

## OTIUM, THE EMPEROR TIBERIUS AND CAPRI

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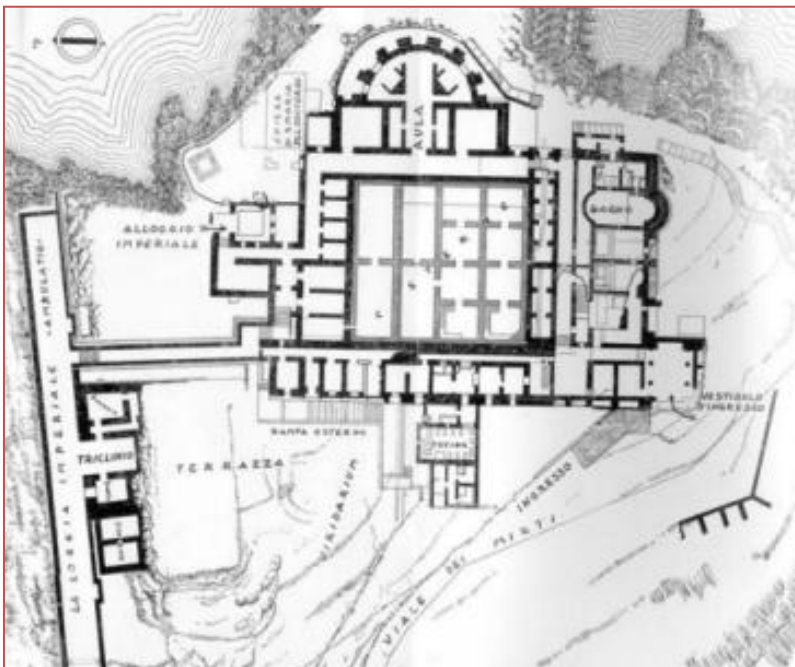


*Otium* is the Roman philosophy of relaxation, gracious living and pleasure. This was no more apparent than in the behaviour of the Julio-Claudian emperors in the first century, especially regarding their retreat on the beautiful island of Capri (*Caprae*). Capri in the Gulf of Naples is unusual inasmuch as the majority of the islands are volcanic in origin. Capri was originally attached to the Sorrento peninsula by a narrow isthmus and is made of limestone and pink sandstone. The effects of weathering and the action of the sea left an island surrounded by steep cliffs and deep sea caves with unique flora and fauna.

Augustus was the first emperor attracted to the place and is reputed to have swapped the larger island of Ischia for it. He started building luxurious villas in 27 BC but the big building phase came with the ascendancy of his heir Tiberius. After his arrival on the island in AD 26 Tiberius remained until his death in AD 37. He built a total of twelve large villas on the island and switched between them depending on the season and presumably his whim. The largest was the Villa Jovis which crowned the north eastern headland atop cliffs standing 350m. above sea level. Nearby also stood a pharos, which was his signalling station enabling him to remain in contact with Rome, and a small complex thought to be an observatory for his astrologer.

### Villa Jovis

The remains today are much depleted. Substantial remains were removed in the early 18th century leaving little more than the foundations. The total site covers an area of around 6000 sq.m. but much of this was used to fortify the island during the Napoleonic wars. So what is left? First the villa in such a position and designed for *otium* required large quantities of water. Accordingly the complex was built around and over a great cistern to hold the necessary water. To the south of the cistern was a bath suite for guests who would refresh themselves on arrival in the entrance lobby to the south west corner.



Plan of the villa taken from 'Capri, History and Monuments' by Amedeo Maiuri, pub. *Itineraries of Museums and Monuments of Italy*, 1981

After this the guests ascended a ramp to the upper storeys where presumably there were rooms built over the cistern but all gone now. They would progress to the eastern aspect where a great hemispherical audience chamber or *Aula* (right) stood on the edge of the headland with views across the Bay of Naples to Mount Vesuvius and the Sorrentine peninsula. Here according to Tacitus the entertainment was sybaritic in the extreme but was he jealous because he wasn't invited or did



he just not like Tiberius! Certainly Tacitus had it that Tiberius in his bath would have young slaves who would swim with him and nibble his toes and genitals. This presumably took place in the private quarters (*Allogia imperiale*).

Alternative sources say Tiberius stayed with a few companions and rather than sexual excess they spent their time discussing Greek philosophy and learning. To support the argument that this was a place of more wholesome exercise there was a long loggia along the northern side of the complex, which appears to have been used for working out. Off the long loggia were small rooms, possibly guest rooms or store rooms, and a *triclinium* for dining looking at the views. Again Tiberius was slandered here. Rumour had it that if you upset him then you would be escorted to the edge of the loggia and dropped off the 350m high cliff.

Scant remains are left to show the opulence of the place. Most of the marble, statues, anything of value, was stripped out by an 'archaeologist' Norbert Hadrawa working on behalf of Ferdinand IV, King of the Two Sicilies. The ruins, entrusted to the care of the priest in charge of the church of Sta. Maria del Soccorso, were neglected and despoiled by local shepherds and the like. Not until 1937 was the importance of the villa recognised and the site excavated by modern archaeologists. Traces of black and white mosaic remain and the usual deep red typical of first century wall paint. Surprisingly the magnificent *opus sectile* marble floor from the *aula* does survive. It was used to pave the chancel in St. Stephen's church in Capri town in 1683.



The floor of the audience chamber

### Villa Damecuta

At the other end of the island Tiberius built a villa with similar features to *Villa Jovis*. Similarly sited atop a steep cliff the villa had a hemispherical audience chamber, a long loggia overlooking the sea and private quarters at the end of the loggia. Much of the villa was removed to build a mediaeval watch tower. The remains were further plundered to provide stone for coastal fortifications built by the French and later reinforced by the British after they took the island during the Napoleonic wars. Probably the most notable remains are those from the audience chamber and the inner wall of the loggia.



The foundations of the audience chamber at Damecuta

### Grotta di Matermania



This huge semicircular cave was dedicated to the god of land and fertility. In the time of Augustus and Tiberius, it was used as a *nymphaeum*. The floor was levelled and reinforcing walls built to allow feasting and pleasure with a dramatic sea view. Traces of marble and decoration have been found but it is likely the material was removed during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Perhaps this site, more than any other, represents the pinnacle of *Otium*.

Slight remains of further Tiberian villas have

been identified. The *Villa Gradola* stood above the famous Blue Grotto. The marine villa built by Augustus for sea bathing lay near the port of Marina Grande.

### **Finis**

Caligula showed no interest in Capri and is reputed to have smothered his uncle Tiberius there in 37 AD. In fact Tiberius died of a cold at Misenum in Campania. Following the eruption of Vesuvius the island was more or less abandoned, and the sumptuous villas were quickly robbed of their precious artefacts and building stone. During the Bourbon occupation in the late 17th century most of the remaining artefacts were removed. Only slight remains of Tiberius' famous twelve villas were left and these were quickly plundered for stone to build fortifications during the Napoleonic wars, by both sides! But underneath the rack and ruin, and the hordes of summer visitors, the spirit of *otium* lives on. The island is stunningly beautiful, the flora and fauna are quite unique and one doesn't need to go far to escape the madding crowd. Perhaps Tiberius wasn't so wrong after all.