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PIAZZA ARMERINA, VILLA ROMANA DEL CASALE

“Here’ he said, ‘today you can see a forest of olive and walnut trees and this rocky little path that goes through it and takes us to the Casale dei Saraceni; but here [...] when our constancy and the work of expert technicians [...] will have [...] brought back to the light the artistic treasures of a Roman villa that was perhaps imperial [...], here you will see people from all over the world. It will be a happy time for our land [...]. It will then be your turn [...] to protect and continue the work that we have begun.’”

Affreschi, in Tra i filari di viti, Lorenzo Zaccone

Hills covered in woods and fields of wheat and poppies. In the August heatwave, a group of carriages travelling on the road from Agrigento to Catania enters an avenue lined with cypresses leading to a huge villa, surrounded by a garden with cooling fountains.

In the sumptuous lobby, the carefree group is welcomed by the owner, wearing a short red tunic with rich gold embroidery. Spirits are high, fuelled by the expectations for the coming days. The Roman elite living in Sicily, great landowners close to the imperial family, have been invited for a holiday of luxury, relaxation, good food, performances and hunting. Less than a century separates this day from the time when a barbarian general of the Roman army was to depose the last emperor, the fourteen year-old Romulus Augustus. Now, though, the Syrian servants are ready to massage guests with rose oil and in the kitchen the meat is roasting on spits. This is life at the Villa del Casale di Piazza Armerina, as told by its mosaics: 3535 square metres of mosaic floors, a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1997.



CULTURAL HERITAGE

UNESCO DOSSIER: 832

PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: NAPLES, ITALY

DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 1997



CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: The Villa del Casale di Piazza Armerina (Enna) is a supreme example of a luxurious Roman villa and with its mosaics it gives us an idea of what the social conditions and economic structure were like in Roman times. The mosaics which decorate it are exceptional in terms of their extension, technical and artistic quality.



MAP



“As far as practical problems are concerned, the Villa del Casale in Piazza Armerina is today the worst headache of the Department of Heritage of Siracusa. The mosaics have to be repaired, which, while they were preserved almost intact when they were under the ground, today are in the open air and exposed to all types of bad weather. A roof is needed but, although there are the funds, it is difficult to think that such a large roof would not spoil the beauty of the site. Something has to be done, because protecting the mosaics is indispensable. For the time being, especially at the end of the summer, we are forced to cover them at least in part with a layer of sand. So few people can say that they have seen them all.”

When Guido Piovene, on his *Viaggio in Italia*, arrived in Piazza Armerina, the Villa del Casale had only recently been discovered, but preserving the mosaics was immediately seen to be an urgent question. It will be solved in 1957, with the covering designed by the architect Franco Minissi, considered the father of Italian museography.

Before crossing the threshold of the Villa del Casale, stop at **1 Aidone**, a quiet village in the hills with a small archaeological museum which deserves a visit on the journey to the ancient ruins of Morgantina. The **museum** houses finds from the site of Morgantina and exhibitions which recreate daily life in Antiquity. It is also home of the **Goddess of Morgantina**, an ancient statue of Venus which had disappeared for a long time and was returned to Italy in 2011 by the Getty Museum of Los Angeles, in California.

Four kilometres downstream from Aidone you come to the ruins of **2 Morgantina**, an ancient Greek-Sicilian city. Then go to **3 Piazza Armerina**. The medieval centre, at the top of a hill, is a maze of atmosphere-filled lanes. Piazza Armerina is actually made up of two nuclei: Piazza, the original core, founded by the Saracens in the 10th century on the slopes of the Colle Armerino, and its expansion towards the south-east, dating back to the 15th century, with an urban layout which was defined in the

17th century. Facing the **cathedral**, there is a splendid **belvedere**, while on its right there stands **Palazzo Trigona**, a baronial residence which houses the **Museum of the City and surroundings of Piazza Armerina**. In the square you can find a **statue** of Baron Marco Trigona, who financed the building of the church. The 44 metre-tall **bell-tower**, which was part of an earlier 14th century church, stands next to the Cathedral. Via Cavour goes down from the Cathedral to **Piazza Garibaldi**, the elegant heart of the old city.



THE GIRLS IN BIKINIS

“[...] they said that in Casale, in the valley of the Nociara, they had discovered a large villa in the ground, floors with tiny tiles that formed frames of garlands of fruit and flowers, hunting scenes and wine animals and forests [...]. But the real wonder they talked about in low voices was the room of the beautiful nude girls, who danced and played gracefully with a ball, a parasol and a drum.”

Filosofiana, in Le pietre di Pantalica, Vincenzo Consolo

The first signs of the Villa del Casale appeared at the beginning of the 19th century, but the first scientific excavations were not organised until the 1950s. In a Sicily dominated by a culture of honour and shame, the discovery of nine girls of 2300 years earlier doing gymnastics in bikinis was truly scandalous. The Villa del Casale was part of a network of very luxurious villas which were the property of landowners and prosperous centres that based their economy on wheat: 6 km further to the south, on the old road which joined Catania to Agrigento (still partly visible), there stood Philosophiana, a town of which very little has been excavated so far. Archaeologists have found an early Christian basilica, thermal baths and a **statio**, an inn with bedrooms and stables to change horses. The story *Filosofiana* by Vincenzo Consolo is set in the place which is still called Sofiana today.



**'PEOPLE ARE PLEASED
IN THE CITIES THAT
ARE BEAUTIFUL [...].
REMEMBER HOW HAPPY
PEOPLE WERE THE LAST
EASTER WE SPENT AT
PIAZZA ARMERINA?'**

In *The cities of the world* by Elio Vittorini, the shepherd Rosario tells his father that the people in Piazza Armerina are happy because they live in a beautiful place. It was the same in antiquity, as the mosaics, like photos from the past, help us to understand what life was like in the Villa del Casale. North of the main entrance, which through

the remains of an arch of triumph leads to an elegant lobby, there are the **1 thermal baths**. Unlike the Greeks, who always bathed in the evening before dinner, the Romans started to go to the thermal baths from the middle of the afternoon after the ovens had been lit at noon to heat the rooms and the water. Warm air passed through a gap under the floor and then was released along small ducts inside the walls; heat and pressure were regulated by valves placed on the roofs. Before bathing, the Romans would exercise in a **2 gymnasium**, which in this villa is decorated with a splendid mosaic portraying a chariot race at the Circo Massimo in Rome, then they

would go into the **3 caldarium** and the **4 tepidarium**, the heated rooms. They would be massaged in the **5 room of unguents** and then they would go to the cool **6 frigidarium**, with mosaics and marble baths. The main part of the villa develops around the **7 peristyle**, a portico with in its centre a garden full of laurel trees, plane trees, box hedges and fountains, and inhabited by peacocks and pheasants. The most interesting of the rooms on the northern side of the peristyle is a winter **8 dining room**, facing south, with a very beautiful mosaic which describes a hunting day: the departure, a sacrifice to the goddess Diana, the hunt and a banquet under a red tent.

This mosaic is called the "Small Hunt" to distinguish it from the **9 Great Hunt**, the mosaic in the ambulacrum.

Sixty metres long, this represents a grandiose scene: panthers lured to a trap by a disembowelled goat kid, antelopes, lions, elephants, rhinoceros and ostriches loaded on to ships in African ports and disembarked at the port of Ostia to be taken to the amphitheatres; then there is a griffon, captured using a child closed in a cage as bait, and a soldier who steals a tigress's cubs and escapes on a ship. On one side of the ambulacrum, a series of rooms opens up with floors illustrating episodes from Homer's epic and other mythological episodes. Of particular interest is the **10 triclinium** (a dining room) with a splendid illustration of the labours of Hercules, in which the hero defeats terrible monsters wearing a smug smile. Near the southern end of the Ambulacrum of the Great Hunt, the most famous mosaic in the villa, portraying nine (but originally there were ten) girls wearing a sort of bikini and exercising with weights and small dumbbells, in the

11 Room of the Ten Girls.



PIAZZA ARMERINA in books

Reading suggestions to get to know Piazza Armerina and the Villa del Casale.

• **Viaggio in Italia**, Guido Piovene (1957). Piovene travelled in Italy for three years to write this unique and highly detailed reportage, considered a classic of Italian travel literature. From the Alps to Sicily, stopping at Piazza Armerina, the author's gaze is an invitation to discover our wonders.

• **The cities of the world**, Elio Vittorini (1969). A posthumous and unfinished novel on which Vittorini himself had based screenplay which became a film in 1975. In the novel, the myth of the "Great Lombard", identified for the first time by Leonardo Sciascia in an article entitled *Sicilian Lombardy* published in the *Corriere della Sera* in 1970, is outlined. Vittorini lists the "beautiful cities" of Sicily, including Piazza Armerina, and finds in their beauty the common denominator of the Lombard influence.

• **Il barone**, Sveva Casati Modignani (1982). The heir of one of the most powerful Sicilian families interweaves his life with three women who will mark his existence. The author said she drew inspiration for her novel from a visit to Piazza Armerina, which seemed to her "splendid and pretty". The cover of the first edition shows a view of Palazzo Trigona with in the background the Cathedral of Piazza Armerina, and the baron mentioned is the owner of the palazzo, who in the novel is called Bruno Sajeva Mandrascati di Monreale.

• **Le pietre di Pantalica**, Vincenzo Consolo (1988). In this collection of short stories, the main character of *Filosofiana*, Vito Parlagreco, is a farmer who, taking a break from his work, thinks of the Roman villa being excavated by some archaeologists not far from his field. That discovery arouses a reflection in him: "What are we, what are we? Time passes, it gathers mud and soil above a heap of shattered bones. And a few slivers of grooved stone, a few engravings on a slab, some scenes or figures like those

unearthed in the Valle di Piazza remain as a sign of the life that has gone by. A cemetery is left, of stones and roof tiles with irises and asphodels growing in their midst every spring".

• **Piazza Armerina nella letteratura**, Ignazio Nigrelli. Only very few copies of this script remain, based on notes taken at lectures in the academic year 1996/1997 at the Popular University of Free Time of Piazza Armerina and printed with the contribution of the Province of Enna. It is a fundamental guide to follow the traces of the quotations of the city of Piazza Armerina and of the Villa del Casale from the Middle Ages to the second half of the twentieth century.

• **Tra i filari di viti**, Lorenzo Zaccone (1998). A collection of short stories written by an Italian teacher at the middle and high schools of Piazza Armerina, with prose that is extremely "Sicilian" in its elegance. The short story *Affreschi* is set in Piazza Armerina and also mentions the Villa del Casale.

