

MINISTERO PER I BENI E LE ATTIVITÀ CULTURALI
SOPRINTENDENZA PER I BENI ARCHEOLOGICI DELLA LOMBARDIA

The Desenzano Roman Villa



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At the end of the Roman era, the general economic crisis destroyed the small and medium sized country estates and favoured the formation of a limited number of large *villae*, an expression of a strong concentration of agrarian property. The *possessores* (proprietors) left the city to move onto their land, where in the mould of luxury and self-praise, guaranteed by their sumptuous *villae*, they regained, not only formally, all the *auctoritas* (authority) which they had lost in the deterioration of the political system.

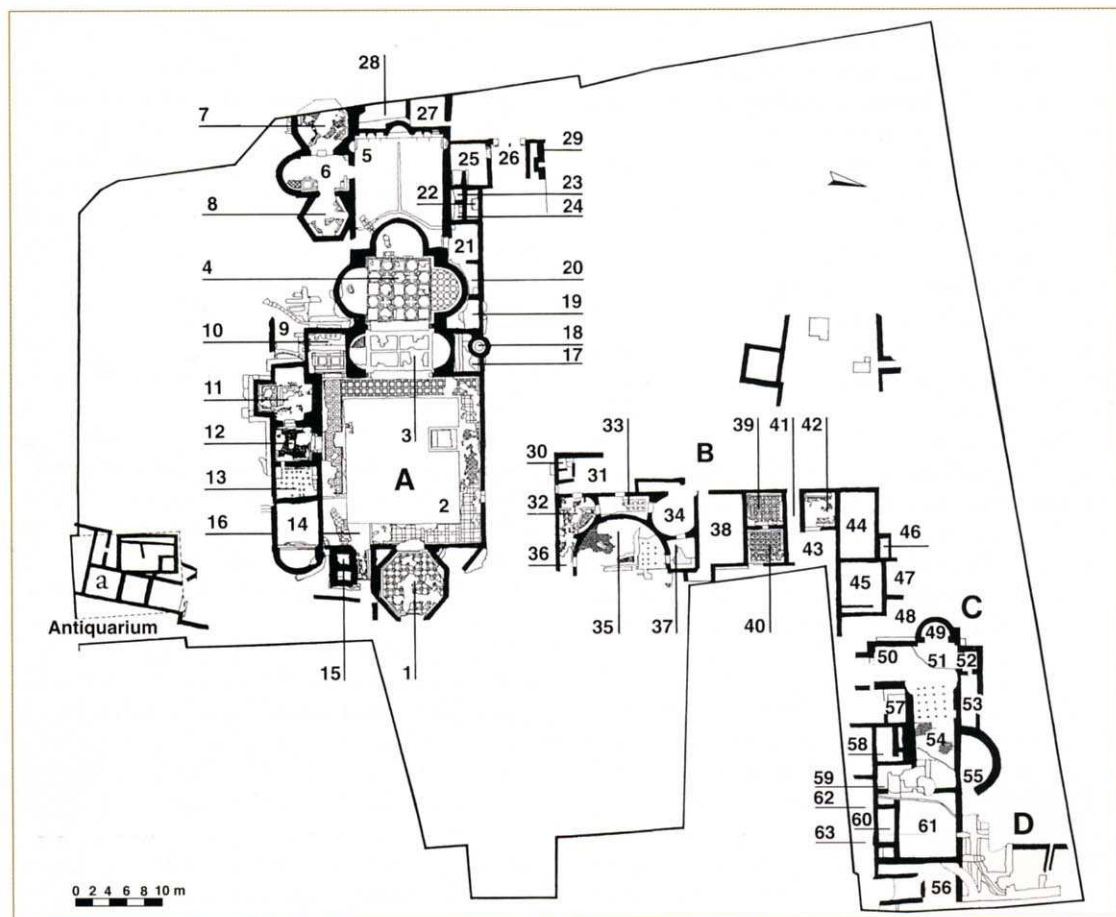
The Desenzano Roman villa is today the most important witness, in northern Italy, to the large late Roman *villae*. The building benefited from an excellent rural setting, being situated a little N of the *via Gallica*, that connected *Bergomum* (Bergamo), *Brixia* (Brescia) and *Verona* (Verona), in a splendid position on the southern shore of lake Garda (which today is less than 70 metres away). Area A, with the exception of rooms 11-14, was

for long the only known part of the villa: excavated in 1921-23, if was restored only in 1928-1930, when the mosaics and walls had already seriously deteriorated. No documentation exists for this initial excavation, illustrated solely by a publication in 1965.

Between 1963-76, the excavation of area A was completed and areas a, B and part of C were brought to light and restored. The excavation and study of the villa were resumed at the end of 1988 and are still in course: therefore the interpretation of the complex cannot be considered as definitive. In 1990 the protection of areas B, C and D were achieved by the construction of a new system of modular covers.

The remains of the villa, that have seen several phases of construction between the end of the Republican era and the V century A.D., extend over an area of about one hectare, forming two main blocks: A to the S and B, C, D to the N, separated by a road which gave access to the W (26).

The oldest phases of the villa are still little known,



even though recent excavations have given new evidence for these phases.

A group of rooms (a, with independent orientation), with an underfloor heating system (*hypocausta*) was discovered beneath the present museum, and is datable to the first half of the I century A.D. In turn, this room was destroyed by a large rectangular cistern, on the same alignment as the villa.

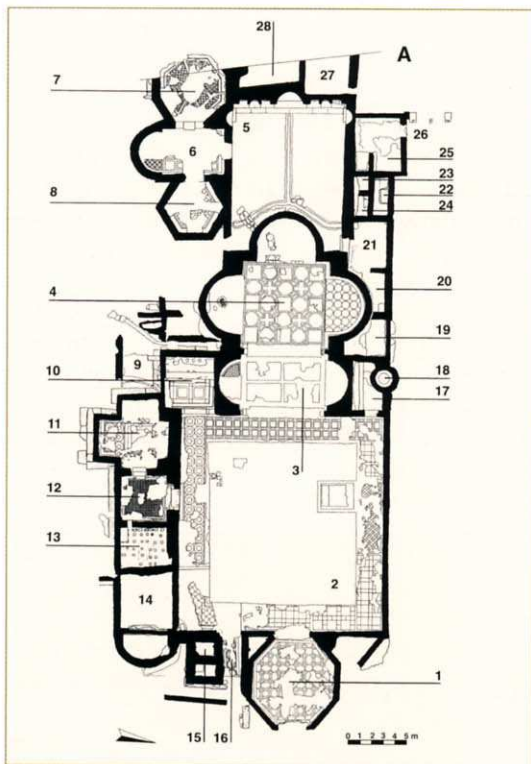
To this new phase, attributable to the second half of the I century A.D., belongs the general layout of the complex, oriented almost exactly NE-SW, the walls of which were partly preserved in the late Roman rebuilding. Some parts were located in areas A and B: a small area of black and white mosaic visible in *trichora* 4 (the room with three apses); rooms located beneath peristyle 2, no longer visible; a floor in *opus spicatum* (with bricks laid in herringbone fashion) beneath rooms 32-33, 35-36), but above all in areas C and D.

From these separated remains one gets the impression of a very extensive, complex building, with a uniform orientation, in which residential zones alternated with rustic structures.

Certainly the villa was subject to other interventions and modifications, but it is only during the first half of the IV century that it received the complete rebuilding now visible, consisting of high-status functions in area A, prevalently residential in area B, and of a mainly thermal nature in areas C and D. In an even later phase, probably at the end of the IV century, a large apsidal hall was built over the earlier rooms in area B, with a circle of rooms behind the apse (34-37). Other modifications were carried out in area C. At present it is not possible to determine whether the final modifications had only increased the nature of sumptuous representation of the villa, adding to the *trichora* (4) the great apsidal hall (35) (these two types of room are present in various large late Roman villas, for example in that of Piazza Armerina in Sicily, or in palace complexes, like the palace of Teodorico at Ravenna), or if the insertion of the apsidal hall, which could be a basilica intended for Christian worship, represents a new function, total or partial, for the building.

Area A

The area of high status A of the late Roman villa is organised along a magnificent axial range, which, starting at the octagonal vestibule 1, open at the E towards the lake, crosses the peristyle 2 and the two-winged atrium 3 and is concluded in the sumptuous *triclinium* (dining room) with three apses 4 (*trichord*).

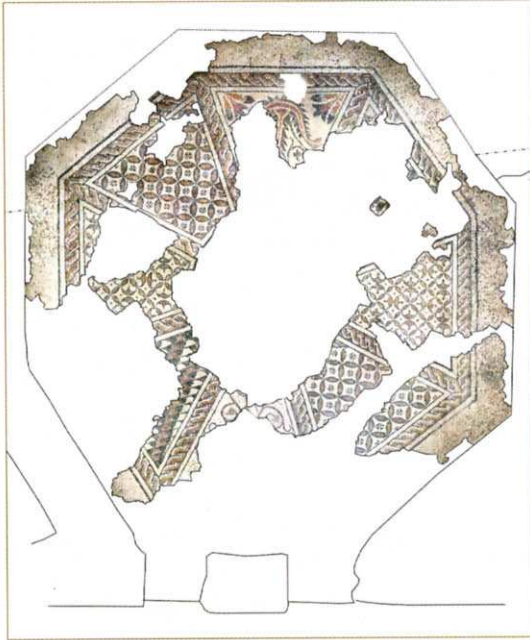


This sequence of high-status rooms is flanked by a series of rooms, heated by *hypocausta*, 11, 12, 13, 14 (the last two were originally one room ending in a semicircular bath). It had the function of a baths complex, but the cruciform room 11 could be, perhaps through the modification of an earlier room with rectangular baths, a *cubiculum* (bedroom) with two alcoves.

Large sections of decorative mosaics are preserved, in which the complexity of motifs, regularly spaced with the effect of expanding the area, and the harmony of colour prevail over the geometric precision of construction and alignment with the walls, themselves glaringly irregular. Given the richness of the complex, one cannot fail to see the intentional disinterest, typical of late Roman decoration, for the geometric regularity of its construction.

The octagonal room, with its rich mosaic floor, leads into the portico of the peristyle 2 (of which only a column base remains), paved with a series of lively mosaic "carpets" of differing lengths. Along the W wall remain parts of the wall paintings with motifs of red Greek key design and stylised flowers on a white background.

Room 11, other than fragments of wall paintings with black background, preserves the geometric decoration of one of the "alcoves" and, in the central



Area A, room 7



Section A, room 11

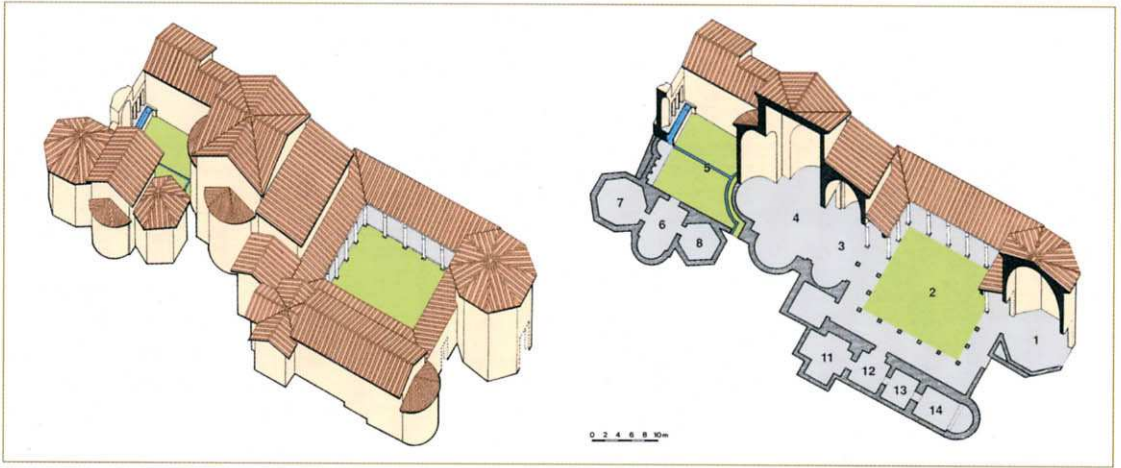
field, fragments of a male figure in a bucolic scene containing animals and trees. A representation of the Good Shepherd has been suggested, but it could also represent Orfeo with animals. Part of an elegant geometric mosaic floor is also preserved in rooms 12 and 13. Left in view, in the open area of the peristyle, is the start of a long underground room, of difficult functional definition and chronology, in which were recovered nearly all of the ornamental statues, now conserved in the museum, which with every probability decorated the peristyle and the *viridarium* (garden). The statues date to the II century A.D., and are therefore older than the late Roman rebuilding of the villa, in which they could however have been utilized.

In the area of high status, domed, apsed, vaulted and barrel-vaulted roofs must have been employed (see hypothetical reconstructions), with a well-constructed game of volumes which highlights, both within and outside the complex, the hierarchy and the differing functions of the rooms. The alternating of open and covered spaces, the latter variably illuminated by natural light and richly decorated, animated the dominant axial range.

At the end of the S wing of the peristyle opens room 10, heated (outside, a *praefurnium* 9 (room in front of the combustion chamber) is visible, that also served rooms 11-14) and decorated with a mosaic floor of which remain only two panels with *psychai coronariae* (young girls that interlace crowns) here interlacing garlands and cupids who wreath chains of fruit, expressing spring and summer, certainly completed, in the missing part of the mosaic, by the other two seasons. The first room could be a *cubiculum* or a small sitting room (*diaeta*).

In the rebuilding of the villa in the IV century A.D., the two large rooms 3 and 4, of mixtilinear perimeter, had evidently been inserted into the previous orthogonal structure. The two-winged atrio 3, decorated in the two apses with a bipartite scaly motif (a large part of the S apse is preserved), contains a mosaic, situated in the rectangular room, divided into four panels; two oriented towards the peristyle and two towards the *trichora*, in order to comply with both the entrance and exit.

The common subject is the representation of fishing cherubs, arranged in boats or on rocks, furnished with fishing rods and buckets. The theme belongs to the late Roman repertoire of decoration, as much as it had lost its specific bath-house destination. From room 3 one enters (originally probably through a colonaded opening, to which must belong



Possible reconstruction of area A

the fluted column found here) the *trichora* 4, certainly a large *triclinium*, an expression of the ceremonial and almost spectacular function that the banquet had assumed in the habits of the private *possessores*, with their customary quick emulation of court life.

Also here the decoration is geometric (in the S apse one sees a fragment of black and white mosaic, belonging to an earlier phase of the villa). The central room is, however, organised in a complex scheme of crosses, octagons and squares, containing figurative themes from the repertoire: cherubs gathering grapes, cherubs on chariots, cherubs between vegetal clusters; nymphs and satyrs; wild beasts attacking game; *kantharoi* (two handled cups) out of which come branches, which are repeated depending on the pattern that could be read for concentric squares, for orthographic or diagonal lines. The figures are oriented so as to allow the enjoyment of the decoration from all parts of the room, given that in all probability the *stibadia* (a curved arrangement of three beds) were placed in the apses. The decoration of this room was unfortunately the most compromised in the restorations of 1928-30, carried out with old tesserae which have altered the style of the images.

Outside the *trichora*, but, seemingly without direct access with it, and therefore with functions more reserved with respect to the peristyle 2, one finds the elegant *viridarium* 5, terminated by a nymphaeum. The water gushes out of alternatively circular and rectangular niches and flows into a *euripo* (a conduit in the the garden of the peristyle), which crosses the open area and encircles the apse. Slight remains of wall paintings in the NE corner allow the recognition of decoration with orthogonal and



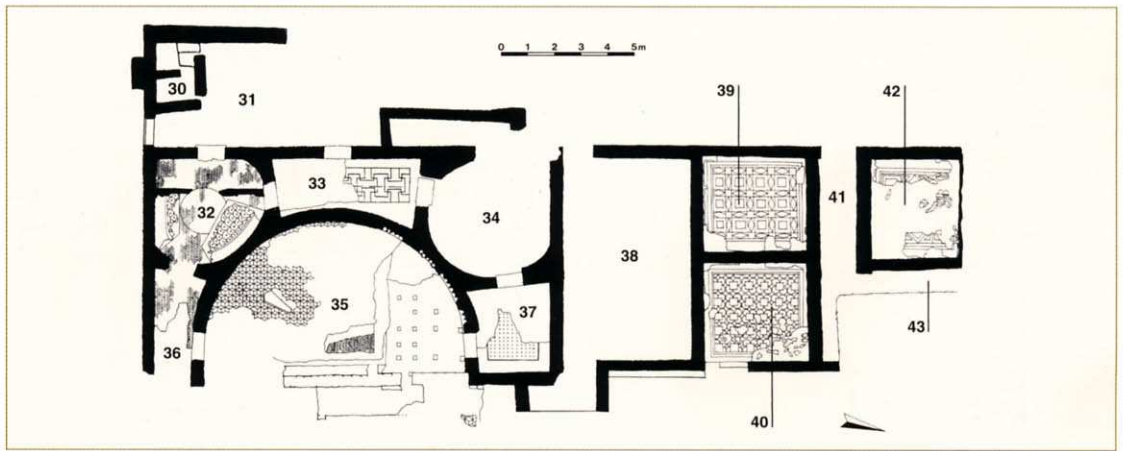
Area A, room 4

oblique borders (*cancellum*) between which appear reddish flowers. To the S of the *viridarium* and the *trichora* complex are aligned a series of service rooms (17-25), in which is situated well 18, partially cut into the apses and largely rearranged.

Area B

This area of the villa has been subjected to repeated transformation, the sequence of which, at present, is unclear.

Beneath apse 35, four successive floors can be seen in section. Between these, visible beneath rooms 32-33, 35-36, is a large *opus spicatum* floor (I century A.C.), on which was probably installed (corresponding to room 32) a *torcular* (press) for the pressing of grapes and olives, as would seem to demonstrate a wide depression (base of the machine



or pressing surface) and the recovery in the villa of the lower parts of the stone counterweight of a press (exhibited in the entrance to the excavations).

Also belonging to the earliest phase is the adjacent heating system with *suspensurae*, (small pillars which support the floor, thus forming a space for the passage of hot air), which remained in function in the successive rebuildings.

The phase of rebuilding in the IV century is documented by a group of living rooms 39-42, whose elegant geometric mosaics are closely analogous to those of area A.

In a later phase, probably at the end of the IV or early in the V century, the entire S part (rooms 31-37) was rebuilt on a notably higher level than that of the adjacent rooms, and was made into a sequence of rooms arranged around a large apse 35, at the end of a room, probably rectangular, of which to date only a small part has been excavated. The apse is floored in *opus sectile* (marble inlay) of rhomboidal marble tiles forming a design of cubes in perspective; the same design is continued in a polychrome mosaic, in the rectangular room (a small part is *in situ* and a part has been moved to the museum). After the abandonment of the villa, a grave was cut in the apse, as also in other parts of the structure. The stratification of floors has not been destroyed as the apse had only been heated in the N portion, where the *suspensurae* had been integrated with *tubuli* (ducts) for the passage of hot air through the walls; the system of *suspensurae* were also continued in the rectangular room and beneath room 37.

A series of irregular and curved rooms, arranged around apse 35, also serve to contrast the thrust of the apse. The rooms, connected between themselves in series and with the apse by corridors 36 and 37, are paved with geometric mosaics, made with large black and white tesserae, less refined than the earlier

geometric mosaics, probably also due to the secondary function of these rooms. The function of the large apsed room is still unknown: it could be a luxurious room of status, in addition to the *trichora* 4 of area A, but for now one cannot exclude a function belonging to Christian worship, and thus the insertion, not exceptional in the transition between late Roman and early Medieval periods, of an ecclesiastical structure within a large private villa.

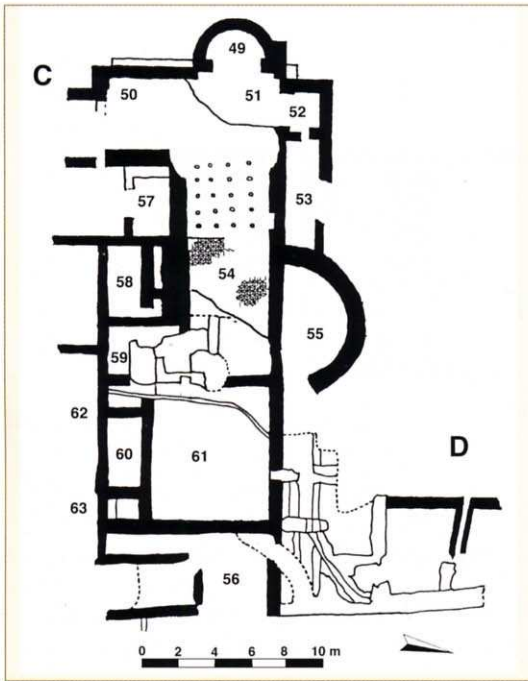
Areas C and D

The North-East area of the archaeological complex has already been partly examined during the investigations conducted following the massive illegal destruction of the area in the 70's. The latter, the seriousness of which is still unknown, have caused the almost total loss of the structures in area D (walls and floors) and stratigraphy relating to the late Roman phases.

During recent research it has been possible to carry out an initial control of the sections and of the horizons saved from destruction, retracing the links with structures already visible. At least in the most important points, the complex sequence of events and uses, that have concerned the area between the end of the I century A.D. and the late Roman period, have been reconstructed.

In period I (Augustan period) areas C and D were occupied by a large structure, probably of residential function, with a regular layout and access from the E, therefore from the lake. The walls, of mortared cobbles, delineate various rooms with the remains of *cocciopesto* floors. Beneath the foundations, the underlying levels contained fragments of pre-Roman and *vernice nera* pottery.

The structure was probably rebuilt during the I



century (period II): some older walls being demolished and rebuilt. The construction of a system of channels dramatically altered the pre-existing situation. A little later (period III), during the late I century, other functional restructuring took place and a new building erected with floors of *cocciopesto*, geometric black and white mosaics and wall paintings. In the excavation it is still possible to see conspicuous traces: a reconstruction of the wall paintings has been attempted in the museum. A new canal and two cisterns, plastered with hydraulic mortar, are probably related to service activities for the new building.

Finally, in the late Roman era, during period IV, the domestic complex was reorganised, probably as a bath house, connected to the large villa which

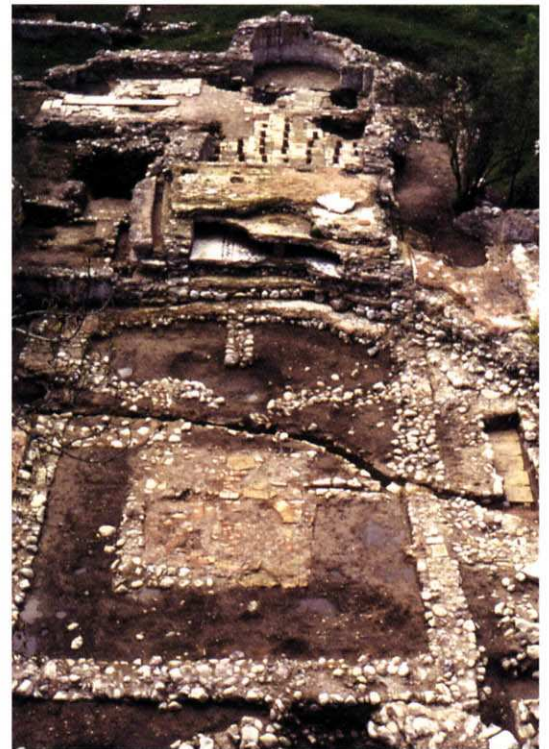


Area C, rooms 49-52

extends to the S: floors of various types, on heavy cobble foundations, overlay the earlier ones. The tanks were destroyed and new heating systems created, both underfloor and in the walls; a solid wall was built to form the eastern boundary of the complex, and an apsed structure for access or berthing at the lake. The new building, oriented like those of areas A and B, shows the same sumptuousness of construction (floors of marble slabs, apsed rooms) combined with the same irregularity and frequency of variables in the structural modules.

The still uncompleted research and absence of details for the unexcavated zone between areas B, C and D, of key importance in understanding the overall picture, do not allow the drawing of definitive conclusions on the layout or functions of the building in areas C and D.

However, the archaeological evidence seems to suggest that the destruction of the complex was caused by a violent fire: following which it is possible to note only the occasional re-use of rooms during the medieval period, with the insertion of timber structures in rooms which, by this time, were in a state of decay, and sparse activity of reclamation and recovery during the Renaissance period.



Area C

THE ANTIQUARIUM

In the first room are two glass cases exhibiting kitchen (pots, pans) and table (plates, goblets) ceramics, numerous lamps, and small bronze utensils recovered from excavations of the villa. The second room contains the rich collection of statues, the richest group of sculptures from a private residence of the Roman period in Northern Italy. They have been found to date from the 2nd Century AD, and were probably in use in the villa until the 4th Century.

As well as various fragments of sculptures exhibited in the glass case, there are statues of Dionysius, Heracles, a young boy, and a refined male portrait. A small glass case displays an exceptional glass goblet with an engraving of a Christian scene depicting the prediction of the Peter's three-fold denial of Christ (second-half of the 4th Century AD). The third room houses two large panels with the reconstruction of the painted wall in alcove 54, area C. The glass case displays a selection of the abundant coins found in the excavations as well as items of clothing. A large fragment of a grape harvest scene which has recently been found, is also presented.



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The archaeological area is open to the public as follows:

From 1 March to the 31 October: 8:30 am to 7:30 pm

From 1 November to 28 February: 8:30 am to 5:00 pm

Opening hours for the Antiquarium are: 8:30 am to 7:30 pm.

The Antiquarium is closed weekly on:

Monday, or Tuesday if Monday is falls on a holiday.

Also closed on: 1 January, 1 May, 25 December

The ticket office is open up to 30 minutes prior to closing time of the archaeological area and Antiquarium.

Text: D. Scagliarini, F. Rossi

Reliefs: Archivio Disegni Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici della Lombardia (CAL, Archeotech, C. Bertolotti, G. Ravelli)

Photoplan of the mosaic decorations: L. Cervigni

Photographs: Archivio Disegni Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici della Lombardia: L. Monopoli e L. Caldera

Curated by E. Roffia