

“Wrapping ruins around buildings”¹

The Roman *Villa delle Grotte*

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Imaginable absences

On the promontory overlooking the Gulf of Portoferraio, on the island of Elba lie the remains of the Roman *domus* known as Villa delle Grotte. This is a characteristic example of the luxurious *villae maritimae* of the Augustan era that dotted the islands of the Tuscan Archipelago, built by noble exponents of the aristocratic classes of Rome for rest and leisure from the capital's political commitments. The building, typically defined by the courtyard onto which its rooms overlooked, stands on a base characterized by an apsidal structure, the caves. This podium, still present today, is the majestic witness of the link between artifice and nature, between architecture and landscape.



Fig. 1. Gulf of Portoferraio, Elba Island, Italy

General issues

The Villa delle Grotte appeared for the first time on the list of monumental buildings of the Superintendency of Monuments and Galleries for the provinces of Pisa, Lucca, Livorno and Massa-Carrara in September of 1901. In the report the remains of the building were described as follows:

"Ruins of the Roman Villa at the grotte. Category: ruins of regional importance. Property, custody and use: the ruins of the Roman Villa are included in a fund owned by Bigeschi. Constructive characteristics: On the two sides of the road that leads from Portoferraio to Portolongone, on a hill that juts out towards the gulf of Portoferraio there are long stretches of walls of Roman construction ad opus incertum and opus reticulatum, of vaulted undergrounds, of sections of brick wall, remains of mosaic floors, and other traces of constructions, and marble coverings. State of preservation: The ruins extend throughout a large land space broken into multiple parts, but in many sections still emerging from the soil surface so as to provide sufficient data to reconstruct the topography of part of the building."³

Previous documentation to this date is almost non-existent, the villa always appears as a backdrop set to the fortifications of Portoferraio.

¹ Scully V. (1993), 'Louis I. Kahn and the Ruins of Rome', in *Engineerin & Science*, pp. 3

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³ Translated from the copy of the document AST 9 Livorno 24 1953-1960- Soprintendenza ai Monumenti e Gallerie per le province di Pisa, Lucca, Livorno e Massa-Carrara, nell'elenco degli edifici monumentali.

Only some views from the eighteenth century and a drawing in the Ciummei manuscript (1786-1791) show us how the Villa must have been before the destruction by the Neapolitans who installed the artillery on the ruins, during the siege of 1799.

Current knowledge concerning the archaeological area comes from the excavation campaign conducted by Giorgio Monaco between 1960 and 1972, the documents drawn up at the end of the excavations are still the most complete source of information on the building. Giorgio Monaco's diaries and the R. Pasquinelli drawings preserved in the Photographic Archive of the Superintendency for Archaeological Heritage of Tuscany describe the current state of the archaeological site.

Interesting is the description of the search for the western boundary of the structures, in this part situated near the street Giorgio Monaco chose not to proceed with the excavations, but rather to proceed toward the backfill as if this area was not part of the complex.

In the *giardino delle essenze*, probably once shielded by an arcade (*ambulatio*) towards the south-west, he preferred to create an open space to park cars and tourist coaches.

The situation today is unchanged, at the entrance of the villa, at the point where the visitor could embrace the immensity of the area and its direct relationship with the landscape, there is a parking lot and a small structure behind a net of protection for the reception.

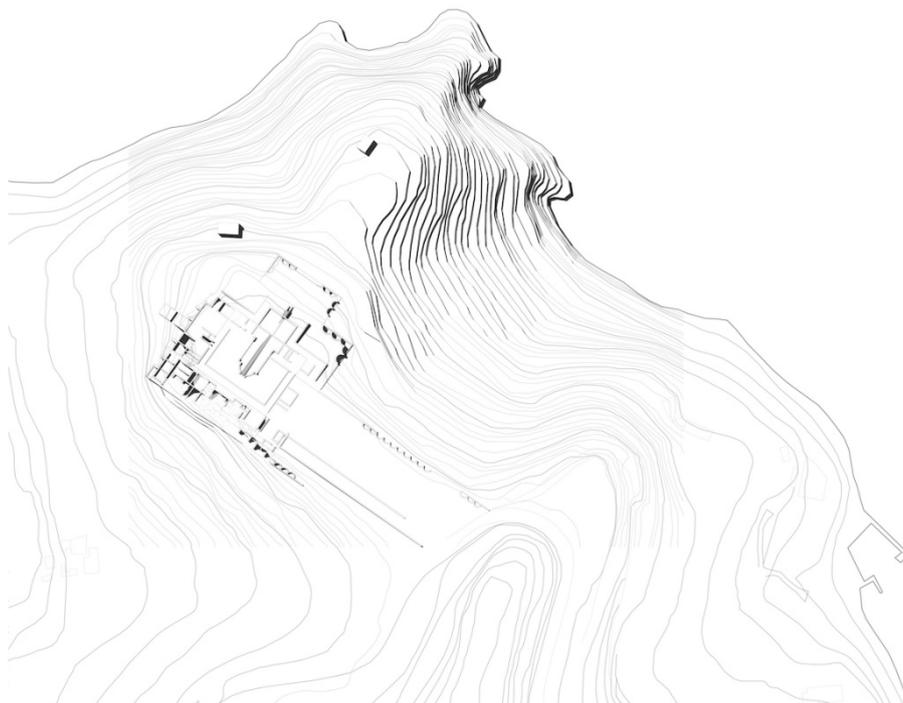


Fig. 2. Landscape and ruins. Graphic elaboration of the relief of Giulio Monaco of 1972

During the course of ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN AND COMPOSITION of the 3-year First Level Degree in Civil, Construction and Environmental Engineering of the University of Florence, we asked ourselves how the visual and physical link between man, memory and landscape could be re-established, maintaining the services necessary for serving and managing archaeological excavations.

Through the example of the villa, and based on the reconstructions made by Giorgio Monaco, small architectures have been hypothesized, capable of establishing relations with the ruins. These relationships

are based on the themes of construction measurement, and variable landscape warping. The ancient construction is credited with having defined a rule of intervention for this place. Terraces, rooms of passage, fences and hortus conclusus, have become the main themes of the composition.

The image proposed here will present the structure of this research, its specific features, the resolved issues and the open argument, with details concerning the graphic approach to the interpretation of the place and of the remains.

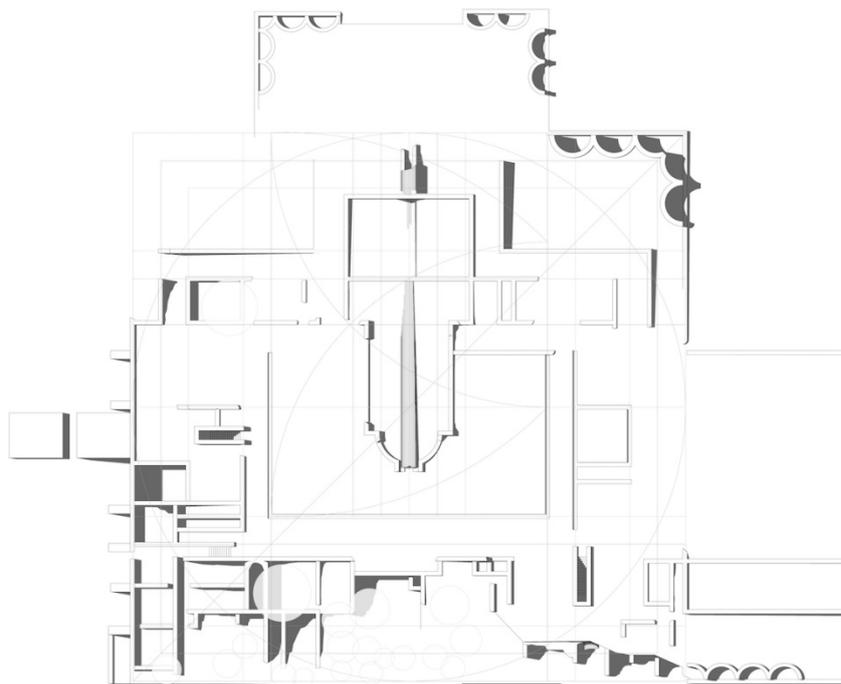


Fig. 3. Villa delle Grotte. Geometric analysis of the ruins.

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