



Guarded by Shield Bearers, a Roman Emperor Endures in Mosaic at His Sicilian Villa

A hard to believe the mosaic in Piazza Armerina was built by Marcus Aurelius Valerius Maximianus, a general who lived between A.D. 286 and 310. The likeness part of 8,000 square feet of mosaic resembles known portraits of Maximianus. Guard at left wears ivy leaf shoulder patch of the emperor's Hercules 200

## Roman Life in 1,600-year-old Color Pictures

Archaeologists Uncover Brilliant Mosaics in an Ancient Villa in Sicily. Preserved for Centuries by an Avalanche

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With Illustrations from Photographs by Duman Edwards

**I**n the heart of Sicily, in a landscape that is green, restful, and fresh with water, there has come to life in recent years an ancient treasure of mosaic floors, astonishing in the coloring of their lifelike figures and the vastness of their surface.

These dramatic picture stories in stone bring to vivid life the times of Imperial Rome, seen through the eyes of its own contemporary artists. They portray with infinite detail an amazing variety of subjects: the courtly life of noblemen, African big-game hunts, an outdoor barbecue, religious customs, feats of Hercules bathing scenes, even a bevy of female athletes lightly clad in costumes like modern Bikini bathing suits.

### A Dramatic Art Gallery in Stone

As an archeologist, I have been entrusted since 1950 with supervising the excavation of these treasures. The site lies in mountainous terrain near the town of Piazza Armerina 55 miles northwest of Syracuse.

Here, some 1,600 years ago, a Roman of almost unlimited wealth erected a palatial and ornate villa, marvelously decorated in color and design. An army of artists, craftsmen, and laborers must have worked on it.

Today the ceilings, most of the walls, columns, and statuary have crumbled away, but the mosaic floors remain, almost unbelievably well-preserved through the centuries, a brilliant art gallery alive with human figures, gods and heroes, animals, fishes, and striking geometric patterns. No other single group of floor mosaics uncovered anywhere matches them in scope and complexity.

Who built the palace? We may never be absolutely sure, but there is impressive evidence that it belonged to a Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius Valerius Maximianus.

While he reigned, the empire still held sway over most of the western world—northern Africa, Europe, Britain, and the Near East. He died A.D. 310, at the end of that century the Roman Empire began its long decline.

A well-known Norwegian archeologist, H. P. L'Orange, has suggested that the Piazza Armerina ruins might be the villa to which Maximian retired after he left public life. I think rather it was simply his summer home, a place for country ease, for hunting and field sports. In those days this part of Sicily would have been a quiet, remote, and wooded area abounding in game.

There were diggings at the site as early as 1812, but extensive excavation did not begin until 1929. This led to the first major discovery: a huge, masterfully executed mosaic depicting the story of the mythological Greek hero Hercules. This mosaic, roughly 60 by 80 feet, covered the floor of what was once a single large room.

After World War II the Italian Government made funds available for further excavation and restoration under my supervision. Since 1950 we have carefully removed tons of earth, section by section we have uncovered the vast structure, about 38,000 square feet of floor pavements, plus part of walls, columns, statuary and other objects.

Obviously, the villa was designed by a master architect with a well-organized plan. A private road led into it from a highway to the south. Aqueducts carried ample water for drinking, baths, and toilets flushed by a continuously flowing stream.

### Palace Built on Split Level

As the diagram on page 214 shows, the rooms themselves fall into four great complexes. First, at the front of the villa—the bottom of the drawing—stand the monumental entrance, the *atrium* (rather like an enormous vestibule), and the typical sumptuous Roman baths, hot and cold.

The second group centers around the *peristyle*, a large courtyard some 40 yards long and 30 yards wide. Here columns supported a roof around the four sides; the center, staced by a fountain, was open to the sky.

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**Africa Personified Bears an Elephant's Tusk as Her Scepter**

Stylized crosslines representing wrinkled skin give the elephant at left the look of a child's quilted toy. The Asian tigress on African soil is another artistic fancy. Strips of colored cloth hanging on the branch in background signify a sacred tree. Flames of a phoenix nest rise at left.

Scholars identified idealized Africa from Piazza Armerina hunting scenes, laid in her realm. War with Carthage introduced African lions and other beasts to Rome some five centuries before Maximian built his Sicilian villa. Successive emperors shipped entire menageries from Africa and Asia to die in *venationes* (mock hunts). Lions, prized for ferocity, were almost exterminated in North Africa.

The emperor Herculian ivy leaf at opposite corners.



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pieces of pincers to place precisely the right colored squares in exactly the right spots. Then they leveled and polished the unlevel floor.

The subject matter of the pictures was often chosen to suit the room they decorated. For example, the *tablinum*, the entrance hall way to the house, portrays a respectful group welcoming the lord on his arrival.

**Bathing Habits, Styles Revealed**

A similarly apt choice of subjects appears in the baths, which actually included not only hot and cold pools but a gymnasium and steam room as well. On the floor of the vestibule leading from the peristyle to the baths is portrayed the lady of the household, the *domina*, taking her two young children to bathe. Two maids follow, carrying bathing gear and clean clothing neatly folded.

These figures not only throw light on bathing customs of the times but on such things as children's shoe styles—sandals with black straps—and ladies' hairdos: combed back and piled on top of the head, leaving the ears uncovered. Oddly enough, one of the children is shown with one triangular eye.

Mosaics in other parts of the baths show, appropriately, bathers in various stages of dressing and undressing, and a stocky athletic young man getting a rubdown from a slave. On the floor of the *frigidarium*, or cold baths, pleasant aquatic scenes lead atmosphere. Four small boats, each carrying two cherubic fishermen, float on the rippling surface of a sea alive with fish. Around the boat, a throng of mythical marine creatures form a whirl—sea nymphs, Tritons, and others.

The *pilulastra*, or gymnasium of the bath, has a particularly notable depicting the Circus

Maximus Rome's great arena (page 218).

The dominant decorating theme throughout Maximian's country estate are, quite properly, outdoor sport, hunting, and animals. These reflect not only the interests of the owner but also the use he made of the villa. I suspect that his visits there were normally from August to October, after the worst of the summer's heat and before winter made travel difficult.

Perhaps the most striking of the athletic scenes, to modern eyes at least, decorates the floor of a room off the peristyle, a room I have named the Chamber of the Ten Maidens (page 215). These ten young women wear very brief two-piece costumes brightly colored in red and green. They perform gymnastics—running, jumping, discus throwing, ball playing, and other games—on the lawn.

Of all the villa's mosaics this one has attracted the most attention in the popular press, for obvious reasons. Yet it probably was not a part of the original villa floor at all but was added a century or so later. The faces and bodies of the girls are drawn in a

**Fable in Mosaic: Winged Beast Cages Hunter**

This single episode, in which trapper becomes the trapped, startles visitors and puzzles scholars. It occurs in the Great Hunting Scene. Hunt lion half eagle, mythology's fanciful hybrid is called a griffin.

Left, Maiden; National Geographic Staff





↓ An Elephant en Route to Please a Roman Mob Loses a Quayside Tug of War  
Piazza Armerina's Great Hunting Scene covers a corridor about 5 yards wide and 66 long. Its episodes depict the chase, capture, and transport of wild animals. Keepers here chain-haul their prize up a gangplank.



← Mounted Featers Drive Stampeding Stags into a Net

The author of Roman Africa's craft-man discovered and laid the Piazza Armerina mosaic in three or four years. Other estimates run as high as 70 to 80 years.

The Small Hunting Scene (left) depicts sportsmen pursuing game through the countryside near the villa. The Great Hunting Scene (below, both page.) shows an expedition to supply mock hunt in Rome's Colosseum.

↓ Hunters Drag a Rhino from an African Swamp

Roman circus crowds rated this ton of fury high on their list of favorite animals. Imperial expeditions sought the rhinoceros in the Sudan and Ethiopia. Laws permitted the hunters to requisition food and lodging in any Roman province.

Two overseers superintend this job. A hippopotamus (above) stands belly deep in the marsh. Loss of tesserae, or mosaic stones, obscures the head.

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