

# The Roman Villa delle Grotte at Portoferraio

## From preservation to excavation

As imposing and fascinating the structures of the Villa delle Grotte are, as complex the history of its life and of its excavations is.

The villa is first mentioned in a report of the September 1901 when in the list of the monumental buildings of the Province of Livorno, Town of Portoferraio, the Soprintendenza ai Monumenti e Gallerie per le province di Pisa, Lucca, Livorno e Massa-Carrara includes an “edifice” described as follows: “Remains of Roman Villa alle grotte. Category: ruins of regional importance. Ownership, conservation and use: the ruins of the Villa Romana are located in a plot owned by the Bigeschi family. Building features: on both sides of the road going from Portoferraio to Portolongone, on a hill protruding above the Gulf of Portoferraio are long sections of a Roman wall in opus incertum and opus reticulatum, of vaulted cellars, lengths of a brick wall, remains of mosaic floors and other traces of factories and marble coating. State of preservation: The ruins stretch along a wide portion of land, interrupted in several points, yet often surfac-

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I Scavi del grande cunicolo della piscina con gli operai Bellini Menotti, Damiani Giulio e Martini Delfo.



ing so as to provide enough data to reconstruct the topography of part of the building. News: These ruins are important as they stretch from the hilltop to the sea and represent the most interesting memory of the Roman past on the whole Isle of Elba. It must have been the Villa of some lavish, 'well-equipped' Roman family (...). It seems that this building might be of the early vulgar age. Works of art: none"<sup>1</sup>.

Actually, it was impossible to find any work of art or, at least, to find any visible one; in fact, besides a systematic spoliation after the abandon of the Villa, maybe occurred as early as the 1st century AD, the use of the upper platform to set the artillery for the siege of 1799 by the Neapolitans against the French, who had conquered Portoferraio, and in 1801 by the French themselves against the rebel town, had caused the razing of all the standing structures, as recorded in the Ciummei manuscript of 1786-1791, which shows the Cape delle Grotte topped with the bulk of the villa with its imposing substructures, remains of two floors and many other ruins scattered between the mountain and the sea behind it. The ruins of the Roman villa are a sort of frame

for the views of the port of Portoferraio of the mid-18th century.

A few statues and antefixes were found during the excavations of 1960, which would last, with some interruptions, until 1972. In addition to clay plates, stuccoes, painted plasters, marble intarsia and mosaic floors, buried during the artificial levelling, the excavation would unearth only a finger belonging to a statue, which must have been part of the monumental decoration of the villa, probably visible for those approaching the island from the sea.

But only in 1911 the Ministero della pubblica Istruzione issued a notification for Mr Pasquale Mattini, son of the late Pietro, domiciled in Portoferraio, "that the remains of the Roman villa alle Grotte in the Town of Portoferraio, owned by the above mentioned sir, are of great interest and therefore must comply with the dispositions of articles 5, 6, 7, 13, 14, 29, 31, 34 and 37 of the law 20th June 1909, no. 364". The notification was written by the municipal envoy Umberto Miliani on 29th March 1911.

Although being recognised of Roman period, the ruins



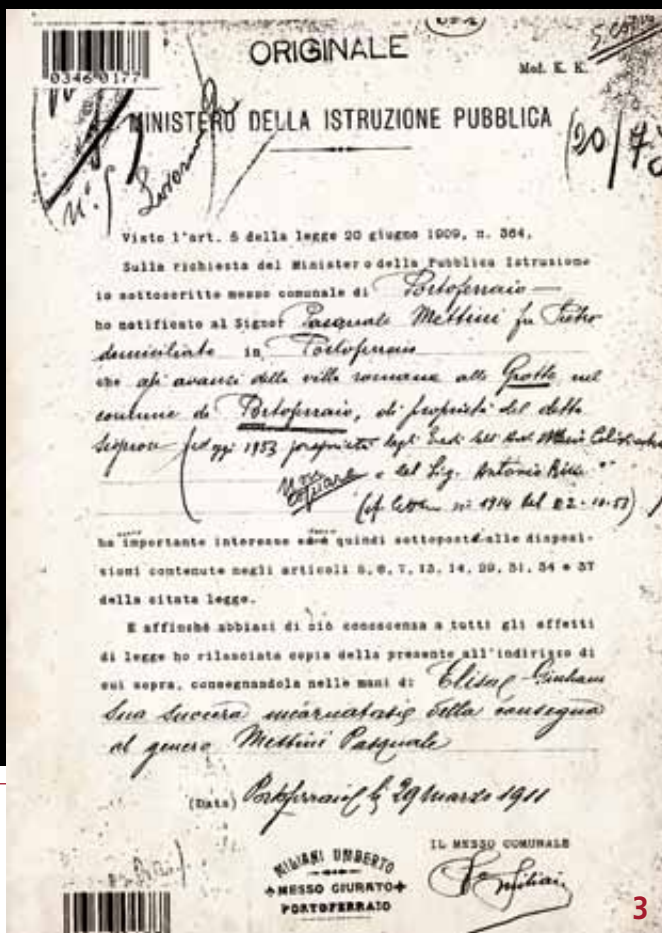


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still impress scholars, as they did in the previous centuries.

Engineer Padova in an article entitled “History and art of the Isle of Elba”, appeared in the paper “Il Telegrafo” of Livorno on 4th December 1913, writes: “... Still on the shores of the gulf, but on the opposite side of the town, facing the Tyrrhenian Sea and the mainland, on the pleasant hill of the Grotte, visitors could see the

remains of an old building, ruins belonging to a huge construction. Is it of Roman origin, as assumed by some people, because of its structure or of its being cloaked in bricks recalling the Roman opus reticulatum? Or is it more modern, with Arabic influence, as it might appear from the typical shape of certain vaults of the now underground rooms? It could be worth carrying out excavations, which might reveal something interesting”<sup>2</sup>. But the island would pass through hard times, so the Villa delle Grotte was talked about again only during the fascist period, when the country prepared to celebrate the 2000th anniversary of Augustus’s birth (63 BC), and Mussolini was celebrated as a new dux, distorting both the iconographic interpretations and the historical facts. And the Isle of Elba wants to take part in it. The correspondence of the year 1934 between the Soprintendenza alle antichità di Etruria di Firenze and the Town of Portoferraio reports an appropriation of 7,000 Lire, later 10,000, by the Podestà Epaminonda Pasella “in order to have archaeological researches and survey carried out in the site of “Le Grotte, where ruins of a Roman villa are” and where “survey works have already been started”. Also



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the Prefect of Livorno Letta visited the site, praising the initiative of the Town. But, despite of the approval of the Superintendent Antonio Minto, the authorization by the Ministero dell'Educazione Nazionale Antichità e Belle arti of Rome and the written permission of the two owners of the area, Avvocato (Lawyer) Mario Colavicchi and Antonio Riu<sup>3</sup>, the excavation wouldn't be carried out because of dissension between the Podestà and the then honorary inspector Leone Damiani.

Only in 1953 the discussion about excavations at the Grotte was resumed, when honorary inspector for antiquities Giovanni Bigeschi della Serra writes to the Superintendent Giacomo Caputo to inform the Soprintendenza "of the presence, among the most interesting

works on Elba, of some remains of an ancient Roman building (...), whose ruins, well visible, stretch over a vast area, in one of the most pleasant places in the Gulf of Portoferraio, at about 4 km from the village"; he also asks to be able to consider a possible resumption of the excavations "in view of the unemployment in this town after the closure of the local blast furnaces and the resulting poverty of most inhabitants" and "in view of the fact that the resumption of excavations in the above mentioned place would certainly unearth works of historical interest, also important for the increasing tourism industry on Elba".

Despite the approval of the Soprintendenza, funds are not enough. So the Ente Valorizzazione Elba (Institution for promoting Elba) hopes for an intervention by the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno, which, through a telegram sent by Minister Togni on 23rd December 1959, announces a 20 million lire funding of the excavation and restoration works at the Roman Villa delle Grotte. At the same time, an anonym patron and benefactor (even if his name and address are recorded in the Town Archive), who, in the name of his love for the island, offered three

2 Manoscritto Ciummei (1786-91)

3 Provvedimento di vincolo della villa romana

4 Foto all'inizio degli scavi, 8 Ottobre 1960

5 Vista delle Grotte su Portoferraio, anni '60

6 Il territorio delle Grotte coltivato a grano e senza alberi, 8 Ottobre 1960

7 Visita agli scavi, in primo piano le sostruzioni nord, 11 Settembre 1970



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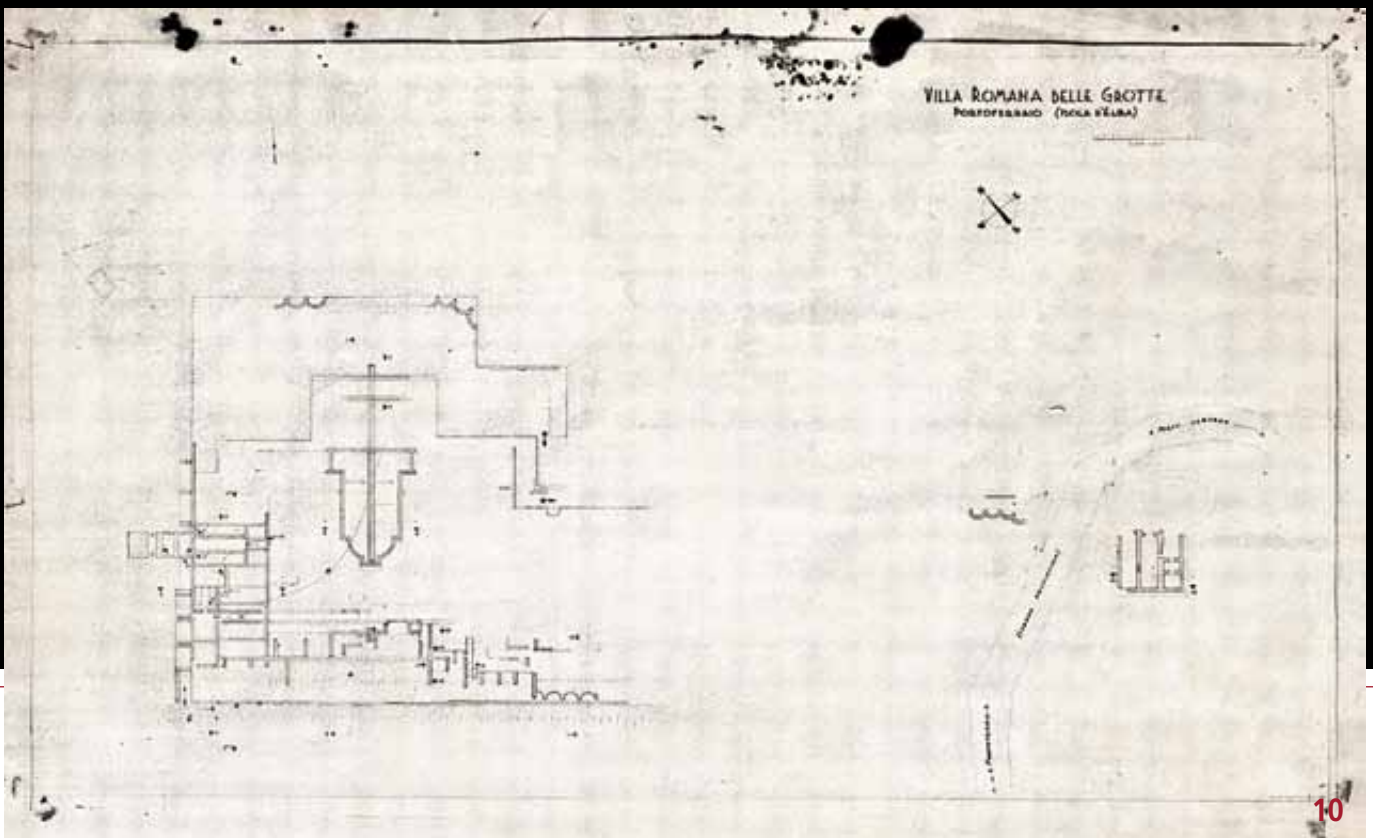


million lire for archaeological excavations, money that was initially refused because the big loan of twenty million lire from the Cassa del Mezzogiorno drew near, but later well accepted, as it was announced that the money couldn't be granted because the ground of the excavations belonged to a private owner. In July 1960, the patron deposits one million lire on the bank account of the Soprintendenza and promises to pay other two million by the first term of 1961. Which will be done.

**Gli scavi di Giorgio Monaco (1960-1972).**

In July 1960 Giorgio Monaco studies the features of the

excavation to be carried out and decides to start from the works from the highest point of the hill, to the west and on the southern scope; three skilled workers are recruited: Bellini Menotti, Damiani Giulio, Martini Delfo. The excavation area is free from crops, since the wheat has already been harvested; one of the spaces of the delle Grotte is used as stable and Monaco will use it as a store for archaeological finds. The excavation works finally start on 18th July at 6 am; the first campaign will last until the 4th of October.





**8** Giorgio Monaco sul grande cunicolo centrale della piscina, 3 Gennaio 1961.

**9** La piscina, 16 Agosto 1987

**10** Pianta della villa in corso di scavo e della cisterna superiore, 1961

**11** Veduta dalla cisterna superiore. Sullo sfondo Porto Ferrajo, 11 Settembre 1970

Giorgio Monaco is to edit detailed reports of the excavation works.

After the cutting of the grass, a flat area with no building appeared, it was delimited only on three sides by ruins of perimeter walls and of substructures, that are the "Grotte". The finds were few: some fragments of ceramics, drain pipes and roofing tiles. The perimeter walls are covered with bushes, but there grow also some olive trees, whose roots are preserved despite of the excavation, and a wood of acacias. Initially, the diaries show some disappointment, as "the works goes on with a certain enthusiasm only for some wall structures", but then, on the south-east side of the perimeter, "several clay and stucco materials appear in the architectural section". Later, more fragments of clay tiles were unearthed, and in August during the excavation in the western rooms, the first remains of mosaic and red plaster floors were found, along with stuccoes and marble material.

The excavation is exciting for Monaco, who is now living on the excavation site, in a tent placed under the shade of centuries-old olive trees surrounding the ruins; he succeeded in inspiring enthusiasm to his workers, as the daily paper of Elba of 18th August 1960 reports, and this is clear from the detailed accounts sent by the director of the excavation works to the Superintendent, but also from the images captured by Monaco himself. In the final report of the first excavation campaign, he describes the unearthed structures as follows "The

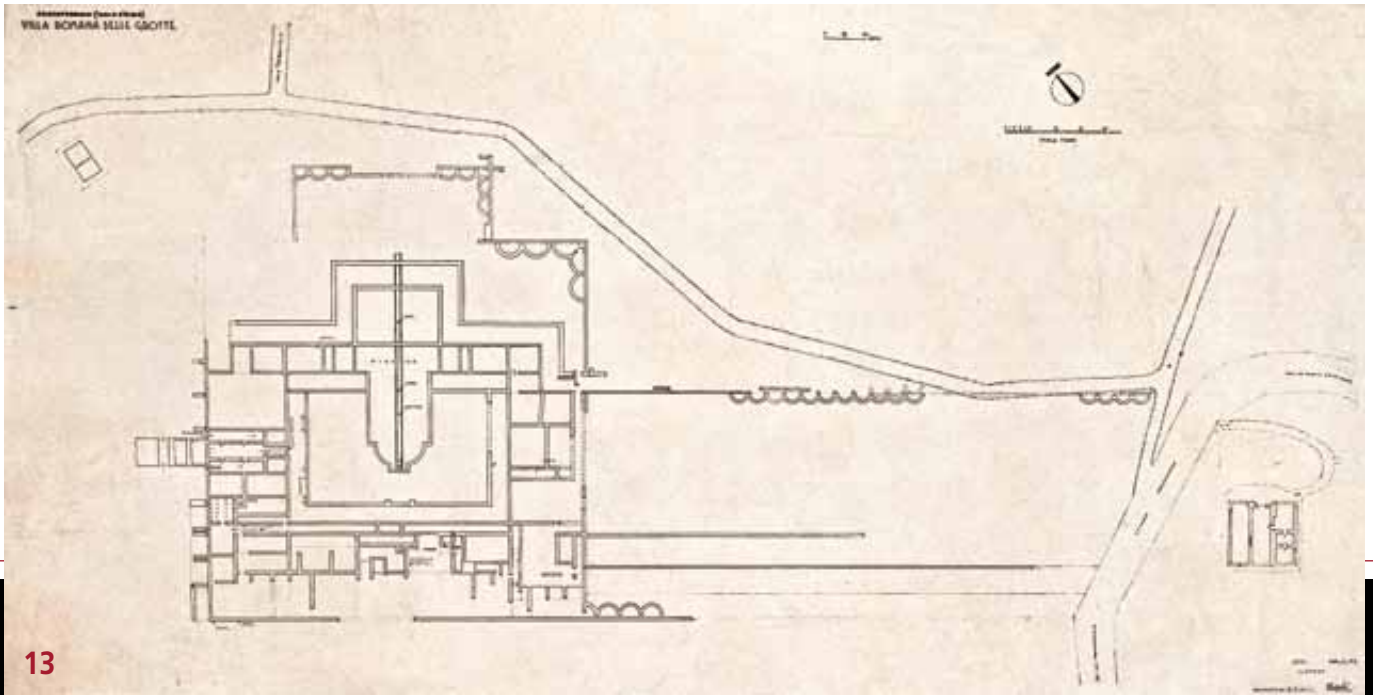
whole north perimeter of the piscina, 23 x 15 m, is preserved, it ends with a wide rectangle instead with an apse. The large tunnel, which makes up its central backbone and sewer, stretches over 10 m. northwards and runs along a terrace retained by walls and exedras, which I am inclined to see as another large basin or monumental fountain (the water wasn't the be wasted). The excavation in the perimeter also revealed fragments of colourful wall painting (geometric patterns), surely belonging to the portico. To the south of the supposed piscina are two pools with red encaustic bottom".

The excavation campaign arises a great deal of interest in the local papers, which highly praises the archaeologist and his work, also for the value it might represent for the island. The first questions are about the probable owner of this residential complex<sup>4</sup>.

The works went on until the end of 1960, in the years 1961, 1963, 1964, and from 1967 to 1972. Initially, the excavations focused on unearthing the central piscina,



**12** Edificio del Demanio Militare costruito su e con i resti dei muri romani, 30 Luglio 1960



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after discovering the middle sewer and its extension northwards at the end of the flat area; the excavation accounts report for the first theories on the shape of the piscina, not corroborated by the excavations, the doubts about the functions of the holes inside the sewer, the discovery that the piscina isn't paved, it only has a base along the perimeter of the walls with the bottom dug in the iron rock, where also the foundations of the walls lay; the excavation earth of the piscina revealed some clay tiles and traces of a decorated portico running around the piscine and the inner garden. Then other walls and other rooms around the piscina, also trimmed at the same level by the works of 1799; moreover, the reports say about the discovery, on the western and southern slopes, of rooms deeply dug out in the earth, featuring floors, sometimes double, with suspensurae to

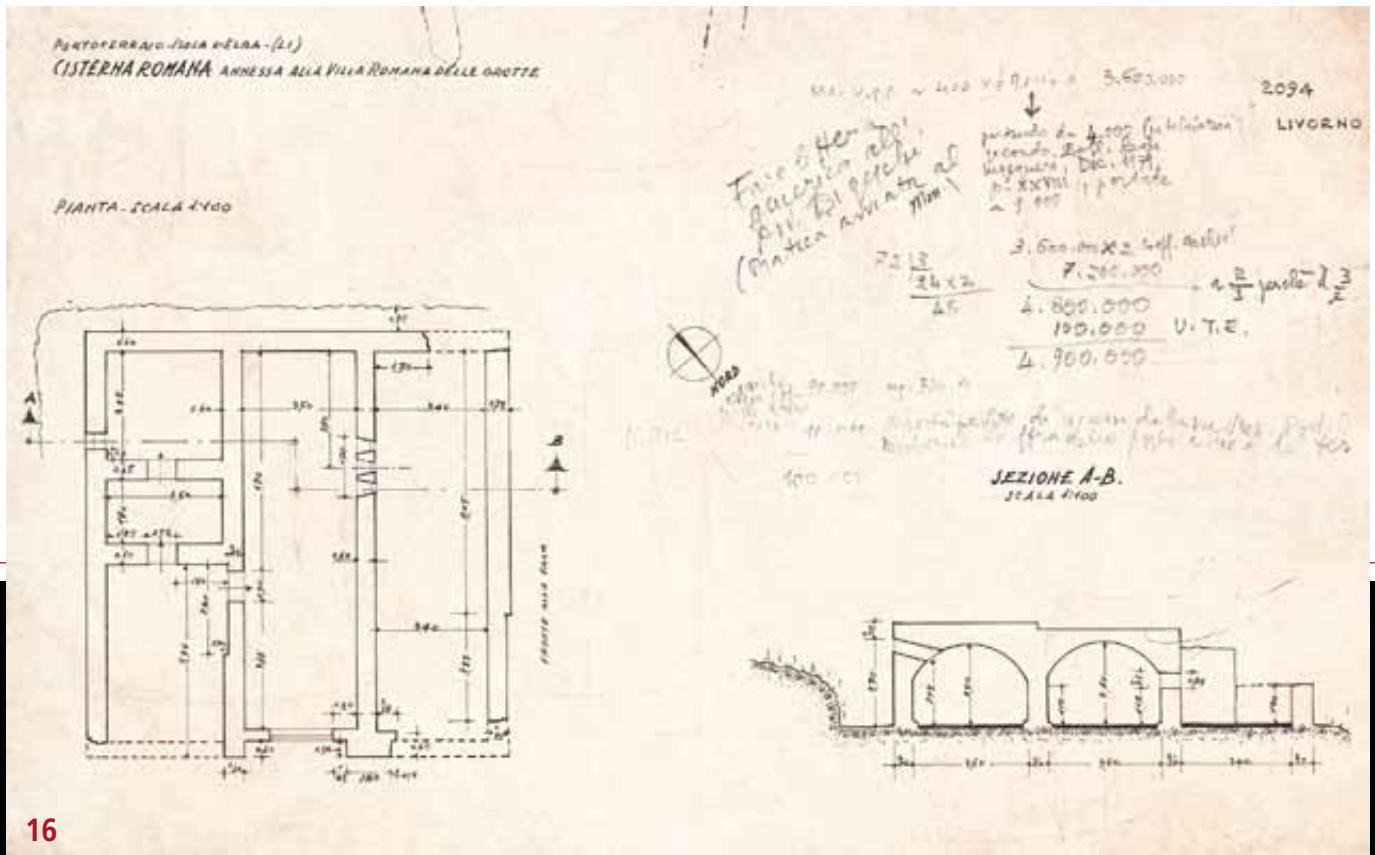
isolate humidity (later it will be interpreted as a thermal room) corridors and steps. Every year new rooms are investigated, while the excavated ones undergo further in-depth analysis; some interpretations about their use are suggested, so the high rooms without any opening, which can be entered only from above, are seen as possible goods lift; all of them are filled with debris of the 18th century; it is difficult to find and recognise a walkway surface; spades and pickaxes are used, sometimes after consolidating the ground, and concrete is needed to prevent collapses; some stretches of walls collapsed or stand sloping against any gravity law. The works on exploring the borders of the structures towards the provincial road facing the villa: to the south-east they almost reach the road, while on the other side there aren't any borders; perhaps there was a garden; so the



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- 13 Pianta definitiva del 1969, disegnata da R. Pasquinelli.
- 14 Sostruzioni in parte crollate.
- 15 Consolidamento delle sostruzioni.
- 16 Pianta e sezione della cisterna superiore con appunti di Monaco per l'esproprio.
- 17 Operai al lavoro nei vani ovest, Agosto-Settembre 1972.
- 18 Sostruzioni puntellate in attesa del restauro.

excavations are interrupted, on the contrary, more earth is added to build a base where the cars of the inhabitants of the island and tourist buses can stop, without reaching the limit of the plain; on the cape were three spyglasses to see in the distance.

The surveys and excavation reports also depict the economic situation of Elba in the early 1960s, when the Island was about to enter a period of massive building; in fact, in 1953 the archaeological excavation was seen as a potential job source for Elba, on the contrary in 1963 Monaco had it difficult to find a building enterprise and workers, since they all were employed in longer and



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more profitable jobs; no building enterprise accepts to carry out excavation works, so in the end only a worker made himself available.

In the survey of 1968 for the excavation to be carried out, Monaco makes a point of the results so far: "In the course of 1967, the excavation at the Roman villa delle Grotte on a cape opposite the gulf of Portoferraio was resumed (with its big vaults in the storerooms on the southern side of the construction). The excavations at the villa, known since the 18th century, investigated from 1960 to 1964, and finally in 1967, revealed the whole perimeter, the western side of the building, both on the slopes (storerooms and lower cistern), and on the plain (the big piscina) and the upper cistern on the east

side. The excavations of the years 1960-64 had already highlighted the remarkable importance of the villa, in particular for its architectural features (planimetry and scenery) and techniques (probable elevators with weights and counterweights, and a system for making lukewarm the water in the piscina. In 1967 the excavation of the piscina was linked to the one of the south and west storerooms (...); the south storeroom was excavated in depth (...) near the well of the probable elevator with weight and counterweights; in the south corridor (...), traces of a south-north staircase were found<sup>5</sup>."

The money of the donor was over in the first two years of excavation, but the Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione - Direzione Generale delle Antichità e Belle Arti

19 Vani del settore ovest, Agosto 1971.

20 Vani ovest al termine degli scavi, fine anni '60.

21 Rinvenimento di palle di cannone, Luglio 1969.

22 L'area delle terme ad ovest, 16 Settembre 1987.

23 Strutture ovest.

24 Settore ovest, vano 22. Settembre-Ottobre 1972

25 Vani ad ovest dell'oliveta ancora immersi nel pietrame della distruzione dei muri, Agosto-Settembre 1972.

26 Pianta finale degli scavi.





would invest its funds in the excavation from 1963 to 1972 and then the restoration of the structures and the materials. Monaco would also establish a storehouse with a small antiquarium inside the cistern, which is still preserved above the provincial road with the original walls and covering of at least two rooms out of three. Here would study and select the materials to be displayed and would try, useless though, to clear the earth behind cistern in order to isolate it from humidity; but humidity forces Monaco to move the crates with the finds to another deposit and the most important ones to the Napoleonic villa Napoleonica of San Martino, hoping to establish a museum in Portoferraio. The cistern was dispossessed in 1977, when it passed into public ownership.

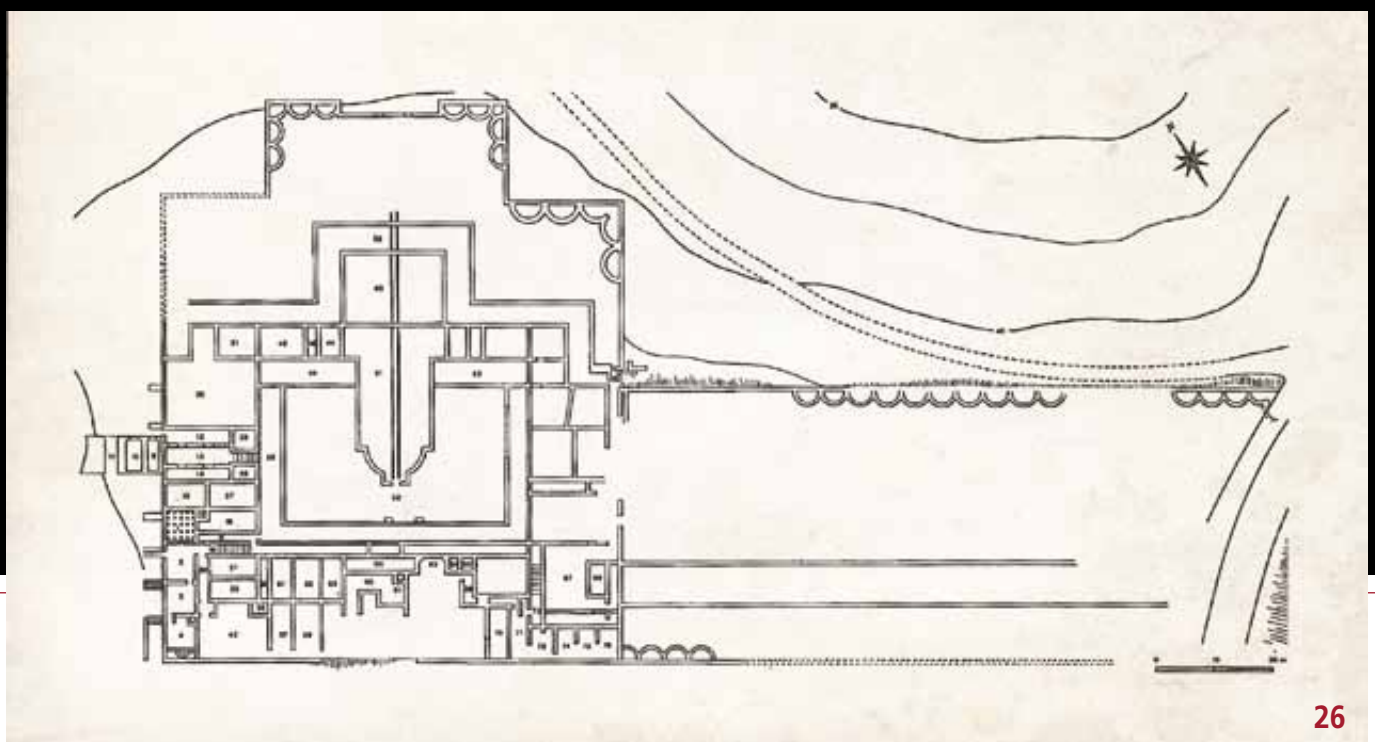
In the last years, Monaco was able to take part in the excavation just occasionally; he was engaged in other

areas and on other excavation sites; the workers were supported by the excavation assistants, Toti and Innocenti; every now and then, some restorers and a drawer would help them in update the plan of the villa, which becomes more and more complex in its architectural layout.

In 1972 Monaco informs the Superintendent that in the building plan of the Town of Portoferraio, the whole area of Le Grotte has been declared natural-landscape heritage, so no buildings are allowed!

The Superintendent gets worried in 1979 when the Cape of Le Grotte is put on auction, but later withdrawn from sale by the State.

Guglielmo Maetzke says in "Il Paese Sera" of 21st August 1979: "We started excavations and studies on the Roman villa situated on the upper part of the cape. Also the lower portion, now being put on sale, is likely to





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reveal the ruins of the building. In the area around the villa, there are traces of walled ruins and probably of gardens and orchards. We hadn't started works in the lower part yet, since it was of public ownership, and we weren't worried about any speculation or intervention." After years of abandon and state of neglect, the excavation grounds were purchased in 1995 by the Fondazione Villa Romana delle Grotte established in the previous year. It provided for the necessary fence after vandals removed parts of the building and of the floors. The Foundation also would provide for conservation and opening of the site in addition to its promotion by publishing a text about the excavation researches carried out by Giorgio Monaco and the materials he found; furthermore, the structures would be investigated analyzing the building techniques applied<sup>6</sup>. The restoration works financed by the Superintendence dates back to 1996.

### The Villa delle Grotte today, in the 2000th anniversary of Augustus's death

After years in which the villa delle Grotte remained closed to the public and the vegetation was thriving inside and over the structures (a problem that Giorgio Monaco had already stressed), today the villa is still the most important archaeological site on the Isle of Elba, also thanks to the initiative of three young female archaeologists, who set up an association, the Archeocolor, to act as volunteers for guided visits to the villa and to the archaeological museum at Linguella, Portoferraio, which houses finds from archaeological sites of the island and materials selected by Giorgio Monaco.

For those driving from Portoferraio along the provincial road to Porto Azzurro, the complex of the villa delle Grotte is well visible on the cape to the left of the road; the flat area after several bends allows to stop and enjoy the view of the esplanade with the elevations of the Roman villa; but only going beyond the gate, it is possible to see the extent of the structures and the perimeter of



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27 La villa vista dalla cisterna superiore.

28 La piscina.

29 Scalinata che porta alla cisterna.

30 Vano centrale della cisterna inferiore della villa.

31 Un'altro vano della cisterna inferiore della villa.



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the rooms, all of which being razed at the same level. The first impression is that of entering a garden, so vast the area without buildings is; here there must have been a wide surface planted with herbs of the Mediterranean scrub, today partially reproduced; a hortus with portico, probably on the western side, as it seems to result from the parallel walls that, standing on the original rock, recede south towards the road. The portico supposedly protected from hot weather or from winds in the cold season; then there was the entrance to the hub of the villa, developing at least on two levels on the esplanade, with a series of rooms, some of which with mosaic floors and decorated plasters along the east, south and west sides of a portico surrounding the space with the big basin in the middle; a portico decorated with clay tiles in several patterns, the most recurring being Psyche between cithara and aulòs players; there were also decorations with vegetal patterns that appeared as a green space bigger than the one enclosed in the por-

tico itself. The large basin, resting on the rock, which acted as a floor, and delimited through a stone wall, a perimeter with apse to the south-west and rectangular to the north-east, was lengthwise crossed by a central duct that stops in space. The piscina must have been fed by the cistern still preserved upstream, although no pipe was found; also the function of the central spine wall featuring openings in the upper part is uncertain; it might have been a system for heating water which probably fell into another basin or into a nymphaeum placed on the lower terrace facing the sea.

While the rooms on the north and east sides of the piscina feature the brickwork at the foundations level, the ones excavated seem to be preserved above ground level, sometimes up to the original height; high walls in opus reticulatum, at times with decorative patterns, some of which coated with plasters; stairs also coated with plasters, covered cisterns with several rooms; walls of sloping heights, which might support a monumental western access to the structures of the upper terrace, where today only two rooms are preserved; Monaco located another access on the opposite side, at the end



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32 Magazzini (ex stalle) ricavati al di sotto della scala monumentale ovest.



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of the garden.

The rooms inside the substructures close to the monumental access housed thermal baths, one of which featured a double floor supported by brick *suspensurae*; to the south were other rooms, some of them being accessible through a corridor connecting them, some others blind with access from above. Arriving from the upper terrace, one can go down the original stairs and walk through the corridors that appear like basements.

The caves, which since the time of Monaco's excavations had been used as stables and storerooms for tools, had originally the function of substructure for the above lying terraces and storerooms or rooms for the servants; above them was the residential quarter. The "Grotte" appear surrounded on three sides of the terrace perimeter, on which the villa stands; surveys were performed to check the presence of structures facing the road and beyond, but they weren't successful. Still visible is the cistern placed on a higher level to the south of the villa and served the purpose of supplying water; unfortunately, the dangerousness of the road in that point makes it hard to visit the cistern, even if it is freely accessible from the outside. A walled area above it might have housed another structure linked to the cistern itself.

For those arriving from the sea, the "grotte" appeared as imposing support of the terraces of the villa and must have been visible from the distance for the ones approaching the gulf and landing at the small harbour of the villa, which Monaco himself confirms on the basis of the presence of a granite block and of other submerged structures; further underwater investigations could confirm what Monaco claimed and what can be supposed from the aerial pictures taken of the creek of

San Giovanni.

The complex of the villa seems to be a residential one; the recovery of a supposed mortar or millstone in volcanic stone didn't confirm its function as production area; the ruins we see seem to belong only to an imposing residence built, dwelled and abandoned in the course of the 1st century BC.

The same happened to the Roman villa of Capo Castello, whose remains are though swallowed up by modern buildings, which cannot provide much information about the villa, surely erected in Augustan times; on the contrary, the remains of the Villa della Linguella at Portoferraio, also swallowed up by structures from the Medicean times and submerged by the sea water, bear witness to the establishing of the residential complex as early as the end of the Republican age, in the mid-1st century BC. The villa remained in use up to the 3rd century AD.

So the three Roman villas of Augustan times known to this day on the this side of Elba (a fourth villa might be hidden between the structures of the Napoleonic Villa dei Mulini and Forte Stella at Portoferraio though) stood out with their sumptuous decorations, marbles and statues as Emperor Augustus was about to leave his empire and his life.

The ruins also tell us about a new use of the three villas as dwelling and as a burial ground in the late empire, between the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 6th centuries.

But who were the owners of the large sea villas of Elba? Despite the many funerary descriptions found in the historical centre of the Medicean town, that is in the Roman Fabricia, it hasn't been possible to give a name to the owners of the other Roman villas; but for the

33 Cisterna superiore, vano est porta della seconda stanza.

34 La cisterna superiore.

35 Muro esterno della cisterna superiore.

36-37 Vedute aeree del sito.



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At villa delle Grotte, the recent excavations conducted at San Giovanni by the University of Siena have unearthed the remains of a farm with wine dolia still in situ, so it was possible to identify not only the pars rustica of the villa delle Grotte, but thanks to the seal on the dolia, also the probable owner, that is Marco Valerio Messalla Corvino patron of poets and father to Cotta Massimo, the friend that the poet, as recorded in his works, visited in his residence on the island before Augustus sent him into final exile to Tomi on the Black Sea in 8th AD. In the year of the 2000th anniversary of Augustus's

death, we want to recall the splendour and the sumptuousness of the Elban villas and of the others of the Tuscan archipelago, dwelled by figures of high rank and by artists.

We can imagine the poet Ovidius leaving the cape of the Grotte with its water special effects in the gardens and on the many-coloured walls; below, at the small, private harbour of San Giovanni the unloading of goods was in full swing; colours and noises that Ovidius will bring along his journey without return.

Today the cape of the Grotte is entirely covered by the



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Archeo Color

Archeo Color è un'associazione di promozione sociale che persegue le seguenti finalità: sensibilizzazione, promozione, cooperazione, ricerca scientifica, progettazione e realizzazione di attività

in ogni ambito e settore dei Beni Culturali, senza limitazioni territoriali, che usufruisce di specifiche professionalità. Attualmente gestisce il Parco Archeologico della Villa Romana delle Grotte, poiché ha tra i suoi soci personale adeguatamente specializzato per garantire la valorizzazione e la fruizione di questo sito. Durante la primavera i soci si sono occupati del ripristino della Villa. Grazie al contributo del Comune di Portoferraio il sito è stato liberato dal manto erboso che da anni copriva completamente l'intera area. L'ingresso a pagamento contribuisce alle spese che l'associazione sostiene per la gestione e la manutenzione del sito. Le tre archeologhe che attivamente si occupano in prima persona della gestione della Villa si offrono come "archeologhe narranti", accompagnando il visitatore lungo il percorso integrato con elaborazioni digitali (QRCode e 3D) che offrono informazioni dettagliate sulla Villa e la vita di chi l'abitava. Il personale attivo sul sito è formato da Laura Pagliantini, Luisa Quaglia e Luisa Zito.

La Villa delle Grotte è aperta fino al 2 novembre, con orario 10-13/16-20.

Per informazioni: [www.archeocolor.com](http://www.archeocolor.com)  
[archeocolor@gmail.com](mailto:archeocolor@gmail.com)





unspoiled vegetation, while the wind blows over the peaks of the walls; the villa is now separated from its cistern by a road, along which the cars speed. But despite the damages of time, and above all of man, the villa still stands there, unexplored, as a warning of the transience of richness and earthly glory. When entering the garden with portico, we remember that there the great poet Ovidius walked, and maybe he recited his poems before saying goodbye his friend and the civil life.

Digitalizzazione delle immagini dell'Archivio Fotografico della Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici della Toscana a cura di Alessandro Pareti.

#### NOTE

- 1 AST 9 Livorno 24 1953-1960: documento in copia
- 2 AST X 4 Affari generali Livorno 4 1913.
- 3 AST 9 Livorno 22 1934-1950
- 4 AST 9 LI 24 1953-1960.
- 5 AST 9 Livorno 12 1961-1970.
- 6 Sonia Casaburo, *Elba romana: la villa delle Grotte*.



38 Veduta aerea dell'ubicazione del sito sul promontorio delle Grotte.

39 Paramento murario della villa romana di Capo Castello (Cavo).  
40 Panoramica della villa romana della Linguella a Portoferraio.