

The island of Sicily is well known today for its impressive Greek ruins, especially those scattered around the coast at such sites as Syracuse, Agrigento and Selinus. And yet, Sicily was an important part of the Roman world as well, and traces of Rome are also to be found throughout the island. One such Roman site that is indeed imposing is located not along the coast, but deep within the interior, in one of the lushest and most heavily forested regions of the island; not surprisingly, it seems to have been a country retreat (or hunting lodge) for a Roman emperor, and is today known as the Villa at Piazza Armerina. For the last two decades this villa has been undergoing excavation, but even so the site is not yet completely uncovered. Still, even its incomplete state at present has not prevented this villa from being called "one of the most outstanding monuments in the whole Roman world".

As seen in the plan, the villa is centered around a large colonnaded hall (15) with an elaborate central fountain complex. To the left of this hall are found several small rooms which most likely served as bedrooms and are famous for their colorful mosaics (such as one showing cupids fishing from small boats). To the right of the central hall were the larger living rooms, also with extensive mosaics, and a corridor (40) which led to a spacious court (41) containing a fountain in the middle. Adjoining this was a large area (46) which seems to have been a triclinium (dining room) with three apses that were once used to display statues. The mosaics here are especially well done, and feature scenes from the famous Labours of Hercules.

Above the central hall on the plan can be found yet another spacious room (30) which archaeologists believe served as a basilica for official receptions. This is flanked on two sides by smaller rooms whose precise function is not yet clear. Again, however, mosaics of various subjects decorate the area, and room 27 is

especially famous for its mosaic of the Cyclops Polyphemus - a scene in which the Greek hero Odysseus is shown attempting to intoxicate the monster so that he and his men can escape from his clutches.

Such an elaborately designed and decorated villa must have belonged to a very important person, and it is now thought that the complex was once in the possession of the Emperor Maximian (286-305 A.D.). Maximian was a man of humble beginnings who rose through the ranks of the Roman army until the Emperor Diocletian made him co-regent. Interestingly enough, Diocletian also gave him the title "Herculius" (apparently so that Maximian might benefit from the divine protection of Hercules), a fact which well explains the prominence of Hercules in the mosaics of the villa. (It is perhaps worth noting at this point that a total area of 3500 square meters is covered by mosaics in the villa!)

What befell the villa as Roman hegemony in the west came to an end is not yet certain, but there is evidence to suggest that it finally fell victim to a disastrous flood which swept this region in 1161 A.D. After this event the villa apparently disappeared from view, but now, thanks to the efforts of the Antiquities Commission of Eastern Sicily, the villa at Piazza Armerina is slowly being restored to our eyes (and even becoming a major tourist attraction on this part of Sicily). For its wealth of mosaics alone, this villa is well worth a visit by anyone contemplating a journey to Sicily.