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diretti da Domenico Vera

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THE FIFTH CENTURY: AGE OF TRANSFORMATION

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AIANO-TORRACCIA DI CHIUSI (SAN GIMIGNANO, SIENA):
A ROMAN VILLA IN CENTRAL ITALY DURING LATE ANTIQUITY

Introduction

The site of Aiano-Torraccia di Chiusi¹ is situated in the municipality of San Gimignano (Siena, Italy), in the territory of the ancient Augustan *regio VII*. This late antique villa lies on a river terrace of 10,000 square meters to the left of the Foci stream (a tributary of the river Elsa, which flows into the Arno river). This natural setting affords the site a strategic position, reinforced by its situation between the cities of *Saena Julia*, *Volaterrae*, and *Florentiae* (today Siena, Volterra, and Florence). In the Middle Ages, the *Via Romea*² passed through this valley.³

Roman occupation of this area has been known since the early twentieth century from various finds, including a funerary urn found near the Foci, which was studied by R. Bianchi Bandinelli. In the 1960s, a water tank – probably linked to a monumental structure in the valley – was identified on the hill.⁴ But it was only in 2001 that the Soprintendenza Archeologia della Toscana and the Archaeological Group of San Gimignano dug a trench (today on the southern part of the excavated area) which revealed some late Roman finds. Later, in 2005, a systematic excavation began under the scientific direction of the Belgian University of Louvain. A combination of geophysical analysis⁵ and field surveys indicates a large area for the settlement which probably extended over more than one hectare.

Up to the present, only an area of about 3,000 square meters has been excavated (fig. 1). The structures that have now been revealed by the systematic stratigraphic excavation of the site are mainly oriented from north to south, with a central trefoil hall

¹ See <http://www.villaromaine-torracciadichiusi.be>. See also, Cavalieri 2008; Cavalieri 2009; Cavalieri 2010a; Cavalieri 2012; Cavalieri 2013; Cavalieri 2016; Cavalieri - Orlandi 2014; Deltenre - Orlandi 2016.

² About the *Via Romea* in Tuscany see Patitucci Uggeri 2004. About the *Via Romea* in the nearby of Aiano - Torraccia di Chiusi, see Chellini forthcoming.

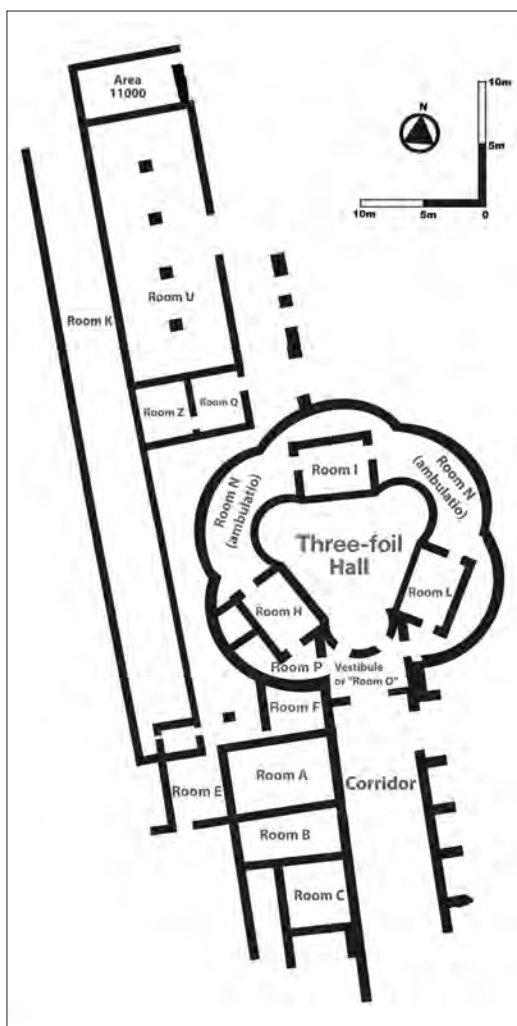
³ Before the *Via Romea*, in Etruscan and Roman times, see Cavalieri 2016, 109; Chellini forthcoming.

⁴ De Marinis 1977; Cavalieri 2008, 7-8.

⁵ Cavalieri - Pace 2011.



1. - Present excavation area of the villa of Aiano-Torraccia di Chiusi, aerial view.



2. - Plan of the villa in the fourth and early fifth centuries.

surrounded by a five-lobed *ambulatio*. This hall opens at the southern end onto a large corridor bordered to the west by a series of rooms (A, B, C, E); to the east, a succession of six small open spaces are distributed along the corridor. The northwestern part of the complex includes a long corridor (room K) and a large room with four pilasters (room U) enclosed at the southern end by two smaller rooms (rooms Z and Q) and at the north by a new space (the so-called «area 11,000», perhaps another room), which was found recently (fig. 2).⁶

⁶ See http://www.fastionline.org/excavation/micro_view.php?fst_cd=AIAC_1045&curcol=sea_cd-AIAC_9219.

Chronology of the Site

The excavations allow us to divide the villa's history into six distinct phases. In the first, between the late third and the early fourth centuries CE, the settlement was founded, and rooms A, B, and E were created, although only the foundation walls today represent this phase. In a second period, between the late fourth and the late fifth centuries CE, the entire area underwent a monumental, multi-stage rearrangement, which transformed it into a veritable architectural *unicum*. Its chief feature was a six-foil hall surrounded by corresponding *ambulatio*. Later (but still part of phase 2), the original building project was modified: three lobes of the central room were dismantled and three rectangular rooms were built, none of which opened onto the inner hall.

A third phase (from second half of the fifth to the mid-sixth century CE) saw the progressive abandonment of the villa. The site was then reoccupied by a group of artisans who set up a series of workshops which recycled precious and raw materials from the villa's structures.⁷ The fourth period (between the late sixth and the early seventh centuries CE) saw the closure of the workshop and a re-abandonment of the site. The fifth phase (down to the mid-seventh century CE) is characterized by sporadic occupation. Thereafter, the complex was completely abandoned and later its ruins housed two burials, without any grave goods. In the modern era (sixth period), the site was ploughed deep and flattened, layers were cut, and walls were shaved down to a mean depth of seventy-five centimeters from ground level.

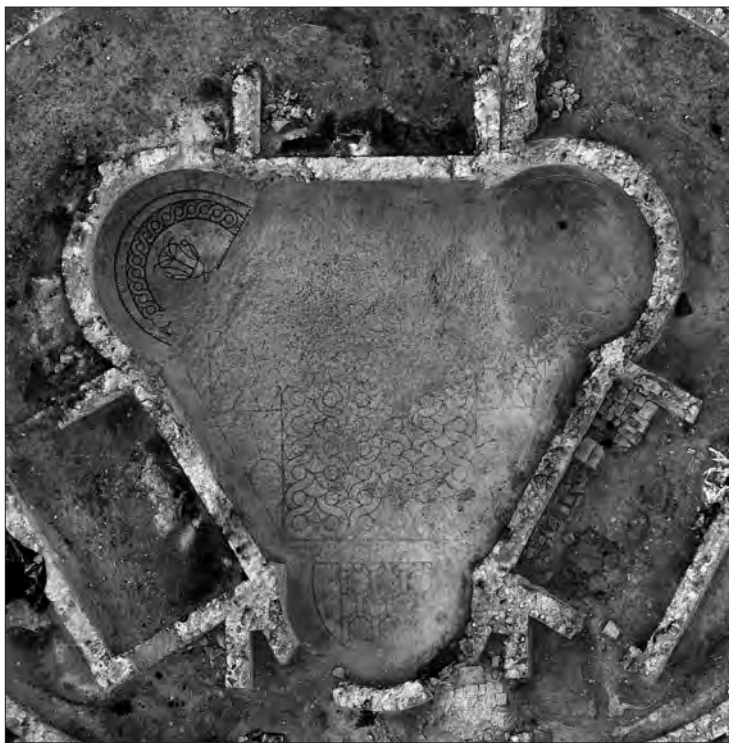
The Fifth Century: A New Architectural Project

The second period presents a particular problem for the site of Aiano-Torraccia di Chiusi. Indeed, the third period – which corresponds to the reuse of the site in the form of material recycling – has largely obliterated the two earlier phases. Operations were carried out in order to strip the villa of its valuable or reusable materials, and the implementation of the requisite workshops required the destruction of the previous levels. Therefore, only the careful study of the stratigraphy has been able to reveal the most characteristic and still visible element of the fourth- and fifth-century phases: the modification of the initial architectural project.

As in the late fourth century CE, the villa underwent extensions 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 rectangular «vestibule». The main entrance to the hall was through some openings in the southern exedra, accessible from the «vestibule», so the ring-shaped corridor led to the northern area of the villa.

Later, between the late fourth and the early fifth centuries CE, the villa was restored and refurbished; the six-foil hall was radically transformed, both architectonically and functionally: the floor was significantly lowered and three exedras were destroyed. Re-

⁷ For a more detailed analysis of this phase, see Deltenre and Orlandi 2016.



3. - Paved floor of trefoil hall.

mains of the *Ambulatio* include parts of the previous building, with wall facings in roughly-hewn travertine.

Three new rectangular rooms (H, I, L) were built, each communicating only with the *Ambulatio* (fig. 2). The new arrangement gives the unusual form of a trefoil hall built out from a triangular foundation, very different from the classic *triconchon*, the result of a complex architectonic history.

The floor of this hall is paved in *opus signinum*⁸ decorated with mosaic details in geometrical and figurative patterns (fig. 3). This is the only surviving floor of the villa.⁹ It was found during the 2007 to 2008 excavation campaigns:¹⁰ some parts of the surface were lost in antiquity, such as some lithic *tesserae*, and only the preparatory layer re-

⁸ The floor is described by Italian scholars as a «cementizio», which better suits the paving style than the term *opus signinum*, which is no longer used by Italian scholars. For a more detailed analysis, see Grandi Carletti 2001; Grandi 2001; Guidobaldi 2016; and <http://tess.beniculturali.unipd.it/web/terminologia-e-definizioni/classi-pavimentali/cementizio>.

⁹ Two other floors were found in the Q room and in the «Vestibule». They were made through the simple juxtaposition of bricks (resulting from the spoliation of the villa's architecture). The floor of the Q room also showed the reuse of white marble fragments from the previous villa's ornamentation. Both floors date back to the workshop phase.

¹⁰ The restoration of the floor was carried out in July and August 2017, after first a consolidation and then sealing of the mosaic itself with sand and earth in 2007 and 2008.

mained, in particular in the northern and northeastern area. Stratigraphic excavation has clarified that the floor had already been damaged when the hall was abandoned, after a very short period, at the end of the fifth century CE. A layer of green-brown clay sealed the floor before the collapse of the ceiling's painted decoration.

The southern foil, the central area, and the eastern foil present at least three different geometric patterns in an asymmetric composition.¹¹ The main decorative figure is in the northwestern foil: a great *guilloche* serves as the frame for a *kantharos*, which shows some vegetal patterns coming out from its rim. This is a common decorative motif, dating back to the end of the fourth / beginning of the fifth century CE, and it can be found in other late antique contexts, either in mosaic floors (such as the floors under the Chiusi Cathedral)¹² or in wall paintings (for example in room 2 of the so-called «Villa dell'Oratorio» in Capraia e Limite, close to Florence).¹³

The floor was painted red, and a black line followed the shape of the *tesserae*. These were lithic, colored black and white. However, an in-depth investigation of the technical, building and decorative features of the floor revealed a fairly hasty installation of the decorations and a poor choice of building materials, with easy availability prevailing over considerations of quality (for example, sand and pebbles from the local rivers used for the flooring).¹⁴ The central room must have had walls higher in elevation than the other sections of the villa. Its covering must have been surrounded by three quadrangular exedrae and by the covering of the *ambulatio*. The collapsed roofs found in that room must have been arched and constructed in *opus latericium*. The *Ambulatio* must have had a single-pitched «hip roof», as shown by the collapsed layers that have been found there, which include *imbrices* and *tegulae*.

The second stage in the building process is associated with an extremely distinctive feature, not least because of the state in which it was preserved. The combination of a central layout and an exterior *ambulatio* is not so unusual in late antique architecture, both in the West and in the East, but very few examples have been found in residential buildings. Although the decorative scheme of the villa was mostly destroyed and recycled during the workshops phase, some parts of the original decoration were found. The most substantial group of glass *sectilia* was found in an open space used as storage for salvaged materials in the south-eastern area of the villa, behind a monumental corridor that led to the trefoil hall.¹⁵ Most likely the glassware must also have been taken to this area to be melted and reused as part of the larger process of systematically stripping the original luxury villa.

¹¹ For a wider description, see Cavalieri 2010b, 369-70.

¹² Cipollone 1998.

¹³ Cantini - Ramacciotti - Alderighi - Lezzerini 2016, 122-23.

¹⁴ Cavalieri 2010b, 370-73.

¹⁵ Cavalieri - Camin - Paolucci 2016. More than 1,600 fragments of glass paste *sectilia*, dating to the fourth and fifth centuries CE, have been uncovered. They consist of small, square monochrome pieces in green or blue, extremely refined, that were part of representations of polychrome fish. A comparison with similar pieces found elsewhere suggests that the glass paste was probably produced by Egyptian laborers as a luxury item.

Also found at the site are coarse-ware, fine-ware coated with a red/brown slip ¹⁶ (engobe), fine-ware and semi-fine-ware, amphoras, oil lamps and *opus doliare*, fragments of African red slip ware (ARS), soapstone, and individual pieces that are not associated with the late Roman site, dating back to pre-Roman and Imperial Roman times. ¹⁷ Both the fine-ware and the semi-fine-ware coated with red/brown slip (engobe) are testament to the economic and cultural transition that took place from the fifth to the seventh centuries CE ¹⁸. The fine-ware coated with red/brown slip (engobe) in particular is the result of the intensive imitation of the ARS that was typical of the fifth century CE. ¹⁹



4. - Atlante type 10 lamp featuring bird on a fluted pillar.

As to the morphological repertoire of coarseware pottery, distinctive styles began to emerge, especially in the case of containers for liquids. The few amphoras found at the site, most extremely damaged, were probably African imports, the so-called *spatheia*. ²⁰ From an economic standpoint, such *spatheia* prove that the site must have been trading with northern Africa, not on a large scale but consistently. ²¹

Lastly, the oil lamps found in the site were quite common in the West from the early fifth to the mid-sixth centuries CE, and were inspired by Tunisian styles. The most outstanding pieces are two oil lamps in ARS: ²² one is almost perfectly preserved and datable to the mid-fifth century CE, while the other, Atlante type 10, ²³ has an uncommon decoration on the disc: a little bird on a fluted pillar with a garlanded capital on top (fig. 4). Its direct counterpart is an oil lamp from the theater of Carthage, datable to sometime before the fifth century CE.

¹⁶ Fumo 2010.

¹⁷ Cavalieri 2010d; Boldrini - Cavalieri - De Idoné - Fumo - Magni - Pace 2015; Bossu - Meulemans 2015.

¹⁸ Arena - Delogu - Paroli - Ricci - Sagui - Venditelli. 2001; Sagui 1998.

¹⁹ Bonifay 2004; Hayes 1972.

²⁰ Magni 2011; Cavalieri - Magni - Baldini - Boldrini - Ragazzini 2014.

²¹ Keay 1984.

²² Cavalieri - Pace 2012.

²³ Barbera - Petriaggi 1993; Ennabli 1976.

Afterwards: The Recycling Period

As a residential settlement, the site was abandoned between the late fifth and the mid-sixth centuries CE; its furnishings and building materials were taken away to be recycled and reused²⁴. 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 southern arch of the trefoil hall, which was dismantled in antiquity.

It was clear on discovery that the decorations of the villa (marble, glass *sectilia*, mosaics, frescoes, and stuccoes) had been put to uses other than their original purposes, since they had been 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.²⁵ Most crafts took place in two separate areas of the site: the southern area, including the trefoil hall, and the northwestern one. The southern area was clearly used for workshop production, to be discussed below, while the northwestern one is characterized by firing activities that have yet to be identified. At the moment, the stratigraphic and chronological study is still not complete, so we cannot assume there was a connection between these two areas.

In the trefoil hall, crafts were carried out in four rooms (H, I, L, and «vestibule»): room H for pottery, room I for copper, and room L for gold. The gold of the mosaic *tesserae* was in fact purified by *cupellatio*, which was also used to purify gold alloys. A small glass-fusing kiln was unearthed in the «vestibule». The base of the kiln was regular, wider than any other found at the site; the side walls were made of stone and tile fragments, while the dome consisted of mud, vegetable fibers, and snail shells. A water supply system was discovered in the «vestibule» as well, and it is possibly related to the glass working. The glass workshop of Aiano-Torraccia di Chiusi probably specialized in recycling glassware from the Roman villa, with the aim of producing small ornaments.²⁶ This practice of collecting and reprocessing glass shards reduced production costs because fewer raw materials and lower temperatures were required.

To the southwest of the corridor, another three rooms hosted a number of workshops. Room A was for glass, but perhaps for lead too. In room A were found two basins: the first one contained 6,000 glass *tesserae*, with traces of mortar and charcoal, and the second contained a Roman *tegula* still *in situ*, probably used as a working surface. Room A must have been the area where glass *tesserae* were prepared for reprocessing in the kiln of the «vestibule».

Room B was used as a blacksmith workshop for ironworking. The room has a rectangular shape, oriented from east to west; in the middle a large water basin was found along with a small channel that apparently supplied it. Close to the southern wall, two other pits were discovered, which were probably used to carry water or other liquids (for example, urine) for tempering. The tests performed on the roughly 200 specimens found in this room revealed that they were probably recycled items and scraps. No waste was

²⁴ About this topic: Munro 2010; Munro 2012.

²⁵ Cavalieri - Lenzi - Cantisani 2012; Cavalieri - Lenzi - Cantisani 2013.

²⁶ Cavalieri - Giumlia Mair 2009; Cavalieri 2010c.

found that could be interpreted as the result of the purification or refining of raw iron. At the moment, the purpose of room C is still unclear.

Two areas of the northwestern part of the villa hosted workshops. Room K is a long rectangular room with the remains of cooking surfaces, along two opposite side walls. All the structures have clear burning and erosion marks on the back walls, and many of them are located at different heights, which means the railings of the nearby kilns were reused or destroyed, suggesting that they were not in operation simultaneously. What was produced in the area is not yet known; there is no residual waste that could help with this determination. Further investigations are required to answer such questions. The second area, room U, probably houses the remains of some baking processes and materials from the villa, especially fourth-century wall paintings.

Such workshops must have been served by the extensive plumbing system of which only traces remain: one manifold runs south of the trefoil hall and the other one flows into the *Ambulatio*, between room H and the «vestibule». They were possibly linked to an earlier water system, which must have been fed by a reservoir, situated on the hill overlooking the site to the north. The location of the workshops must have been dictated by the proximity of materials as well as by the state of preservation of these places, which were probably less extensively damaged by such operations in the late fifth century CE. What is most outstanding at Aiano-Torraccia di Chiusi is the remarkable organization and efficiency of the workshops: they were skillfully connected with each other so as to share a plumbing system, fuel, and raw materials.

The area between room A and room P hosted another kiln, a medium-size vertical structure that was very similar in shape to type II/b Cuomo di Caprio,²⁷ and which could be adjusted to bake different items, such as clay for building material, vessels, and coarseware. Again, no residual waste materials were found. Ongoing investigations in other parts of the settlement, especially south and west of the trefoil hall, provided evidence of other manufactures, all involving the use of fire, but their features and their relations with the workshops are not yet completely understood.

Conclusions

Although the recycling phase largely eliminated traces of how the villa of Aiano-Torraccia di Chiusi functioned during earlier periods, the study of the monumental architectural remains, of the stratigraphy, and of the reused materials makes it possible to confirm the importance of the site, particularly from a regional and a chronological point of view.²⁸ In spite of an obvious restructuring of the original architectural project, the villa remains a very important settlement in the fifth century CE, whose planimetry constitutes an *unicum*. The construction and reworking of the complex shows remarkable durability in a period still often thought to have been in crisis. It demonstrates

²⁷ Cuomo di Caprio 2007, 524 figure 169.

²⁸ Cavalieri 2016.

perfectly the importance of a re-evaluation of such historical postulates on the basis of new archaeological data.

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