



LEGEND

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VILLA DI LIVIA

Located on a hill overlooking the Tiber Valley, the villa of Livia still appears with its unspoiled nature to represent that discrete and not overdone place where real power was exercised in the Augustan era. Defining it as a residence of otium and rest, although it responds perfectly to the canons of this type of villa that combined the productive aspect with the residential one, could be an understatement. The apparent simplicity and the constant references to nature seem to echo the importance of the characters who inhabited it and who embellished its garden and its rooms with symbols of power.

The villa is referred to by ancient authors as Gallinas Albas, a name that evokes the prophecy that occurred to Livia Drusilla while she visited her lands in the Veian region, between 39 and 38 BC. Caesar Augustus, after his marriage to Livia, restructured the Republican residence she had received as a dowry, transforming it into a villa characterized by the alternation of building blocks and green areas, confirming the couple's preference it be known "not so much for statues and paintings as for arcades and groves" (Suet. Augustus, 72, 6) in a form of ostentatious simplicity. The residence, renovated several times over the centuries, was divided into functional areas: the large garden, the private area, the representative area, the area dedicated to guests, and the spa complex.

The large garden was a large quadrangular terrace bordered by a three-armed portico divided by pillars, the porticus triplex, with the roof covered with tiles and the entablature decorated with

terracotta slabs and painted walls. The southern side of the garden was scenographically open on the Tiber plain; on this side the area was enclosed by a green belt, as evidenced by the discovery of a long row of perforated jars intended to contain shrubs and flowers. The northern side was divided into large rectangular compartments, plantation „boxes" containing small shrubs. The central space was occupied by the *lauretum*, the laurel grove remembered by ancient sources from which the emperors of the Julio-Claudian dynasty took the twigs for the crowns used in the triumph.

The private area has an Augustan-era structure that has remained unchanged over time with restoration interventions in the second and third centuries AD. Here is the main entrance of the villa, marked by a travertine threshold that leads into a vestibule and an atrium. This area was made up of two building nuclei: in the first, a bank of rooms closing the body of the villa towards the large garden; in the second, a private apartment, consisting of two cubicula and an exedra, arranged around a three-wing portico, erected on Republican structures. A small garden was adorned by small shrubs (oleander, rosemary, aromatic herbs, figs, and lemons) and flowers were contained in ollae perforatae.

The representative and reception area was constructed during the Augustan era, with renovations up to the fourth century AD. Large rooms circumscribed the porticoed peristyle and were paved with Augustan mosaic, originally delimiting a third garden, in which in the Flavian

age a basin (*natatio*) was installed, decorated on the edge in the Severian age with a mosaic representing a marine thiasos. On the north-east side of the peristyle, there was a triclinium and three rooms; in the north wing, flanked by the corridor leading to the private area, two rooms connect to the spa; on the south side large rooms are decorated with opus sectile flooring; in the south-western wing, rooms belonging to a *hibernaculum* (winter apartment) are enclosed by the portico of the *frons villae*.

Every corner, almost every flower, represents a symbol of power recognizable by contemporaries, transported and masterfully received in the large frescos of the semi-interred ancient triclinium. The triclinium was built by the will of Livia and Ottaviano, in 38 BC, the year of their wedding, as part of the renovation program of the previous republican residence. The triclinium was from the beginning one of the attractions of the villa, together with the large garden and the overall green layout of the villa. The owners' willingness to re-propose the beauty of the villa's garden in the basement is evident. Equipped with a single entrance, it was covered with a barrel vault decorated with painted stucco coves and frescoed with a continuous painting of a garden with a symbolic value: in the foreground the cane fence and the marble balustrade, in the background a great variety of birds and plants, including the recurrent laurel in all its forms. The triclinium was no longer in use after the earthquake of 17 BC.

The spa system, built in the Flavian age, connected the private and residential area. Centered on two rooms, *calidarium* and *tepidarium*, delimited by other rooms and initially heated with the 'samovar' system, the complex was renovated in the Severan period. The function of the two rooms changed, one became an *apodyterium* and the other, a *frigidarium*, with the heating system based on the *testudo alvei*.

The outermost strip of the residential district consisted of guest rooms built in the Augustan age with Severian renovations: rooms and corridors with mosaic and opus sectile floors, frescoed in the second half of the second century AD, heated rooms, a latrine.

The villa has had a long life, as evidenced by the restoration interventions and findings datable to the fifth and sixth centuries AD. After abandonment, probably due to a fire, starting from the seventeenth century, the area was subject to devastation and looting in search of antiquities. The discovery in 1863 of the statue of Augustus and of the semi-hypogeal room with the garden paintings gave it notoriety but did not guarantee it protection. Only since 1982, with the Italian State acquisition of this Prima Porta hilltop, has the villa been subjected to protection.

In 2013-2014, on the occasion of the Augustan bimillennial celebration, among other interventions, the Lauretum above ground was reconstituted. It is placed in the space where it was in ancient times, but with the choice of placing the laurel plants in large jars to facilitate any excavation operations and to suggest the discovery of the *ollae perforatae* in the large garden during excavations. The garden, together with the other interventions carried out, reflects a narrative form of spaces and structures that have overlapped over time and that today cannot be dismantled. According to this criterion, the current large roofs of the area of the villa are currently full-scale stratigraphic drawings that take on the color of the sky, like the background of the painting in the hypogeal triclinium, evoking a vision of the sky and at the same time the closure of the rooms.

The Villa di Livia has always been an oasis of uncontaminated landscape on the outskirts of Rome, with a degraded appearance due to the major urban transformations of recent decades. The contrast is evident. As is also evident the predominance of the landscape aspect in the articulation of the villa which alternates structures and green spaces. In this, the intent of the imperial couple Augustus and Livia has remained unchanged and this constitutes the main value of the villa, one of a kind.