

# Roman estates on the island of Brioni, Istria

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## Introduction: the island of Veli Brijun

The coastal landscape of the Istrian peninsula in the northern Adriatic (fig. 1) was dotted with country villas of high-ranking Romans. As late as A.D. 537 Cassiodorus wrote to the provincials of Istria:

Not undeservedly it [Istria] is called the Campania of Ravenna ... Great villas (*praetoria*) shine out far and wide: you would think them sited like pearls to show the taste of your ancestors in this province, which is plainly adorned by such buildings. That coast also has the most beautiful chain of islands.  
(*Var.* 12. 22.3-5; transl. Barnish 1992, 176)

These villas estates were both models of classical art and architecture and microcosms of the social and economic order. A number of coastal villas lay in the S part of the peninsula which included Brijuni (Brioni) archipelago (fig. 1). The largest island of the archipelago, Veli Brijun (Brioni Grande), is the site of a luxurious seaside villa (known as the Val Catena villa) in Verige bay (fig. 2). It belongs to the series of the largest Roman maritime villas. A. Gnirs excavated the site at the beginning of this century and presented reports and plans,<sup>1</sup> but the villa has never been fully published. Conservation work begun after Brioni became a national park in 1985 prompted new research on the site under the auspices of the State Agency for Protection of Cultural and Natural Heritage of Croatia and the Brioni National Park. From 1985 to 1989 teams from these two institutions conducted underwater investigations of the submerged buildings in the bay of Verige and made a systematic architectural survey. Archaeological probes and conservation in the residential area were carried out from 1990 to 1992.<sup>2</sup> This recent work has permitted a better understanding of the evolution of the site and the periods of construction of the villa and its parts.<sup>3</sup> Further work since 1993 on the landscape of the island and on the mainland at the Roman colonies of Pola (Pula) and Parentium (Poreč) provided the opportunity to examine the Verige villa in relation to its changing environments.

This article examines the building periods of the *villa maritima* and the two *villae rusticae* on the island of Brioni Grande, and explores the social and economic contexts in which the villas developed. The luxurious villa has for some time been associated with the Italian senatorial family of the Laecanii, who owned an amphora and building-supplies factory across the narrow straits from Brioni.<sup>4</sup> There are strong links between the history of the villa, the island's diversified economy, and the rise in political power of the Laecanii, and the periods of prosperity and expansion in the estate's architectural history have a bearing on the relationship between imperial policies and senatorial profits based on economies of scale.

## The villa in the bay of Verige

### *Brief history of earlier work*

In 1893 an Austrian steel magnate, Paul Kupelwieser, purchased the Brioni archipelago from a Triestine merchant who had a year earlier bought the islands from the Venetian family of Franghini. Kupelwieser developed the attractive but neglected and malaria-ridden property into a luxury resort for European aristo-

1 Gnirs published yearly reports in *ÖJh* 5-18, *Beibl.* (1902-15). Except for his comprehensive report of 1915 they will not be cited individually in this article.

2 The archaeological investigation and conservation was directed by J. Šmic and V. Begović of the State Agency for the Protection of Cultural and Natural Heritage (Ministry of Culture) and by A. Vitasović and M. Pavletić of the National Park. M. Orlič and M. Jurišić of the Agency directed the underwater work, while V. Begović directed the architectural survey and drew the new plans.

3 Begović 1990, 1993-94, 1998.

4 Tassaux 1982 and 1998; Bezeczeky 1995 and 1998.