

Introduction

The site of Aiano is in the municipality of San Gimignano (Siena, Italy), located in the territory of the ancient *Roman VII regio*. The site is located on the border between the Roman civic territories of Siena, Volterra and Florence, in the small Elsa valley, formed by its tributary Foci, on the axis that connects the region in and around Siena to the Arno Valley.

In the Middle Ages, the *via Romea* or *Francigena* ran through this valley, over the hills, leading pilgrims from Canterbury to Rome.

This late antique villa has been excavated since 2005 by a Belgian-Italian team led by Professor Marco Cavalieri (UCLouvain, Belgium). About 3,000 m² of the settlement have been excavated. The site covers an area of about 10,000 m², an estimate based on various geological surveys.

The building presents at least six phases of occupation from the 3rd to the 7th cent. AD.

Period 1: the settlement was founded, between the late 3rd and the early 4th cent. AD.

The oldest building is located in the S-W area of the settlement: only the foundation walls, made of roughly hewn travertine blocks, remain in rooms A, B and E.

Period 2: between the late 4th and the late 5th cent. AD, the entire settlement underwent a monumental rearrangement in multiple stages, which turned it into a veritable architectural *unicum*.

From the late 4th century AD, the villa began to be extended with the addition of a six-foil hall in the middle surrounded by a five-foil *Ambulatio*. A room in the southern part has been identified as a square-layout “vestibule”.

Later on, between the late 4th and the early 5th cent. AD, the layout and flooring were changed, with the six foils replaced by three foils, after closing off three of them.

The combination of a central layout and an exterior *Ambulatio* is not so unusual in late antique architecture, but very few examples have been found in residential buildings.

Only the late 4th - early 5th century floor of the central hall (trefoil hall) still remains in-situ. This was made of *opus caementicium*, decorated with mosaic details in geometrical and figurative patterns. It was made after the refurbishment of the previous six-foil hall into a trefoil hall.

Three new rectangular rooms (H, I, L) were built after pulling down the foils, communicating only with the *Ambulatio*.

Period 3: the site was abandoned as a residential settlement. Between the late 5th and the mid-6th cent. AD, its furnishings and building materials were taken away to be recycled and reused. Most interestingly, a large part of the reused bricks found in the villa, such as those used for the floors and worktops, is associated with the collapsed southern arch of the trefoil hall.

During the third period, the spaces and functions of the building itself changed. The decorations had been deprived of their original purposes, since they had been systematically disassembled or recycled during the last stage in the life of the site, when the villa became a sort of quarry and a small-scale manufactory.

Most crafts were created in some areas of the site.

The location of workshops must have been dictated by the proximity of materials as well as by the state of preservation of these places.

Among the decorations of the villa that were taken away, during the third period in particular, there are more than 2,000 pieces of glass *sectilia*. Most of them come from some pits located in the south-eastern part of the excavated site. They must have been taken to this area to be melted and reused as part of a process in which the settlement was systematically stripped.

The glass *sectilia* originally formed panels with representations of sea fish, such as breams. These luxury products have the closest comparison to some glass fragments from Trier, dating back to the 4th century AD and **presumably** made by Egyptian craftsmen.

Period 4: between the late 6th and the early 7th cent. AD, all workshops were closed down, and the site was therefore abandoned.

Period 5: until the mid-7th cent. AD, the ruins were occasionally used as a burial ground. Neither grave contains any goods: just a small and very badly preserved metal buckle (now being restored) was found in the grave in room Q.

Period 6: contemporary age; the site has been ploughed deep and flattened, layers have been cut, and walls have been shaved down to a mean depth of 75 cm from ground level.

The northern area of the site has been excavated since 2017.

Today we will show you a preliminary presentation of the most recent findings in Aiano. Our purpose is to show what we have found, and we would be grateful for possible suggestions and comparisons.

Room U - area 7600

Room U is a large, rectangular room located between the smaller rooms Q and Z, and the area 11.000. It is 20 meters long and 8 meters wide, with 4 central pillars each approximately 1 meter wide. A large 3-meter-wide entrance is located in the eastern part of the room, opening onto a corridor or portico with pillars. In 2018 and 2019, the excavation of the northern and last part of the room was started, in order to complete the previous excavations (2010 and 2011).

The residential phase

Room U's function is still unknown for the residential phase of the Roman villa. Its planimetry with internal pillars could be related to large storage rooms, like the ones in the late-Roman villa of Piazza Armerina (Sicily) or the granary of the villa of Settefinestre (not far from *Cosa*, today in the district of Grosseto, southern Tuscany). However, no material evidence has been preserved in this space after the phase of artisanal reuse, making it impossible to confirm this storage function.

Furthermore, this hypothesis has been under discussion since the excavation of the area in 2018, when we found two portions of collapsed walls that most likely came from the eastern wall. We found traces of painted plaster on some of the stones which are not compatible with a storage function. Moreover, a large amount of decorated painted plaster was found in the crumbling layers in Room U. To sum up, the wall paintings consist of imitation of marble with various decorative motifs of which only one fragment has been discovered: a white flower on a red background. The presence of painted plaster fragments, both in the crumbling layers and on some of the stones of the two portions of collapsed walls, would suggest that the room was decorated with frescoes.

One hypothesis that has emerged following the latest results, leads us to imagine that Room U had an upper floor. This is suggested by the four central pillars which could have supported that floor, and by the height of the collapsed eastern wall. This latter could reach almost 4 meters of height. In this case, the first floor may have had a residential function with painted walls while the ground floor was used to store the production of the villa. A similar configuration was present in the villa of San Giovanni di Ruoti in Basilicata (southern Italy) during the fifth century AD.

The artisanal phase

Like the other rooms of the villa, Room U was reoccupied in the sixth century by some artisanal workshops that recycled all types of materials. In the case of Room U, the interpretation of these artisanal activities remains difficult, but it seems that the central part of the room was dedicated to recycling the mosaic stone tesserae. Indeed, many fragments of mosaics like this example with a decorative motif and a lot of stone tesserae were found in this area. Many of these show traces of rubefaction following exposure to strong heat, whose aim was most likely to transform them into lime. A large amount of carbonised wooden elements were found, presumably linked to these activities.

Room K, with its long length, frames the western side of the site. The southern part of the room was excavated between 2011 and 2017, revealing traces of wide cooking surfaces. No scraps were found in the area. In 2018 and 2019, the archaeological excavations were carried out in the northern part of room K. A layer completely filled with broken tiles was discovered. They hadn't collapsed from a possible roof: they had been deliberately set on the ground. This space was not excavated towards the north, so we don't know where the northern limit is, but it was closed towards the south with a wall made with reused blocks. The wall was directly set on the previous anthropic layers and it leaned on the wall of room U towards the east. So, we can certainly assume that this arrangement for the northern area of K was realized much later than the building of U and - probably - the productive activities in the southern part of K.

Why does this area have a ground covered with broken tiles and why was it closed with reused stone blocks towards the south? The answer could be in the layer just over the tiles: a deep layer of wet and doughy clay, which could be used for pottery production.

Area 11000

Area 11000 is located north of Room U. A wall separates the two rooms; during the first phases of excavation two collapse layers were found.

Under these layers, a wall was found on the northern side of the Area, with a threshold on the eastern side, most likely with the aim to connect Area 11000 with Area 13000.

The eastern wall was probably built with reused blocks; some of them still show painted plaster on their surface; the structure's foundation seems to be realized with stones and tiles and the wall itself seems to be of a later phase, compared to the northern and southern walls of the room.

In the eastern side of the Area, a layer of mortar (whose function is unknown: either a floor preparation or a water basin) was identified: this layer, which continued under the eastern wall and also under the eastern section, is interrupted near the middle of the Area, with a sort of cut that is bordered by stones arranged irregularly, which fit under the layer itself, and contain gaps in some points.

On the western side of the Area, two circular pits were identified: they were cut in the same layer and were filled with fragments of burnt bricks, burnt stones (remains of a very floury limestone or marble?), and burnt pottery. These two pits could indicate that Area 11000 was part of a craft area, but no other evidence was found there.

In the southwestern part of area 11000, an area of 1m² was deeply excavated in order to obtain more information about the foundation of the western and the southern walls. This operation allowed us to understand the building technique of the walls. Indeed, slight traces of the wooden formwork were found on the walls. It is also interesting to mention that traces of a possible pavement preparation were found at the intersection of the walls.

Area 13000

Area 13000 is an area of approximately 65 square meters located north of area 11000, between the northern limit of area 11000 and the new border of the site's excavation area. A collapse layer made of stones and mortar was found during the excavation in 2018. The removal of this layer allowed us to find a second activity in this area; a wall (of poor quality) that leaned on a pilaster and a thin pavement layer made of reused *cocciopesto*.

A second probable collapse layer made of stones, mortar, tiles, bricks, and *cocciopesto* blocks, was found. More than 20 bronze coins of 4th - 5th century AD were found in this layer. Most of these coins were found in the same area; in the south-eastern part of area 13000. However, it is important to say that these coins were still in use after the 4th and 5th centuries – which would therefore bring the date of the layer to a later period of time. A great amount of archaeological material (among them a 4th-6th century fragment of a lamp disc in African Red Slip Ware and of Atlante X A1 type, with the representation of a human figure, most likely masculine, on the disc and a heart-shaped pattern on the shoulder) was found in this layer. Later, a wall made of stones and bricks was identified. It seems to divide the area into two different parts. Indeed, the pursuit of the excavation confirmed this hypothesis because the stratigraphical situations were always different on each side of this wall.

In 2019, the area was extended for 3 meters on the eastern side. This extension has allowed us to bring to light other walls. During the removal of a layer with a big amount of glass, bronze and pottery - not yet studied - in the central-western portion of the area a reused brick layer with superficial combustion traces, probably pertaining to a pavement, was identified.

A similar kind of floor revetments was already known in Aiano: reused bricks were also used on the floors of room Q and room O, the vestibule, which dates back to the first half of the sixth century AD. However, this kind of floor revetment was very easy to make and a different - possibly later - chronology cannot be excluded.

This area has not been completely excavated yet, so it is difficult to draw conclusions for now. It will thus be important to continue the fieldwork in the next few years to obtain more information on the area and to hopefully understand the different phases and activities that characterized it over the years.

Area 14000

During the last excavation campaign in 2019, it was decided to carry out some surveys in the eastern part of the site to try to define the extension of the villa. The first of them, called area 14000, was of great interest. Several walls, which delimit different rooms, were uncovered directly under the humus layer.

The first room, fully unveiled, is 9 meters long and 5 meters wide in a north-south axis. It has 4 buttresses of about 50cm each on its west and east sides. However, only the foundations of this room have been preserved, without any anthropological layer inside. To the west of the room, another one was discovered. Only a part was excavated, which currently measures 9 meters long and 8 meters wide with 2 central pillars, each approximately 1 meter wide. Two dolium bottoms, not yet excavated, were discovered in the south-east corner of the room. Each is surrounded by a cocciopesto strip to support them, like another dolium present in corridor K. Finally, a wall extends to the south suggesting another room.

All of this new district of the villa of Aiano needs to be excavated in the following years, but it is already possible to draw a few conclusions. Firstly, only the foundations of the structures seem to be preserved because of modern agricultural works. Secondly, the planimetry of the room with the 4 buttresses suggests that the structure was very high, like the typology of granaries with buttresses, or had a strong internal pressure like a cistern. This last hypothesis is possibly reinforced by the presence of a three-basin cistern on the hill above the site. Unfortunately, it was not possible to uncover traces of hydraulic plaster on the walls.

Thus, it is likely that the next campaigns will provide us with more information about this probable, new productive district of the archaeological site of Aiano.

Conclusion

This short presentation was the chance for us to introduce you to the latest results and the work in progress on the Roman villa of Aiano. The ongoing excavations unveiled new rooms whose functions and relations with the southern and central part of the villa remain to be determined.

In the northern part of the site, spaces are usually wider, walls are better preserved (due to the covering of the ruins with earth, for agriculture purposes, in the mid-20th century) and the excavation showed a lower presence of archaeological materials (such as pottery, glass or bronze) than in the central and southern areas. Moreover, we haven't found the accesses to the northern areas yet, but we can say that the paths changed inside the building and some paths are still recognizable. However, the northern area seems, at a certain point, to lack direct connections with the central one, with the possible exception of room K.

The research is too preliminary and the excavations need to be completed in order to find a reason for these noticeable differences inside the same site. Could there have been a different function for the northern areas during the last "life" of the site? Or perhaps a lower (or different) presence of productive activities in general in the northern areas? Only future research will allow us to completely understand what we have found.

In the future, the project will continue to focus on this area. On one hand by continuing the excavations, and on the other hand by studying the archaeological findings deeper. At the same time, a major project of the site's museumization is under preparation for the archaeological museum of San Gimignano.

Thank you for your attention.