

Essays in Classical Archaeology
for
Eleni Hatzivassiliou
1977-2007

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Designing the landscapes of the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta

Manta Zarmakoupi

As a result of the recent excavations and survey carried out over the past 30 years in the ‘Villa of Livia’ at Prima Porta and its gardens by the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma and the Swedish Institute at Rome, the architecture of the villa is no longer a mere backdrop for the garden paintings and the famous statue of Augustus. The excavations and geophysical survey have contributed to our understanding of the villa’s architectural development, contemporary landscape, ecology and life. Recent studies have addressed the architecture and landscapes of the villa, but their focus has been to contextualise the garden paintings and Augustus’ statue rather than understanding them. In this paper I analyse the architectural design of the Villa of Livia and point to landscape and environmental factors that were instrumental in its conceptualisation. In doing so I address the painted landscape of the underground chamber as part of an architectural programme that, I argue, was formed in response to the actual landscape and environment of the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta.

Introduction

The villa is located about 14 km north of the centre of Rome on top of a 20 metre high hill; to the north are the offshoots of the Apennine range and southeast is the Tiber valley that leads to the *urbs*. The villa lies on a large *basis villae*, the boundary walls of which can be seen on the steep southeast side of the hill. The buildings of the villa occupy the southwest part of the *basis villae* and the big garden, surrounded by a *porticus*, the northeast. Access to it was achieved from the more gradually sloping

northwest side of the hill. Its southeast façade overlooks the piazza of the modern site of Prima Porta, which in antiquity was the site of the junction of Via Flaminia and Via Tiberina.

The area of the villa was briefly explored during the sixteenth century when a statue of a consul was found near the Osteria of Prima Porta (1596),¹ and during the eighteenth century, when Hamilton and Jenkins were reported to have undertaken some work in the area (1771).² The first excavation was conducted in 1863, which led to the discovery of the famous statue of Augustus of Prima Porta and of the underground complex with the garden paintings.³ The statue of Augustus was removed in 1864 to the Vatican Museums and the garden paintings were removed to the Museo Nazionale Romano roughly a century later, in 1951. These two fascinating finds attracted the attention of archaeologists, and thus the underground room and its wall paintings as well as the location of the statue of Augustus were studied,⁴ whereas only a preliminary survey of the overall complex of the villa was conducted.⁵ Following a brief excavation that exposed parts of the thermal

¹ Lanciani, R., *Storia degli scavi di Roma e notizie intorno le collezioni romane di antichità*, vol. 1-4 (Rome, 1902), v.4, 37.

² Michaelis, A., *Ancient marbles in Great Britain* (Cambridge, 1882), 81.

³ Henzen, W., “Scavi di Prima Porta”, *Bullettino dell’Istituto di corrispondenza archeologica* 4 (1863), 71-78.

⁴ Sulze, H., “Die unterirdischen Räume der Villa der Livia in Prima Porta”, *RM* 47 (1932), 174-92; Gabriel, M. M., *Livia’s garden room at Prima Porta* (New York, 1955); Kähler, H., *Die Augustusstatue von Prima Porta* (Köln, 1959).

⁵ Lugli, G., “Studi topografici intorno alle antiche ville suburbane: La villa di Livia “ad gallinas albas” al IX miglio della via Flaminia”, *Bullettino della Commissione archeologica Comunale di Roma* 55 (1923), 26-42.

complex in 1970, Carmelo Calci and Gaetano Messineo resumed work at the site in 1982 for the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma and during the 1980s uncovered the whole villa complex.⁶ Furthermore, in 1996 the Swedish Institute in Rome started investigating the garden of the Villa.⁷ The excavation of the Villa's overall complex prompted nuanced readings of the garden paintings as well as investigations into the placement of Augustus' statue.⁸ Unsurprisingly, the unique character of the paintings and the statue, and especially their association with Augustan ideology, led researchers to stress the symbolic role of the Villa for imperial propaganda. Hence emphasis was placed on the monumental presence of the Villa in the landscape, and its architecture was conceptualised as a frame for the famous laurel grove, from which the emperors of the Julio-Claudian family took the branches for their triumphal wreaths.⁹ We know from literary sources

that Livia Drusilla had owned a villa at her country estate near Veii, in the vicinity of the ninth milestone along the Via Flaminia, before her marriage to Octavian, and this villa had a laurel grove which had sprung from a branch carried by a white pullet that was dropped into Livia's lap by an eagle.¹⁰ Antonio Nibby had first identified the site on the basis of the close similarity between the reticulate workmanship of the substructures of the *basis villae* and that in the Mausoleum of Augustus in 1837. However, the identification of this villa with the Villa at Prima Porta is more or less based on accumulated, indirect evidence, such as the statue of Augustus, the underground chamber, and a lead pipe with the name of Tiberius, combined with the lack of a site in the vicinity that would fit Pliny's description.¹¹

The aim of this paper is to examine the Villa beyond the confined scope of Augustan ideology and contextualise its architectural design as well as its real and painted landscapes vis-à-vis the broader theme of landscape that permeated the period. Roman luxury villas were part of a cultural *koine*, attested in contemporary literary (e.g. pastoral poetry) and visual sources (e.g. garden paintings), that was concerned with what may be termed an appreciation and praise of landscape. Roman designers configured the architecture of luxury villas not only in order to enjoy the views to the landscape but also in response to environmental design factors, such as location, orientation and climatic conditions. The Villa of Livia at Prima Porta attests such concerns, and further enables us to investigate the nuanced ways in which landscape and its constituent factors were conceptualised in the designing of the Villa's landscapes, whether these were real or painted.

Description of the site

The Villa is divided into two major parts (fig. 1): the buildings of the villa (*circa* 104 x 60 = 6,240m²), occupying the southwest of the *basis villae*, and the big garden (77 x 100 = 7,700m²), occupying the northeast of the *basis villae*. Both the buildings and the garden have a southeastern orientation.

The house of the villa is divided into five areas: (1), the entrance, with the entrance to the villa and

⁶ Calci, C., and Messineo, G., *La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta* (Rome, 1984); Messineo, G., "Ollae Perforatae", *Xenia* 8 (1984), 65-82; Messineo, G., *La Via Flaminia: da Porta del Popolo a Malborghetto* (Rome, 1991); Messineo, G., "La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta a dieci anni dalla ripresa dello scavo", *Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia. Rendiconti* 65 (1992), 11-21; Messineo, G. (ed.), *Ad gallinas albas: Villa di Livia* (Rome, 2001).

⁷ Klynne, A., and Liljenstolpe P., "Investigating the gardens of the Villa of Livia", *JRA* 13 (2000), 221-33; Klynne, A., and Liljenstolpe P., "The imperial gardens of the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta. A preliminary report on the 1997 campaign", *Opuscula Romana* 22-23 (1997), 127-47; Klynne, A., *The Prima Porta garden archaeological project. Terra sigillata from the Villa of Livia, Rome. Consumption and discard in the early Principate* (Uppsala, 2002).

⁸ Garden paintings: Kellum, B. A., "The construction of landscape in Augustan Rome: The garden room at the villa ad gallinas", *The Art Bulletin* 76, no. 2 (1994), 211-224; Clark Reeder, J., *The Villa of Livia ad gallinas albas* (Providence, 2001); Flory, M. B., "The symbolism of laurel in cameo portraits of Livia", *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 40 (1995), 43-68; Flory, M. B., "Octavian and the omen of the 'gallina alba'", *CJ* 84, no. 4 (1988), 343-56. The most recent publication of the garden paintings (with bibliographic appendix): Settis, S., and Donati, F., *Le pareti ingannevoli: La Villa di Livia e la pittura di giardino* (Milan, 2002). Augustus' statue: Pollini, J., "The findspot of the statue of Augustus from Prima Porta", *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma* 92 (1987), 103-08; Clark Reeder, J., "The statue of Augustus from Prima Porta and the underground complex", in *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History, Collection Latomus* 8 (Brussels, 1996), 287-308; Clark Reeder, J., "The statue of Augustus from Prima Porta, the underground complex, and the omen of the gallina alba", *AJP* 118 (1997), 89-118; Klynne, A., and Liljenstolpe, P., "Where to put Augustus? A note on the placement of the Prima Porta statue", *AJP* 121, no. 1 (2000), 121-28. The exact findspot of the statue is not known. Pollini argues for a findspot to the west of the staircase to the underground *triclinium*, on the basis of his interpretations of the excavation diaries (*op. cit.*), 107-108. These diaries are published in Calci and Messineo (*op. cit.*, note 6), 66-71.

⁹ Klynne, A., "The laurel grove of the Caesars: looking in and looking out", in Frizzell, B. S., and Klynne, A. (eds.), *Roman villas around the urbs: interaction with landscape and environment. Proceedings of a conference at the Swedish Institute in Rome, September 17-18, 2004* (Rome, 2005), 167-75.

¹⁰ Plin., *HN* 15.136-137, Suet., *Galb.* 1, Dio Cass., 48.52.3-4; 63.29.3, Aur. Vict., *Caes.* 5.17, Iulius Obsequens, *Liber Prodigiurum* 131. Livia probably inherited the villa from her father, M. Livius Drusus Claudianus, but other possibilities are suggested: Clark Reeder, J., *The Villa of Livia* (*op. cit.*, note 8), 29-34.

¹¹ Calci and Messineo, (*op. cit.*, note 6), 15; Klynne, *The Prima Porta garden archaeological project* (*op. cit.*, note 7), 11-12.

adjoining rooms around the small garden space 43 (15 x 20 = 300m²); (2), the residential quarter around the small *peristylum* garden space 48 (15 x 21 = 315m²), which can be reached from 43 through corridor 46; (3), the *peristylum* garden quarter, with some *triclinia* and other rooms around the large *peristylum* garden space 22 (23 x 32 = 736m²), reached from 43 through corridor 44; (4), the bath quarter, with the baths looking onto court 65-63; and (5) the underground *triclinium* quarter (30 x 28 = 840 m²), at the southwest end of the villa, arranged around the underground *triclinium* (8 x 16 = 128m² with roughly a 2m void around it) looking to the southeast. Further secondary structures of the villa, one of which is a water depository, are situated to the northwest just above the baths' court. The garden was enclosed by a portico with brick-built columns of Corinthian order – at least on the north and east sides. At the back of the north side of the colonnade was an elaborate construction of compartments for planting in different levels with a *euripus* in front.

The villa dates from the late Republican period and underwent several phases of rebuilding up to the fourth century AD. It is likely that the Republican nucleus corresponded to the area around atrium 43 and the interior garden 48. Before, or during, the Augustan period the western wing with the subterranean *triclinium* (2) was added.¹² The bath complex (25-32) was totally rebuilt in the Severan period and some rooms around the atrium (35, 37-39) were rebuilt during the fourth century AD.¹³ The dating of the substructures of the Villa has been debated on the basis of its facing in opus *quasi-reticulatum* (which is also the masonry of the underground complex). Lugli dated it to 100-55 BC but recent studies that wish to associate the garden terrace with the famous laurel grove push it down to 35-10 BC.¹⁴ In this paper I focus on the early imperial period of the villa (figure 2).

Environmental design: design concerns and solutions

According to literary sources, orientation and position in relation to climatic conditions were decisive factors in villa design. First, the position of a villa in the landscape depended on the kind of climatic conditions that this location would offer. For

example, Varro noted that sites at the foot of wooded hills were preferred because villas there enjoyed healthy winds from the woods (Varro, *Rust.* 1, 12.1); and that low-lying depressions were avoided because villas would have been vulnerable to sudden rains and swollen streams (Varro, *Rust.* 1, 12.4). Second, regional climate was a factor in the orientation of buildings. Vitruvius, for example, indicated that in cool regions buildings should be protected from the north and should look out to warmer directions (Vitr., *De arch.* 6.1.1); conversely, in warm regions, where the sun is strong, buildings should open to the north or northeast (Vitr., *De arch.* 6.1.1-2). Finally, Varro noted that orientation to the east is advantageous because it provides shade in the summer and sun in the winter (Varro, *Rust.* 1.12.1).

An examination of the Villa of Livia indicates that these factors were considered. Being on the top of the hill, it was protected from the Tiber's humidity and enjoyed the healthy north winds coming from the Apennines. The rooms opened both to the southeast and northeast, taking full advantage of the eastern orientation. Garden 22 opened to the south and the garden terrace opened to both the south and east slopes of the hill, which, as Columella pointed out, provide a healthy climate with fertile soil (Columella, *Rust.* 1.2.3).

The orientation of individual rooms was as important as that of the Villa as a whole. Ancient authors mentioned that the orientation of rooms was dependent on their function and time of use; for example, according to Vitruvius, *cubicula* and libraries should face east, because they needed the morning light. Spring and autumn *triclinia* should also look east, because the sun's course would render them temperate by the evening, when these rooms were used. Conversely, summer *triclinia* should look to the north so that they were turned away from the sun's course, and winter *triclinia* and baths towards the west because they needed the evening light (Vitr., *De arch.* 6.4.1-2).¹⁵

An examination of the orientation of the rooms of the Villa of Livia indicates that designer(s) provided a variety of choices, and also suggests that they shared Vitruvius' concerns. Rooms 35, 38, 39, organised around the interior garden 43, and rooms 54, 52, 51, and 50, organised around the interior garden 48, looked southeast, thus following Vitruvius'

¹² Calci and Messineo (*op. cit.*, note 6), 23-36. For a summary of the dating problem: Clark Reeder, *The Villa of Livia* (*op. cit.*, note 8), 16-29.

¹³ Messineo, *Ad gallinas albas: Villa di Livia* (*op. cit.*, note 6), 23-90.

¹⁴ Klynne, "The laurel grove of the Caesars: looking in and looking out", (*op. cit.*, note 9), 170-171.

¹⁵ For a recent discussion of seasonal rooms in Roman villas: Cosh, S. R., "Seasonal Dining Rooms in Romano-British Houses", *Britannia* 32 (2001), 219-242.

directions for good *cubicula*.¹⁶ Rooms 23, 30, 6/5, and 3/4, which looked east, are good candidates for spring and autumn *triclinia* or *oeci*; rooms 56, 41, 42 and 49, which looked northeast, are good candidates for summer *triclinia* or *oeci* – and perhaps a room for a library; and rooms 57, 58, and 55, which looked southwest, are good candidates for winter *triclinia* or *oeci*. Finally, rooms 26 and 27 of the baths exploited a western orientation, which is the best for baths.

However the ancient authors admitted that the qualities of a site might change the ideal situations outlined above and designers had to come up with solutions in order to deal with the ‘problems’ that arose on such occasions. On the one hand, the choice of a favoured position in the landscape was a privilege that one did not always have. For example, if one was forced to build a villa on the bank of a river, which Varro indicated was not an ideal position, the villa should not face the river as it would be extremely cold in the winter and unwholesome in the summer (Varro, *Rust.* 1.12.1). On the other hand, a site might prevent certain choices in regards to the orientation of certain rooms. For example, whereas warm and tepid baths should be lit from the west, if the nature of the site prevented this, Vitruvius indicated they should be lit from the south (Vitr., *De arch.* 5.10.1).

Obviously, there are design problems and solutions that ancient authors could not possibly attest. The case of the Villa of Livia provides a case-study for such design problems and does not only provide evidence for the ways in which designers dealt with them, but also for the ways in which they combined architectural design solutions with interior decoration in order to accentuate their aims. Indeed, the investigation of the role of landscape and its constituent factors in the architectural design of the Villa of Livia indicates that the location of the garden paintings in the underground room was not a random choice, but resulted from the wish to create a pleasantly fresh space alluding to an illusionary paradise-like garden that would accommodate a summer dinner party.

Whereas the general southeastern direction of the Villa provided nice spring and autumn rooms these could become very problematic during the summer, especially the ones towards the south side. Furthermore the position of the garden terrace to the northeast of the Villa’s architectural body exposed

the Villa to the north winds. These problems were dealt with the following four design solutions.

Designers used *portici* as protective screens towards the warm south and west: one *porticus* screened rooms 5, 2, and 4, which opened to the southeast, and another one screened rooms 23, 30, 57, 58 and 56, which opened to the southeast and west. The use of a *porticus* to protect the rooms of a villa from the sun is mentioned by Pliny the Younger when he described his Tuscan estate (Plin., *Ep.* 5.6.14-15). Additionally, designers broke the Villa’s architectural body in order to form an alternating series of protruding and receding volumes that would provide protected areas within the house: the central volume of the Villa (rooms 23, 27, 30) receded in relation to its southwest and northeast volumes, thus creating the area for garden 22 that was protected from the elements. This solution also has a parallel in literature: Pliny the Younger described the ways in which the protruding volumes of a *triclinium* and a *cubiculum* in his Laurentine villa formed a space that retained the warmth of the sun (Plin., *Ep.* 2.17.7). Another solution designers employed was the organisation of rooms in a series, or the parallel placement of corridors, in order to create ‘protecting’ walls for the rooms or spaces behind them. For example, rooms 41, 42 and 49 protected the two interior garden spaces 43, 48 and the rooms surrounding them from the north wind; rooms 12, 10, 11 protected rooms 9, 6 and 5 from the southwest; and corridors 13 and 15 protected the whole southwestern sector from the west. Notice that access to the big garden terrace was achieved only through corridor 47 that faced the closed wall of room 50, thus avoiding large energy losses. Also, corridors 13 and 15 were placed one next to the other with no other obvious reason than to create an extra layer that insulated the rooms located to their south from exposure to the north. Finally, the design decision to employ the underground level of the Villa provided a cool dining room for the warm months of the summer, when the sun would strike the southwest facing Villa mercilessly. The embellishment of the *triclinium* with life-size garden paintings accentuated its character as a paradise-like oasis that provided refuge from the hot summer days. Pliny the Younger appreciated the insulating properties of underground spaces when he described the semi-underground *cryptoporticus* in his Tuscan villa that “never loses its icy temperature during the summer”, which was provided by its eastern direction (Plin., *Ep.* 5.6.30; cf. Varro, *Rust.* 1.12.1). Environmental design today values semi-underground and underground spaces because they conserve energy using natural insulating properties and allow for more efficient heating or cooling. The underground *triclinium*

¹⁶ Rooms 52, 51, and 50 have been definitely identified as *cubicula* on the basis of their characteristic mosaic decoration; the other rooms are identified as such on the basis of their size.

would have been cool during the summer but also easily heated during the winter due to the insulation provided by the surrounding corridor. The underground level in the Villa of Livia was also very sensibly used for some spaces of its baths.¹⁷

Naturally, the design solutions employed were not unique. If we examine other luxury villas around Rome that were faced with similar climatic conditions, for example, Domitian's villa in Castel Gandolfo, the so-called Horace's villa near Licenza, and Villa Anguillara Sabazia near Lake Bracciano, we notice that their position and orientation were also chosen for similar reasons. For example, most have a main southern orientation: Domitian's villa in Castel Gandolfo had a southwest orientation, Horace's villa had a south orientation and Villa Anguillara Sabazia had a southeast orientation. Furthermore, the design solutions in regard to environmental factors singled out for the Villa of Livia can be noted in other luxury villas as well. For example, the south façades of villas were often screened with a *porticus* or *cryptoporticus*, e.g. in the Villa Oplontis A; or with a double corridor, e.g. in the Villa of the Papyri; or with protruding volumes, e.g. in the villa at Capo di Sorrento and the Villa Oplontis A. Furthermore, underground spaces were also used to create pleasant underground *triclinia*, as in the Casa del Cryptoportico in Pompeii. Finally, the 'Auditorium' of Maecenas also attests to the embellishment of an underground space with an illusionistic garden.¹⁸

However, the architectural design of the subterranean *triclinium* and the ways in which it enhanced the experience of the painted landscape is unique. A visitor would have descended into the subterranean complex, which was roughly 4 m below the ground level, by a steep staircase (each step *circa* 30 cm) that was accessed through a *porticus* at the south (figs. 2-3). Upon arrival in the small vestibule, the visitor would have only caught a glimpse of the garden paintings of the *triclinium* on the left, which at this point would have appeared like any other framed garden paintings (fig. 4), while his/her attention would have been distracted by the preparations conducted for the meal on the right, where the service room was located. It is only after entering the *triclinium* that the visitor would have finally perceived its life-size garden paintings (fig. 5). Inside, this naturalistic garden surrounded him/her.

Passing from the view towards a garden into the garden itself, the visitor would have been fully immersed in the experience of landscape that the paintings suggested, which was further enhanced by the soothing fresh temperature and, one would expect, the selective lighting. In this way, the experience of the painted landscapes in the underground *triclinium* of the Villa of Livia was carefully staged and revealed to the visitor. The architectural design of the underground complex, that is, the carefully designed access to the *triclinium* and the proportionate scale of the garden paintings in relation to the size of the *triclinium* itself, accentuated the reality, perception and allusion of the painted landscapes within. Although the underground room of the 'Auditorium' of Maecenas also featured painted landscapes, these were placed in niches, and thus the landscape was framed and perceived as being outside the space of the spectator. The bigger underground room of the Auditorium did not provide the intimate perception of an all-embracing landscape like that of the intimate space of the underground *triclinium* in the Villa of Livia.

Conclusion

Roman luxury villas were part of the cultural discourse with the landscape attested in contemporary literary and visual sources. From the late Republic onwards, landscape was singled out as a theme in its own right: it was accurately described, its qualities were eulogised and sought in everyday life, and its representations permeated the public and private spheres. In the realm of the country house residences, whether they were luxurious leisure retreats or agricultural farms, ideas about landscape could not only be explored but also tested. The villas literally provided a drawing board for Roman lovers of landscape. We read the exposés of their architectural design exercises vis-à-vis the landscape in poems, letters and agricultural treatises; the latter providing more of a blueprint for the villa – *villa rustica*, *urbana*, *suburbana* and the like – than realised designs. But it is in the luxurious country house residences, which were primarily conceived as leisure retreats, that ideas about landscape were fully explored and indeed shaped. In designing for luxury, Romans tested sophisticated ideas about the ways in which architectural design can form a discourse with the landscape.

The design solutions observed in the Villa of Livia were responses to the particular conditions of its site, but they were quite common in luxury villa design, and certainly not exclusive to them. Nonetheless, in the Villa of Livia Roman designers did not merely respond to the particularities of the specific site, but

¹⁷ Messineo, G., "Piscinae Calidae", *Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia. Rendiconti* 74 (2001-02), 233-52.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the architectural typology of the underground *triclinium*: Clark Reeder, *The Villa of Livia* (op cit., note 8), 53-66.

elaborated the all-pervading discourse with the landscape attested in the period and came up with an architectural scheme that enhanced the experience of landscape in this villa. The careful way in which the design of the Villa's underground *triclinium* set up and staged the painted landscapes points to the sophisticated solutions that Roman designers

employed in responding to the actual environment. In doing so, they articulated an architectural discourse with the landscape. To this end the Villa's underground *triclinium* provides exceptional evidence for the interplay between architectural design, interior decoration and landscape that characterised the cultural mannerism of the period.

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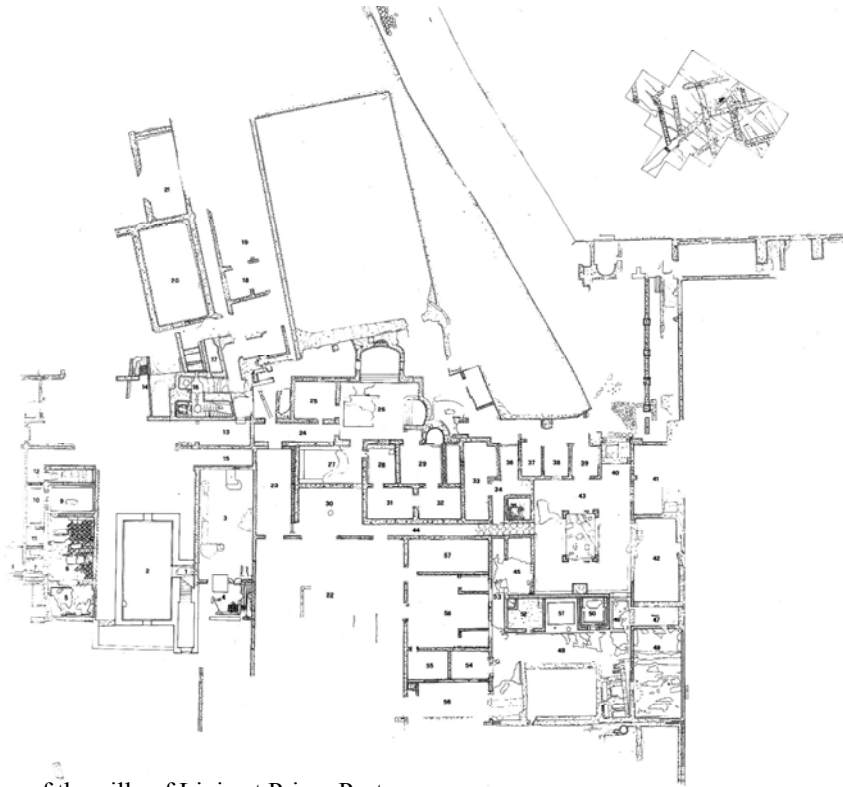


Fig. 1. Plan of the villa of Livia at Prima Porta.
After Messineo, *La Via Flaminia: da Porta del Popolo a Malborghetto*. 229.

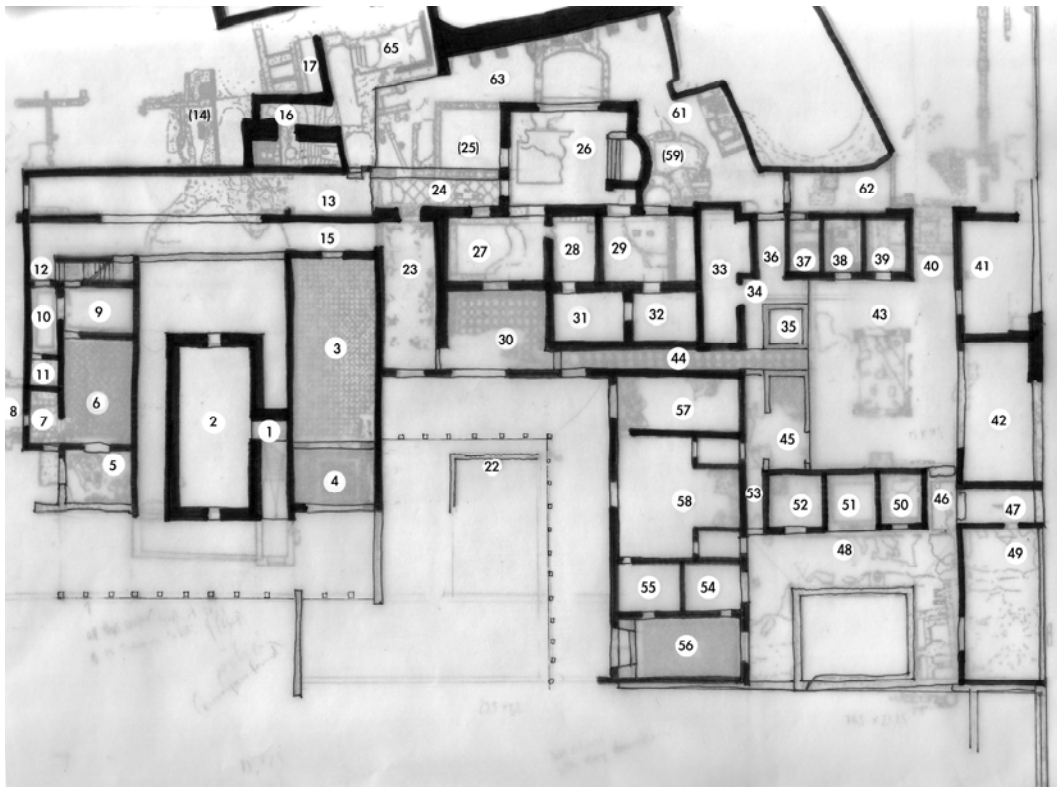


Fig. 2. Plan of the villa in the early imperial period.
Plan: author.

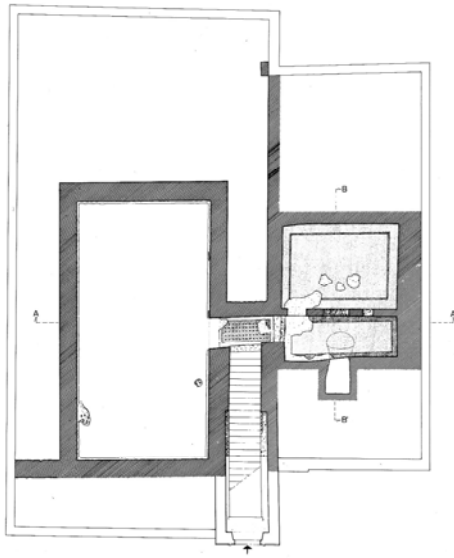


Fig. 3. Plan of the underground level.
After Messineo, *La Via Flaminia: da Porta del Popolo a Malborghetto*. 234.



Fig. 4. View from vestibule towards the underground triclinium.
Photograph: author.



Fig. 5. View inside the underground triclinium.
Photograph: author.