

## WORLD HERITAGE LIST

### Villa Romana del Casale (Italy)

No 832

#### Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Villa Romana del Casale
<i>Location</i>	City of Piazza Armerina, Province of Enna, Sicilian Region
<i>State Party</i>	Italy
<i>Date</i>	19 July 1996

#### Justification by State Party

The Roman Villa del Casale is unique. Other structures that mirror so completely not only an antique life-style but also a complex economic system that constitute a moment of union between different cultures of the Mediterranean basin (the North African and the Roman) simply do not exist elsewhere.

[Note The State Party does not make any proposals in the nomination dossier concerning the criteria under which it considers the property should be inscribed on the World Heritage List. However, in the tentative list for Italy, sent to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre on 28 June 1996, criteria i, iii, and iv are quoted.]

#### Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, the Roman Villa del Casale is a *site*.

#### History and Description

##### History

An earlier rural settlement, generally thought to have been a farm, although on slender evidence, existed on the site where the Late Roman villa was built. Its orientation was the same as that of the baths of the villa, and its foundations were discovered beneath parts of the villa.

The existence of baths in the earliest phase of the site suggests that it was the residence of a rich tenant or the steward of a rich landowner. Two portraits were

discovered dating from the Flavian period (late 1st century AD) that may represent members of the owner's family. The stratigraphy of this earlier house provides a chronology from the 1st century AD to the Tetrarchy at the end of the 3rd century. This is an obscure period of Sicilian history, when the traditional *latifundia* system using slave labour underwent considerable changes.

There are indications that the earlier house was destroyed by an earthquake in the first decade of the 4th century, by which time it was probably owned by Marcus Aurelius Maximinianus, a Pannonian who had risen from the ranks of the Roman army to become a general, and then was raised to the status of *Augustus* by Diocletian. On the violent death of Maximinianus in 310 it would have passed to his son and Imperial colleague Maxentius, who lost his life at the hands of Constantine the Great at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in Rome in 312.

The grandeur and lavishness of the new structure that arose on the ruins of the earlier country house suggests that it was built on the orders, if not of one of these Roman rulers, then of a rich and powerful landowner, some time between 310 and 340. It continued to be occupied up to the Arab invasion of the 9th century, though in a state of increasing degradation. It seems that the final act of destruction was the work of the Norman ruler of Sicily, William I the Bad, around 1155.

##### Description

This building, which merits the title of "palace" rather than villa, is designed in the tradition of the Roman villa, but on a scale and to a level of luxury with no parallels in the Roman Empire. The area that has been excavated, which is only part of the full establishment and covers about 4000m<sup>2</sup>, may be divided into four zones or groups of rooms, all of them decorated with floor mosaics of superlative quality. The villa is built on a series of terraces

The first is the monumental entrance, which opens into a courtyard, on to which faces the elaborate baths complex. The oval *palaestra* (exercise area) gives access to an impressive octagonal *frigidarium* (cold room) and thence through the *tepidarium* (warm room) out of which open three *caldaria* (hot baths). Next comes the impressive main peristyle, with its monumental fountain in the centre, and the rooms opening out of it. There is a small apsidal shrine to one side.

To the south is the third group, around the elliptical peristyle. The spacious *triclinium* (dining room) has apses on three sides and is decorated with mythological scenes, notably the Labours of Hercules.

The fourth group lies to the east of the main peristyle, linked by the long Corridor of the Great Hunting Scene. This monumental area contains one of the finest and deservedly most famous mosaic pavements, covering 350m<sup>2</sup>, depicting the capture of wild animals in Africa, with the master and his assistants directing the activities in the centre. This group also includes the basilica, a large hall for

receptions, which is paved in marble instead of mosaics. Most of the small private rooms in this part of the complex contain mosaic floors depicting more peaceful and domestic activities. Particularly well known is the group of young women wearing costumes remarkably similar to modern bikinis, engaged in sporting activities.

The mosaics are the glory of the Villa del Casale. They date from the most advanced period of mosaic art and were in all probability the work of artists from North Africa, judged by both the quality of the work and the scenes that they depict. On stylistic grounds it is believed that at least two master-mosaicists worked on the villa, one working in a more classical style on principally mythological scenes and the other using a more realistic approach for scenes of contemporary life. The range of subject matter is vast - mythology, hunting scenes, flora and fauna, domestic scenes, and much more. Almost all the more than fifty rooms in the villa have mosaic floors, which cover in total some 3500m<sup>2</sup>. The columns and walls of the villa were also decorated, with painted plaster, both inside and out, and much of this survives. A programme of restoration and conservation of these wall paintings is currently in progress, along with the mosaics.

## **Management and Protection**

### *Legal status*

The villa, which is the property of the Sicilian regional government, is protected under the provisions of the basic Italian antiquities statute, Law No 1089 of 1 June 1939. This requires any intervention on the defined protected site or monument to be authorized by the Assessorato per i Beni Culturali ed Ambientali of the Sicilian Region, acting through the local Soprintendenza per i Beni Culturali ed Ambientali di Enna. The protected area (which is also that proposed for inscription on the World Heritage List) extends to an unexcavated area where it is known that the more mundane part of the establishment, the *villa rustica*, was located.

### *Management*

The Soprintendenza per i Beni Culturali ed Ambientali di Enna is entirely responsible for the management of the site. Funds for its maintenance and for restoration and conservation projects come from the Regional Government; there is no involvement of the national government.

The access to the site and the entrance to the building itself are currently being revised. A new entrance for visitors has been devised which will enable them to enter through the monumental entrance of the villa itself and then proceed in a logical sequence through its separate elements.

## **Conservation and Authenticity**

### *Conservation history*

The site as at present visible was largely excavated in the 1950s. A great deal of conservation work was

carried out, some of which is now acknowledged to have been inappropriate, in particular the use of reinforced concrete slabs for supporting some of the mosaics.

A steel and glass cover structure was raised over the entire site in the 1970s. This has created internal climatic conditions which are not considered to be in the best interests of preservation of the delicate mosaics.

Recent work has involved partially reconstructing the inadequate system for the evacuation of rainwater from the site.

### *Authenticity*

The authenticity of the site is in general good, particularly so far as the mosaics are concerned, where the interventions have been minimal. The regrettable use of inappropriate materials, especially reinforced concrete, in the 1960s may be deemed to have affected the overall authenticity, although some action of this kind is undoubtedly desirable to permit the better display of the mosaics. Currently work is in progress or planned which will remedy these adverse effects on the authenticity of the monument.

## **Evaluation**

### *Action by ICOMOS*

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the site in March 1997. ICOMOS also consulted a distinguished British expert on the classical archaeology of the Mediterranean lands.

### *Qualities and comparative analysis*

The Villa del Casale is indisputably one of the largest and most luxurious Roman villa anywhere in the Roman world. The quality of its wealth of mosaics makes it unique.

### *ICOMOS recommendations for future action*

The most serious problem on the site is the drainage. The site is vulnerable to flooding from the violent rain-storms that occur periodically in this region, and this can have serious effects on the mosaics. It is imperative that action should be taken with the minimum of delay to carry out a detailed hydrogeological study of the entire site and its surrounding area, so as to devise and implement appropriate measures to avoid further damage by water, whether from climatic or from underground causes.

The cover buildings over the site are also a source of problems, creating a "greenhouse" effect that is deleterious to the mosaics and unpleasant for visitors. Once the hydrogeological survey is complete, the next priority should be a detailed study of alternative measures for protecting the mosaics from environmental impacts. This should also take account of the aesthetic aspect.

Work to replace the reinforced concrete slabs supporting some of the mosaics should be intensified. The effect of humidity has caused the mild-steel

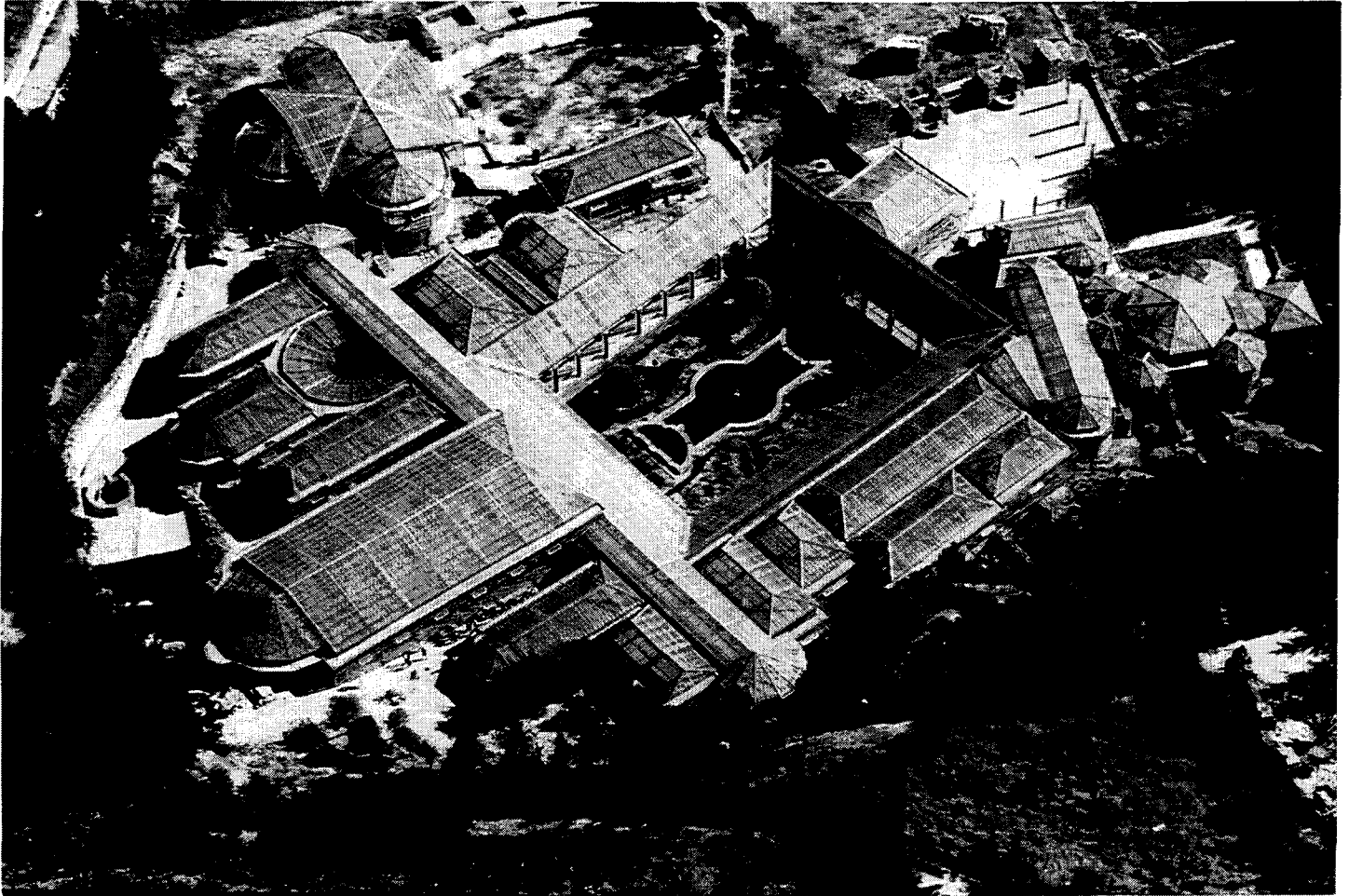
reinforcing rods to corrode and expand, resulting in bloating and damage to the mosaics that they were designed to protect.

**Recommendation**

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria i, ii, and iii*:

The Villa del Casale at Piazza Armerina is the supreme example of a luxury Roman villa, which graphically illustrates the predominant social and economic structure of its age. The mosaics that decorate it are exceptional for their artistic quality and invention as well as their extent.

ICOMOS, September 1997



**Villa Romana del Casale :**  
**Vue du site montrant la structure de couverture /**  
**View of site, showing cover building**



**Villa Romana del Casale :  
Détail de la mosaïque de la Grande Chasse /  
Detail of Great Hunt Mosaic**