

Contextualising the past in the Alban Hills (Colli Albani)

Preliminary report 2022

This is the third preliminary report from the international research project on the Alban Hills launched in 2017. The report is based on the campaign that spanned five weeks from 27.6 to 28.7 2022. The illustrations were made by N. Bargfeldt, L. Dibbern and B. Poulsen.

Villa Santa Caterina

The fieldwork involved the collaboration between Aarhus University, Denmark, University of Exeter, England, Accademia di Danimarca as well as the Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per l'Area Metropolitana di Roma, la provincia di Viterbo e l'Etruria meridionale (SABAP). The participants were scholars as well as students and volunteers from Denmark and Italy: Birte Poulsen (Aarhus University), Consuelo Manetta (Exeter University), Silvia Aglieti (Albano), Niels Bargfeldt (Aarhus University), as well as Danish and Italian students and volunteers. The first week was used for preparation, the remaining for the excavation itself.



Fig. 1 Plan of the building (N. Bargfeldt 2019).

In the years 2017-2019, through four short campaigns, we had the opportunity to investigate and document the ruin without excavation (fig. 1, see preliminary reports), and we were therefore quite sure where to focus this year's excavation. The focus area became the area to the north of the building remains that were recorded by P. Rosa in the 1869 and G. Lugli in 1914 (fig. 2, Area 1-4). As is wellknown, no scientific archaeological investigation has ever

been carried out on the site. In fact, we very much doubt that G. Lugli even had access to study the ruin, because there are so many discrepancies between his records and the actual preservation. Regardless, the interpretation as a villa belonging to P. Clodius Pulcher, the notorious statesman, who in January 52 BC was murdered at the XIII mile of the Via Appia (Cic. *Mil.* 51-54), goes back to G. Lugli. Several things indicate that the structure cannot be interpreted as a Roman villa, and we believe that the structure is instead to be identified with the shrine of Bona Dea, which is mentioned by Cicero and his commentator Asconius (Asc. *Mil.* 31-32, 55) in connection with the murder of Clodius. According to Cicero, it was no accident that Clodius was murdered outside a shrine to Bona Dea, a goddess whom this politician had dishonoured ten years earlier by forcing his way into her religious festival in Rome, a festival reserved for women (the so-called Clodius scandal).



Fig. 2 Plan of the entire structure divided into six areas referred to in the text (N. Bargfeldt 2022).

The campaign in 2022

We therefore wanted to focus the excavation in the area immediately to the north of the large ashlar structure (fig. 2, area 5) where no previous excavation seemed to have been carried out. Here, two additional rooms of a building constructed of elongated and flat ashlar blocks in peperino were found (Figs. 2-4), apparently from an earlier construction phase than the previously known ashlar structure (Area 4). The rooms of the building are limited by walls to the east, west and south but the building extends further north. The construction style suggests that it is a monumental building, perhaps the remains of the first sanctuary on the

site. Objects dating back to the 8th century BC were found in this area. The dating shows that it can hardly be a sanctuary for Bona Dea, of whom we only have certain knowledge from the 4th century BC. According to the written tradition, she was brought to Rome from the Greek city-states of southern Italy. It could perhaps be a shrine to a local goddess like for instance the old Italian goddess Fauna associated with fertility and healing, and whose function is continued by Bona Dea. In any case, the monumental form of the structure would seem to indicate an earlier larger sacral building at the site, but it is still premature to suggest any certain date or identification.



Fig. 3 East wall of Area 5 (2022).



Fig. 4 West wall of Area 5, room ζ (2022).

After the documentation and removal of a wall from the Orsini period (1830-1899) and the surface layers, we encountered the second surprise, namely the corner of another monumental building, which unfortunately could only be partially exposed during this year's campaign (Figs. 2 and 5). The visible part measures 2.60 x 7 m, and it continues both further north and east. It consists of an approx. 90 cm high podium built in an early type of Roman concrete, perhaps from the 2nd century BC. On top of this are large well-hewn blocks of peperino, which have clearly been reused and therefore originate from an earlier monumental building. Unfortunately, nothing has been preserved on top of this, and we therefore do not know the appearance of the building above the foundation. The building has the same orientation as the ashlar building (Fig. 2, Area 4).



Fig. 5 Area 6. View from the north towards the so-called atrium K (2022).

The area around the building in Area 6 (Fig. 2) was explored to the south and west. In the last days of the campaign, excavations were carried out immediately to the west of the building found in Area 6, and here was found what we believe to be a votive deposit, which again confirms the sacral character of the area (Fig. 6).

The votive deposit could only be partially excavated, but is a clearly defined fire layer filled with thin-walled pottery, which in particular consists of beakers, that can be dated to the late 2nd – early 1st century BC. In addition, three small round clay plates with relief were found among the beakers in the burned layer. They are only approx. 1 cm in diameter and has various stamped decorations. They are all grey due to the layer in which

they were found. The motifs are a helmet, an armed soldier on a horse heading towards the left and holding a round shield and a trident, and a portrait of a man facing to the right. They are presumably to be identified as stamped clay sealings from papyrus scrolls/documents. Such clay sealings are well known from archives especially in the East during the Hellenistic and Imperial periods where they were used to seal both official, religious and private documents, often preserved in archives. We think that the deposit should possibly be linked with the construction of the building in Area 6 (Figs. 2 and 5).



Fig. 6 Votive deposit between buildings in Area 5 and 6 (2022).

Two of the previously known rooms, N and Y, were cleaned and documented for the first time (Fig. 2, Area 3). Room N (Fig. 7) has three semi-circular and one square niche, and it could be ascertained that it had been built into an already existing square room in *opus reticulatum* from approximately mid-1st century BC. Unfortunately, the floor is no longer preserved, but the building style of *opus latericium* shows that it must have been rebuilt in the Flavian period or later. The room finds parallels in Roman bathing facilities, where it has been interpreted as a laconicum, frigidarium or sudatorium. An interpretation as a bathing facility is perhaps also supported by the room to the west of this, Room Y (Fig. 8). It encapsulates a larger and a smaller water channel below the floor level. The water was drained off via a channel in the so-called atrium (K). Room Z could unfortunately only be explored sporadically due to a large pine tree in the middle of the room.



Fig. 7 SE niche of Room N with visible earlier wall of *opus reticulatum* below floor level (2022).



Fig. 8 Room Y seen from the south (2022).

The clearing of the area north of these three rooms (fig. 2, Area 3) revealed three more rooms: AA, AB, AC, which have still only been explored sporadically. In Room AC the remains of a floor mosaic in white tesserae were exposed. As the floor mosaic curves strongly downwards to the north, the preliminary theory is that this could perhaps be a room with a hypocaust, i.e. a floor supported by low pillars, thus forming a cavity under the floor for heating. The floor is in miserable condition, but one of the few floors that were not removed by the previous owners, the Orsini family.

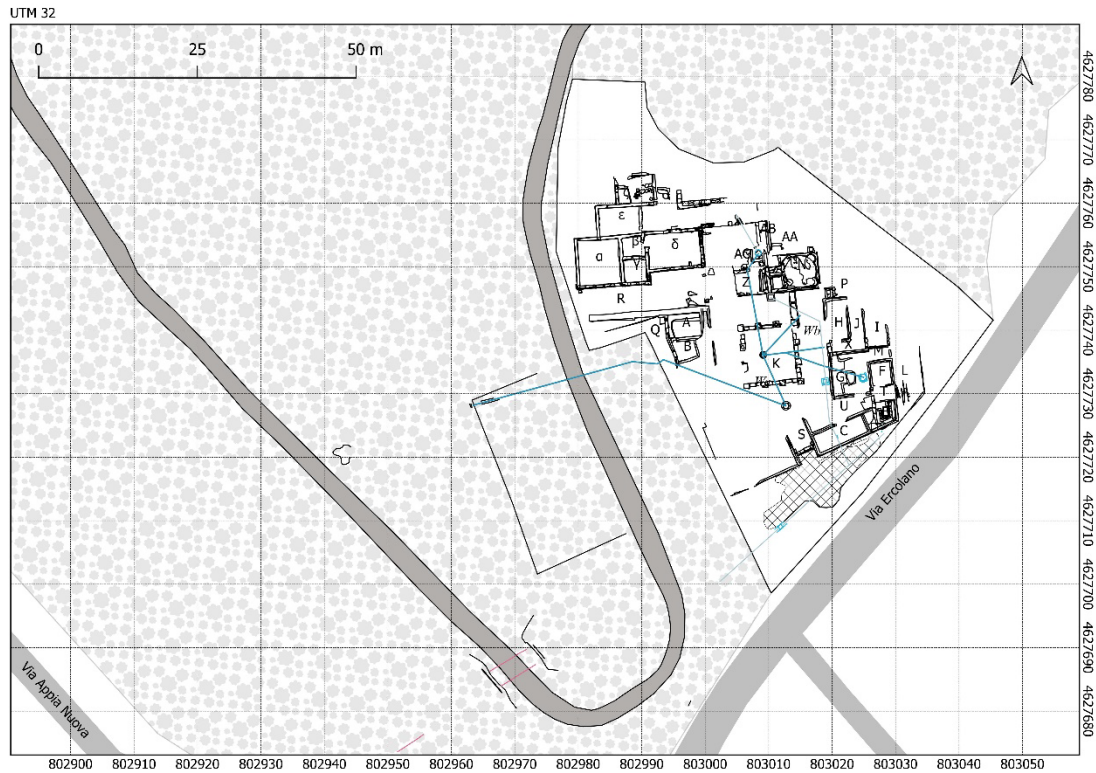


Fig. 9 Plan with cisterns and subterranean channels indicated in blue (N. Bargfeldt 2022).

Immediately east of the mosaic is one of the large bottle-shaped cisterns, 7 m deep, carved into the rock (Fig. 2, Area 3). This is just one out of five wells and cisterns that have been located in the area. It has been difficult to explore these with the equipment at our disposal, so this year a group of speleologists “Arco di Diana” visited the site. They were only in the excavation for a single day, but fearlessly allowed themselves to be lowered into the cisterns. The results were both surprising and important (Fig. 9). It turned out that the cistern in the middle of the so-called atrium (K) was connected to the other cisterns and wells via man-high channels – and that one of the channels had an exit further down in the park to the west of the so-called peristyle. However, it is still unclear where the water for these large water containers came from, but perhaps from the large springs on the crater rim (close to Castel Gandolfo). Unfortunately, no ancient finds were recorded, but a bed, some Coca-Cola bottles (circa 1960) and two empty bottles of alcohol had been left in the cistern. The dating of this type of bottle-shaped cistern goes back to at least 4th – 3th century BC and could thus have been carved at the same time as the ashlar building in Area 4/5 was constructed.

Results – chronology and interpretations

After the fieldwork in 2022, we can now conclude that several buildings existed on the site and the building activities have a wide chronological range from perhaps the 6th century BC to the late 1st century AD. We are still convinced that the buildings on the site should be attributed to a sanctuary rather than a Roman villa.

1. An archaic construction in elongated flat ashlar dates from the 6th century BC (Figs. 2-4, Area 5, room ζ), but finds go back to the 8th century BC. This building in Area 5 is only partially excavated, but continues further towards the north and perhaps also to the west.
2. Immediately to the south of this is a mid-Republican building constructed of large ashlar in polygonal masonry with five rooms α-ε (Fig. 2, Area 4, 4th-3rd century BC).
3. To the northeast of this, a new monumental building, perhaps a temple, was constructed in the late 2nd – early 1st century BC. This probably includes a votive deposit found immediately to the west of the building (Figs. 2, 5-6, Area 6).
4. A major rebuilding and expansion of the area took place approx. 50 BC (Fig. 2, Area 1). Here, most of the already known rooms A-Z in *opus reticulatum* were added with an entrance from the south, perhaps towards a road that led from the Via Appia up to the crater rim of Lake Albano. The rooms are located on two levels, with rooms A-B compensating for the level difference on the slope, perhaps facing a large peristyle, which has not yet been explored.
5. Reconstruction and additions in the Flavian period are seen in rooms N, Y, AA and AB (Figs. 2, 7-8, Area 3).
6. We have noticed that there are virtually no finds dating later than the middle of the 2nd century AD.

These first excavations have demonstrated with great certainty that the area had a sacred function with perhaps three different monumental buildings in the period from the 6th to the late 2nd century BC. But how do we then explain the cisterns, the later additions from around 50 BC and the bathing facilities?

For the purposes of an interpretation, it is crucial to keep in mind the special nature of the Bona Dea sanctuaries. Not many of them have been preserved, and they are extremely different. There was an official cult for Bona Dea on the Aventine Hill in Rome, but originally the cult was probably of a domestic nature, where the goddess had a *sacellum* or *sacrarium* in connection with a private property, thus completely different from an ordinary temple (*aedes*). It is characteristic that they are shielded from the public with surrounding walls, and they have an irregular plan that can include both a kitchen and a room for the manufacture of medicines. The presence and abundant access to water is well documented in other sanctuaries of Bona Dea (e.g. Ostia).

To understand the structure in its entirety, we may have to return to Cicero, who writes (Cic. Mil. 86): "ante ipsum sacrarium Bonae deae, quod est in fundo T. Sertii Galli, in primis honesti et ornati adulescentis" ("in front of the sanctuary of Bona Dea, which is

adjacent to the property owned by Titus Sertius Gallus, a respectable and learned young man”). Unfortunately, we know no more about this Titus Sertius Gallus and his family, but the private aspect of the cult is alluded to. If the sacral buildings are to be interpreted as belonging to Bona Dea, then the rest of the building constructed around the middle of the 1st century BC could perhaps belong to the private property described by Cicero. We do not yet have final evidence of which deity was worshipped here, but we hope to get a closer identification via future investigations.

These first field archaeological investigations have resulted in important new knowledge of the area, and we hope to obtain funding for continued work in 2023-2024. With the excavations in 2022, we are for the first time certain that the stratigraphy and the finds have not been disturbed by the previous owners. The Orsini family, who owned the area in the period 1830-1899, made many changes, and they removed floors and other finds which are probably now in other properties belonging to the Orsini. Archival studies (C. Manetta 2020/2022) show that the family may have known that the site might originally have been dedicated to Bona Dea. In any case, the inscriptions found in the complex (on more of the columns) show that the family used the site as a kind of commemorative place, marking important events in the family.

Funding and Support

We are grateful to Aarhus University and not least the Ingeniør Kaptajn Aage Nielsens Familiefond that made the fieldwork in 2022 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 invaluable support. The owners of the Villa Santa Caterina have supported the project in all respects, including making a large magazine for the finds available in the property.

Photos from the fieldwork



Fig. 10 Work in Area 5 (2022).



Fig. 11 Work in Area 5 (2022).



Fig. 12 Measuring the ancient remains in Area 5 and 6 (2022).



Fig. 12 Excavation in Area 3 (2022).



Fig. 13 Excavation of the votive deposit (2022).



Fig. 14 Excavating east of Area 5 (2022).



Fig. 15 Speleologists investigating the cisterns (2022).



Fig. 16 The new archaeological storeroom and magazine (2022).



Fig. 17 The new archaeological storeroom and magazine (2022).



Fig. 18 Cleaning of the pottery outside the magazine (2022).



Fig. 19 Team 2022 (N. Bargfeldt 2022).

For preliminary results, see also:

http://www.acdan.it/projekter/v_appia_c_albani/index.html

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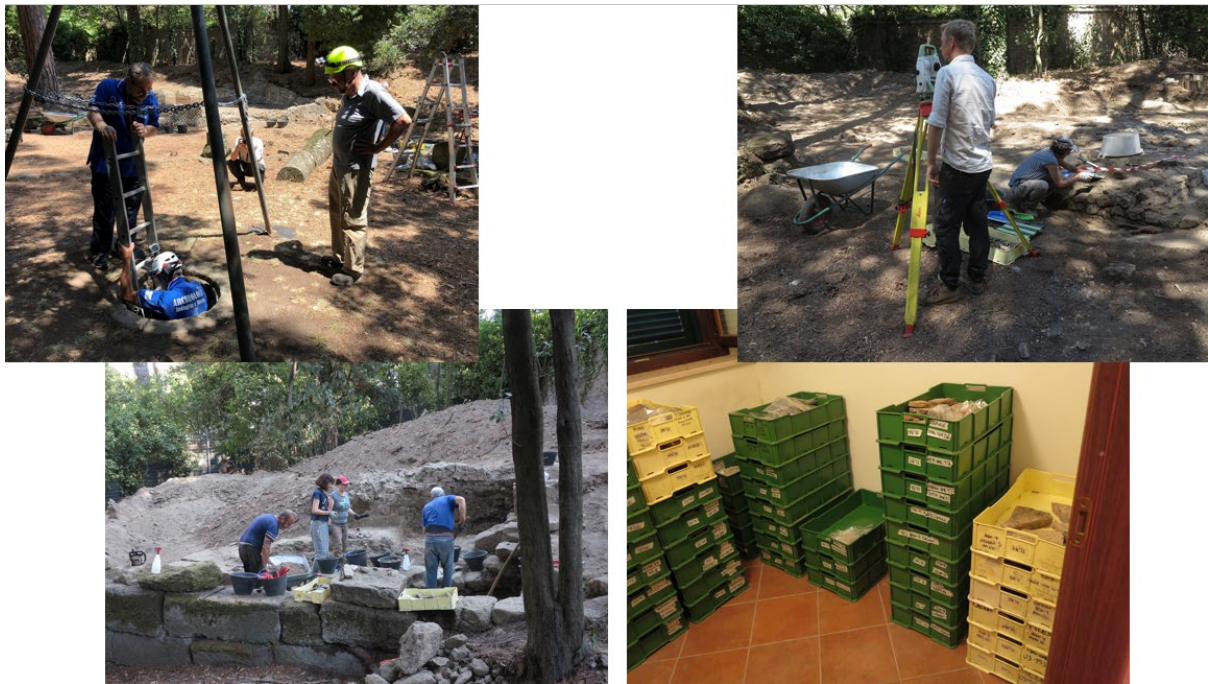


Fig. 6 Snapshots showing the investigation of the speleologists, the excavation of Area 5, measuring (Niels Bargfeldt) and the magazine. Birte Poulsen 2022.



Fig. 6 Plan of the recently excavated areas 5 and 6 – and 3 (N. Bargfeldt 2022).