

Archaeological investigations at San Giovanni Portoferraio

The first excavation campaign at San Giovanni in 2102 was started with the idea to establish the presence and the quantity of old kilns for the reduction of iron minerals, as archive documents and a large literary production reveal.

The site, located in the eastern end of the coastal plain of San Giovanni, below the cape on which the Roman Villa delle Grotte lies, is one of the first centres of reduction of Roman times known on the island being explored and investigated. Unfortunately, from 1938 to 1943 both the Isle of Elba and the mainland underwent a major activity of removal and recovery of the old iron slag to be recycled in the iron industry. The site of production of San Giovanni was also involved in this activity, and the vast excavation of the plain through mechanical means is still visible, in particular in the north-eastern area, which has altered the morphology of the landscape and the conservation of the site.

The whole area underwent a geophysical survey conducted by dr. Laura Cerri, who pointed out the presence of numerous ar-

chaeological relics buried. In the first place, the geomagnetic maps featured the many anomalies of high intensity (marked with a red circle) mainly detected in the north-eastern area of the land estate, between the house and the sea, (squares 1-6); these anomalies, characterized by high magnetic values, showed the presence of a strong concentration of metals in the subsoil, and their shape, circumscribed and circular, let suppose the presence of furnaces for the reduction of iron. Furthermore, the survey revealed numerous linear anomalies, which could be interpreted as masonry structures, built closed to the supposed kilns and as well as near the house and the 17th-century church of San Marco (fig. 7).

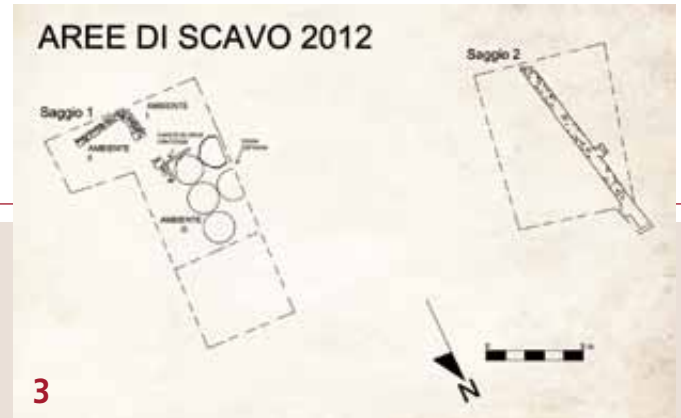
During the two excavation campaigns carried out in 2012 by the Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici della Toscana and in 2013 by the Università degli Studi di Siena, the areas of the site revealing the major anomalies were the subjects of survey; but the investigation didn't unveil the remains of the kilns for the reduction of minerals, which supposedly are still





1 Lo scavo della fattoria di San Giovanni
2 Anomalie geomagnetiche individuate nel sito di San Giovanni

3 Planimetria dello scavo di San Giovanni
4 Particolare di uno dei cinque dolia defossa in corso di scavo



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beneath the layer we have detected.

The first survey revealed the remains of a large building, whose roof and walls were mostly collapsed. During the first excavation campaign, three rooms were uncovered, two of which were covered with a roof and separated by a threshold, while a third one might be interpreted as a courtyard, featuring five large “dolia defossa”, used for completing the fermentation of the wine or for its preservation (fig. 8).

The imposing wall unearthed during the second survey, being constructed with regular stone blocks, bound together through mortar, allowed to establish the western extent of the building: this wall actually marked an external area to the west and an internal area to the east, where some unstable layers made up of raw bricks, nails, carbonized wooden pieces, fragments of plaster and of opus signinum floor with insertions of white tesserae arranged to form a geometrical





pattern; this type of floor, which indicates a high standard of quality of the building structures, is documented in a time span between the late 3rd and the late 1st centuries B.C. (fig.9).

The excavation campaign of 2013, which mainly focused on an in-depth examination of the first survey, allowed to identify two further rooms of the building and to make clear the chronology of its construction.

All the walls of the building standing at San Giovanni seem to be made of raw earth, and the fact that these walls have survived is surely due to a fire: the collapsed layers are of a deep red colour, rich in fragments of raw earth, later baked because of combustion, which still feature clear signs of the support lathwork and are alternate to black-coloured layers, which formed after the decay of the wooden parts of the structures.

The building features the use of two particular techniques: the walls, whose brick bases are still visible, as they define the rooms II, IV and V, seem to be made with the 'raw brick' technique, where the bricks were obtained by pressing clay,



sand and organic material and later arranged on the stone bases; besides providing solidity to the structure, they were a protection against humidity. The coating of the raised wall featured clayish earth, on which a layer of plaster was supposedly laid, since it was detected in all the rooms collapsed. The discovery of many traces of carbonized wooden structures, the presence of reeds imprinted in the burnt raw earth and the outstanding quantity of iron nails also witness the



5 Anfore Dressel I nella cantina di San Giovanni



6 Saggio 2 dello scavo di San Giovanni: muro che delimita ad Ovest un'area esterna e ad Est una interna

7 Parete in opus craticium in situ

employment of the technique called *opus craticium*, a large part of which has been uncovered in situ, where it marked the room III, that is the vast courtyard for the conservation of the *dolia* (fig. 10).

The further excavation in room I also allowed to confirm the hypothesis of part of the building being on two storeys, thanks to the removal of a floor paved with “*cocciopesto*” (lime mortar with an aggregate of coarse pieces of broken terracotta), featuring small stone inserts, which fell down



onto the collapse of the *opus craticium* wall defining the underlying courtyard with the *dolia*.

The layout on two storeys has also been proved in room IV, where the excellent state of preservation of the building has enabled to discover a clay wall with plaster on, which had fallen down from an upper storey: indeed, this wall had collapsed onto the floor covering paved with “*cocciopesto*” and with small white insertions, which in turn had fallen down onto the collapsed walls of the lower level. In the same room also numerous fragments of plaster were found, which belonged to the roof and the walls of the room itself (fig. 11).

The excavation of room I also brought to light some Dressel 1a amphorae, mainly used for the storage of wine, in the inside of which some grape seeds were found and sampled, being burnt because of the fire that destroyed the building; a great number of pieces of amphorae were also found in the excavation next room II, which can be interpreted as an area for the preservation and storage of wine.

By the northern border of the excavation area a further room was discovered, where an imposing collapse of plasters and numerous bricks in a circle were unearthed but not properly excavated, supposedly masonry columns supporting a rustic portico facing the sea (fig. 12-13).

During the last excavation campaign, the *doliarium* was also uncovered. It was made up of five lidded *dolia defossa* placed in an open courtyard, where all the layers of collapse of the rooms were found: bricks and shingles, baked clay and pieces of lathwork, fragments of floor and the most part of the wall covering. Beneath the collapses, fallen in for the weight, it is now possible to see the brims, the upper parts of the walls and fragments of lids, thus demonstrating that the containers were empty or full of wine when the building collapsed.

The capacity of every single container has been approximately estimated between 1,300 and 1,500 litres, when taking into account their bad state of preservation. In close proximity to the Church of San Marco and of the villa owned by Mr and



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Mrs Gasparri, a further trial excavation was started, which brought to light three walls belonging to the same space, made with stones bound with mortar and coated with plaster. It is a building whose structures are similar to those found and documented in trial excavation 2 of 2012, thus confirming the effectiveness of the geomagnetic survey of 2011 and providing a further important clue about the extension of the Roman settlement of San Giovanni and about the complexity of its layout.

The lucky recovery of some seals on opus doliare enabled to get important information about the ownership of the buildings excavated and about the near sea-side villa, which would support a more and more convincing hypothesis: the neighbouring villa delle Grotte would belong to the estate of the Valerii Messallae.

We know about the this gens being linked with the Isle of Elba thanks to the verses of Ovidio, who remembers travelling to the Island before going into exile (8 A.D.), to greet his friend Cotta Massimo, the younger son of M. Valerius Messalla Corvino, a politician with relationships in the imperial family and protector of arts as well as of Cotta's second wife, one Aurelia of the Aurelii Cottae. After the adoption by his maternal uncle, M. Aurelius Cotta, he will get his cognomen so becoming L. Aurelius Cotta Maximus Messallinus.

As Orlanda Pancrazzi has noticed just from Ovidio's words, Cotta Massimo must have possessed a residence on the island, necessarily worthy of his high rank, which might be identified with one of the three monumental sea-side villas known: alle Grotte and alla Linguella, in the gulf of Portoferraio, or at Capo Castello, on the north-west point of the

island. The three of them are all situated within a scenic location and feature a high quality structure, which dates back their building in the Augustan age.

Confirmation of this hypothesis was given by the presence of stamps in planta pedis in the walls of dolia, which, though fragmentary, allowed to retrieve the whole text content with the name of the maker: H^{er}mia V^a(leri) M(arci) s(ervus)/fecit. The servant Hermia uses a way of expressing the maker's name, which is well recorded in the opus doliare between the late Republican age and the early Augustan age, as the prenominal of the dominus is put behind his family name; two other fragmentary seals on brick are also referred to Hermia, probably the same mentioned above: on a rectangular scroll, next to the two initial letters of the name, joined together



8 Parete in opus craticium concotta con intonaco in situ

9 Mattoni a forma di settore di cerchio che costituivano le colonne del portico



10 Particolare del bollo in planta pedis su dolium in corso di scavo
11 Bollo in cartiglio rettangolare "HE" su tegola.

like in the seals in planta pedis of the dolium, a dolphin with arched back is depicted in relief (fig. 14-15).

There are many stories about dolphins in antiquity as well as many episodes of love and benevolence between this animal and man set in several Greek towns, one recorded by Pliny being particularly striking. It is set in Iasos, in Caria, and tells the story of a young boy astride the back of a dolphin, who was killed by the waves of a sudden sea-storm: no sooner did the dolphin perceive he had caused the death of the boy, he swam back to the shore, and there let himself die. The name of this young boy was exactly Ermia. Maybe the officinator with a Graecian name, like many of the professionals working in the figline of northern Etruria during the 1st century B.C., wanted to evoke his homeland.

On the basis of the study of the ceramic materials found and of the inscriptions, the building and the doliarium of S. Giovanni date back to the early 1st century B.C. and their state of neglect is marked by a fire occurred in the 1st century A.D., which "baking" the structures in raw earth enabled its preservation.

This large complex can be surely interpreted as the *pars rustica* of the Villa delle Grotte, excavated in the 1960's.

The Roman Villa delle Grotte, which stands on the cape that flanks the south-eastern harbour of Portoferraio, separating the plain of San Giovanni from the one of Magazzini, dominates the whole stretch of sea between the coast of Piombino and Portoferraio inlet, enclosed on the other side by the Roman Villa della Linguella. It is a luxury residence, which meets the needs typical of an important family, like the one of the Valerii, who along with the Aurelii Cottae appear to be deeply rooted on the whole Tuscan coast, still keeping close relationships with the capital city, which provides skilled labour, building materials and works of art.

A recent revision that Sonia Casaburo did of the materials and of the building stages of the villa has made it possible to date its building to the Augustan age, while the absence of the

main forms and products of the late 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. leads us to place the abandonment of the residence and the spoliation of its most valuable items of furniture in the second half of the 1st century A.D.

The elements gathered from the layers of collapse of the building at San Giovanni also confirm that it was uninhabited from the same period and suggest that the fire itself was the cause of its abandonment.

