time during the second half of the 1st century BC.

We are grateful to the Beckett Foundation, Dronning Margrethe II's Arkæologiske Fond, and Aarhus University that financially made the fieldwork in 2019 possible. We also sincerely thank the present owners of the Villa Santa Caterina for giving the permission to work on the site and for their ever invaluable support. The preliminary results of the campaigns in 2017-2019 will appear in two articles in *Analecta Romana*.

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