

# Contextualising the past in the Alban Hills (Colli Albani)

## A preliminary report on the excavations in the so-called Villa of Clodius (Villa Santa Caterina) 2023

This is the fourth 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 26 June to 28 July 2023.

The fieldwork involved the collaboration between Aarhus University, Denmark, Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, the Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per l'Area Metropolitana di Roma, la provincia di Viterbo e l'Etruria meridionale (SABAP) as well as Accademia di Danimarca. The participants were scholars, students and volunteers from Denmark and Italy: Birte Poulsen (Aarhus University), Consuelo Manetta (Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa), Silvia Aglietti (Albano), Niels Bargfeldt (Aarhus University), Caroline E. Fisker (University of Lund), Luna C.L. Christiansen, Lilian Dibbern, Chiara Giulia Ferrari, Mathias Møller Helt, Sara Vejrup Jørgensen, Søren Lykke, Amanda Leighton Spatzek, as well as Danish and Italian volunteers: Daniel Andersen, Jesper Carlsen, Marianne Nordby. The first week was used for preparation, the remaining for the excavation itself.



Fig. 1 Plan of Villa Santa Caterina with the ancient structures marked in pink. N. Bargfeldt 2023.

The 2023 campaign was in many ways a direct continuation of the work begun in 2022, and we continued exploration of Areas 5 and 6, in particular with the aim of clarifying the size of buildings and their chronology.

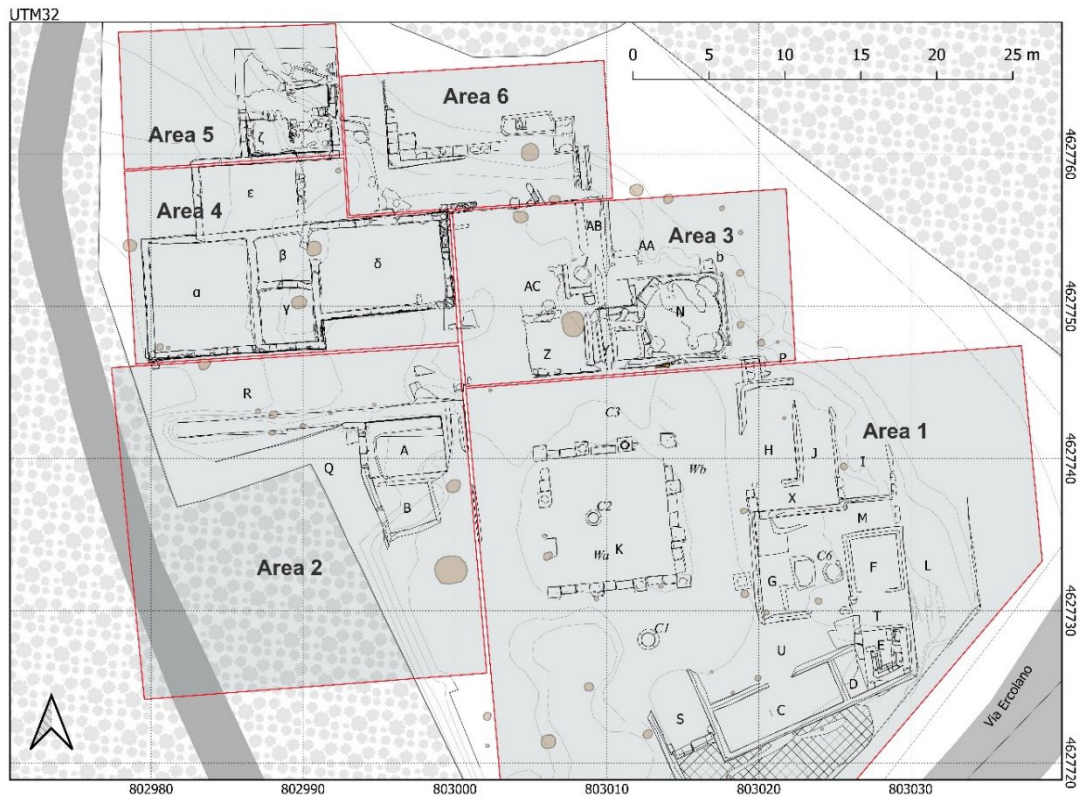


Fig. 2 Plan of the archaeological site with the preserved structures divided into six main areas. N. Bargfeldt 2023.

### Area 5

Area 5 was extended to the north (Figs. 1-3). In this area, walls of one or perhaps more rooms were revealed in 2022 (Building A). These rooms were constructed in elongated peperino blocks immediately to the north of the building in Area 4, and they have been preliminarily dated to the Archaic period. Furthermore, the remains of a floor were found at a fairly high level in the northern profile of the trench, and a wall of a rather poor quality had been erected directly on the surface of this floor. When the trench was extended towards the north in 2023, a further part of this floor was verified. Being at level 355.79 m asl, it clearly sealed the Archaic Building A. Only a triangular part of the floor with a series of vertically placed peperino blocks to the north is preserved (Figs. 3-4). This northern limitation consisting of vertically placed peperino blocks is oriented completely different from the other buildings in the area, and it is most likely that these blocks were added at a later date. The floor is made in a characteristic technique, *opus signinum* with inlaid coloured stones, and this type of floor dates quite broadly from the middle of the 2nd to the 1st century BC and may even continue

to be made also during the 1st century AD. Very interestingly, the level of the floor corresponds to the blocks in Building B (the top of the foundation is at 355.78 m asl), and it is likely that the two constructions are contemporaneous.

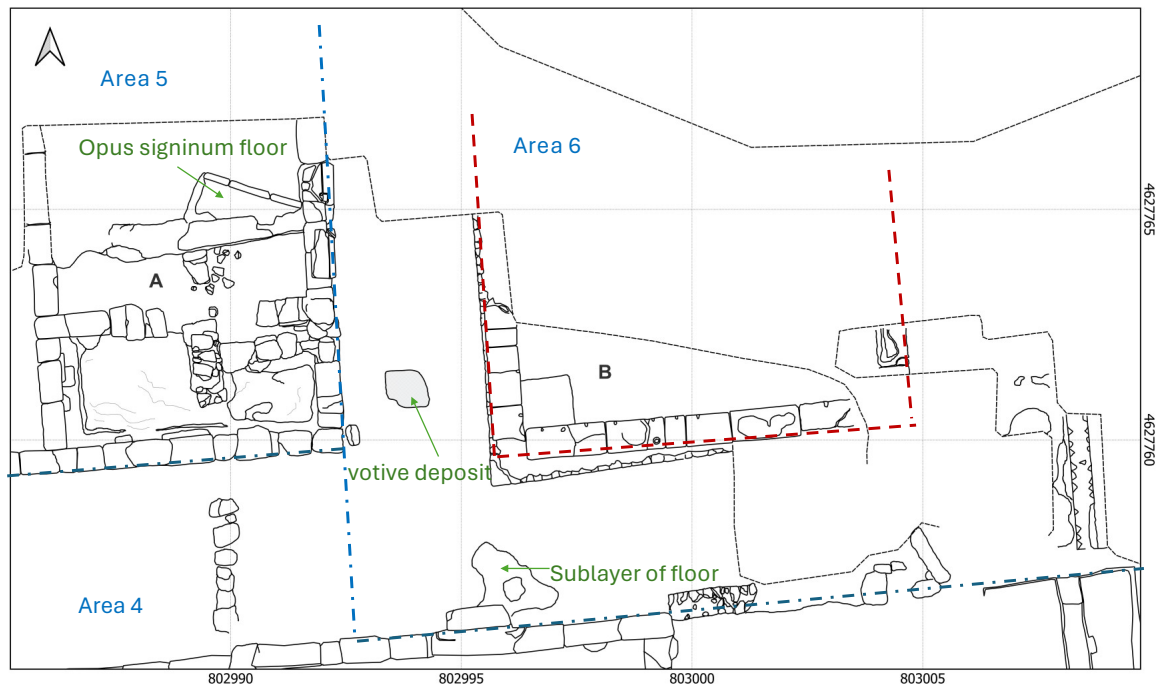


Fig. 3 Area 5 and 6. N. Bargfeldt 2023.



Fig. 4 *Opus signinum* floor seen from the north. It seals the Archaic Building A in Area 5. L. Dibbern 2023.



### *Area 6*

The purpose of the excavation in Area 6 in 2023 was partly to establish a demarcation of Building B, partly to investigate if there were more objects from the votive deposit found immediately to the west of that building in 2022 (Fig. 3).

### *Building B*

Part of its western and southern walls had been exposed in 2022. The continued work was, however, not without problems, as a 30 m tall pine tree is growing on the south wall of the building (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5 View of the southeast corner of Building B in Area 6 – to the left. N. Bargfeldt 2022.

We therefore had to lay out trenches around the tree, and we were lucky. We located ashlar of the eastern wall of the building (Fig. 6) immediately to the north of the pine, and we now know that the total length/width of the structure is 9.10 m. Unfortunately, the extent to the north was not determined in 2023.



Fig. 6 The east wall of Building B below the pine tree. L. Dibbern 2023.

A trial trench laid out further towards the east also resulted in important information. At a distance of 3.17 m from the east wall of Building B, a stretch of a north-south going wall was discovered (Figs 2 & 7). It was constructed in *opus latericium*, and the mortar contained stones and reused tile and brick of which one was stamped. Unfortunately, only a very small part of the stamp remains, and it cannot be identified. On the western façade this wall was faced with red mortar and in front of it were remains of a mosaic floor in white tesserae. It is therefore clear that Building B is placed at ca. 3 m (10 Roman feet) from the surrounding buildings to the west and east. The distance to the building in Area 4 to the south exceeds this with 40 cm, being ca. 3.50 m.

We have always wondered about the construction of Building B. The foundation of *opus caementicium* with only one row of peperino ashlar on top does not seem appropriate for a superstructure, and right now we are more inclined to identify this construction as the remains of a peristyle. This gives a completely different impression of the complex. In any case, the eastern wall (Figs. 2 & 7) seems to be a later addition to the earlier constructions since the wall is made of *opus latericium*. It should probably also be dated later than the *opus signinum* floor found in Area 5 and the peristyle that may well be contemporaneous with the floor.





Fig. 7 The wall to the east of Building B with remains of mortar and white tesserae in front of it. L. Dibbern 2023.

*A votive deposit? Preservation and conservation*

In 2022, a unique discovery was made immediately west of Building B in Area 6, namely a delimited fire layer containing large quantities of broken pottery, which we interpreted as a votive deposit (Fig. 3, 8-9). We had hoped to find more fragments of it in 2023, but it turned out that we actually had the votive deposit in its entirety, apart from a few missing fragments.



Fig. 8 Deposit during excavation. L. Dibbern 2022.

A conservation of the objects from the deposit was therefore a high priority, and the conservator Sara Carraro performed miracles (Fig. 9). After conservation and restoration, a black-glazed jug, a small pyxis, also black-glazed, an olla with associated lid, another lid, and seven drinking cups, all of different sizes, emerged. One of the cups has an incised X, another part of a painted inscription -ION. These beakers can be dated to the period from the late 2nd to the first half of the 1st century BC. Between these drinking vessels were found three small circular reliefs, only approx. 1-1.5 cm in diameter. The motifs are a helmet with plume, an armed soldier on horseback with a round shield and a spear, and a portrait of a man in profile to the right. On the back there is a secured impression of papyrus, and it seems that the clay plates originally sealed papyrus scrolls, which were consumed by the fire. So far, no parallels are known in Latium, but they are relatively common in archives in the eastern Mediterranean area in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, where they were used to seal both official, religious and private documents. The dating could suggest that this votive deposit might be connected to the dedication of the new buildings in Areas 5 and 6. The votive deposit was presented at the conference *Ellenismo: il Lazio in Italia e nel Mediterraneo. Forme, processi, idee* in Rome in October 2023.



Fig. 9 Votive deposit after conservation. S. Carraro 2023.

### ***Cleaning and excavation in Area 1***

As we still have not clarified the overall chronology of the structure, a smaller excavation was also carried out in Area 1, in rooms H, J and X (Fig. 2). As the only one, Room X was excavated down to the level of the rock. The floor, which originally lay at a level of 355 m asl, had been removed and it was therefore possible to excavate the layers below. Here it appeared that Room X was divided by two transverse walls, perhaps a kind of stabilizing of the two parallel walls that they connect. The excavation showed that the walls in *opus reticulatum* were built on a foundation of coarse concrete directly on the rock. We can date the walls to around the middle of the 1st century BC, but the finds in the fill suggest activity dating back to the 4th century BC.

### ***Villa or sanctuary***

But the question regarding interpretation as sanctuary or villa – or both – is still open. After the excavation campaign in 2023, we are probably most inclined to an interpretation as follows:

1. Originally a monumental building was erected on the site using rather large oblong flat peperino blocks in Area 5. This building, whose extent to the west and north is still unknown, is probably to be dated to the Archaic period.
2. This building was extended to the south at some point in the 4th or 3rd century (Area 4) with a building built in large peperino blocks, some of them polygonal.
3. Around the middle of the 1st century BC, the site is expanded with walls in *opus reticulatum* (Area 1). In addition to several rooms around an open courtyard or atrium (K) and on two levels, a peristyle (Building B) was built to the north rather precisely located at 3.10-3.50 m from the surrounding buildings to the east, south and probably to the west. In this connection, the Archaic remains of the sanctuary were covered with a floor in *opus signinum*, and some of the blocks from the Archaic building (A) were used as a stylobate in the peristyle.
4. These buildings are undergoing minor renovations with the installation of, among other things, a bath in late Flavian times or some decades later, and on that occasion the wall in *opus latericium* was added 3.10 m to the east. Perhaps a floor of white tesserae was also added at that time.

Such an interpretation would fit very well with the description by Cicero (Cic. *Mil.* 86). He writes: *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 educated young man"). Unfortunately, we know no more about this Titus Sertius Gallus and his family, but the private aspect of the cult is hinted at, and if the monumental sacral buildings are to be interpreted as belonging to Bona Dea, then the rest of the building from around the middle of the 1st century BC could perhaps be the private property described by Cicero.



### ***Processing of the finds***

Work on registering the finds was intensified in 2023. All finds excavated up to 2023 were registered, and numbering and drawings were begun. We plan to start the work with the catalogues in 2024.

### ***Measuring***

The survey was carried out by Niels Bargfeldt, Luna C.L. Christiansen and Giampaolo Luglio.

### ***Participation in conference and publication***

Related to the work in Villa Santa Caterina, we participated in a conference entitled *Hellenismo. Lazio in Italy and in the Mediterranean. Form, process, idea*, held in Rome during the days 25-27 October 2023, and a scientific article for publication about the votive deposit is being prepared. We have also communicated the project to a wider Danish audience with an article in the Danish journal *Sfinx*: S. Aglietti, L.C.L. Christiansen, C. Manetta & B. Poulsen 2023: Villa eller helligdom? Nye udgravninger ved Via Appia XIII, *SFINX* 46.6, 22-28.

## Photos from the fieldwork



Fig. 10 Work in Area 5 and 6, seen from the south. B. Poulsen.



Fig. 11 Finding the eastern limit of Building B in Area 6. B. Poulsen.





Fig. 12 Area 5, excavation near the *opus signinum* floor. B. Poulsen.



Fig. 13 Measuring anno 2023. B. Poulsen.





Fig. 14 Work with the data. B. Poulsen.



Fig. 15 Team 2023 – the first week. L. Dibbern.





Fig. 16 Team 2023 with car – the fourth week. S. Lykke.



Fig. 17 Final group photo with owners and visitors 2024. S. Lykke.