

The Villa delle Grotte at Grottarossa and the prehistory of Roman villas

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The origin of many Roman architectural forms continues to be debated, with a main point of contention focusing on the issue of whether Roman architectural forms were indigenous to Italy or derived from the Hellenistic world following Rome's eastward expansion. It is clear that, in aesthetic terms, Romans and Etruscans were heavily influenced by Hellenistic tendencies, often perhaps through the filter of western Greek cities such as Tarentum (Holliday 2002, 76-78). Architecture *per se*, however, poses a different dilemma since complex and developed buildings that have been found in Etruscan cities and at Rome (especially in the private sphere) predate significant contact between Rome and the Hellenistic world. By the Late Republic — precisely when the Romans had conquered the Greek East and flooded their city with Greek art and artists — the villa was a widespread building type in Central Italy. There is, however, a considerable terminological confusion, which makes any generalization about villas hard to support: buildings that have been called "villas" range in size and function from simple country houses used for farming and production to large estates often run by means of slave labour. Out of the many problems that villas still present, the one relevant here is the prehistory of this Late Republican building type, a prehistory that is far from clear but whose tendencies are much more strongly Italic than they are Hellenistic.

A further complicating factor is the scarcity of substantial architectural remains in the archaeological record of Central Italy for the 5th through 3rd c. B.C. This 'black hole' of the Middle Republic has often been interpreted as a sign of decline at Rome or, at least, of inactivity (Gros and Torelli 1988, 92-104). Recently compiled archaeological data begins to alter our perspective of this period, especially as building techniques and contemporary ceramics are better understood. The presence of monumental architecture from the Middle Republic, especially in the domestic sphere, suggests that the period was not necessarily one of decline.

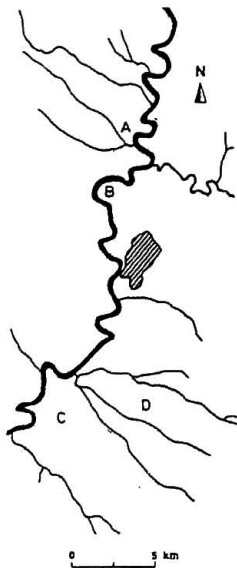


Fig. 1. Map with locations of Grottarossa (A), Auditorium site (B), Torino (C), Acqua Acetosa Laurentina (D) (after Quilici & Quilici Gigli 1993).

The recent discovery of the Auditorium site has made it possible to reconsider the evidence provided by a range of large sites, from Murlo and Acquarossa to the Via Gabina and Francolise sites. Grottarossa on the plateau known as the Monte delle Grotte, lying on the Via Flaminia c.9 km north of the center of Rome, also deserves to play a rôle in this new debate (fig. 1). An excavation was carried out here in March of 1926 by P. Mottini, uncovering a large villa with an unusual plan that included two *atria* and numerous rooms, along with an area seemingly associated with domestic production (fig. 2). The excavation report did not appear for almost 20 years and it was published not by Mottini but by E. Stefani, an Italian architect who was active mainly on Crete. Stefani's report (1946, 52-72) describes the excavated structure in some detail, but offers little analysis and even less in the way of chronology or comparisons. A few years later, L. Cozza (1948, 101-10) returned to the Monte delle Grotte to examine the site after roughly a third of the villa had been destroyed by a pozzolana quarry. He was able to document the system of *cuniculi* underneath the villa (fig. 3), as well an Archaic ogive cistern connected to them (figs. 4-5). Thereafter the villa virtually disappears from the published record, apart from brief mentions in a handful of books dealing with villas in Central Italy or with the Via Flaminia. Some attempt at contextualizing the site can be found in recent discussions of Etruscan and Early Roman building techniques (Cifani 1995, 185-226) and of the origins of Roman villas (cf. Terrenato 2001), but no