

THE ROMAN VILLA IN RUSSI

In the 3rd century B.C. the Romans extended their conquest to the South East of our region and founded the town of *Ariminium*. (Rimini) And in 187 B.C. *Via Aemilia* (Via Emilia) was built. Subsequently the land intended for agricultural activities was subdivided into a grid made up of regular squares marked out by *decumani* and *cardini* (*Via Aemilia* was the main decuman, the *decumanus maximus*).

Each square, which measured 50 hectares, was subdivided into smaller and smaller squares down to the smallest square which measured 710 x 710 mt., and was called *centuria*. Each *centuria* was inhabited by one, maximum two families of farmers.

The production system was based on a *Villa Rustica*, as reported by agronomer Cato (II century B.C.) .

The *Villa Rustica* in Russi was a perfect example of the *Villa Rustica* Cato spoke of. In fact it was situated on the bank of a navigable river, maybe the *Vatrenus* (nowadays the river Santerno) or a branch of the river Lamone. Moreover it was not far from the sea and from Ravenna, an important town and a major port for the Roman fleet; it was close to a very important road joining the towns of *Faventia* (Faenza) and Ravenna; and the road *Salaria*, joining *Felsina* (Bologna) and Ravenna, was not far away.

Up to the 1st century B.C. the *villae* were just country houses (not big ones). The farmers produced cereals, wine, fruit and raised poultry, pigs, cattle, sheep and goats. The produce was enough for the living of the family; any possible surplus joined the local trade system.

During the Augustan times, the port of *Classis* was built and Ravenna grew bigger.

Actually the new big town required more supplies for its maintenance and the country nearby was involved in its evolution and was requested for more support. As a consequence the villa in Russi grew bigger, too, as we can see from the excavations.

Hystory of the excavations of the “Villa romana” in Russi

The archeological site was found by chance in 1938 during some excavation works in a clay quarry. At a depth of 11 metres below the ground level they found out traces of a thermal plant, but soon the works were interrupted because of the war and the site was covered with earth.

In 1953 new excavation works brought to light the main body of the Villa. The works have been interrupted many times and they have not come to an end yet. The present day planimetry shows several buildings linking the *pars urbana*, where the *Dominus* and his family lived, and the *pars fructuaria* or *rustica* devoted to the agricultural and crafts activities. The ruins we can see today date back to the Imperial Age (I - II century A.D.), but the site stands on a previous settlement dating back to the Republican Age.

The remains are a big rectangular building positioned northwards-southwards and surrounded by a porch with columns in bricks. Inside the building we can identify two *peristilia* (peristyles = porched courtyards): a small one for the family and a big one for the farm activities. The *Dominus*'s home was situated to the north: it consisted of a two-storey building with elegant wall paintings and floors in black and white mosaics with a geometrical pattern.

To the north-west you could see a smaller building made up of three rooms: it was the *Villicus*'s (the farmer's) or the *Procurator*'s (the bailiff's) home and separated the *Dominus*'s home from the lodges for the servants. The rest of the *Pars rustica* looked over the big peristyle and consisted in various plants for the production and preservation of agricultural products and in structures for irrigation (cisterns and drain wells).

Recent excavation works in the eastern part of the site have brought to light an orchard; on one side of it a porch limited another dwelling section of heated rooms.

The *Dominus's* home

The first peristyle had columns in bricks; they were originally painted red and had a base of whitish stone. The rooms in which the *Dominus's* family spent daytime were situated on the southern and western side of the porch; they had floors in mosaics or "cocciopesto" (fragments of pottery and mortar).

A large room, maybe a living-room, linked the first and the second peristyles; its floor was in mosaics with black flowers inside a geometrical pattern; the walls were painted black and had a skirting board with a red and white Greek fret; in the upper part of the walls you could see polychromatic friezes showing fruits, flowers, birds; purple festoons hanged down from the friezes.

In the next rooms the floors were in white and black mosaics and the walls were painted with frames in fake polichromatic marble. The door-steps to the rooms overlooking the porch were in red Verona marble; on them you can still see the beats of the big heavy doors of which the archaeologists have found the bronze hinges. On the west side of the small peristyle opened the *cubicula* (small bedrooms); some of them had got a floor in red cocciopesto with a square pattern of white mosaic tesserae. One of the *cubicula* situated to the NW had *suspensurae*, that is very short pillars in bricks supporting the floor, maybe in wood, to fight dampness.

A big room, maybe the *triclinium* (the dining-room), opened on the opposite side of the small peristyle. Its floor showed lozenges intersected to stars, and its walls were frescoed with frames in black. On the walls big polychromatic flowers alternated to red and yellow gallery motifs. The *triclinium* did not open outside, but was linked to the rest of the house by corridors which protected the inhabitants from bad weather conditions.

And now the *Pars Rustica*

It was the part of the farmhouse devoted to the activities dealing with the processing of the farm products and to the lodging of the workers, slaves and servants. The rooms of the *pars rustica* opened onto the big peristyle which had pillars in bricks. On the Western side of the peristyle you could see a furnace (now covered with earth) , a room with a tank in bricks, a large kitchen with two fireplaces , a well with a ditch draining bad waters to the outside. On the Eastern side a big storeroom was probably devoted to keeping terracotta containers and amphoras.

Next to the storeroom, there were several small rooms, each of them with a small fireplace; they were not used as dwellings but probably for working purposes and just in more recent times. The area with the buildings devoted to the production of wine was situated to the East. The most interesting remain here is an over-ground-level press with a floor in mosaics which was linked to a lower tank with a hollow for collecting the wine which was subsequently decanted to amphors.

During the excavation works in the Eastern part of the site they found out another large courtyard with columns all around, originally an orchard (apple trees and pear trees). On the Southern side of that courtyard the archeologists found the thermal plant that had come to light in 1938. But after a short time it was covered with earth again!

The plant consisted in a hall in mosaics crossed by a drainage system located under the floor and with drain covers in engraved marble. On the Eastern side of the hall a doorway led to a small room with a floor of small marble hexagons; on the southern side, through a two-step marble stairway , you could go into a second over-ground-level room with a floor in mosaics and two small side tanks in mosaics as well; one of them was semicircular and the other one was L-shaped. To the East of the porch we can see a series of quite large rooms; some of them were heated by a furnace.

A few graves dating back to early Middle Ages testify that the structure of the Villa underwent to some little renewals at the end of the 3rd century; but in the next century the site was totally abandoned. The port of Ravenna, which had caused the birth and the flourishing of the Villa,

played a fundamental role in its growing swampy, in its downfall, abandonment and end. The Villa gradually disappeared; the demolition material was recycled and the site became a lime furnace.

Then in the Middle Ages the river alluvia led to neglect and filling up.

Archeological finds at the “Villa romana”

It seems to be quite evident that the Russi complex was a good example of the *Villae Rusticae* which played a great role in the process of romanization of the area due to their productive, economical and cultural peculiarity. The material the archeologists have collected proves the Villa was perfectly integrated in the local trade system.

The pottery is not abundant but offers items of various shapes and types; among them there is a quite big quantity of red-sealed terracotta items ; it is the fine red-painted pottery typical of the Imperial Age. The oldest fragments of pottery came from Arezzo, but most fragments came from the furnaces of Ravenna and the Romagna . There is also a number of small pots whose very thin surface was an imitation of items in glass or noble metals; they may have been produced by the furnaces in Ravenna, too.

The glass items were probably imported from the North (Aquileia), and a few items in decorated bronze were typical products of Northern and Central Italy during the Imperial Age.