LA POSTA VECCHIA

LA POSTA VECCHIA ROMAN VILLA

The masonry in opus reticulatum and opus listatum makes it possible to establish that the building survived for centuries almost certainly because of its importance. Therefore, it must have been the home of a socially influential person. The villa's ruins, scattered under the entire structure of La Posta Vecchia's building, give an idea of how grandiose and imposing this residence must have been.

In the central part of the building there is an atrium, characterised by a basin, which certainly had a rectangular shape and marble lining; an impluvium rising up in what most probably was a two-storey dwelling; a portico around the basin; passageways and rooms with polychrome mosaic floors and rich geometric and floral decorations dating back to late ancient times. A small room with an apse and a coloured mosaic floor is truly charming. It was probably a kitchen characterized by a drainage well in opus reticulatum and heated by a hypocaust.

Some parts of the passageway's walls are still covered with interesting squares of African and Greek marble. A water cistern is located under the basin and can be reached via recently built iron stairs. In the centre of this cistern stands a column, which must have supported the basin above. A great number of archaeological findings, discovered during the excavation works, are exhibited in the small antiquarium sited in this area, which has been converted into a museum. They include interesting domestic objects, such as tableware and crockery dating back to the imperial period, oil lamps, needles for nets, transport amphorae, architectonic terracotta and make-up implements, among which of special charm are several glass balm containers.

A fragment of inscription, including part of an imperial title dating back to the first decades of the 1st century B.C., is particularly interesting.

LA POSTA VECCHIA

LA POSTA VECCHIA ARCHAEOLOGICAL ITINERARY

1. THE ENTRANCE TO THE CISTERN

The entrance is 18 metres long and has a 25% gradient. It leads to the centre of a Roman cistern, which probably dates back to 2 A.D and is 26 metres long, 3.50 metres wide and 5 metres high.
The entrance was built only recently to allow for the cistern's maintenance and to install an electric pump to remove water build-up.
Having cautiously walked through the entrance, the visitor reaches the cistern's centre, from where a wonderful view of the whole structure can be enjoyed.
The cistern's floor and walls are covered with a thick coat of coccio pesto, a particular kind of cement then used to plaster surfaces that needed waterproofing (aqueducts, cisterns, swimming pools, castles, inlets, etc…)
The cistern's barrel vault contains three manholes recently closed with concrete and removed, while a fourth is still situated not far from the cistern and connected to it.
The barrel vault bears traces of the wooden falsework erected to permit the laying of the concrete above.

2. THE FRONT COURT YARD

The wide front square is paved in opus spicatum (a type of external pavement made up of small terracotta bricks laid on edge, so as to form the design of several corn ears placed side by side) and was probably the courtyard of a large complex of buildings with service functions.
The one-or-two-storey buildings were characterized by roofs that looked out onto the large courtyard and, in case of rain, conveyed the water down onto the square's sloping surfaces, from where it reached the cistern underneath through three drains.
This water must certainly have been used for different purposes, but not to drink or cook, given the huge size of the cistern (about 500 cubic metres) and the collecting method.
Not far from here, there is still an original drain (the fourth) that is connected to the cistern via a canal and also to another canal going out to sea.
It was used to remove surplus water from the cistern.
In this square, there are three rectangular marble-lined niches and, in the centre, peculiar foundations characterized by flat arches, whose weight, together with that of a hypothetical house above, rested on the area beyond the underground cistern.

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When this building was demolished, because it had no connection with the Roman settlement, its foundations were anyhow preserved as a testimony of the past.

The building's external walls, made in opus reticulatum (a construction technique used in the republican period), can be seen on the sides.

3. THE GARDEN

Ruins of several service rooms of the Roman villa, featuring walls in opus reticulatum or mixtum, opening out onto a paved passageway in opus spicatum, have been brought back to light in the excavation site, located in the centre of the garden in front of La Posta Vecchia's main entrance.
Because of the extensive restoration works done to the masonry during the excavation, today it is very difficult to determine the exact floor plan of the rooms and distinguish the different building phases.
The doorway of a small room still stands in its original site. A column was partly included in a wall in opus mixtum, close to the passageway in opus spicatum.
A remarkable feature is the difference between the level of this group of buildings and that of the main mansion, which lies below the structure of La Posta Vecchia.

4. THE PASSAGEWAY

Remains of a long passageway paved in opus spicatum, probably penetrating into parts of masonry in opus reticulatum which may have belonged to service rooms of the villa, are located in the north-western part of the garden, almost on top of the external walls.
The other masonry sections, made of cement and characterized by large uncut stones, seem to have been built later, probably in the imperial period, and are situated at foundation level. The passageway's western side is particularly important, because it contains ruins of three walls, standing side by side, which make up a basement, whose height is about 1.80 metres. A wall, crossing the passageway obliquely near the northwestern end, was probably erected on a subsequent occasion.

5. THE DOMUS

This section is located in the green area southeast of the garden's external wall.
The excavation site is covered with a roof supported by a wooden structure built especially for this purpose.

Analysis of the structures makes it possible to distinguish an ATRIUM with impluvium, which probably had a rectangular base and a white mosaic floor with larger black tesserae forming a geometrical design. There are also the remains of a paved basin, featuring a white mosaic flooring with a strip of small bricks along its internal perimeter and traces of marble lining.

White triangular marble slabs, inserted into the floor, highlight the structure's external corners. Part of a smooth limestone column, 1.43 metres high and 23 cm in diameter, lies in the basin: it could be one of the pillars that supported the roof near the impluvium's opening. At least four entrances connect the hall to other rooms, which haven't been excavated. Two of these are located in the northern area, one in the eastern area and one in the western area. The doorway of a paved passageway in opus spicatum, with a marble threshold and the housings for the hinges, is still standing in very good condition. On the same side, the visitor will see a wider door opening out onto a room paved with coccio pesto and decorated with fragments of marble slabs. On both sides of the door, the threshold of which seems to have been removed in ancient times, the floor contains two small circular pits, which could be traces of architectonic elements, such as pillars. Under the hall's floor there are traces of pipes, made up of fragments of roofing-tiles and bent tiles. One of these pipes is almost certainly connected with the excavation of the basin. The pavement of another possible passageway in opus spicatum can be identified near the south-western side of this section in an area that was heavily altered by excavation works and stripping, as the masonry shows signs of having been changed and restored several times up until the imperial period (1st century A.D.), while the original structure, which can be seen distinctly in the north-eastern wall, probably dates back to pre-republican times (2nd century B.C.).

ROMAN HISTORICAL FACTS

THE ALSIUM CITY

The Odescalchi Palo Castel and La Posta Vecchia were built over the remains of the Roman town of Alsium.
The ancient town and port of Alsium was located between Fregenae and Pyrgi (Roman colony in 247 B.C.).
It was mentioned by Livy, because in 206 B.C., during the second Punic War, it petitioned to Valerius Maximus and Cicero to exempt it from supplying troops for the war against Hannibal, as in its territory there were villas owned by

M. Aemilius Porcina (124 B.C.), Pompeius, Caesar, Murena, Sallust and Dida in 46 and 32 B.C. Cicero mentioned the presence of the port in the late republican period, when he spoke of Caesar's arrival there in 46 B.C.

In the imperial period, Vereinius Rufus asked to be buried in Alsium at his villa, later owned by Pliny's mother-in-law. In Antonine's time, according to Frontone, Alsium had become a "MARITIMUM ET VOLUPTARIUM LOCUM" (a voluptuous sea-side resort), where, at the time of Marcus Aurelius, there was at least one large villa owned by the Emperor and administered by a procurator, perhaps the same house that belonged to Emperor Elagabalo around 220 A.D.
In Caracalla's time (210 A.D.), the town of Alsium was still run by a Council of Decurions (decuriones coloniae alsiencis) and probably by the QUADRUMVIRATE's College, as confirmed by 1st and 2nd century inscriptions.

In 416 A.D., Rutilius Namaziano, while sailing along Alsium's coast, could still see the luxurious villas situated in the area where the small OPPIDUM (fortified city) once stood.
Alsium was officially mentioned for the last time in 547 A.D., when battles stemming from the siege of Portus took place under the lead of General Totila. By the 17th century, maps already placed Alsium where the castle of Palo (probably from palus – marsh) today stands, but its exact location was more precisely identified by the studies on the consular road Aurelia carried out by the Institute for Ancient Topography of the University of Rome, according to data of the itinerarium Antonini (Antonine's itinerary) and the calculation of the distances between Alsium, Pyrgi, Fregenae, AD TURRES (Statua). On the stretch of coast dominated by the castle of Palo, between La Posta Vecchia and the town, there are many archaeological ruins, which unfortunately cannot be easily visited by tourists.

THE AMPHORAE

Amphorae were the transport containers most widely used in ancient times. They were made of terracotta and usually had a tapered shape. Since very ancient times, their function has been the transport of foodstuffs, such as wine, oil and fish sauces, especially by sea.
At present, they are among the most frequent findings in archaeological sites located both on land and below the sea surface. In fact, intact amphorae, some standing in the same position in which they had been originally loaded, are often found in old shipwrecks.
In a chronological and geographical order, amphorae began to be manufactured, first, by the Phoenicians in the mid 8th century B.C., then, by the Greeks, followed by the Etruscans and, afterwards, by the inhabitants of the Western Greek colonies. Later, the Romans, too, began to produce these containers, first, in Italy in 300 B.C. and, then, in the Empire's richest provinces, such as Gaul, the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa.
Finally, the last amphorae were made in the East up to the 7th century A.D. Their different parts were first manufactured separately and then joined together before being fired.
Marks and inscriptions were often applied to them to indicate the place of origin, the manufacturer, the owner, the goods they contained, etc… The amphorae were usually closed with a cork or a clay stopper and then sealed with pitch, resin, pozzolan or lime. Sometimes, even the amphorae themselves were covered with lime. The stopper, called ANFORISCO, was made of terracotta, as well (it looked like a spinning top), and was inserted into the container's neck, which was then sealed with lime. Abbreviations and marks could also be applied to the stoppers that closed the amphorae. These vessels almost always ended in a point, so that the effect of possible

shocks and blows received during transportation would spread over the whole surface of the amphorae's bellies, thus preventing them from breaking. At the same time, such points made it possible to stack several layers of amphorae in the ships' holds, by inserting the point of the top amphora into the free space filled with straw made by three close-fitting amphorae in the layer below it.

THE TABLE POTTERIES

In the regal and the republican periods, the Romans used ceramic containers to eat and drink. Metal vases were very rare and began to appear on the tables of the more affluent in the 2nd century B.C., while glass became widespread only in the Augustan age.
Pottery was produced not only by the town craftsmen (FIGULI), but also by the slaves of the rural families, as this work was connected with agriculture.
There existed in Italy various kinds of terracotta products: from the most modest, rather shoddy pottery to Arezzo's vases, characterized by embossed decorations made using moulds. The latter belonged to an art that had flourished in ancient Etruria, where the most widely used piece of pottery was the so-called BUCCHERO (from the Spanish word Bucaro), a type of dark-coloured vase coming from Latin America. Both the surface and the internal grain were black or grey and the Bucchero's brightness made it look like bronze. But one must not forget the wonderful Etruscan vases, which were similar to the Greek ones and often surpassed them in elegance and craftsmanship. They were painted in black and, later, in red.
In Italy, there were a great number of pottery factories, most of which were located in Tuscany, Rome and its surroundings (Cerveteri), Campania, Pozzuoli, Capua and Sicily. Tuscans (from Pisa and Arezzo) set up factories even in some southern French cities and sold their products in the country's inland areas.
There is a singular and interesting fact worth mentioning: Roman cargo ships usually carried wine, oil, fish sauces, cereals and, to reach the weight necessary for sailing, loaded extra pottery aboard. This means that

the Roman cargo ships had to reach a certain weight to lower the keel and thus ensure safety during navigation.
Therefore, to be stable in water during the journey, ships would never sail without cargo, and they were often filled with empty amphorae to reach the right weight, or very rarely with bags of sand.

THE LAMPS

Romans mainly used four lighting devices:
1. Torches (faces, taedae). They were lit only on special occasions, such as weddings and funerals, and were probably used in the country, because they used leaves as fuel.
2.Candles (candelae). Candles, unknown to the Greeks, began to be used by the Romans at a very late stage in time, before the diffusion of olive-trees in Italy. They were obtained by wrapping a layer of wax or tallow around a wick made of marsh plants (papyrus). Such candles, twisted together, formed big torches, called funalia or funales cerei or simply cerei, because they looked like ropes. These torches were held by slaves (for example, when they took their masters home late at night) or placed in special candelabra, some of which have survived until now and have beautiful features and different heights (from 75 to 150 cm).
3.Oil lamps. Thousands of oil lamps have been found during archaeological excavations, as these means of lighting were much more common than candles and torches. Their shape is very well known: they consisted in an oblong and flattened container, ending, in the back, with a handle and, in the front, with a spout (rostrum or mixa), from which the wick came out. The spouts could be several (dimyxos - trimyxos- polimyxos).

A hole in the centre made it possible to raise the wick by using a small iron bar or to add oil while the lamp was burning. In addition to hand-carried lamps, there were also suspended ones, held up by small chains ending in a hook. Obviously, the former were stood on flat surfaces while the latter were hung on candelabra (LYCHNUCHI) of different shapes and heights.
Hooks, on which oil lamps could be hanged, were attached also to the ceilings. Small low tripods were used to put the lamps on the tables, for example, when someone needed them to study at night. The lamps were used everywhere: in the triclinium, the bedrooms, the studies and the bathrooms. Obviously, several oil lamps were necessary to light up one room. Before envying the Romans' splendour, which has always been highly extolled, it would be better to remember that their night-time revelries were conducted in oily, greasy air, full of smoke.
4.Lanterns. They were very common and their shape was similar to that of the present ones. They consisted in a small light surrounded by transparent walls made of horn (lanterna cornea), bladder skin (bladder lanterns) and, later, glass.