

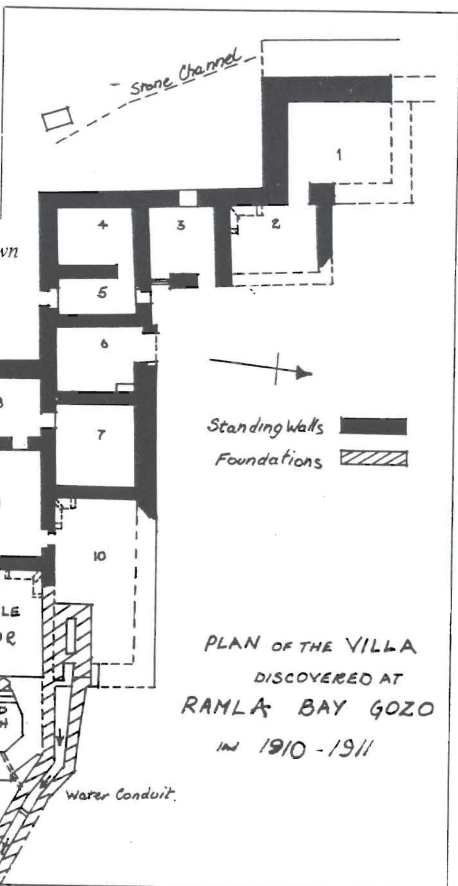


# ROMAN VILLA AT RAMLA BAY, GOZO

The Maltese Islands are studded with the remains of buildings belonging to the era when Malta was under the sway of Rome. Most of these buildings can legitimately be called "villas" because they were sited away from the cities, in the heart of the countryside or by the seaside. It is important to note, however, that there are essentially two types of Roman villas. The first type in modern terms would be called a "farmstead" and consisted of a building incorporating rooms for habitation and others for agricultural activity, such as the extraction of olive oil. This in Roman times was generally called the "villa rustica" a description of which is given by Cato the Elder in his treatise *De agricultura*.

The second type is strictly a residential villa, a resort, sometimes provided with a thermal complex and almost always adorned with marbles and mosaics. This, on the other hand, would correspond to the Roman "villa urbana" examples of which, admittedly far more extensive and luxurious than any found in Malta, are described by Pliny the Younger in his letters. The best example of the second type of villa existing

The second type is strictly a residential villa,



Plan of the Roman Villa at Ramla Bay Gozo, redrawn by J. Young (after Ashby).



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*A photo taken at the time of the diggings on the site of the excavations at Ramla Bay, Gozo.*

in Malta is the one at Ghajn Tuffiegha. Another one is at Ramla Bay, Gozo, even if this is smaller in size.

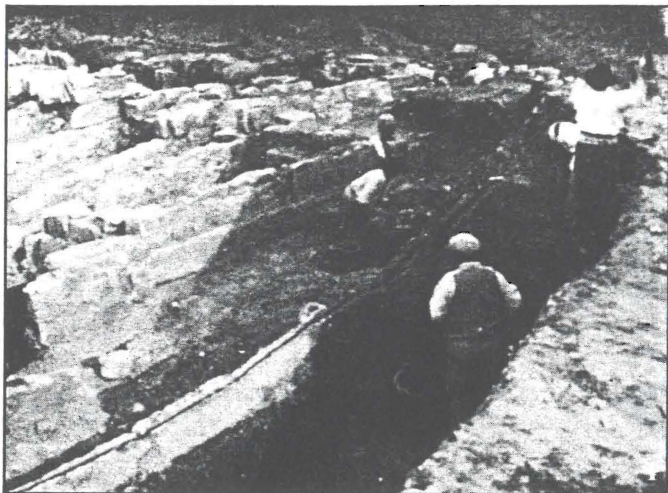
The Ramla Bay villa was excavated by Temi Zammit in 1910–11 and soon covered in again. It now lies buried in the sand immediately to the east of the slightly more evident battery built by the Knights. With some effort, its walls can be seen emerging out of the sand.

The building must have extended over a considerably large area. Portions of it, such as the main entrance which is assumed to have been from the beach to the north, did not survive at the time of the excavation. Its foundations had been laid on clay and sand, the subsidence of which must have contributed to its decay and abandonment. About nineteen rooms were discovered, six of them (1–6 in plan) probably intended to

serve as living quarters. There were no doorways communicating these to rooms 7–9 which seemed rather to be related to the thermal complex (rooms 13–19). The latter consisted of an interconnected series of rooms and baths provided with a sophisticated heating system. The heating was supplied by an underground furnace, or hypocaust, which transmitted hot air beneath the floors of rooms 14–18. The limestone concrete floors of these rooms were supported on low pillars of stone or clay bricks. The excavators also discovered numerous fragments of hollow fluetiles which originally permitted the hot air to rise through the walls.

One of the more complicated bathing habits of the Romans was to move, after undressing, first into a warm-air room, or *tepidarium*, and then into the hot-air room, the *caldarium*, where after





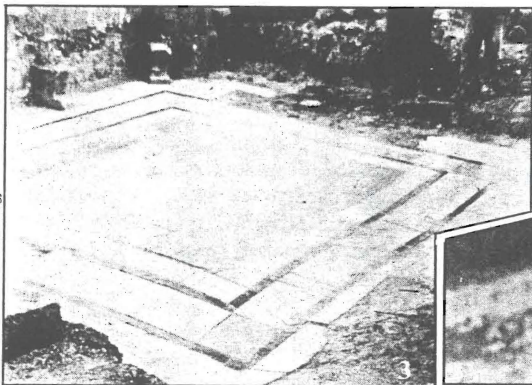
1910 photos of the excavations of the Roman Villa at Ramla Bay.

1. The excavations in progress. Shown is the waterduct discovered on the site.

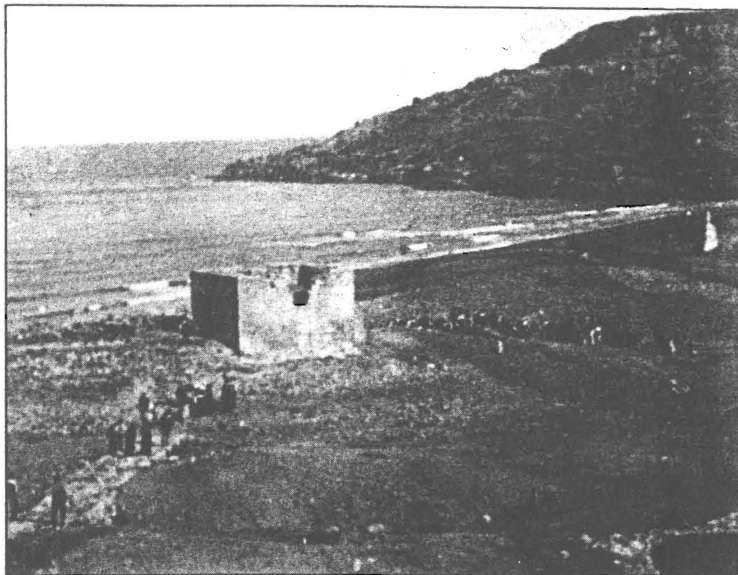
2. Room 14, the floor of which was warmed by an underground system of heating.

3. The richly decorated floor in room 13.

4. A statue of Telamon, representing a nude, young satyr. This statue was lost, presumably soon after the excavations.



The discovery of the remains of a Villa Romana at Ramla Bay created interest and aroused curiosity among various sectors of the Gozitan society. Picture shows a part of the crowd that gathered to watch the progress of the excavations.



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profuse perspiration the bather took a warm bath. The process ended with a cold dip in the *frigidarium*, or cold room, which in the Ramla Bay complex is represented by the octagonal room (1A) on the east end. The warm and hot rooms could be any of those numbered 14 to 18, while it is likely that rooms 10, 11 and 13 were the dressing-rooms (*apodyteria*).

The villa was decorated with various coloured marbles. The cold bath, for instance, was veneered with slabs of grey marble. But the most richly decorated room was the one between the hot rooms and the cold bath (13). Its floor consisted of successive rectangular bands of "Gozo stone", grey, black, red and grey marble framing a central square of eight slabs of a fine breccia, perhaps Africano. The walls were covered with painted stucco in imitation of coloured marble. Fragments of mosaics were found in room 1 but no designs were recovered. Only one piece of sculpture was discovered, in room 2, almost certainly intended to support an architectural element. It represented a nude young satyr with pointed ears and head crowned with ivy. The sculpture has since been lost.

To whom did this villa belong? The question comes naturally to one's mind. In the absence of concrete evidence, such as an inscription with the name of the proprietor, it is impossible even to speculate who its owner could have been. Certainly it must have been occupied by a well-to-do family who could afford certain luxuries such as the expensive foreign marbles. It could be a "place in the sun" of some wealthy Roman citizen, a quiet refuge from the exacting life of the capital, but it could also be the resort of some rich Maltese whose tastes had been considerably Romanised.

ANTHONY BONANNO

#### REFERENCES:

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Cover: *An artistic impression of Valletta by an unknown early 19th Century artist. Detail from large canvas now at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta.*

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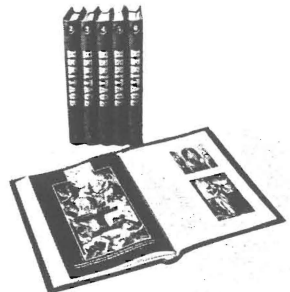
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