

## THE ROMAN VILLA OF FARNESINA OR THE FARNESINA HOUSE

During the construction of Tiber embankments in 1878-1879, within the area of the Renaissance Villa of Chigi, many ruins of ancient buildings came into light: a villa, some warehouses and a tomb; these buildings were destroyed so fast that it was not possible to record them precisely, as complained by the engineer Domenico Marchetti head of the Technical Office. Some clarification about the building structure and its decorations were possible by means of the documents drawn on china ink, concerning part of the excavations which were found in the historical archive of the Archeological Authority at Altemps Palace.

The suburban Villa was built on the river's right bank, along the way connecting Trastevere to Vatican area.

That area was plenty of rich *domus*, gardens and many *horrea*, i.e. warehouses, related to commercial and artisan activities in proximity of the fluvial harbour. Next to the *domus*'s southern side were found the remains of the wine-cells *Novae et Arruntiana*, belonging to the *Arruntii* family and later became imperial property.

The architectural plan of the Villa is known only from the excavation reports and from two evaluations: the area plan which is summarized in the *Forma Urbis* and the survey published in "Notizie degli Scavi" from 1880, to whom the documentation compiled by Marchetti must be added.

The Villa plan was characterized by a basement with several rooms which should support an upper floor deducible by a stair next to the triclinium C. Was rediscovered the eastern side of the building, from where all the decorative equipment come from and today stored at the Museo Nazionale Romano, but it is possible to hypothesize that the Villa was constituted by two symmetrical parts articulated on a central axis passing through the big exedra facing the Tiber.

Along the southern side runned a semi-subterranean gallery, called Cryptoporticus A, divided in two by a series of pillars and preceded from twelve rooms probably devoted to servants. Between the Villa forepart and the cryptoporticus, two representative rooms were found: the triclinium C, the two cubicles B and D facing the garden L which is enclosed by walls (*hortus conclusus*) and another cubicle E, inserted within the forepart structure.

The central area was occupied by the big exedra formed by three concentric walls which should constitute the basement of a double, not preserved, colonnade; on the external side, the façade on the Tiber was characterized by a masonry with blind arches mounted on column pillars. Between the two internal rings, runned the room G which continued straightward F until the cubicle E.

### **The decorations**

Every room should have mosaic floors made by black and white tiles, in some case even polychrome, which in part are preserved and stored by the Museo Nazionale Romano and partly known from the reports of Marchetti.

Concerning the coverage of several rooms there are no precise information apart from the three cubicles whose anterooms were covered by plastered barrel vaults.

The painting decorations are fine and elegant in their details execution.

The cryptoporticus A had a decoration on a white background with panels made by bands and decorated with checkered patterns. On the upper parts feminine figures support an architrave with facing sphynxes; on the foreground a porticate with black background plinths and green columns with illustrated capitals. On the back side, landscapes with sacral-idyllic themes surround the central little squares –not always readable– which seem to depict a mysteres ritual. Four small squares date back to a restoration from I century a.C: their style and executive technique appear to be more concise.

Such a remake and a door filling seem to be the unique restoration measures of the whole residential building, perhaps precociously abandoned due to the continuous Tiber floods; this hypothesis seems to be supported by the lacks of furniture and sculptures during the discovery.

The decoration of the triclinium C had a black compact background characterizing all the wall partitions from the base – decorated with thin white and red lines depicting a meander-like theme– to the attic where female figures, wearing light fluttering dresses, alternate to male ones in supporting the upper part. In the frame between the figures, there are sketched animals and vegetal themes. The central part was divided into panels from thin candelabra joint by ivy and plane tree garlands below which some idyllic landscapes, not always visible, were painted (Fig. 8).

Into the freeze along the attic, are represented many judiciary scenes difficult to interpret, but quite realistic. The paintings of the room are similar to those in the yellow triclinium of the Livia's House on the Palatine Hill.

The two rooms B and D are cubicles, being both divided into forerom and alcove by different floor levels. They were also similar for their colours, mostly expensive red cinnabar background together with yellow ochre, light green and blue. The cubicle B forerom decoration, was articulated on a white background: nowadays only the left side depicting Venus on the throne with an handmaid facing Cupid or a cherub – resembling the decorations of the Attican *lekythoi* from V century b.C. On the edges, two Isis statues are represented while in the upper part alternate framework containing erotic scenes and theatrical representation. The alcove decoration, more simple, is characterized by panels of smaller dimensions. The decorations' focus was the bottom wall with an aedicule supported by columns showing a mythological scene on their inner part: Leucothea carrying little Dionysus into her arms (Fig.10). Part of the vault plaster decoration in total white without any colours addition, is still preserved. Such a feature associates all the stuccoes of the Villa. The decoration had a geometrical structure with frames showing winged Victories, griffins or idyllic-sacred decorations.

The decoration of Cubicle D doesn't seem to be so refined as the B one; furthermore a wider use of white pigment within the genre representations as well as in the upper part of the walls, articulated in a series of columned aedycules, carrying squares on a white background, both in the forerom and in the alcove.

In the centre of the alcove there are two feminine figures standing, probably offering a sacrifice. The smaller squares on the upper central part, depicted erotic scenes and feminine figures alternately. The stucco decoration on the vault represented the same partition of that in the room B, but with a freeze representing Victories and Arimaspi alternately, and in the central squares, idyllic landscapes. The room E, identified as cubicle too, was in a remote area of the *domus* at the beginning of the hallway F.

The difference between the forerom and the alcove could be seen also in the pictorial decoration: in this case the alcove paintings, articulated around a central aedycule, were more elaborated respect with those of the forerom. Instead of red cinnabar of the cubicles B and D, a white background can be found while the geometrical lozengedecorated floor compensate the greater ease of the paintings. The figurative elements are characterized by a considerable eclecticism: the aedycules are decorated with the usual idyllic landscapes, whilst the feminine figures on the edges of the northern side aedycule are more realistic. The small squares, according to the archaic tendency of Augustan age, had very polished lines, the feminine figures on profile, represented in the inner part, stand out for the refined chromatism and the sketches elegance, as for example in the frame depicting a young woman pouring a perfume. In the sprandels of the stucco vault, there are idyllic landscapes surrounding mythological scenes concerning Phaeton and the Sun cart. Together with the cryptoporticus A, the hallway F-G substituted one of the communication path of the Villa; it had a decoration over a white background articulated according to a paratactic scheme.

The decoration is composed by thin candelabra highlighting the middle band panels; refined feminine figures bearing garlands stay as caryatidis, while the squares of the upperpart are decorated with rural landscapes, hermae, statues of goddess and temple alternately with still lives and theatrical masks.

The Villa was attributed to Clodia, sister of the tribune Publius Clodius Pulcher, enemy of Cicero. Another hypothesis identify the Villa as the residence built for the wedding of Julia, Augustus' daughter, and his cousin, Marcus Claudius, Marcellus, in 25 b.C. After Marcellus' death, at the time of the second wedding of Julia with Agrippa, the Villa came into her hands as confirmed by the building of *pons Agrippae* connecting the right shore with the Campus Martius properties. Another thesis support the idea that the Villa was built in 28 b.C. in occasion of the wedding between Agrippa and Claudia Marcella Augustus' niece. Another theory ascribes the *domus* to the *Arruntii* family, due to its close proximity of the winery cells. Even if the Villa property is a still debated question, the exceptionality of the Villa rediscovery is undeniable together with its refined pictorial decorations which are similar to those found into Augustus and Livia's house on the Palatine Hill, to those of the Aula Isiaca and those of the Livia's Villa at Prima Porta.

## THE CHARACTERS

**JULIA:** daughter of Augustus and Scribonia, stands out among the feminine figures of the first imperial dynasty for her unconventional character and her tragic fate. Her existence was characterized partly by State reasons and political opportunism and partly by the research of a

personal autonomy and a rebellion feeling, determining in this way her sorrowful conclusion. As she was born, Augustus divorced from Scribonia and married Livia Drusilla. In the imperial *domus* on Palatine hill, Julia lived her childhood with opposing feelings: affection for her father who teared her up from maternal care; a stepmother perceived like an usurper; the minor role of Scribonia who during their meeting was not intended to rise the kindness and gratitude of the daughter towards the official family. After the battle of Actium in 31 b.C. which sanctioned the defy of the Egypt queen Cleopatra and Mark Anthony who was for few months brother-in-law of Augustus' being married his sister Octavia Minor, also the children of Octavia: Antonia Major and Antonia Minor joined Julia in the House on the Palatine Hill also together with the children from the first marriage of Livia: Tiberius and Drusus. According to Macrobius (*Saturnalia* I, 2, 17), Julia apart from spinning wool –the traditional activity of Roman matronly women- loved literature and had a considerable knowledge. Very proudly Augustus was used to declare he had two daughters: Julia and the Republic. Since every attempt of Augustus to have a son failed, the only hope for lineage safeguarding was transferred on Julia descendants; Hence, after she completed her studies, Augustus begun to look for an husband. Julia married Marcellus, 4 years older, who suddenly died in 23 b.C. and Augustus dedicated to him the nowadays the Theatre of Marcellus. Julia belonged to such an exclusive, wealthy grown youth, far from the civil wars and intended to enjoy life and call everything into question, hostile towards the frequent Augustus' quotes to the ancient Roman *virtus*. To hush up the spiteful comments and regulate Julia's life following the decrees he reaffirmed into the *Lex de maritandis ordinibus* aimed to avoid bachelor and sterility, Augustus wanted she to marry again. The chosen was Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, his favourite collaborator and commander of many victorious battles and man of proved devotion. He was the most powerful man after Augustus whit whom he divided the proconsular empire. The new family chose the Villa on the Tiber's shore, surrounded by greenery and with frescoes by court's artists. Agrippa was 18 years older than Julia, but the couple became the most flourishing of the empire, symbol of power and richness. When Agrippa died leaving Julia pregnant of her 5th son, Augustus made her married with Tiberius, the older son of Livia. He was a brave commander, faithful to duty, with a suspicious and difficult personality. At that time he was happily married with Vipsania Agrippina (born from the first marriage of Agrippina) which, pregnant of the second son, tried in any way to avoid divorce. But also Livia encouraged this union, conscious of the benefits her son could derive. In her projects, Tiberius should became Augustus' successor and this could be easily done after his wedding with Julia. Suetonius said that the wedding took place within a very pleasant climate full of affection and harmony, but very early the relationship went bad. Disappointed by nuptial love and bothered by his father-in-law who seemed to prefer nephews than him, Tiberius –the year after his victory over Germans- left the Capital and retired to Rhodes. It was the 6 b.C. and Julia, left in Rome, suffered a lot for the leaving of her husband. The public and private behaviour of Julia –being either true or presumed- challenging the public morality laws promulgated by her father, ended suddenly in 2 b.C. She was accused to be the lover of some aristocratic conspirators of Augustus and condemned by her father himself to perpetual exile by applying that law made on his own *De adulteriis coercendis*.

Julia was immediately deported in the current Pantelleria Island, being accompanied only by her mother, Scribonia who decided to follow her. Nobody could come to visit her. Her only consolation as a mother, was the career of her sons, Gaius and Lucius, which proceeded smoothly. Nevertheless, very shortly, a very tragic fate was to loom: they died almost simultaneously, in 2

and 4 b.C. leaving Augustus at nearly 70 years old, again without descendants. He dedicated to his grandchildren an arch and the Basilica Julia in the Roman Forum. The rumours about the criminal operation of Livia, increased after such early deaths: it was really strange that everyone honoured by Augustus as his heirs, had to die one by one. For Julia, so hardly hurted, it was very difficult to bear the exile. Tiberius who returned to Rome since long time, obtaining from Augustus -which reluctantly conceded it- the adoption he longed for, succeeded to him as the second member of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, for their paternal and maternal origins. Once Tiberius had the power, he was very hostile towards his wife, depriving her from every economical source and forced her to live into a unique room. Julia died in extreme poverty, perhaps by let herself dying for starvation, in 14 a.C., the same year of her father's death. Few sketches are left from her, maybe because after her death she got a *damnatio memoriae*. One of these few is that stored at the Museo Archeologico di Corinto Antica which shows a quiet beauty carrying a simple hairstyle according to her time, without particular ornaments. To know the environments she grown within and her tastes, it is possible to admire the frescoes and the stuccoes decorating her Roman residence on the Tiber where she had the happiest times of her domestic life.