

## Horace's (Other) Sabine Villa: Antiquarianism and Forgery at the Roman Villa of Vacone

Since 2011, the Upper Sabina Tiberina Project has conducted the excavation of the so-called Villa di Orazio in Vacone, Italy (Masci et al. 2014). The town of Vacone has been associated with the Sabine villa of Horace since at least the 15<sup>th</sup> century when Flavio Biondo falsely linked the town's name with the *fanum Vacunae* of *Epistulae* 1.10. Subsequent antiquarians and travelers continued to connect the town and its extant villa to the Roman poet, citing the structure's ruins and inscriptions of dubious origin as evidence. Rediscovered by road construction in the 1960's and subject to conservation in the 1980's, four recent seasons of intensive fieldwork have exposed large sections of the villa's architecture and have begun to clarify the site's occupational history. Two falsified artifacts bearing the name *Horatius*, brought to light during the 2013 and 2014 seasons, have also shed light on the villa's second life as the so-called "Villa of Horace". This tradition, less famous than that of the villa at Licenza commonly cited as Horace's (Frischer et al. 2006), nonetheless presents an intriguing intersection of antiquarianism, local pride, and forgery worthy of further study.

The recently discovered inscribed artifacts can be linked to a practice, dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, of using falsified epigraphic evidence to prove the villa's Horatian origins. The first object, found in 2013, consists of an ancient dolium rim inscribed with seven incised letters, made after the vessel was already fired, reading HORATI F. It was found within a stratum that was unfortunately heavily disturbed by recent agricultural activity, not far below the surface. The first word appears to represent the genitive singular of *Horatius*. The last letter could be an attempt to render *filius*, or, more intriguingly, the *cognomen* Flaccus, thus identifying the villa's owner as the Augustan

poet. In 2014, a similar inscription was discovered in another disturbed context, this time on an amphora rim, bearing the nominative HORATIUS. The fact that the inscriptions were carved after firing, along with their suspect letter forms and unstratified contexts, suggest that these inscriptions are falsified. However, the presence of accretions within the inscribed letters implies that they were not newly made.

While not precisely datable, these objects may originate in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, when a series of artificial inscriptions were on view in Vacone as part of an orchestrated scheme to substantiate the villa's Horatian ownership. In 1703 the Abbot Carlo Bartolomeo Piazza cited three inscriptions as proof. One, an early modern forgery mentioning the *Fons Bandusiae* of *Odes* 3.13 is still extant in a restaurant located adjacent to the archaeological site. Another appears to be a misreading, or perhaps a purposeful corruption, of a genuine Roman inscription (*CIL* IX.4826) now incorporated into the nearby ruined church of S. Stefano, which names two freedmen of the *gens Octavia*. Piazza altered these individuals' names, turning them into imperial freedmen of "Octavianus", in an attempt to underline the Augustan association of the nearby villa. Finally, Piazza also claimed to have seen a third inscription, since lost, identifying the villa as a benefaction of Maecenas. Later in the century, Piazza was challenged by the French Abbot Bertrand Capmartin de Chaupy, who argued against Piazza's suspect methodology and stated that Horace's villa was to be found near Licenza, at the site still often identified as the poet's estate.

Like the falsified epigraphic evidence, our inscribed rims are likely modern creations intended to add further weight to the argument of Horace's ownership. It may also be worth noting that a similar attribution of villa ownership based upon the toponym

of the neighboring town of Cottanello, first theorized in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was confirmed in the 1960's by the discovery of a stamped *dolium* rim naming the Aurelii Cottae (Sternini 2000). Since similar dolia fragments are known from many sites in Italy, the forger of these rims was probably trying to create a similar piece of evidence. While an absolute date is uncertain for the newly discovered inscriptions at Vacone, they nonetheless shed new light on a longstanding antiquarian identification. This belief, though rooted in a loose interpretation of Horatian topography, is still strongly held by many members of the modern community of Vacone whose pride in their town's ancient heritage is beyond reproach.

#### Bibliography

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