

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

A preliminary report on the work in the so-called Villa of Clodius (Villa Santa Caterina), Castel Gandolfo, 2025

This is the sixth preliminary report from the Danish-Italian research project on the Alban Hills launched in 2017 (Figs 1 and 2). This report presents some of the results obtained during the campaign that spanned five weeks from 23 June to 25 July 2025.

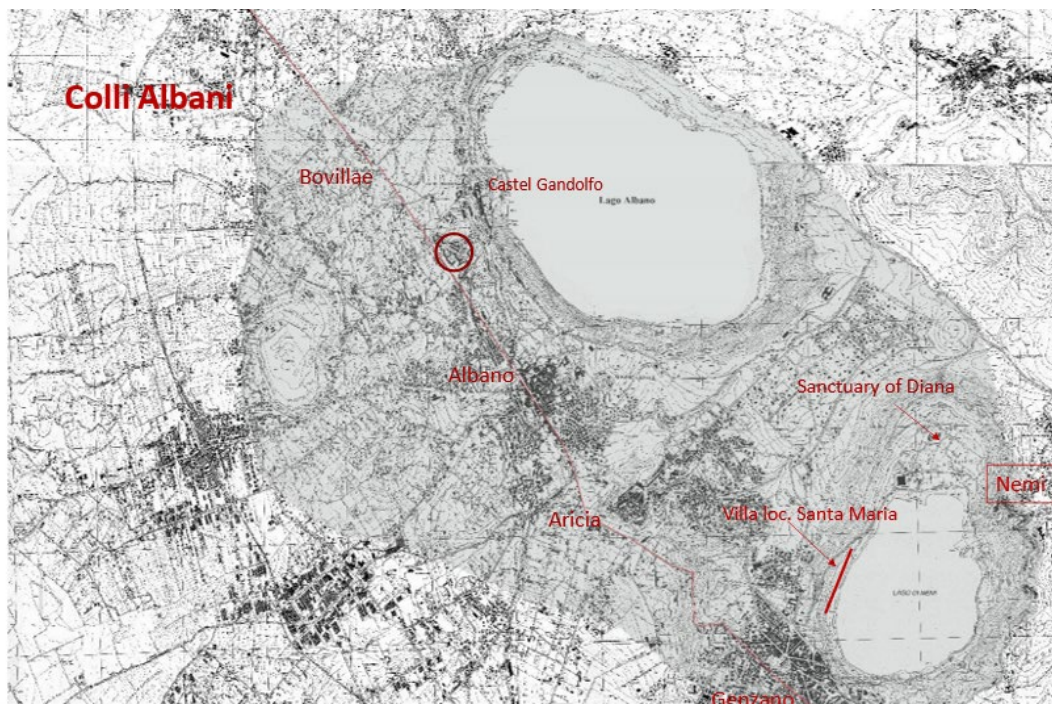


Fig. 1 Map showing the lakes (Albano and Nemi) and with indication of Villa Santa Caterina (red circle) (N. Bargfeldt 2024).



Fig. 2 Plan of Villa Santa Caterina with the ancient remains indicated in pink (N. Bargfeldt 2023).

The work is a collaboration between Aarhus University, Denmark, Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, the Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio per le Province di Frosinone, Latina e Rieti 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) and students: Anton Sidenius Almlund (Copenhagen University), Søren Lykke (Aarhus University), Hanne Christensen (Copenhagen University), Ida Johanne Samsø Sorring Petersen (Aarhus University), Sarah Amalie Korsgaard (Aarhus University), Jonas V. Dybro (Aarhus University), Bill Michael Linde (Aarhus University), Chiara Giulia Ferrari (Tor Vergata, Università degli studi di Roma) as well as two Danish volunteers: Jesper Carlsen (University of Southern Denmark) and Marianne Nordby (Accademia di Danimarca).

While the actual fieldwork in Villa Santa Caterina came to an end in 2024, the work in 2025 concentrated on the last measurements and descriptions on the site and the processing of the finds. During the very last days of the excavation in 2024, a so far unknown cistern was discovered in Building B, a peristyle (Fig. 2), but due to the lack of the necessary security equipment, further investigation was postponed until we have another excavation permit. Therefore, work was concentrated on the processing of the finds in the magazine, that has kindly been provided by the present owners, as well as descriptions and measuring of structures and certain architectural elements on the site.



Fig. 3 Plan of the ancient remains on the site and with trenches indicated (---).  
(N. Bargfeldt & G. Luglio 2024/2025).

### ***The architectural remains in the ‘atrium’***

The work on the site was limited to measuring and descriptions of a few ancient architectural elements on the site, such as columns, capitals and various blocks, all made of peperino. Most of these elements are located in the so-called atrium K (Fig. 3), which we now consider to be a construction of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but with recycled elements from one or more ancient buildings. In this area are registered at least three ancient capitals of the Tuscan-Doric order, various parts of unfluted columns as well as one fluted fragment. The capitals are made in a characteristic way with abacus, echinus, annuli and the upper part of the column cut in one piece, and they reflect two different

sizes presumably form the same period (Fig. 4). The upper diameter of the column is 43 and 37 cm respectively. Furthermore, there is one fragment of a larger fluted column that has been cut into a regular building block, measuring 53 x 30 cm (Fig. 5). Some of the reused and replaced blocks in the stylobate of the 'atrium' have the lower diameter of the columns indicated, and that corresponds to ca. 60 cm, (=2 RF). The reconstructed and recent columns in the 'atrium' show that the original height must have been around 9-10 m.



Fig. 4 Two Tuscan-Doric capitals, the larger is seen to the left (2025).



Fig. 5 Fragment of fluted column and its documentation (2025).

In the northern wall of room  $\delta$  of the building made of large peperino ashlar, another architectural element has been reused, probably during the time when the Orsinis restructured the site (Figs 3 and 6). Originally, it may have formed part of the superstructure of a monumental building but was at some point recut and used as a threshold.



Fig. 6 Architectural element placed in the northern wall of room  $\delta$  and its documentation (2025).

Besides the registration of various architectural elements on the site, the north-eastern corner of the peristyle Q was re-examined (Figs 7 and 8). In this place remains five oblong blocks in peperino (1.12-1.79 m long and 58 cm wide) (USM 62 and 63). As to dimensions, they are similar to the peperino blocks in Building B, the peristyle (Fig. 3). They are clearly *in situ* but on top of these were placed columns on an Attic base. The diameter of the base is 47 cm. According to the indication of the placing of columns on the top of the blocks, the interaxial measurements to the north was 1.85 m, to the east a bit smaller, 1.78 m. The majority of these columns are made as imitations of the original ones and there are two with inscriptions in this corner. It seems, however, that they closely imitate the original columns of which some fragments can be observed in the Orsini wall (USM 66) along the southern limitations of the ramp (R). The original width of the ramp seems to have been 4.30 m, but the later wall constructed during the time of the Orsinis has tried to eliminate the irregular corner between the orientation of the ramp and the likewise irregular placed room A and B (Fig. 3). A third recent column with an inscription from the Orsini period is located some meters further to the west.

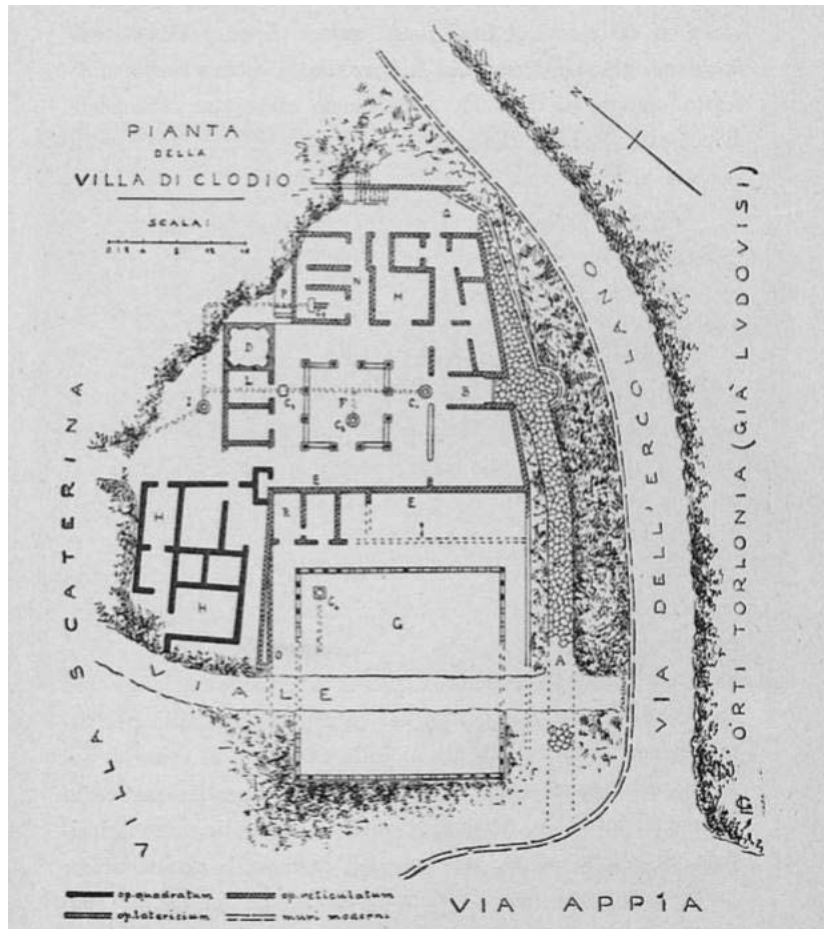


Fig. 7 Plan with cistern (C<sub>4</sub>) indicated in the corner of the large peristyle (G. Lugli 1914, fig. 3).



Fig. 8 Northeast corner of the large peristyle Q with indication of cistern (C<sub>4</sub>) visible in the plan of Lugli 1914 (2025).

### Processing of the finds in the magazine

In 2025, the focus was on material processing in preparation for the forthcoming publication. All finds had already been basic registered during previous campaigns, so that we had a full overview of the various types of finds and the chronological frames. Only a limited number had, however, been numbered and drawn. This year all diagnostic fragments were numbered and about half of the finds were drawn (Figs 9-10), and we hope to finish this work and also make photos for the publication in 2026-2027, so that we can start the actual cataloguing of the finds.



Fig. 9 Students working with the finds (2025).



Fig. 10 On the tables a typical find box and a couple of diagnostic finds (cooking ware and genucilia). All finds were photographed when a drawing had been made.

## Conclusion

The material from the investigations of the so-called villa of Clodius is covering a wide chronological period spanning from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE to the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. There are still no conclusive finds from the later Imperial period, Late Antiquity, the Medieval period or the Renaissance – in fact there is a lacuna in the finds until the Orsini period. We are, however, still working with four or five main periods of the structure on the site:

Phase 1/2 – Archaic/Mid-Republican (4<sup>th</sup> century BCE)

Phase 3 – second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE

Phase 4 – around mid-1<sup>st</sup> century BCE

Phase 5 – Flavian to first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE

When we started work in 2017, our working hypothesis was – and still is – that the ancient remains cannot be identified with the remains of a Roman villa from the mid-1<sup>st</sup> century CE. It seems certain

that the monumental building in *opus quadratum* was later encapsulated by later constructions and that parts of it was modified in relation to these constructions (Phase 3 and 4).

We have earlier argued that these phases would fit well with the description by Cicero (Cic. *Mil.* 86) - *ante ipsum sacrarium Bonae deae, quod est in fundo T. Sertii Galli, in primis honesti et ornati adolescentis* ("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 1<sup>st</sup> century BC could perhaps be the private property described by Cicero.

### **Publication**

During the campaign we also had the opportunity to discuss the find material and the planned publication with the representatives of the Soprintendenza, Giorgia Leoni, whom we thank for a very constructive and fruitful collaboration. As for the publication in preparation, a first preliminary plan for a monograph has been made, and the contributions will be in English and Italian. The preparation will surely take a couple of years.



Group photo with some of the participants (2025).