CLASSICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Large Roman Villa Where Falernian Wine, the Most Esteemed in the Empire Was Produced, Found in Campania

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View of the large Roman villa discovered in Campania. Credit: Soprintendenza Archeologia Belle Arti e Paesaggio per le province di Caserta e Benevento

Construction work on an agrivoltaic plant has unearthed a Roman villa approximately 2,000 years old in the small Italian municipality of Cancello ed Arnone, in the province of Caserta. The discovery offers an opportunity to study and better understand the settlement dynamics of a historic area of great importance to Roman civilization: the **ager Falernus**.

The discovery was made thanks to the efforts of the *Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio* (SABAP) for the provinces of Caserta and Benevento, which coordinated the preventive excavations with a team of archaeologists

under the scientific direction of SABAP. The original purpose of these excavations was to clear a space for the construction of an agrivoltaic power plant by Enel Green Power, a company focused on renewable energy engineering and construction. However, archaeological fortune brought to light this ancient witness of life and its millennial history.

What makes this villa an especially significant find is its multi-layered structure, which reveals the occupation of at least two distinct periods in Roman history. Studies conducted thus far indicate that the villa began to be occupied in the late Republican period and continued operating until the beginning of the Augustan period, in the 1st century BC. This first level of occupation is characterized by the use of a building technique known as *opus reticulatum*, a characteristic method of the period that employed small stones arranged in grid patterns. Later, in a second phase of occupation, the villa was expanded and renovated in the late Imperial period, roughly between the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, with brick construction.

The ager Falernus produced the most famous wine of ancient Rome, which had up to 30% alcohol. Credit: Soprintendenza Archeologia Belle Arti e Paesaggio per le province di Caserta e Benevento

These signs of space reuse and adaptation show how ancient structures were transformed over time to meet the needs of new generations. This not only provides information on architectural changes but also on lifestyles and the development of Roman building technology in the Campania context, a key area of economic and agricultural expansion in antiquity.

The excavation has also uncovered several elements that allow us to imagine life in this Roman villa. Among the finds are **floors made of *cocciopesto***, a mix of lime and ceramic fragments typical of Roman flooring, and large *dolia*, terracotta containers used to store food, reflecting the importance of agriculture and self-sufficiency in these villas. Several amphorae were also found, used to transport wine and oil, essential products in the Roman diet and economy.

One of the most notable finds was an **oil lamp in *sigillata italica***, a fine ceramic used for tableware and everyday objects, decorated with an erotic scene. This detail provides an intimate glimpse into the culture and customs of the time, reflecting the sophistication and private life of the villa's inhabitants. Additionally, a considerable amount of pottery has been collected, including both everyday tableware and decorative and utilitarian objects.

Detail of the remains of the Roman villa found in Campania. Credit: Soprintendenza Archeologia Belle Arti e Paesaggio per le province di Caserta e Benevento

The ***ager Falernus***, located between Mount Massico and the Volturno River, was famous among the Romans for its fertility and vineyards, which produced the **renowned Falernian wine**, the most prized wine in ancient Rome. Pliny the Elder once noted that it *is the only wine that ignites when a flame is applied,* alluding to its high alcohol content. This villa, like others that likely existed in the *ager Falernus*, would have played an important role in the production and trade of wine, olive oil, and other agricultural products.

The *ager Falernus* was a hub of agricultural activity from its founding in 318 BC, and its proximity to the Via Appia, one of the most important routes of the Roman Empire, facilitated the transport and commercialization of agricultural

products to Rome and other cities of the empire. The villa discovered in Cancello ed Arnone appears to have been an integral part of this rural economy that sustained Roman urban life.

In his statements, Superintendent Mariano Nuzzo emphasized the importance of this discovery as an extraordinary testament to the past and an invaluable documentary source for archaeological and historical research. According to Nuzzo, *the remarkable result achieved highlights the relevance of cooperation between institutions and the private sector, reminding us once again of the value of the safeguarding actions carried out by the Soprintendenze, which enable the preservation and conservation of our cultural heritage without hindering the country's developmental process*.

SOURCES

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