

## PIAZZA ARMERINA. VILLA DEL CASALE

### Introduction

After the end of the First Punic War, in 241 B.C., and the conquest of Syracuse, in 211 BC, the whole of Sicily, long disputed between native populations, Greeks and Carthaginians, became a Roman province, a statute further confirmed by the Emperor Diocletian, in 284, as part of his administrative reform of the provinces. Extraordinarily rich in fertile agricultural land, the island, exploited by the Romans through a network of immense *latifundia*, served as an important granary for Rome from the end of the Republic onwards. Long depressed by this system of exploitation, the island experienced a new period of prosperity at the beginning of the 4th century, thanks to its strategic position on the Mediterranean trade routes. Since then, it was subject to a succession of conquests by the Vandals in 440, the Byzantines in 535, the Arabs in 827 and the Normans in 1086.

### History

Five km from Piazza Armerina, near Enna, in the inland part of Sicily, the Roman villa del Casale is a luxury leisure building built around 320 in the centre of a large *latifundium*, in the place of a previous villa. Its plan, which seems to have been predetermined, provided for public and private spaces; it was later modified, perhaps following an earthquake in 363, until the end of the same century. Access to the building was through a monumental entrance, similar to a triumphal arch, with a horseshoe-shaped courtyard leading into the central body of the villa, arranged around a garden-peristyle, the centre of which was occupied by a mixtilinear basin, the true fulcrum of the complex. From there, a long corridor, called of the Great Hunt, gave access, in its centre, to a basilica hall and to the private apartments of the villa, as well as to a large elliptical peristyle. The villa also included a large thermal complex, accessible from the monumental entrance, composed of a traditional sequence of rooms - *apoditerium*, *calidarium*, apsidal *tepidarium* and octagonal *frigidarium*. As a whole, the building had about thirty rooms decorated with paintings and, for a total surface area of about 3,500 m<sup>2</sup>, polychrome mosaic floors, dating back to between 370 and 400, which present a very rich iconography: hunting scenes, circus games, mythological tales, scenes from everyday life, sports exercises ("maidens in bikinis"), agricultural works. Their realization is attributed to artists coming from Africa. Despite the extraordinary luxury of the villa, it was not an imperial residence, but that of a member of the pagan senatorial aristocracy - maybe, among other numerous hypotheses, the governor of Sicily in the Constantinian age, Lucius Aradius Valerius Proculus, consul in 340, who had organised memorable games in Rome, possibly evoked in the mosaic floors of the villa. A village called Platia, from the Latin *Palatium*, developed on the site of the villa and remained occupied, at least partially, in the Byzantine and Arabic ages, until the middle of the 12th century.

### **Rediscovery and restoration**

Destroyed by a fire, the villa was buried by a landslide, and rediscovered only at the beginning of the 19th century. The extensive excavations that took place there in 1929, from 1935 to 1939, and in the years 1950-1970, were mainly conducted in the residential part of the building. Given the state of conservation of the villa, whose walls are still raised to an exceptional height for this type of monument (circa 1 m), and the fragility of its decoration, the villa underwent a major restoration project, innovative in its time, at the end of the 1950s. After the creation of a collector ditch to divert rainwater, a large Plexiglas canopy was built, supported by steel pipes; the outer perimeter of the building was surrounded by Plexiglas walls, and walkways were installed to allow visitors to walk over the mosaics. Following several problems linked in particular to the solution chosen for the roof, a new restoration was carried out between 2007 and 2012, both to protect the structures with more suitable materials and to clean and integrate the mosaic carpets of the villa and its paintings. Particular attention was paid to the lighting of the ancient rooms. Further restorations were started in 2018, in areas not yet touched. The Roman Villa del Casale has been on the UNESCO World Heritage List since 1997, for an area of about 9 hectares, as an example of the very high level of luxury and refinement achieved by the Roman aristocracy in the late antique age. This is particularly evident in its mosaics, exceptional for their artistic qualities, their inventiveness and their extension: they are considered the most beautiful still preserved *in situ* in the Roman world.