

Excavations at Villa Magna 2006

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The first season's excavation at Villa Magna initiates the investigation of both the Roman villa and the monastery built over it. Over half of the area of the villa was covered with a geophysical survey whose results give us an extraordinary preview of the structures we are studying. This report gives a brief overview of the significant results of the project, which is sponsored by the 1984 Foundation and is the result of a collaboration between the University of Pennsylvania, the British School at Rome and the Soprintendenza Archeologica del Lazio, represented by co-director Sandra Gatti.

The Geophysics

Introduction

The magnetometer survey conducted in 2006 at Villa Magna covered approximately 8.5 hectares. The survey covered three areas: around the church, inside the courtyard in the main casale, and the large field to the east of the casale. Overall, the results proved to be highly successful and provided a clear plan and layout of the villa and its surrounding buildings. In some areas the extent and limit of the villa complex was identified (fig. 1).

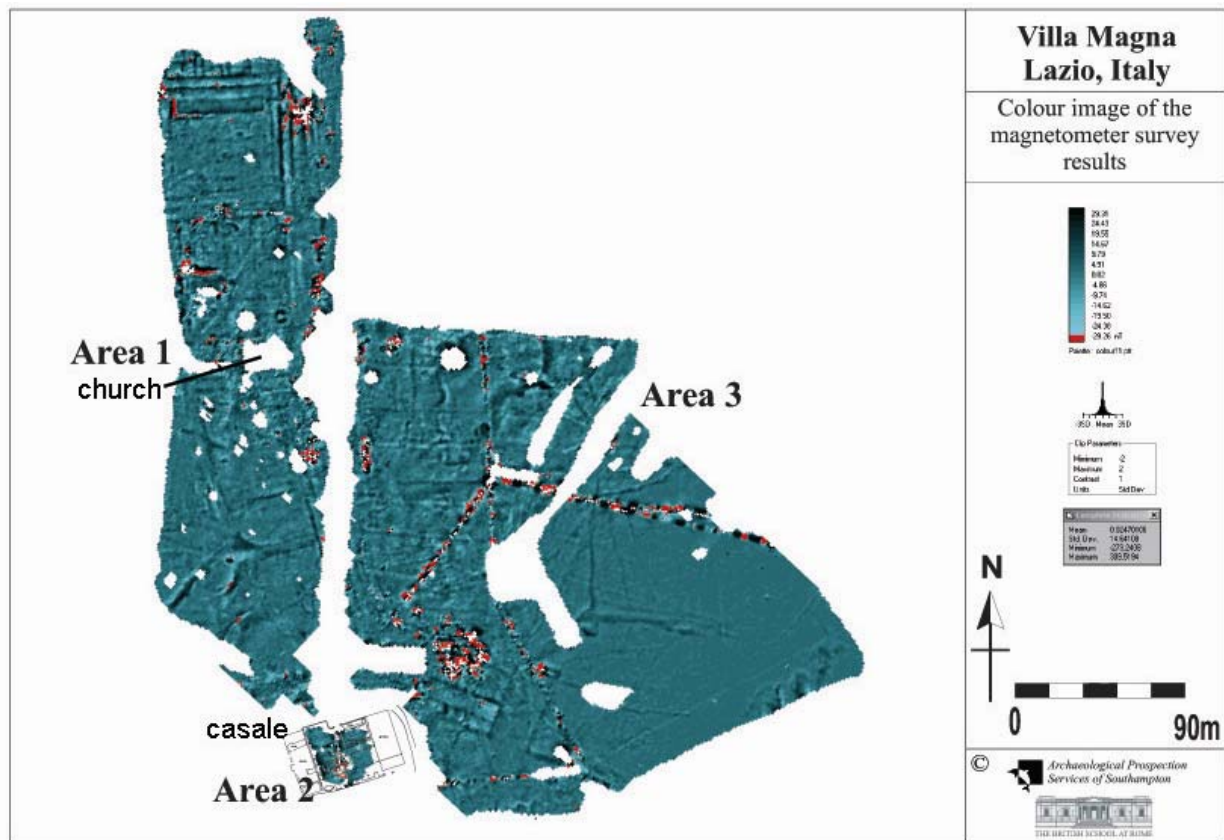


Fig. 1. Magnetometry near the villa (Sophie Hay).

Area 1. Church

The area to the north of the church consists of a flat terrace partially bounded to the north and east by a revetment wall constructed in *opus mixtum*. The results were extremely clear in this area and a clear plan of a main body of the villa was identified which lies on a north-south alignment covering an area of about 150m x 80m. In the northernmost part of the area, the survey indicates the presence of walls very close to ground surface that probably contain courses of brick within the build. Immediately evident is the presence of a large, mainly open area measuring 60m by 60m that appears to have some internal divisions particularly along the northern edge of this feature. This open area could represent a courtyard or peristyle. Bordering a corridor or portico that surrounds this feature there are a series of small rooms to the north and east. The structure continued to the south on the same alignment and many internal divisions indicating rooms can be seen. The remains of an underground cistern stand today in the centre of the terrace and it is probable that some of the anomalies represent this construction.

The area to the south of the church rises gently towards the farmhouse. The results from this area are very interesting. The linear positive anomalies are oriented NNW-SSE; a different alignment to those north of the church. The anomalies are slightly fainter than those to the north of church suggesting that either the remains are buried more deeply or that brick was not a principle building material in this area. At least one clear structure can be determined measuring about 45m by 30m with a potential apse-like western end in the centre of the area. Linear anomalies stemming from the ends of this structure seem to indicate further buildings particularly to the north, with possible internal divisions. There are some faint traces of the continuation of this structure to the south.

In the area directly in front of the entrance to the church linear positive anomalies were detected and through the course of excavation were revealed to be walls associated with the various phases of the churchyard. Small rectangular strong anomalies along one of the walls were exposed as brick lined tombs.

Area 2. Casale courtyard

The survey inside the casale courtyard was less successful in detecting archaeological subsurface remains as the small area contained a profuse amount of modern interference namely three modern pipes that trisected the area and the presence of a modern drain that ran along the edge of the farmhouse walls. The presence of ferrous material disrupts the results and obliterates the fainter traces of archaeological features.

Area 3. Field east of Casale

The area was partially bisected by a small water course and the field dived down steeply towards it. The only relatively flat area was the extreme south-western corner of the field adjacent to a modern building that occupied that area. Along the southern edge of the survey area are standing remains of Roman cisterns.

The most striking results were located on the only flat ground in the south west corner of the area. Linear positive anomalies on a WSW-ESE alignment represent a long rectangular structure measuring about 40m by 20m. The north edge of this structure appears to contain small internal divisions. There may be a similar set of rooms to the south but the anomalies are very faint. Perpendicular and adjoining this construction is a larger structure (60m by 20m) lacking any internal divisions. This vast complex may relate to the cisterns that border the southern edge of the field.

Along the western flank of the field that bordered the track leading to the farmhouse are a series of linear positive anomalies. They appear to form enclosures of varying size ranging from 30m to 10m in length. It is at present difficult to discern their function but they could represent a continuation of the built up villa complex as they share the same north-south alignment as the main complex to the north of the church. For the main part the eastern section of the survey area was devoid of any anomalies confirming the apparent extent and limit of at least the built up villa territory.

The next season of work at Villa Magna aims to complete the area to the north and west of the farmhouse in order to continue to reveal the extent of the villa complex. It would also be interesting to continue the survey to the north and east of the present survey coverage in order to establish the limit of the villa in these areas.

Sophie Hay

The Excavation

The Casale

Like our predecessors in the eighteenth and nineteenth century who carried out a certain amount of treasure hunting, we began our explorations in the courtyard of the casale, wide open area measuring some 30 x 30 metres (fig. 2). Here was already exposed a small stretch of *opus spicatum* pavement in yellow marble (*giallo antico* and *porta santa*), lying beside what appeared to be the base of a raised cistern. Expanding the trench to ca.10 x 10m. we exposed the entire extent of the paving, unfortunately heavily destroyed by previous interventions. However, enough was preserved to allow us to reconstruct the nature and function of the room, which was certainly a *cella vinaria* (room I).

It consists of a large rectangular space, 14 metres wide and at least 15 metres long (fig. 3). Along the north side lies the foundation of what is certainly a *lacus*, raised just under a meter over the floor surface. Below this on its south side at least one marble-lined vat, with a settling tank at its bottom, received the must from the pressed grapes. From this tank the must would have been transferred into a number of *dolia* built into the floor (figs. 4-5). Under the floor level the *dolia* were encased in yellow clay, which creates ideal conditions for the fermentation of the wine, as it prevents the contents of the *dolia* from overheating. The *opus spicatum* floor was built on a mortar preparation over the clay, connecting with the *dolia* just below their necks. At this point hydraulic *opus signinum* plaster was laid to seal the area between the marble tiles and the jars: numerous fragments of thin, curved serpentine bands of the diameter of the shoulder of the *dolia* suggest that the join was articulated with these.

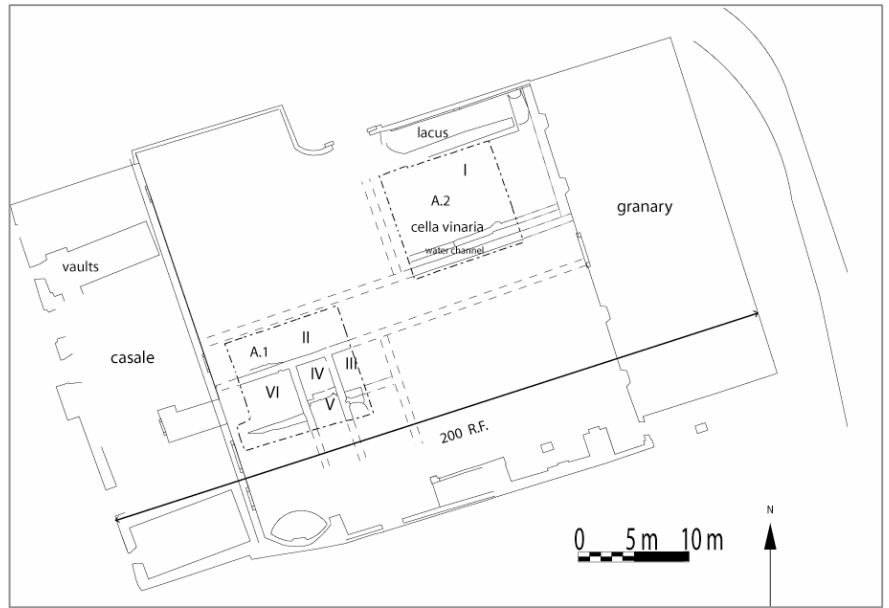


Fig. 2. Trenches in the courtyard of the casale.

Between the jars the floor was pierced by a series of drains running vertically from the pavement, 20 cm. square and framed in the same yellow marbles. These were emptied of earth as far as we could reach, but we were unable to bottom them. As there are apparently as many of these as there are *dolia*, we suggest that they lead to a lower storey, on the basement floor of the *basis villae*, where another range of *dolia* would have been located.

A massive destruction deposit filled the areas where the floor and the *dolia* had been robbed out during what we assume to have been treasure-hunting excavations. Curiously, this contained enormous quantities of wall and floor veneers, as well as at least a cubic meter of the yellow marble tiles with which the *spicatum* pavement had been made.

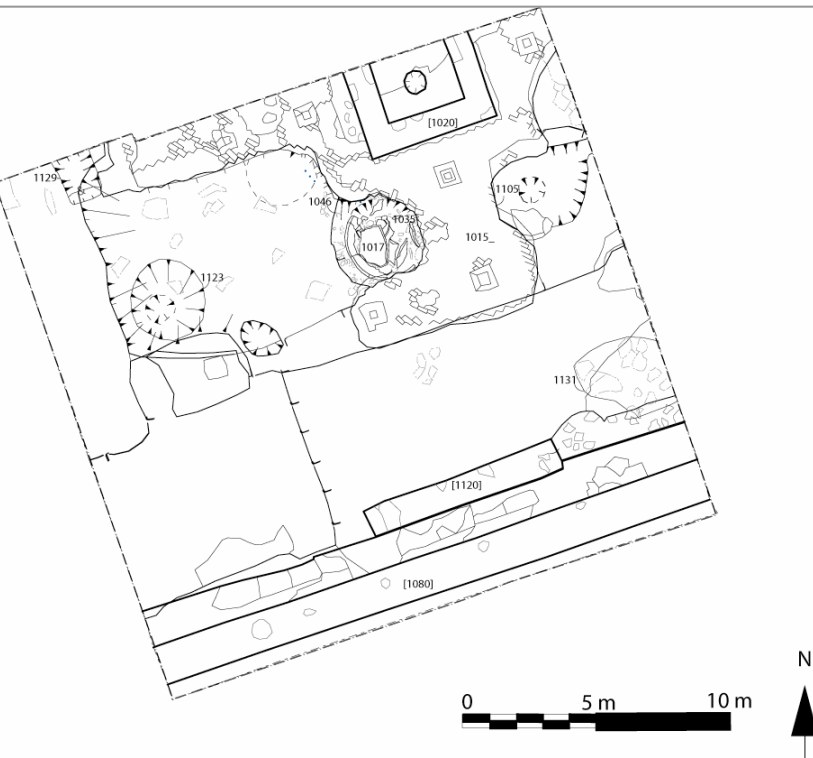


Fig. 3. Plan, Area A2.

This deposit allows us to form an idea of the decoration of the room, whose walls were revetted in panels of yellow marble with serpentine edging, in a fashion similar to other second-century buildings. The deposit was so deep and extensive that we were unable to complete its excavation, thus a plan of the positions of all of the *dolia* will have to await next year, when we hope to be able to reach the lower edges of their cuts.

The second trench in the cortile was somewhat larger, 16 x 12m, and placed in the diagonally opposite corner (figs. 6 and 7). Here a corridor (room II) stretching towards the *cella vinaria* was revealed, as well as a series of rooms off it. The pavements of all of these rooms have been almost completely spoliated, but enough remains to show that the corridor was floored in a simple rectangular pattern carried out in white marble with yellow veining and *pavonazzetto*, while the large room, VI, was paved in a white marble, but with a pattern of rotated squares. From this room a staircase leads down west towards the vaulted



Fig. 4. Area A2: the cella vinaria.



Fig. 5. Dolium and spicatum pavement in the cella vinaria.

substructures which are visible today on that side of the *basis villae*. A second room off the corridor, IV, appears to have been a vestibule leading to a second broad stair leading down towards the south. At some point in the late empire this stair was partially filled with earth, and floored at 60 cm. below the level of the rest of the rooms with a coarse white mosaic (fig. 8). To the east of it a small room without an apparent doorway seems to have served as a light well for the lower story. This, too, was redesigned in a later period. An apsidal wall was built, visible from a window cut into the room formed by the old staircase, and the light-well was filled with earth up to the level of the staircase mosaic and floored in the same way. We will understand these changes better next year. A final room, III, only partially excavated, revealed an *in situ* collapse of plaster from the ceiling. This is important in that it demonstrates that the marble pavement had already been spoliated when the ceiling fell, and thus that the stone robbing in this area dates to late antiquity.

Although only a quarter of the area has been excavated, it is already clear that we are dealing with a particularly



Fig. 6. Area A1.

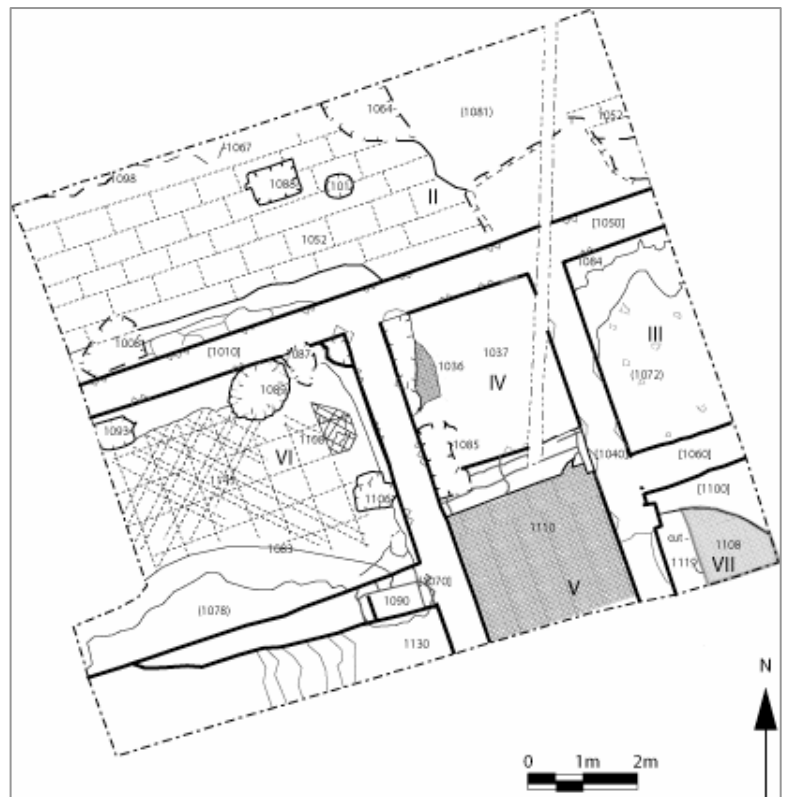


Fig. 7. Plan, Area A1.

glamorous *pars rustica*, the productive area of the villa. It appears to have been built to a uniform plan, 200 RF x 150 RF, and decorated to the highest standard. *Cella vinaria* entirely paved and revetted in marble is, to our knowledge, unique. Two brick stamps of C. Galerius Rest[itus], whose products are also known from the imperial villa of Praeneste, dating to the reign of Hadrian, connect this part of the villa to the imperial properties, as does the important inscription found over the door of the church, which reads “[...]o Villae Magna”. There is no doubt that this is the villa from which Marcus Aurelius wrote to his tutor Fronto the letter in which he describes his participation in the grape harvest, together with his father, Antoninus Pius, and their dinner in the ‘*torcular*’, “... *in torculari cenavimus... et rusticos cavillantes audivimus libenter.*” (We ate in the press room and gladly listened to the joking rustics: Fronto iv. 5). Jean-Pierre Brun suggests that rather than actually eating with the rustics, the emperor and his heir were watching them press the grapes in the *lacus*, an activity which was normally accompanied by dancing and jests¹. Until we have a better candidate, we may assume that the room we are excavating is precisely this *torcular*. This is, of course, a rare example of the congruence of text and an archaeologically known space.



Fig. 8. Stairwell with late mosaic.

The Monastery

The only surviving structures associated with the monastery are the church of S. Pietro in Villamagna, whose roof was removed in the 1970's, and a large defensive wall, marked by a tower at its southwest corner, which abutted the church. We carried out two exploratory excavations, trench C I in a small chapel at the northwest corner of the church, and a larger trench, B, just in front of and as wide as its west facade. We also cleaned a clandestine excavation in the presbytery of the church, C II, which revealed a fine 13th-century Cosmatesque pavement with



Fig. 9. Cosmatesque pavement below the modern floor.

evident traces of repair (fig. 9). The patterns and materials of the floor have strong affinities with floors in Rome (S. Clemente) and elsewhere in Lazio (the Duomo of Ferentino), both of which have been dated to the first decades of the twelfth century.² This dating indicates that there was a phase of renovations to the church prior to the reconsecration of the altar by Gregory IX, attested by an inscription of 1217, and also prior to the major projects by the Cosmati family of stoneworkers at Anagni, which took place in the 1230s–50s.³

Excavation of the chapel revealed a plaster floor and threshold, possibly dating to the 15th century, and cut by a number of tombs (fig. 10). Similar rings on two of the skeletons suggest that this was a family chapel: in all, 6 adults and 10 babies were found there. Visible in one of the cuts is an *in-situ* column base clearly removed from the villa, which probably formed part of the arcade of

the nave at an earlier phase, perhaps related to the Cosmatesque pavement.

The trench in front of the church (fig. 11) has identified structures of four major phases. The most recent is the period of construction and subsequent use of the fortification wall running east-west and abutting the church (fig. 12). The construction of this fortification might have happened in the 15th century. The typology of the windows and tower suggest a dating then, and the few textual sources available to us corroborate such a dating.

¹ Brun 2003: 55.

² Claussen 2002, s.v. S. Clemente. For Ferentino, see Glass 1980: 65-69.

³ The inscription from the church is now lost, for text see Zappasodi 1908: 236. For the pavements of Anagni, see Glass 2002: 55-59.

The site is referred to as a *castrum dirutum* in 1478, suggesting that the borgo wall was already built at that date and that the site was nearly abandoned.⁴ It is tempting to consider the construction of the fortification as a reaction to the attack on Villamagna by the inhabitants of Gorga in 1396, attested by documentary material in the Archivio Capitolare.⁵ The construction of the fortification entailed the destruction of a building located in front of the church, but not in alignment with it. The structure runs beyond the limits of the excavation, but there are sufficient remains to suggest that it was rectangular in form and its walls were very thick, built of rubble bonded with very hard mortar. The function of this structure remains to be determined.

The rectangular building straddles the remains of a churchyard wall. The walls were built in different masonry, perhaps reusing earlier structures (fig. 13). Later pits and trenches in the area make clear that the churchyard was used as a cemetery. The skeletons which have been excavated are male, female, adult and child, indicating that it was a lay cemetery, not monastic, which must be located elsewhere. Along the northern side of the church yard, monumental tombs were built of stone and brick. Two of these were robbed out, but the third produced fully 6 adult burials, though no elements to suggest a date of the tombs. We anticipate a significant number of tombs to emerge from this churchyard in coming seasons.

Beneath the tombs and visible on both sides of the churchyard walls in the bottoms of pits is a continuously paved context, 1.0 to 1.40 m below ground level. The pavement may represent an earlier phase of the church yard, before it filled with earth and was used for burial.

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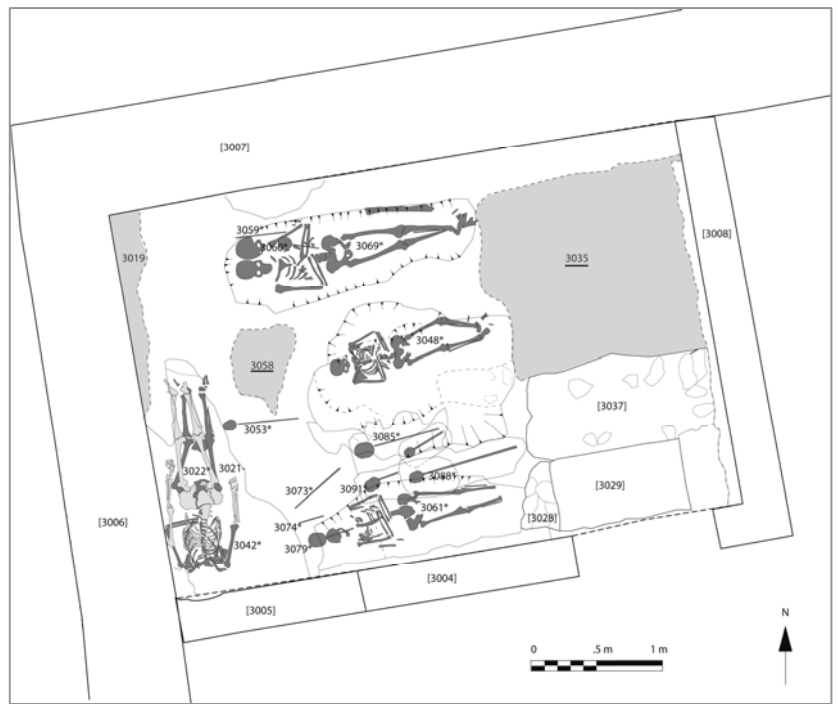


Fig. 10. Cemetery in the southwest chapel.



Fig 11. Excavation in front of the church of S. Pietro.

⁴ ASV, Reg Vat 598, f. 265, cited Raspa 1999: 16.

⁵ Archivio Capitolare di Anagni, Cartulario: 75, cited in Raspa 1999: 16.



Fig. 12. Borgo wall and associated surfaces in front of the church.

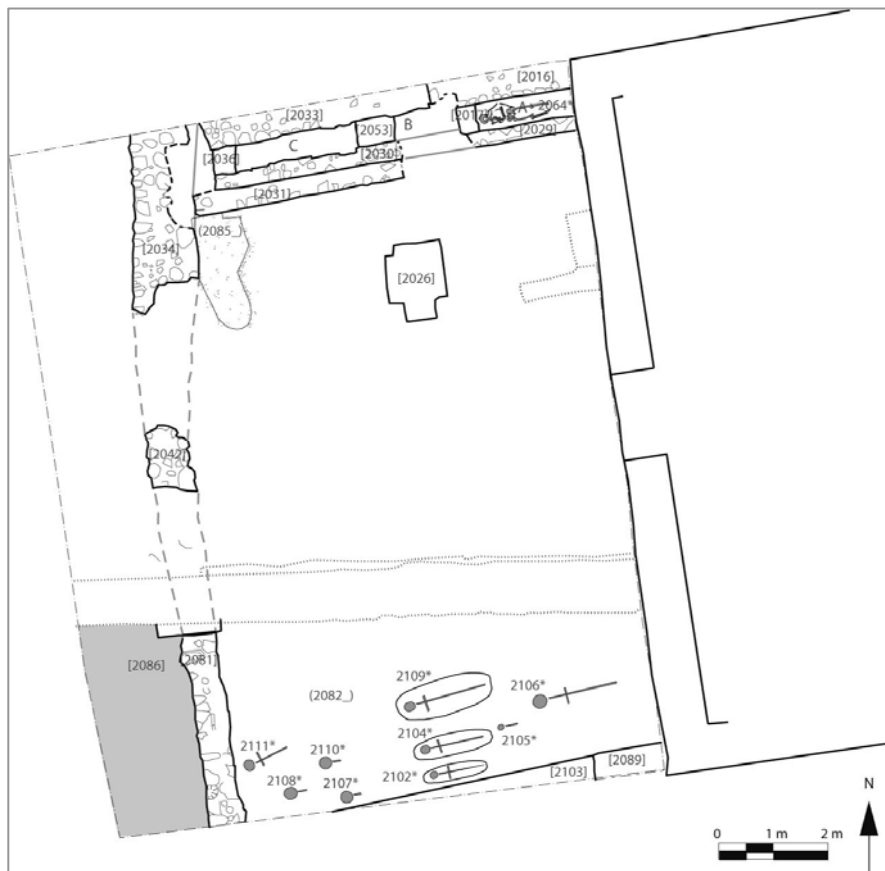


Fig. 13. The churchyard wall.

Architectural elements and other finds

In the fills and disturbed soils of the 2006 season emerged a large amount of fine stone decorations, both Roman and medieval. Typical of such contexts is 1076, in the *cella vinaria* with 180-200 pieces. Both the church and the granary had piles of architectural marbles and veneers, heaped in corners; their specific provenance is unknown.

Particular decors are signalled by three sets of remains. One is a set of pieces of an attached Ionic order, similar to a column shaft has been found at Trajan's villa at Arcinazzo. There is also evidence for tall and wide attached pilasters, represented by two different molding and dimension types. These are remains of decors on a monumental scale. A third set consists of two or three badly worn fragments of a highly decorative miniaturized columnar wall treatment, much-battered little capitals in one piece with their cornice block, like ornaments of an aedicula or nymphaeum.

Decorative materials

A large amount of *opus sectile* and plainer veneer emerged from casale trenches, particularly in the *cella vinaria*. The marbles represented include Proconnesian and other white marbles, *pavonazzetto*, *giallo antico*, and *porta santa*, the latter two used primarily in the *cella vinaria*. Less common is the granite found here, a very fine-grained white with close small black speckling; it occurs in small, very finely cut elements, including frieze bands for walls as well as possible floor inlays. Large pieces of porphyry and curved fragments of *giallo antico* suggest that at least one floor pattern in the villa consisted of dark red circles inscribed in yellow squares. The original range of floor patterns is also signalled by a chunk of mortar bedding with patterns of radiate fine stones in larger (and thicker) tiles. The granary stone piles yielded a fragment of ancient mortar with five hexagons still embedded, showing a patterning of lighter alternated with darker elements.

Many other *opus sectile* pieces in *giallo antico*, as well as in other stones, are obviously wall treatments for large-scale patterns of framed panels. There are some smaller pieces, including a white volute of a pilaster capital. Serpentine banding was clearly used for framing. Given the imperial ownership of this villa, these decors of purple, red and gold can be correlated to imperial taste in public construction for colored stones like *giallo antico*, porphyry and *pavonazzetto*, whose quarries were imperially controlled. Our decors echo fashionable developments of the later 1st century AD like the fictive *opus spicatum* floors of *giallo antico* at the bath of Domitian's imperial villa at Circeo and the remains of large-scale wall panelling in use at Trajan's early 2nd century AD villa at Arcinazzo.

Mosaic floors were found *in situ*, though their coarse white tesserae and the contexts in which they were discovered suggest that they pertain to a late Roman context. However, rare fine blue-glass tesserae found in secondary deposits suggest water-display architecture in the villa, as blue-glass mosaic typified walls and ceilings of Roman nymphaea from the Late Republic onwards.

Ann Kuttner

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