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Residential villas in Italy in the Augustan age: the case-study of the Sabina Tiberina

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Abstract

This paper presents some observations on the characteristics and development of residential villas in the Augustan age, with particular reference to the Latium region, and, within it, to a case study represented by the Sabina Tiberina territory. In this context, the data concerning the villa of Cottanello, recently investigated by the Sapienza University of Rome and the National Research Council (CNR) of Italy, could offer some new perspectives to debate. The main aim of this paper is to try to verify whether there are or not typical elements of the Augustan phase, within the long tradition of the Roman villa.

Key words: Villa; Latium; Sabina; Augustan Age

Introduction

*Salve, magna parens frugum, Saturnia tellus, magna virum.*¹ So Virgil, in the *Georgics*, enhances Italy, in full harmony with the celebratory message of August regarding a new *saeculum aureum* initiated by the emperor himself.² The Augustan political program of reconciliation and rebirth is in particular synthesised through a series of iconographic motifs in the *Ara Pacis* (Zanker 1988: 172-183):³ the idea of happiness is effectively represented by a female deity sitting on a rock with two babies in her arms, the so-called *Tellus*. Although this identification has been much discussed,⁴ there is no doubt about her general significance of fertility; this message is further enriched with the presence of vegetal motifs, and in particular of the acanthus, symbol of regeneration, in many reliefs of the *Ara*. The theme of fertility recurs often in monuments of the Augustan age, to celebrate the new *saeculum aureum* that Augustus had been able to give to Rome (Parisi Presicce 2013: 230-241, with specific bibliography on the topic). The land has a central role in Augustan ideology and propaganda, for the need to strengthen the class of the Italic farmers hit by decades of civil wars and consequently to revitalise the productivity of the Italic regions. Moreover, in the ideological program of returning to the authentic values of the *mos maiorum*, a *vir bonus* also had to be above all a *bonus agricola* (Cato, *Agr. Praefatio*). From an archaeological point of view, therefore, considering the enrichment of the aristocratic class during the first century BC, which had already led to a significant development of urban and rural residential architecture, it not surprising to find an extraordinary development of the villas just in the Augustan age.⁵ The phenomenon occurs not only in Italy but also in the provinces, where 'within this period of peace, which in the western provinces was only locally and temporarily broken, the villa began, developed and prospered, the product of settled conditions and economic stability and indication of the extent and intensity of Roman cultural influence' (Percival 1976: 34).

In the last 15 years, studies on Roman villas in Italy have been enriched with valuable works devoted to specific areas or periods. Among these studies, we should at least mention the volume of L. Romizzi

¹ Virg. G. 2.173-174: 'Hail, land of Saturn, great mother of earth's fruit, great mother of men!' In *Virgil, Opera. I., Eglogues, Georgics, Aeneid 1-6*, trans. H. R. Fairclough, Cambridge, London 1934: 129.

² See also Virg. *Aen.* 6.791-794: *Hic vir, hic est, tibi quem promitti saepius audis, Augustus Caesar, divi genus, aurea condet saecula qui rursus Latium regnata per arva Saturno quondam* ('This, this is he, whom thou so often hearest promised to thee, Augustus Caesar, son of a god, who shall again set up the Golden Age amid the fields where Saturn once reigned.' In *Virgil, Opera. I., Eglogues, Georgics, Aeneid 1-6*, trans. H. R. Fairclough, Cambridge, London 1934: 563. For the 'Golden Age,' see also Virg. *Buc.* 4; *Tib. Eleg.* 1.3.35-48 and *Ov. Met.* 1.89-112.

³ On *Ara Pacis*, see also Rossini 2006 with bibliography.

⁴ According to Zanker 1988: 175, the 'best candidate' is *Pax Augusta*.

⁵ For an overview of Augustan art, see La Rocca *et al.* 2013.

on villas of *otium* (Romizzi 2001), the X. Lafon's research on maritime villas (Lafon 2001), the M. De Franceschini's study on the villas of the territory of Rome (De Franceschini 2005), G. W. Adams' volumes on the villas in Campania and in the suburb of Rome (Adams 2008 and 2012) and the A. Marzano monograph on the Roman villas in Central Italy (Marzano 2007), my study on late antique residential villas (Sfameni 2006), and many conference proceedings devoted to specific territories or themes.⁶ On the basis of these research and from the methodological perspective of the modern 'global' archaeology,⁷ in this paper I would like to present some reflections on the characteristics and development of villas in the Augustan age, with particular reference to the Latium region, and, within it, to the case study represented by the Sabina Tiberina area. This territory was not only always closely linked to Rome for geographical, historical and cultural reasons, but it also experienced an important development in the age of Augustus.

The Roman villa: origin and development

The villa is an original and characteristic product of Roman civilisation with residential and productive functions and a specific ideological value.⁸ The question of the origin, characteristics and development of the villas has always been the focus of important historiographical debates. It is related to the theme of the features and the development of Roman agriculture and to the issues regarding the so-called Romanisation processes (Martin 1971; Cossarini 1976-77; Cossarini 1979; Marcone 1997). In the literary tradition the word *villa* refers to very different types of buildings, from rustic installations to luxury residential dwellings, all sharing an extra-urban location and, according to Varro, the peculiarity of producing an income.⁹ The ancient agronomists (Cato, Varro, Columella, Palladius) propose some villa models that, while maintaining some common features, changed over time. The 'Catonian' villa, for example, is characterised by its insertion in a reasonably small farm and as such easily controllable by the master, with a multiple-culture to be self-sufficient (Cato *Agr.* 1.7). The villa was also made up of two main parts: the *villa rustica*, the farm with all the spaces and equipment for the production (Cato *Agr.* 3.2), and the *villa urbana*, the owner's residence (Cato *Agr.* 4.1; Varro *Rust.* 1.13.6-7). This distinction is also in the work of Varro, while Columella divides the villa into three parts, urban, rustic and *fructuaria*, the latter term referring to the facilities used for processing and storage of agricultural products (Colum. 1.6.1). The property described by Varro and Columella is a large productive estate, within which the villa becomes increasingly complex for a multiplicity of new functions (Colum. 1.6.1-20).¹⁰ N. Terrenato (2001: 25; 2012), starting from the excavation of the *Auditorium* villa in Rome, of which, against the opinion of the discoverers (Carandini 2006), identifies a remarkable continuity through the various stages of the Republican era, has questioned the model of a linear development from a 'Proto-Catonian' or 'Catonian' villa to the 'Varronian-Columellian' classic examples (Carandini 1989; Torelli 1990, in particolare 127-128). This thesis has been discussed by many scholars (Carandini 2006: 521; Rosafio 2009), who also stressed that new elements emerging from the most recent archaeological investigations allow to better document the gradual spread of the villa phenomenon and, above all, the importance of local factors (Gualtieri 2003: 135).

With the exception of a few more ancient examples, the oldest villas were developed between the mid-second century and first century BC in a fairly limited area from a geographical point of view – the central Tyrrhenian Italy (Campania, Latium) – where the economic interests of the Roman aristocratic classes were concentrated (G. Pucci in Carandini 1985, I, 17; Carandini 1989; Marzano 2007). Therefore this is the area of the 'classical' villa, where are attested all types of residential buildings between the second century BC and the first century AD (Romizzi 2001: 224).

In the late Republican era, as witnessed by Varro (*Rust.* 1.2.10, 1.13, 3.3)¹¹ and, above all by the archaeological evidence, the residential parts of the villas acquired a more and more luxurious character with the creation

⁶ On Roma and Latium, see Pergola *et al.* 2003; Jolivet *et al.* 2009; Santillo Frizell and Klynne 2005.

⁷ On 'global' archaeology, see Volpe 2015.

⁸ On the Roma villa, see Mielsh 1987; for a synthesis, Sfameni 2006: 9-28.

⁹ On the literary tradition about Roman villas, see Romizzi 2001: 29-40. See Rosafio 2009: 135, on Varro.

¹⁰ On the 'slavish villa' model, see Giardina and Schiavone 1981; Carandini 1989; Giardina 1997.

¹¹ See also Lafon 1989.

of reception halls, libraries, art galleries, baths, nymphaeums and luxury apartments. The spread of urban-type villas has been linked to the economic transformations that occurred after the end of the Punic Wars, when the possibility of investment allowed landowners to get hold of estates that were ever larger as well as intensively exploited; the contact with the opulence of the Hellenistic monarchies also raised emulation phenomena that resulted in the choice of specific architectural types (as peristyles) and of prestigious furnishings and decorations for urban dwellings and villas (Pensabene Perez 2000).

The villas in the Augustan age between tradition and innovation

A turning point is definitely represented by the age of Augustus, when the end of the civil wars and the new conditions of economic development encouraged a true 'villa boom' in many Italic regions. According to N. Terrenato, the spread of the villas should not be considered a result of the development of the modes of production in the late Republic; 'villas were rather an architectural fashion adopted by a moneyed élite that had acquired its prosperity elsewhere' (Terrenato 2001: 26-27).

Among the literary sources of this period, the work of Vitruvius is particularly important. The author, while devoting little space to rural homes, stresses that criteria similar to those used for urban *domus* should be adopted for their construction (Vitruvius 6.5.3; see Coarelli 1989; Gros 1997: 848);¹² in both cases, moreover, there must be a link between the architectural and decorative features of housing and the social status of the owner.¹³ The representation of the Vitruvian villa, despite having strong similarities with that described by Varro, however, presents some peculiarities essentially concerning the *pars rustica*: for example, the author admits the screw press and not only that one operated by levers, he reminds warehouses with specific functions such as *fenilia* and *farraria* and he recommends placing the *pistrinum* outside the villa although previously it had been inside the building. According to P. Gros, these differences would be due not only to the 10-15 years between the publication of the Varro's work and the Vitruvius' one, but they would depend on the practical character of the Vitruvian treatise and on the changed cultural context of the first Augustan age, aimed to reconcile the laxity of moral habits which had spread in the Republican era with the new establishment of more austere codes of behaviour (Gros 1997: 980).

From an archaeological point of view, one could argue that the transformations that have affected the age of Augustus may have also determined changes in the organisation of the dwellings, both urban and rural. Moreover, the same Augustus acted within domestic architecture, primarily in the construction of his house on the Palatine, the first 'imperial' residence in Rome. The issue is very complex, but it should be remembered that there are two overlapping dwellings, the first built by Octavian in 42 BC and then transformed by himself, when became Augustus, with the inclusion of the temple dedicated to Apollo.¹⁴ Between the two phases there were significant changes, due to the different political role assumed by the owner and to the ideological value which he attributed to the various parts of the dwelling.

The status of the evidence, however, does not allow to get properly documented synthesis on the domestic architecture of the Augustan age, because many of the Augustan building phases were preceded by Republican structures and followed by further changes and transformations in the following centuries. No synthetic study exists about villas of this period, while the Augustan buildings are rather inserted into a longer chronological range that covers the entire first imperial age or the period between the late Republic and the 1st century AD.¹⁵ F. Ghedini, examining the literary sources of the period from an archaeological point of view, noted some peculiarities for the urban *domus*, in a substantial typological continuity from the Republican buildings (Ghedini 2009): for example, the traditional *atrium*, often lacking the location in sequence from the entrance (as well as the *alae* and *tablinum*) could really be considered a courtyard, although with an important symbolic value, especially in the provincial examples. A substantial continuity

¹² A difference between *domus* and villas could be in the passage from *atrium* to peristyle in the *domus*, and from peristyle to *atrium* in the villa (but this inversion is not always found in the cases archaeologically identified). See Wallace-Hadrill 1998: 47.

¹³ See also Cic. *Off.*, 1.138. Cf. Tortorella 2013 on the *domus* in the age of Augustus.

¹⁴ A synthesis in Carandini 2008.

¹⁵ For Italy, see Romizzi 2001.

is attested for the structures destined to private worship and especially in the exaltation of luxury, already characteristic of the late Republican dwellings (Ghedini 2009: 101-103). There are no substantial changes with regard to the relationship between the type of paving and the function of the rooms, with a richer decoration used only for the main reception rooms. The only significant changes are in some decoration of the walls and floors: for example, the cement floors are progressively marginalised in favour of mosaics and *sectilia*, and simple geometric elements prevail among the decorative motifs (Ghedini 2009: 104).

In the Italian Peninsula, many villas have a building phase in this period. In L. Romizzi's catalogue, the main *otium* villas with Augustan phases are about fifteen (Romizzi 2001, cat. 3, 5, 13, 14, 15, 22, 23, 31, 33, 40, 44, 49, 51, 56). Among these, the direct intervention of the emperor or of a member of his family can be recognised in particular in Livia's villa at Prima Porta and in the Farnesina Villa in Rome. The first building (Figure 1)

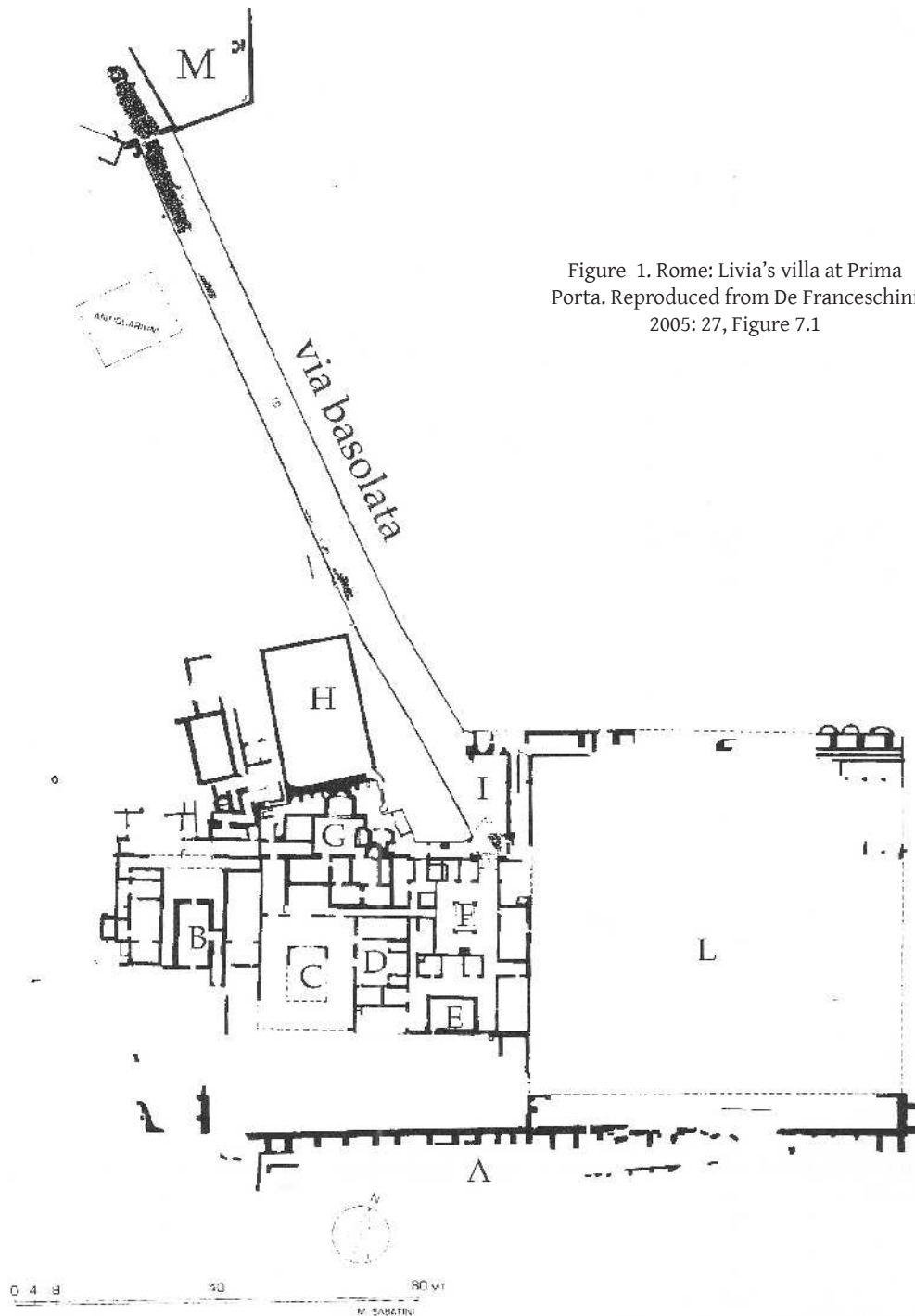


Figure 1. Rome: Livia's villa at Prima Porta. Reproduced from De Franceschini 2005: 27, Figure 7.1

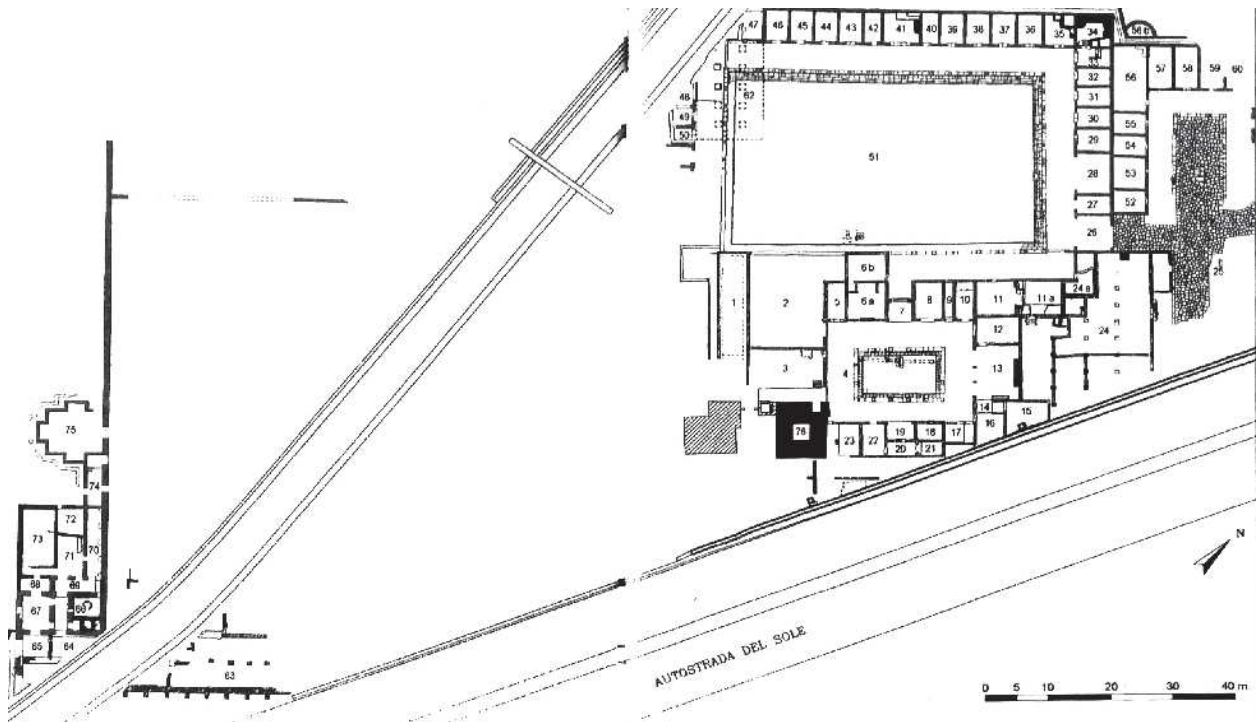


Figure 2. *Lucus Feroniae*: the Volusii villa. Reproduced from De Franceschini 2005, p. 274, Figure 99.1

is characterised by its size and rich decoration (the subterranean summer *triclinium* with wonderful garden frescoes now preserved in the National Museum of Palazzo Massimo alle Terme in Rome, architectural terracottas, and finally sculptures, including the loricate statue of Augustus – see Messineo 2001) that allow it to be categorised with a small group of luxury villas from the beginning of the Empire, like that of the Volusii at *Lucus Feroniae* (Figure 2) (De Franceschini 2005: 43). The Farnesina villa is also characterised by its remarkable architectural structure (marked by a magnificent exedra – Romizzi 2001: 221)¹⁶ and above all for the exceptional quality of the frescoes (Sanzi Di Mino 1988; La Rocca 2008).

Of course, taking into consideration specific territories, a greater number of buildings should be noted: for example the villas of the Augustan age reported in the volume of M. De Franceschini on the ‘agro romano’ territory are 19 (De Franceschini 2005: 353, list of villas). So it is impossible to offer here an inventory of all the identified villas in Italy from this important phase of the Augustan age.

In general, from a typological point of view, in this period we cannot find particularly innovative elements with respect to the previous tradition. When there are any new elements, such as the insertion of thermal installations, these have more ancient origins and will become characteristic of later villas. In conclusion, it seems not possible to distinguish, at least in the current state of studies, a true ‘Augustan’ architectural type of villa, but some particular aspects can be found in the characteristics of the decoration and in the articulation of plans.

It might be interesting, however, to verify these general observations in a limited area of the Italian Peninsula. For this reason, I would like to propose some remarks about the Sabina Tiberina region, a territory of the Latium where, in the last years, I have been carrying out a research project together with a team of the CNR and the Sapienza University of Rome.¹⁷

¹⁶ Note that this is one of the few examples of peristyle villa with a semicircular front building, all belonging to members of the imperial family and thus related to a high patronage.

¹⁷ For more information see <http://cottanello.isma.cnr.it>

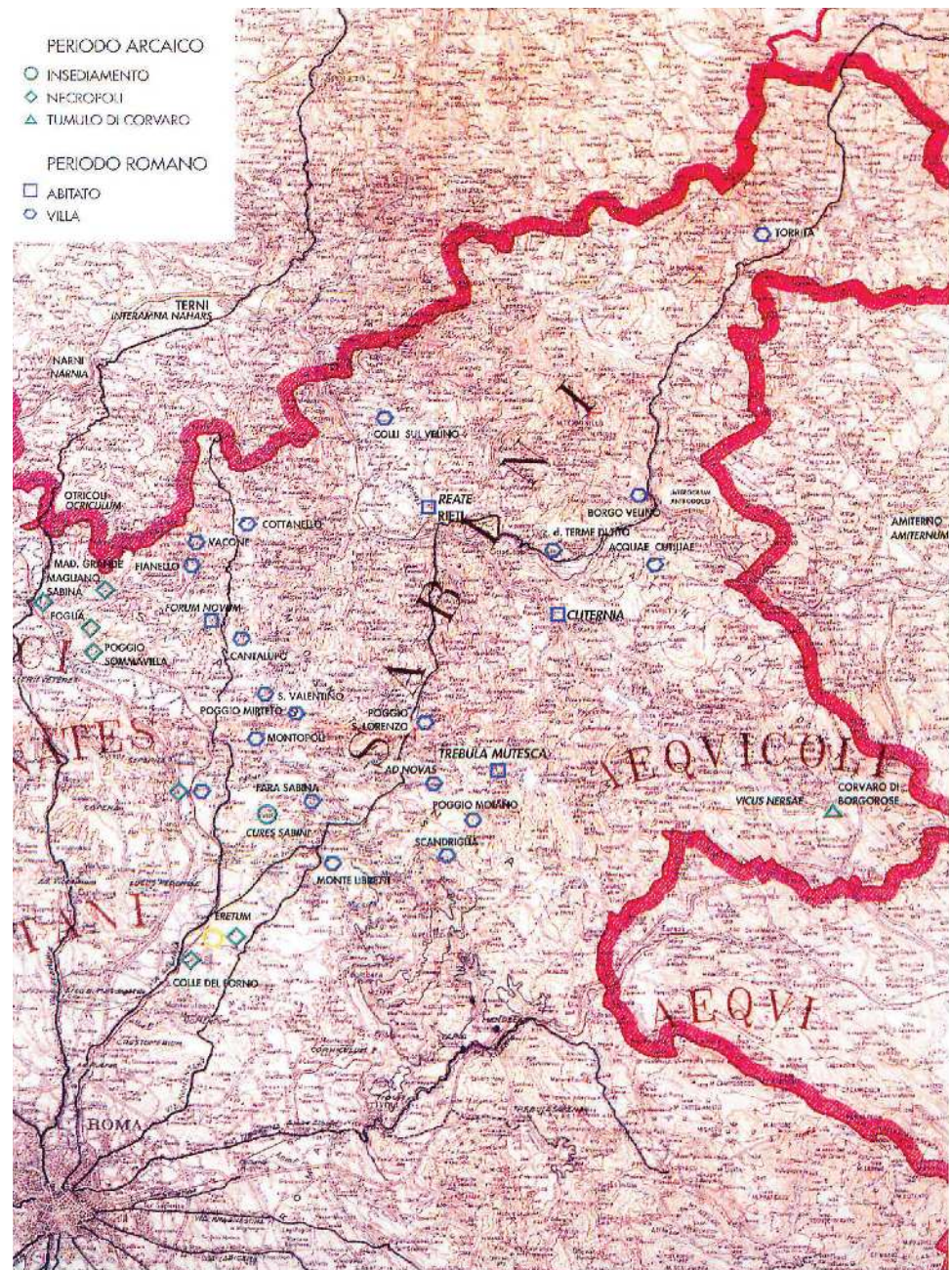


Figure 3. The Sabina map. Reproduced from G. Alvino 1999. *La Sabina 2*. Roma

The villas in Latium and Sabina in the Augustan Age: the case-study of the Forum Novum territory

Large élite villas appear to be more numerous in those geographic areas, like Latium, which present a higher degree of urbanisation (Marzano 2007: 176-179): villa distribution must be considered in relation to local communities in addition to factors such as the fertility of the soil, the availability of resources and the presence of communication routes (Marzano 2007: 176). So, between the end of the first century BC and the first half of the first century AD, intense building activity takes place in the countryside with the construction or the 'monumentalisation' of villas, mainly characterised by the use of the *opus reticulatum* (Torelli 1980).¹⁸

In particular, the Sabina (Figure 3) is a region with which the Romans had relations since the period of their origins, but which was finally conquered at the beginning of the third century BC.¹⁹ In the Augustan

¹⁸ See also De Franceschini 2005: 297.

¹⁹ Cf. the synthesis in Sternini 2004.

reorganisation of Italy, this territory was included in the *IV Regio, Sabina et Samnium*. As regards this period, Strabo gives us the following information about *Sabini*: ‘They have but few cities and even these have been brought low on account of the continual wars; they are *Amiternum* and *Reate* (near which is the village of *Interocrea* and also the cold springs of *Cotiliae* where people cure their diseases, not only by drinking from the springs but also by sitting down in them). *Foruli* too belongs to the *Sabini* – a rocky elevation naturally suited to the purposes of revolt rather than habitation. As for *Cures*, it is now only a small village, but it was once a city of significance, since it was the original home of two kings of Rome, Titus Tatius and Numa Pompilius; hence, the title *Curites* by which the public orators addressed the Romans. *Trebula*, *Eretum* and other such settlements might ranked as villages rather than cities. As a whole the land of the *Sabini* is exceptionally well-planted with the olive and the wine, and it also produces acorns in quantities; it is important, also, for its domestic cattle of every kind; and in particular the fame of the *Reate*-breed of mules is remarkably widespread.’²⁰ The picture presented by Strabo is substantially confirmed by modern archaeological research: few towns and an economy based on agricultural and pastoral activities. In the Augustan age the *municipia* of *Reate*, *Trebula Mutuesca* and *Forum Novum* were created and numerous villas were built or renovated, especially in the area of *Sabina Tiberina*.

In the mountainous area of inner *Sabina*, there were many small farms devoted to breeding and herding, with a few productive structures and rare residential villas (Alvino 2009: 95). However, these villas increased at the end of the Republican era, when rich people from *Rieti* become part of the Senate, such as the famous *Q. Assius* who, according to *Varro*, owned two properties in the territory of *Reate* (*Varro, Rust.* 3.2; Alvino 2009: 96-98). The *Sabina Tiberina* territory had particular advantages, like the fertility of the soil, the navigability of the *Tiber* and its proximity to *Rome* (Sternini 2004: 63). Between the first century BC and the first century AD many villas were built in hilly areas, near streams; they had a typical structure on terraces supported by substructures and cryptoporticos (Mari 2005); they were also characterised by the use of the *opus reticulatum* and by the presence of rich mosaic, sculptural and architectural decoration; they were finally equipped with a complex water supply system (Alvino and Lezzi 2015: 36). In some buildings the rustic and productive areas were also investigated. The main productions (vines, olive and fruit trees, as well as cereals and vegetables), were intended to supply the market of *Rome* (Sternini 2004: 24). Rural settlements were connected to the main communication routes, the *Tiber* and the *via Salaria*.²¹

Inside this larger territory, we will focus our attention on the area of the *municipium* of *Forum Novum* which seems to have had a particular development between the late republican age and the early imperial period. The site of *Forum Novum* was already attended at least from the late republican period as a market place, function that it held until late antiquity. The town was small and without walls, even after the creation of the *municipium* in the second half of the first century BC: in the 1960s were brought to light the forum, the basilica, the *tabernae* and some religious buildings, the remains of which are visible near the *Santa Maria di Vescovio* church in *Torri* in *Sabina*, while from the late 90s, through geophysical surveys, it has identified an amphitheater and a suburban villa dating from the mid-first century AD (Sternini 2004: 26-27; Gaffney *et al.* 2003; 2004). The creation of the *municipium* of *Forum Novum* coincided with a program of revitalisation of the territory, with the presence of large villas and more modest farms (Verga 2006).²² A preliminary study has allowed us to select 29 main villas (Figure 4), dating mostly from the 1st century BC to the 1st century AD, in the area that probably belonged to the *municipium* of *Forum Novum* (Sfameni 2017). Among these villas, one of the main buildings is in the territory of *Vacone* (Sternini 2004: 203-207, n. 135), where the *Rutgers University* (USA) started systematic excavations in 2012, which are still in progress.²³ In an area between two vaulted corridors set on different levels, a series of rooms with mosaic and fresco decoration has been excavated, and the investigation of a production area previously identified was carried on (Bloy *et al.* 2014). The main phase of the villa has been referred to the beginning of the imperial age (Bloy *et al.* 2014: 61). Some walls related to an early imperial villa have been found in *Fianello Sabino* near the *Maria Assunta* church (Figure 5) (Sternini 2004: 104-106, n. 70), along with

²⁰ Strabo 5.3.1. In *The Geography of Strabo*, trans. H. L. Jones, Cambridge (Mass.), London 1923: 2, 375.

²¹ On the *via Salaria* see Alvino and Leggio 2000; 2007.

²² See Filippi 1989 for the epigraphic documents.

²³ See the website www.ncas.rutgers.edu

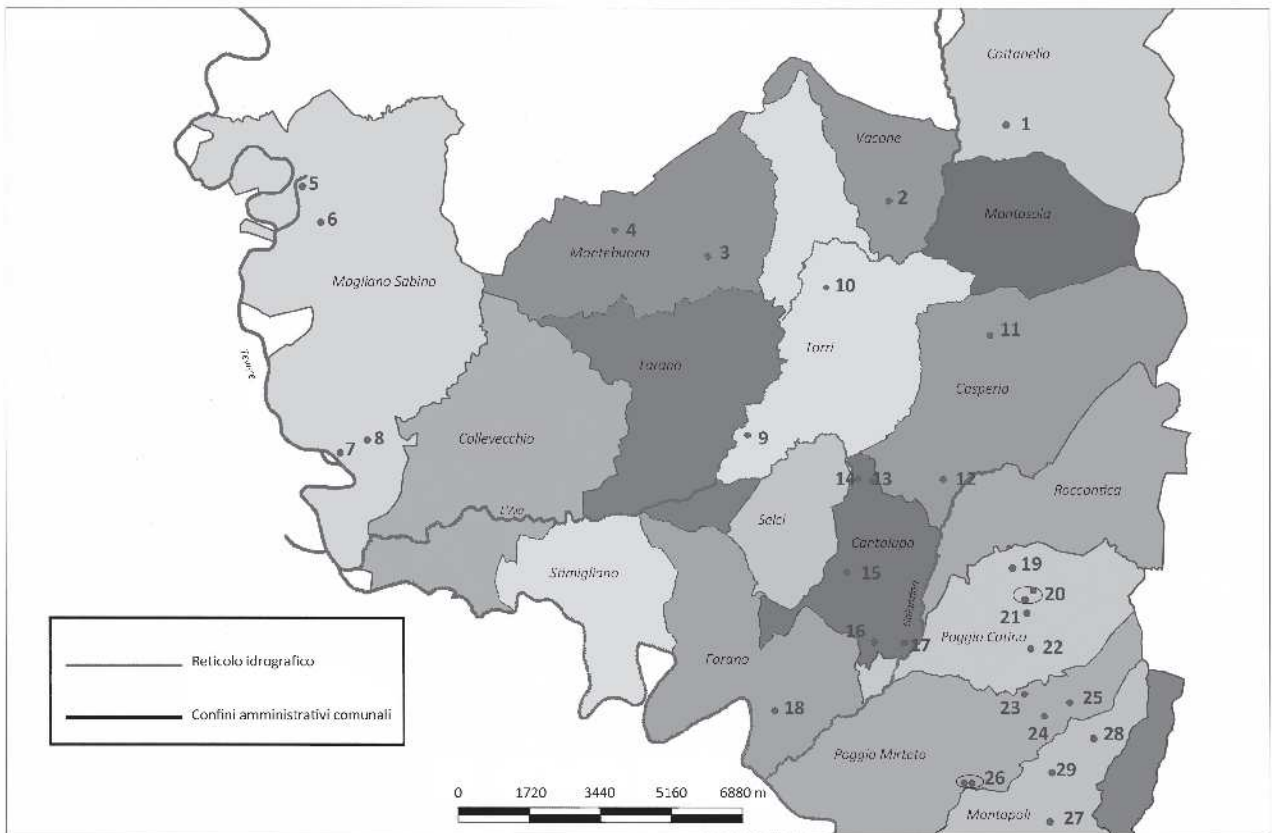


Figure 4. The main Roman villas identified in the territory of *Forum Novum*.
 Reproduced from Sternini 2004, tav. IV, processing by C. Bacigalupo

a pit full of fragmented marble sculptures of late Hellenistic era with a few of imperial period (Vorster 1998). Other sculptures were found in Casperia, in relation to a *nymphaeum* of a Roman villa of the first imperial age (Sternini 2004: 74–80, n. 13). Still in Casperia, near the church of S. Maria in Legarano, there are the remains of a contemporary villa never excavated in a systematic way (Figure 6) (Sternini 2004: 80–82, n. 14). Among the sites known from topographic surveys, that of Ponti Novi (Magliano Sabina) is characterised by the presence of materials related to a prestigious villa built between the first century BC and the first century AD (Colosi and Costantini 2004). Finally, for the territory of the towns of Poggio Mirteto, Poggio Catino and Montopoli we possess detailed descriptions of ‘the ruins of Roman-Sabine villas’ provided by E. Nardi in 1885; such buildings, in some cases, have been also interested by further investigations (Scarpati 2010). All these buildings and many other less known, although only partially investigated and in a very few cases object of systematic research, share several features such as the use of *opus reticulatum* for the walls, the presence of cryptoporticos and terraces and geometric mosaic floor decoration with common characteristics, referring to a period between the end of the first century BC and the first century AD.

M. Sternini has identified, through the examination of the epigraphic documentation, the families linked to this territory by birth or by the acquisition of properties from the time immediately following the constitution of the *municipium* (Sternini 2004: 27–53). Moreover, the tradition attributed a villa to Cicero (*Tullianum*), in Cantalupo, which actually owes its name to a *Tullius Epaphra* witnessed by inscriptions (CIL IX 4840) and that in Vacone to Horace, without reliable evidence.²⁴ According to the epigraphic evidence, Agrippa must have had properties in the area of *Forum Novum* in Montebugno, where two inscriptions were found; here the structures of a villa identified under the St. Peter’s Church *ad Muricenti* or *ad centum*

²⁴ The villa that Horace himself mentions in his work was in fact identified with the building excavated at Licenza, in southern Sabina (Frischer et al. 2006).

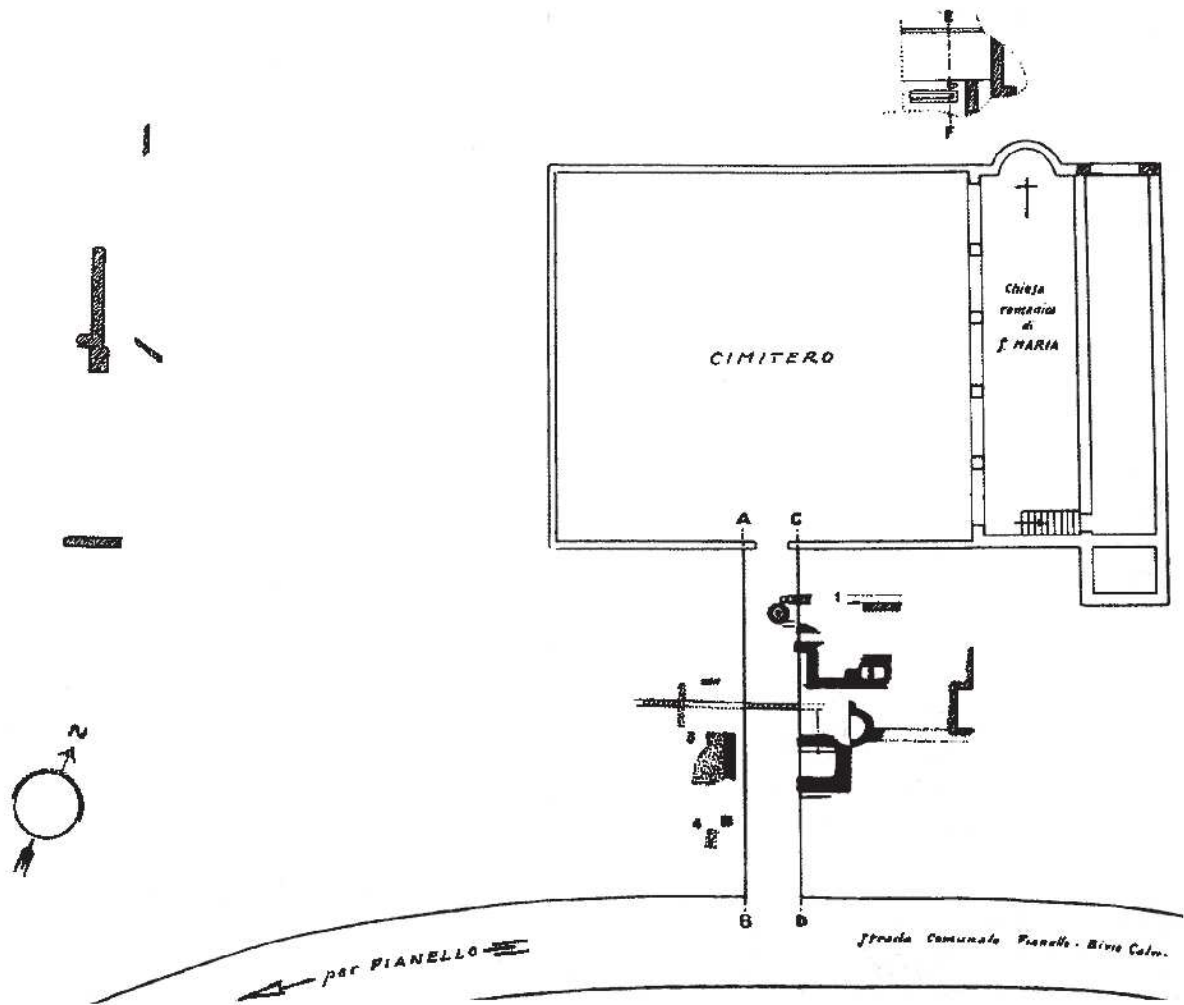


Figure 5. Fianello: the Roman villa. Reproduced from Sternini 2004: 105, Figure III.54

muros were considered part of his estate and called ‘Baths of Agrippa’ (Figure 7) (Sternini 2004: 96-102, n. 67).²⁵ Therefore, it is not inconceivable that Agrippa himself was in charge of development of the *municipium* of *Forum Novum* and of its territory in the Augustan age (Reggiani 2000: 12).

The Cottanello villa: the early imperial phase

The beginning of the main phase of one of the best known buildings of Sabina, the Cottanello villa (Rieti), also probably refers at the age of Augustus. Identified in the late 60s, the villa was excavated for the part still visible between 1969 and 1973.²⁶ A team from the Sapienza University of Rome carried out important research in the villa in the years 2010-2012 that enabled the first stratigraphic data to be acquired, useful for defining the building’s phases, and opened interesting perspectives for research on materials and in particular on the so called ‘Cottanello marble’ (Pensabene and Gasparini 2011; Pensabene *et al.* 2012). From 2013 the research in the villa have been carried out by the Institute for Studies on Ancient Mediterranean (ISMA) of CNR (Sfamemi *et al.* 2014; Pensabene and Sfamemi 2017), with the collaboration of the Sapienza University of Rome, the Superintendence for Archaeological Heritage of Lazio and other

²⁵ An epigraph, then dispersed, had the name of Agrippa and the indication of his third consulate. In another incomplete inscription appeared AGRIPPA L.F. (CIL IX, 4779).

²⁶ These works are unpublished. In 2000, an important book was published containing contributions dedicated to structures and materials of the villa (Sternini 2000).

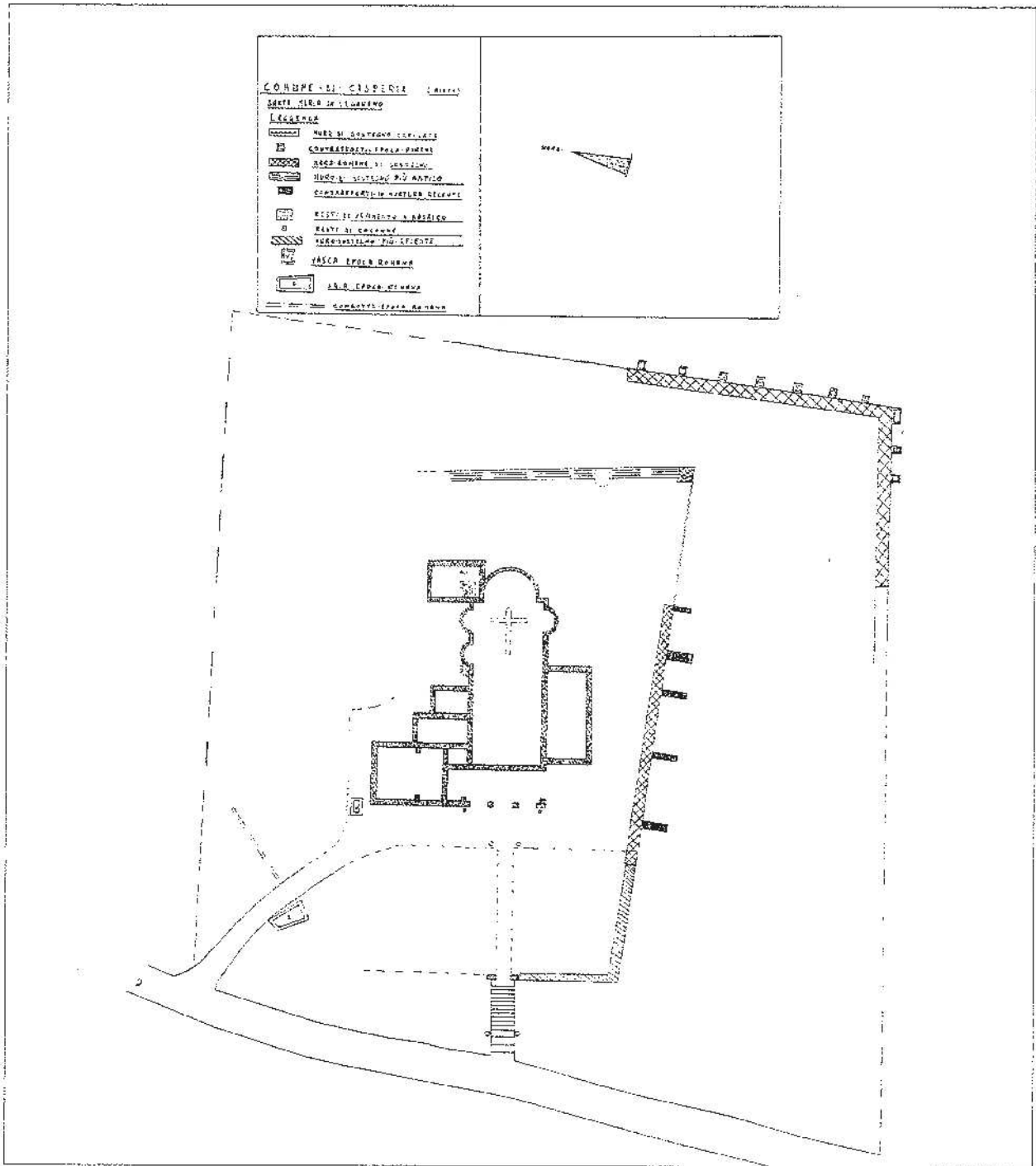


Figure 6. Casperia, S. Maria in Legarano: the Roman villa. Reproduced from Sternini 2004: 80, Figure III.16

CNR Institutes²⁷ and thanks to the logistical support the Municipality of Cottanello. Interdisciplinary research carried out by ISMA consists of archaeological excavations and diagnostic support to the study of the site and materials.²⁸

²⁷ Institute for Technologies applied to Cultural Heritage (ITABC), Institute for the Conservation and the Valorisation of Cultural Heritage (ICVBC), Institute of Structure of Matter (ISM) and researchers of other CNR Institutes, of the Universities of Naples 'Federico II' and 'Suor Orsola Benincasa,' together with other scholars.

²⁸ For the results of this research see Pensabene and Sfameni 2017.

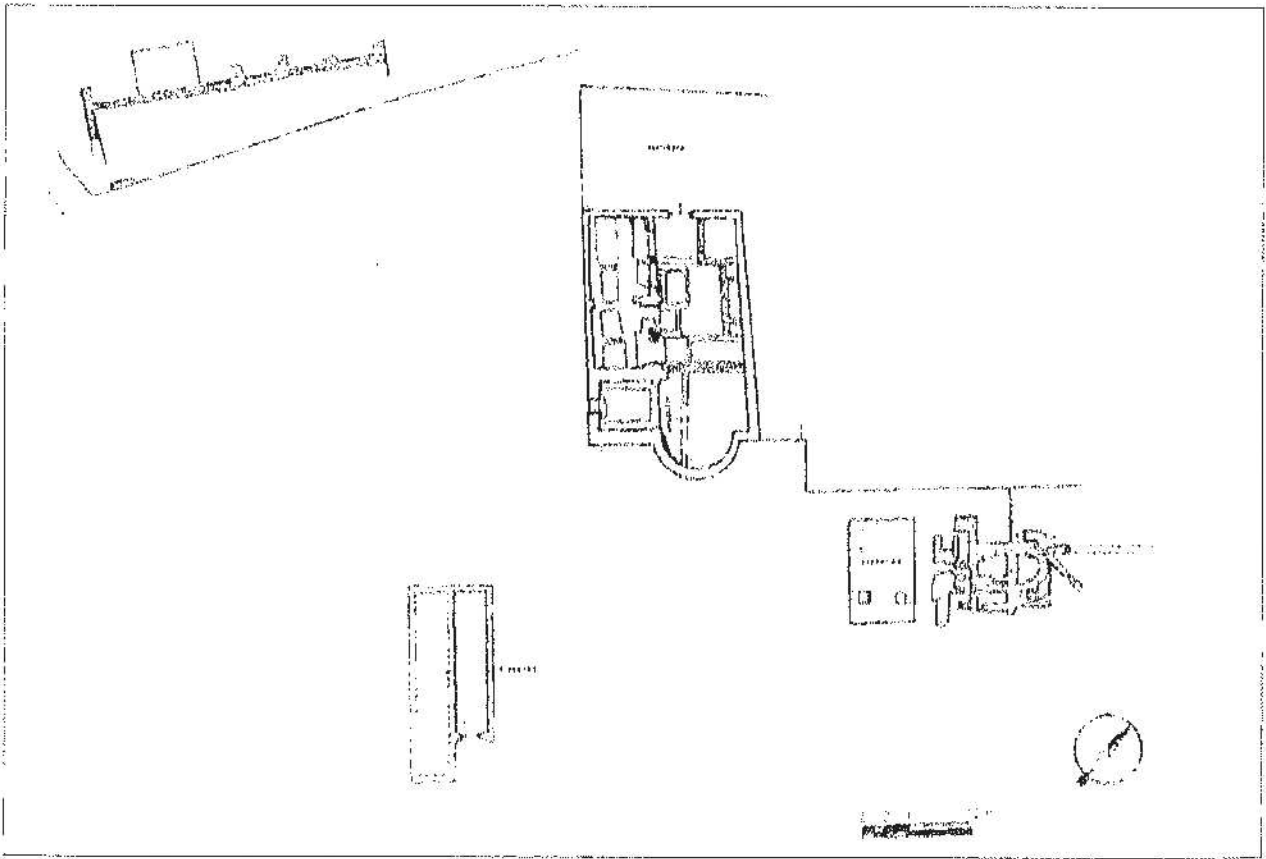


Figure 7. Montebuono, St. Peter: the Roman villa. Reproduced from Sternini 2004: 101, Figure III. 47

These investigations have confirmed the existence of several building phases (Sternini 2004: 63), of which the main refers to the early first century AD when an older building was completely obliterated by a new villa with walls in *opus reticulatum*; some subsequent modifications (first century - early second century AD) also belong to this construction phase. A late antique phase is also documented, dated between the fourth and sixth century AD.

In its main phase, the villa (Figure 8), only partially excavated,²⁹ was a building with an atrium, peristyle, bath, cryptoporticus and elegant floor, wall and architectural decoration, the characteristics of which are inserted in the typical figurative repertoire of late Republican period and the early imperial age.³⁰ Among the decorations of the villa, the architectural figured terracotta of the type commonly called Campana are especially important (Sternini 2000: 109-136; Caravale, forthcoming). From the Augustan age to the middle of the first century AD, it is well attested that clay friezes were used to decorate residential complexes related to the imperial family or to Roman élite members, starting from the same *domus* of Augustus on the Palatine (Mar and Pensabene 2015). The decorative motives of the terracotta fragments found in the Cottanello villa are inserted in the decorative repertoire of the so-called terracotta Campana: for example, the symmetrical repetition of motifs, the presence of spirals, the inclusion of Egyptian-style elements and the heads of gorgons (Figures 9-10). Also the dolphins, animals sacred to the god Apollo, are a common motif in the figurative language of the Augustan age after the naval victory of Actium (Sternini 2000: 110; Caravale, forthcoming). In addition to an ornamental character, it is clear the connection of these issues to the rebirth of nature and the Golden Age, typical Augustan themes (Sternini 2000: 134).

²⁹ Between 1969 and 1973, a part of the residential sector has been excavated, while we not know the rooms in the north area of the atrium and the peristyle and the productive and service areas.

³⁰ On mosaics cf. Alvino 2000 and on paintings Bruni *et al.*, forthcoming.

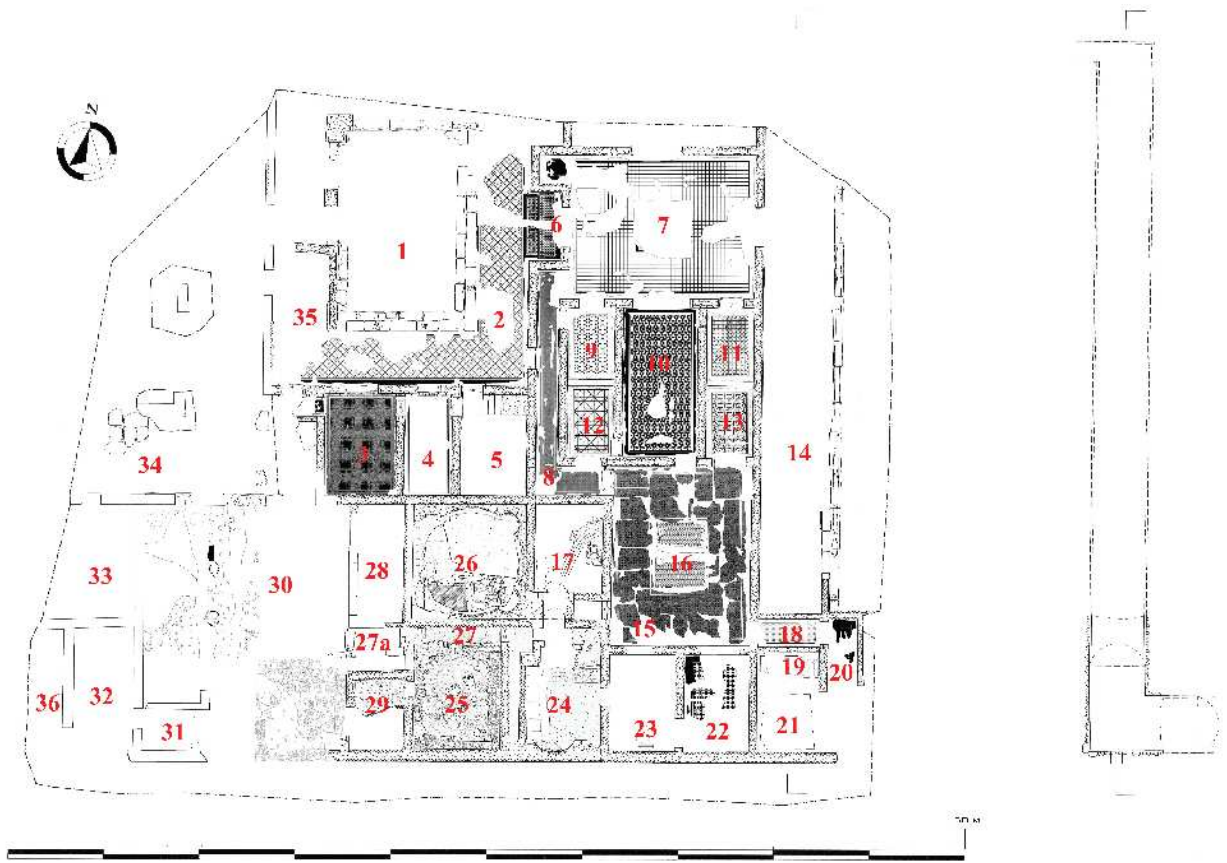


Figure 8. The Cottanello villa: general plan. Reproduced from Sternini 2000: 54-55, Figure 1, processing and updating by G. Restaino and D. Vitelli



Figure 9. Fragment of a gutter tile. Photo Excavations 2010, Cottanello, Istituto Rinaldi



Figure 10. Fragment of a covering slab. Photo Excavations 1969-73, Cottanello, Istituto Rinaldi



Figure 11. Rim of a dolium with the stamp MCOTTAE. Photo Rieti, Museo Civico, sezione archeologica

In the case of Cottanello, the clay reliefs relate to the rebuilding of the villa at the beginning of the first century AD, which could be probably linked to a member of the family of *Aurelii Cotta*: the discovery of two rims of *dolia* with the stamp *M Cottae* (Figure 11), in fact, allowed an attribution of the villa and its *fundus* to this ancient and important family, also linked to the imperial household since an *Aurelia* was the mother of Caesar and Octavian's great-grandmother (Sternini 2000: 135). It is also possible to speculate that the restructuring of the villa should be attributed in particular to *Marcus Aurelius Cotta Maximus Messalinus*, son of another *Aurelia* of the *Cotta* family and of the famous *Messalla Corvinus*; he would later be adopted by the *Aurelius Cotta* maternal uncle. *Maximus Messalinus* was a protagonist of the first imperial age: consul in AD 20, author of treatises on vines and olives, and a close friend of Ovid and Tiberius (Sternini 2000: 27-50).

Conclusion

The period between the end of the first century BC and the beginning of the first century AD marks in the Sabina Tiberina, as in other central areas of Italy, a time of particular development, evidenced by an extraordinary flourishing of villas with residential characteristics. These buildings had a substantial continuity at least until the middle imperial age and sometimes even further without significant changes, while only at the end of the second century we note the signs of an economic and demographic transformations, which would be amplified in the following centuries (Sfameni 2017).

As in other areas of Italy, in the villas of the Sabina Tiberina territory it is difficult to identify specific architectural features of the Augustan period. Where it is possible to make comparisons with earlier and following phases, between the end of the first century BC and the beginning of the first century AD, it is possible to find an accentuation of the luxurious decoration (mosaic floors, painting walls, sculptural decoration) and a development of the residential areas. With few exceptions, the decorative features of villas in the *Forum Novum* territory do not show a particular refinement and the same Cottanello villa, on the whole, is not a very luxurious building. Nevertheless, the villa presents some special decorative features and its rich terracotta decoration, in particular, allows a specific comparison with the Augustan courtly models.

The issue certainly requires further study, but what has been observed could be a signal of the importance of the decorative features and their symbolic message in order to recognise the most significant characteristic of the residential architecture of the Augustan age, within a general framework of economic and cultural development for which the villas are very relevant evidence.

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