

# FUN MUSEUMS

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MUSEUMS OF ITALY / VISITS



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3 MONTHS AGO

## Archaeology in Sicily: the beautiful mosaics of Villa Romana del Casale

*Originally built as a majestic Imperial property of the Roman times, Villa Romana del Casale is today known as one of the most famous monuments of archaeology in Sicily. It is located next to Piazza Armerina, an art city into the core of Sicily, and is home to some of the best-preserved and extensive examples of Roman mosaics spread over around 3500 square metres. Since 1997, this place has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site and represents the quintessence of the typical rich residences of the late Roman Empire.*

*The mosaics and polychrome floors of the villa weren't new to me since I had read about them before in books and archaeological magazines. But when I finally got to see them in person, I realised why they were considered so precious – their rare beauty blew me away completely!*

Villa Romana del Casale was the last place I visited before the first of a long series of lockdowns in Italy due to Coronavirus outbreak – just think that wearing a mask wasn't mandatory

yet and the concept of “social distancing” was still inexistent!

When I got there on a beautiful sunny morning, I was so thrilled at the thought of finally exploring the villa in its entirety. Not only was I looking forward to seeing the famous mosaics, but also the complex architectural layout that, with its rich decorations encompassing columns, statues and fountains, has made the building a monument of great historical and artistic value.



Villa Romana del Casale

## History of the villa

One of the aspects of the villa that instantly fascinated me was its intriguing history. It was built in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD on the remains of a smaller rustic residence from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD to be used as an agricultural estate controlling the surrounding countryside. What still remains unknown is who the owner was: it's believed that the villa was the property of a powerful Roman family, probably of a member of Rome's senatorial class and a governor. However, some scholars have alleged that the villa was built and eventually expanded upon the official commission of an Imperial functionary identified with Maximian, one of the four co-Emperors of the Tetrarchy, a specific political system set up by Diocletian in 293.

## Villa del Casale at Piazza Armerina 3D model (Terr...

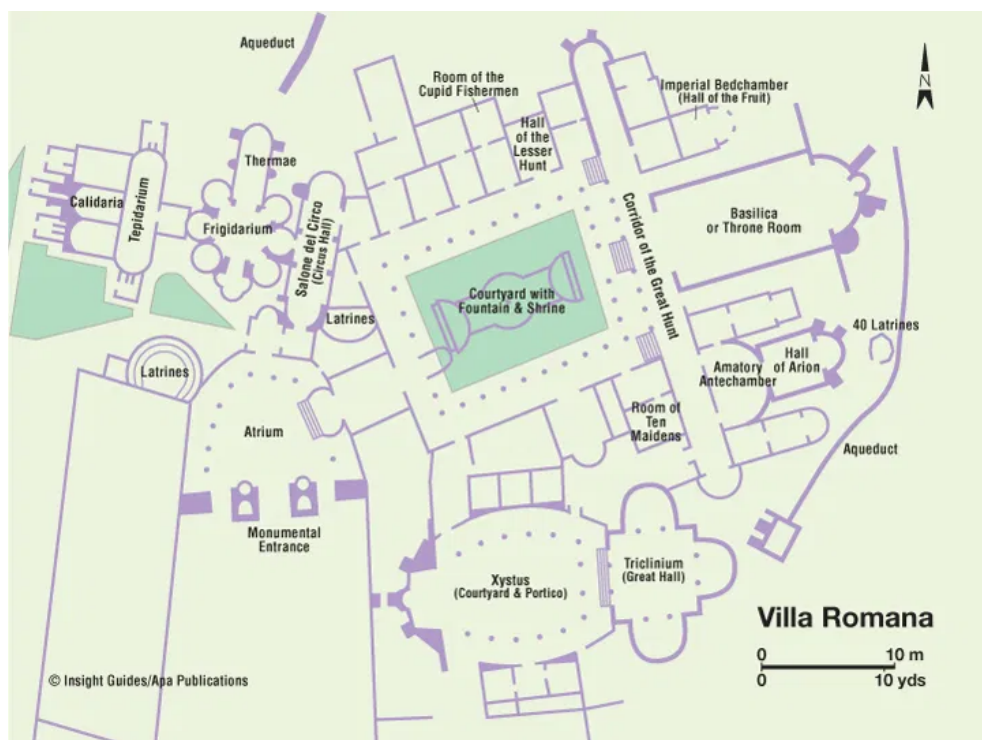


After the decay of the Roman Empire, the building was fortified over the course of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century to later become a large medieval settlement. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century the area was abandoned by its inhabitants who moved to the location where Piazza Armerina is now located. Around the 15<sup>th</sup> century a small community known as Casale, from which the villa's name derives, settled over the ruins of the ancient residence, which at that point was entirely forgotten. It was only in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century that some columns and the first pieces of mosaics were finally brought to light, marking the starting point of a long and intense archaeological campaign to unearth the whole villa.

## **Rediscovering the villa was the result of a strenuous excavation work**

From the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, several scholars and archaeologists undertook an important excavation project which gradually led to the uncovering of the extensive mosaic flooring, wall mosaics, ornaments and other architectural elements which were part of the villa's structure. Among others, it was Paolo Orsi who conducted a significant

campaign in 1929 (I talked about this famous archaeologist in my previous article. If curious, give it a read [here!](#)), followed by more and more excavations throughout the 40s, 50s and 60s. Thanks to this unrelenting research, it was possible to reconstruct the original functions of the villa and finally have a clear idea of its design in the Roman period.



Map of the villa via [thethinkingtraveller](#).

## Structure and multiple functions of the villa

Just like it appears nowadays, the entire property was built in four main sections, comprising the monumental entrance with its thermal baths, a peristyle courtyard with living area and guest rooms, the private apartments of the owner connected to the large basilica (public hall), the triclinium (dining area) and the adjacent elliptical courtyard.



Peristyle courtyard next to the entrance of the villa.

Judging by its united structure set around the central courtyard, the villa was probably used for several purposes: some rooms were residential while others appear to be for official purposes. Although the function of some other rooms is still uncertain, it's highly believed that the villa's owner used them to entertain the locals and clients.



Part of the basilica or Throne Room.

Overall, the entire complex is absolutely unique especially considering its well-preservation despite all these centuries. A systematic conservation and restoration programme has been carried out in the last years, of course, but the original beauty

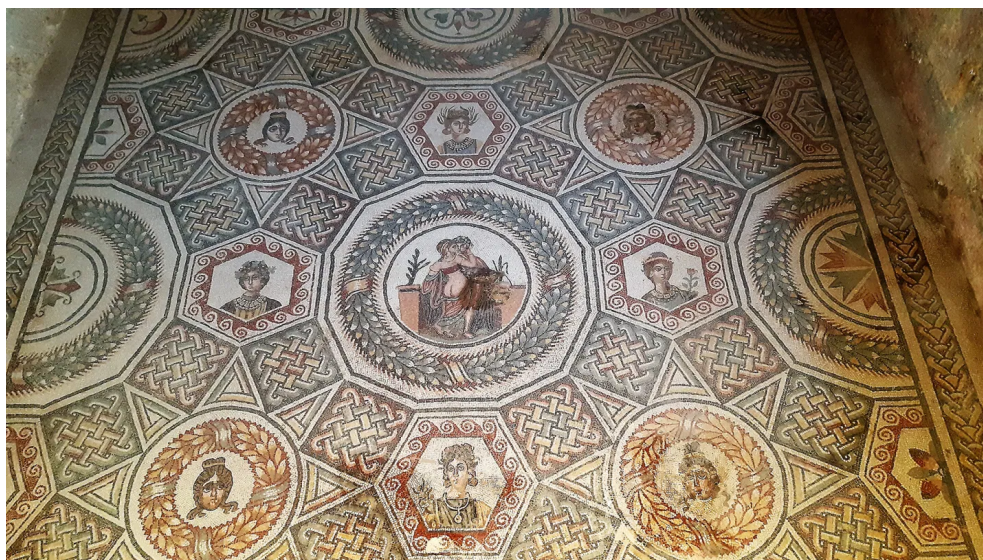
and richness of this place has remained intact over time – something that definitely astounded me as I walked through the rooms of the villa, cherishing every single detail I came across.



Semi-circular portico on the north-east side of the villa.

## The mosaics: a variety of noteworthy designs and themes

As already anticipated at the beginning of this article, the best part of the Roman villa is the mosaics, which are wonderfully preserved and cover the floors of most of the residence's rooms. The extraordinarily vivid colours and detailed composition, as well as a definite influence from North African art styles have led some scholars and experts to believe that the mosaics were made by African masters. The presence of these specialised workers, who would always compose new scenes and representations according to the requirements of the client, has turned the villa into one of the most important testimonies of all the African mosaic art of the Late Antiquity!



Lover's embrace (probably referring to Cupid and Psyche).

Read also: [The History and Nuances of Love](#)

These real works of art present an incredible array of patterns and narrative cycles which got me completely hooked when I saw them: from mosaics with beautiful geometric motives to the ones showing mythological scenes, portrayals of the Roman aristocracy's daily life, love scenes, games and much more. Plus, the richness of the polychromy, the realistic observation, and the energy of the depictions made with great care and precision are impressive elements that made me appreciate each mosaic to the fullest.

## The great hunt

I particularly loved the corridor of the famous "Great Hunt", the highlight of the villa that, with its 60-metre-long mosaic, tells the story of the Roman *Venatio*: wild and exotic animals used to be hunted from across the Roman Empire to be exhibited and fought in the circus spectacles of Rome for entertainment purposes. From one side of the corridor to the other these remarkable hunting scenes clearly explain the meaning of the theme, unfolding in just a single space the extensive geographical map of the Empire from the furthest west to the furthest east.



One of the numerous scenes depicted in the “Great Hunt” mosaic.

## What does the bikini have in common with archaeology?

So many other – even if less popular – mosaics are worth mentioning, like the ones featuring respectively the personification of the four seasons, the myth of Orpheus, and Ulysses offering wine to Polyphemus. However, I’d like to complete this virtual “tour” of the villa with a mosaic that compared to the others stands out for its avant-garde representation: the “Bikini Girls” mosaic on view in the room called the “Chamber of the Ten Maidens” – my surprise at seeing such an outstanding masterpiece was beyond words!

The mosaic shows young women in their “bikinis” – the so-called *strophium* (a piece of cotton or linen cloth wrapped around the breasts) and the *subligar* (similar to the modern underpants) – performing various sports including weight-lifting, discus throwing, running and ball-games. On the left of the composition, a woman in a toga is depicted with a crown in her hand, whereas, at the bottom centre, another maiden has been crowned and holds a palm branch as a symbol of victory after a competition.






“Bikini Girls” mosaic.

## An immersive journey in the Roman world

As you can imagine, I absolutely loved visiting the Villa Romana del Casale. It was a memorable experience and a unique opportunity to get an in-depth look at a glorious, ancient Roman house that has maintained its intactness and everlasting beauty over the centuries. I highly recommend visiting it to all the archaeology and Roman history enthusiasts out there, but also to those of you who appreciate ancient art or are simply curious about the origins of a place you're eager to explore.

The entire itinerary of the villa is well-structured: information panels are provided throughout the whole visit to help you learn about each room and their multiple functions. In addition, the labels explain the themes, the characters, the symbolic and figurative elements of all mosaics, giving a clear idea of their meaning. With this understanding, I'm pretty sure you'll find the tour extremely enjoyable and at the end of it you'll go back home with a great sense of wonder and fulfilment!

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A truly majestic Roman villa! It's really amazing to see all these wonderful mosaics which remained intact throughout the centuries! Definitely worth visiting! Many thanks for the virtual tour!

**CHIARA BRANCATO**

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My pleasure! Thank you a lot for your comment. Glad you liked it!

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