

VILLA ADRIANA. TIVOLI

Introduction

Already in the Republican period, members of the Roman aristocracy had made a habit of leaving the city to stay in suburban gardens, or in large residences located not far from Rome, particularly in the area of the Colli Albani. Hadrian, emperor of Rome from 117 AD until his death in 138 AD, chose to create a villa of leisure on the first slopes of the Tiburtine Hills, under the ancient Tibur (now Tivoli), about thirty kilometres east of Rome. This extraordinary residence, which brings together in the same site places and monuments visited by Hadrian during his travels - the Nile and the leisure city of Canopus in Egypt, the Lyceum, the Academy and the *stoa poikilè* of Athens, the valley of Tempe in Thessaly... - also allowed him to dedicate himself fully to his taste for architecture, long opposed by the architect of Trajan, Apollodorus of Damascus, whom he had first exiled, and then murdered in 130 AD. About 130 hectares of total surface area, more than two kilometres long, about thirty main buildings, kilometres of underground service tunnels... Hadrian's Villa is an exceptional complex, comparable to the great royal palaces of which Versailles is the modern archetype.

History

The complex stands on the site of a former late republican villa, perhaps already owned by Hadrian's wife, Vibia Sabina. The part reserved for the emperor's apartments, organised around a vast peristyle, gave access to different parts of the property: to the east, to an enormous nymphaeum with a hemicycle, to the "hall of Doric pillars" and, from there, to the vast peristyle garden that formed the majestic ensemble called by the Renaissance antiquarians "Piazza d'Oro", precisely because of the magnificence of its architecture and decoration. Towards the west, the "Maritime Theatre" is a circular block occupied by a miniature villa, probably the emperor's refuge for his moments of leisure, which gives access to the "Philosophers' Hall", whose apse has seven large niches interpreted as the recesses of the cupboards of a library, and which overlooks the end of the "Pecile". This long portico, whose name is linked to a monument to the agora of Athens, the *stoà poikilè* (the "portico of paintings"), runs along an immense terrace with a swimming pool in the middle, which rests on powerful substructures, known as the "Cento Camerelle", the "one hundred chamberlets". In these small rooms, arranged on three levels, lived, invisible from the surface, the slaves and the service staff of the villa, several hundred men and women. From here, they only had access to the immense network of underground tunnels that allowed them to carry out all the tasks that were required of them, without ever interfering with the lives of their masters. The rest of the park of the villa is occupied by numerous buildings skilfully distributed in space, including a place of worship dedicated to the emperor's favourite, Antinous, a theatre, two thermal complexes, and above all the "Canopus", a canal 119 m long, bordered by a colonnade marked by copies of Greek statues, at the bottom of which the imperial triclinium is supposed to evoke the temple of Serapis at Canopus, the Egyptian city that earned him his name.

Rediscovery and restoration

After Hadrian's death, Villa Adriana was still frequented and restored at least until the 3rd century, before being gradually abandoned. Identified in the middle of the 15th century by the antiquarian Flavio Biondo, the site was the object of excavations for centuries, in search of ancient sculptures and building materials to be re-used in new buildings, or to be burnt to produce lime. It is estimated that there are about 300 major works, including portraits, statues, herms, reliefs, sculptures, mosaics, now dispersed in museums around the world. Visited by artists and architects from the Renaissance onwards - including Pirro Ligorio, Antonio da Sangallo the Elder, Francesco Borromini and Giovanni Battista Piranesi - its ruins have profoundly influenced Baroque architecture. From the second half of the 19th century onwards, the complex, acquired from the Braschi family by the young Italian State in 1871, was the subject of careful restoration work, which led to the anastylosis of various structures. During the second half of the last century, extensive excavations were carried out in particular in the sectors of the "Maritime Theatre", the "Canopus" and the "Piazza d'Oro", but a large part of the site still remains to be excavated. Villa Adriana, currently one of the most visited archaeological sites in Italy, was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1999, for a total surface area of 80 hectares, as evidence of a refined synthesis of the material cultures in the ancient Mediterranean world, for its profound influence on architecture, from the 16th century to the present day, and for the unique testimony it gives us of the taste and erudition of one of the most influential Roman emperors.