



**ProMare, Inc.**

**ITALY OPERATIONS**

**Rediscovering Ancient Ventotene Research Project**

*-In Collaboration with the Soprintendenza ai Beni Archeologici del Lazio-*

***Project Goals***

The month of June 2008 has seen the beginning of the first season of collaboration between the Soprintendenza ai Beni Archeologici del Lazio and ProMare, under the direction and scientific supervision of Dr. Annalisa Zarattini. The area of intervention chosen is the island of Ventotene, a small islet of only 1.3 Km<sup>2</sup> in the middle of the Tyrrhenian Sea, 45 km offshore the Italian mainland (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Aerial view of Ventotene and of the nearby island of Santo Stefano. In the background it is visible the island of Ischia and the Italian coastline. (Photo: Valeria Diana©).

***Ventotene: Island of Emperors***  
***Historical and Archaeological Background***

Known in antiquity as *Pandataria* (from the Greek word *Pandoteira*, literally meaning “bestower of everything”),<sup>1</sup> Ventotene is part of the Pontine archipelago, a series of six islands located between Rome and Naples which includes the larger Ponza (7 km<sup>2</sup>), and the smaller Palmarola, Zannone, Santo Stefano, and Gavi (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Location of Ventotene and the Pontine archipelago.

(Map from: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Pontine\\_Islands\\_map.png](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Pontine_Islands_map.png)).

The discovery in Palmarola of worked obsidian, a volcanic stone used to produce cutting tools in prehistoric times, along with pottery remains, testifies to the presence of humankind already in the Late Neolithic Age, or ca. 5,000 years B.C. It is likely that the obsidian, after having been quarried in Palmarola, was exported to the mainland – fact that would attest an early presence of traders and seafarers in the area. Pottery sherds of Middle and Late Bronze Age (sixteenth-twelfth centuries B.C.)<sup>2</sup> prove also that Ventotene kept being inhabited at the time Mycenaeans were active on the sea routes connecting the eastern and western sides of the Mediterranean.

Until present, no material remains dating to the time of Greek colonization have been found. However, considering that Ventotene is located just in front of Ischia, which was the first center of Greek presence on the Italian peninsula in the middle of the eighth century B.C., there are no doubts that the island was visited by eastern settlers at this point in time. According to an interpretation of Homer’s myths, it has been assumed

<sup>1</sup> De Rossi 1995, 11.

<sup>2</sup> De Rossi 1995, 11.

that Ponza was the island where Circe lived, Ventotene and Santo Stefano the nearby islands of the sirens.

The only historical information available for the area during the Roman Republican Age deals with Ponza, which, inhabited by Volscian populations, became a Roman colony in 313 B.C., at the time of the Second Samnitic War (327-304 B.C.). Ponza, and probably the entire Pontine archipelago, became in this way the first islands to be annexed to the Roman territory at a time when Carthage's naval supremacy forced the Romans to expand their influence only on the Italian mainland. During the Second Punic War (218-201 B.C.) the Pontine islands stayed loyal to Rome, being cited among the 18 colonies that provided help and material support against the Carthaginians.

At the end of the first century B.C. suddenly Ponza and Ventotene reappear into the historical record. Augustus made them part of the Imperial patrimony, transforming both the islands into imperial summer residences. As it happened along the coastline of Latium and Campania, luxurious villas were built in these places to please the desire for a comfortable vacation of the Roman upper class. Agrippa, husband of Augustus' daughter Julia, probably directed the building works at Ventotene. The so-called "Villa Giulia" had already been built and was in use at the end of the first century B.C.

### **The Roman Villa at Punta Eolo ("Villa Giulia")**

Due to the small size which made the island easy to control and to its location close to Rome and Naples, Ventotene became from Augustus' time a luxurious place of exile for some of the most prominent members of the Roman aristocracy. According to historical sources,<sup>3</sup> his daughter Julia was the first member of the Imperial family confined to Ventotene because of her immoral behavior. She spent five years on the island (2 BC - A.D. 3), alone with her mother Scribonia, before she was allowed to return to the mainland. She ended her life in the city of Rhegium (modern Reggio Calabria), where she died in A.D. 14.

In A.D. 28 also Agrippina Maior, daughter of Julia and Agrippa, was banished to the Ventotene, followed a few years later by one of Caligula's sisters, Agrippina or Livilla, by Ottavia, Nero's former wife (A.D. 62), and eventually by Flavia Domitilla (A.D. 95), the last member of the Roman élite to be secluded in Ventotene.

Due to the social status of these upper-class inmates, the entire island underwent a deep architectonic transformation between first century B.C. and first century A.D. It was indeed necessary to transform a rock in the middle of the sea into a residence that could host its aristocratic residents with a level of comfort and amenities similar to what they were used to in Rome. The northern promontory, nowadays called "Punta Eolo", was then entirely covered with the large imperial villa, measuring ca. 350 x 100 m. Its imposing remains are still visible, and the Soprintendenza ai Beni Archeologici del Lazio is currently directing a new phase of conservation and restoration of the entire complex (Figs. 3-5).

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<sup>3</sup> Suet, *Aug.* 65; Tacit. *Ann.* 53; Dio. Cassio LV 13.1.



Fig. 3. Overview of the archaeological remains of “Villa Giulia” in Ventotene, named after the most famous of its inhabitants. (Photo: Dante Bartoli)



Figs. 4-5. To the left a Roman arc still standing, in *opus reticulatum*, which opens a passage connecting the villa with the sea. (Photo: Ayse Atauz). To the right a wall decorated with a fresco of third Pompeian style as revealed by recent archaeological excavations. (Photo: Dante Bartoli).

In order to reach the imperial residence bringing fresh supplies from the mainland, it was necessary to deeply transform the natural features of the island. A Roman harbor was therefore carved into the rock, a complex system of cisterns was designed to provide fresh water to a place where natural springs do not exist, while the remaining area of the island was farmed in order to make the villa at least partially self-sufficient. A monumental fishpond was also cut in the rock, adding to the products of the land also those coming from the sea. It is inside the Roman fishpond that the marble statue of a Roman magistrate has been found.

Archaeological excavations at Villa Giulia have brought to light several remains of

its elegant decoration, visible at the local archaeological museum (Fig. 6). Among other finds, are noteworthy some figured stuccoes and finely-decorated frescoes (Figs. 7-8).



Fig. 6. Ventotene's 1768's Fortress, currently hosting both the City Hall and Archaeological Museum. (Photo: Ayse Atauz).



Figs 7-8. Fragments of frescoes from Villa Giulia. (Photos: Annalisa Zarattini).

## The Roman Harbor

In order to grant easy access to the emperor's villa, Roman engineers had to address an unparalleled technical challenge. Ventotene indeed originally had only two natural landing places (Cala Nave and Cala Rossano), totally exposed to eastern and southern winds, while the remaining of the island has high cliffs falling straight into the water, which do not offer any shelter to ships and their sailors. In the only place where the rocky coastline opens up in a flat bank of compact tuff rocks, an ingenious masterbuilder had the idea to create an artificial basin of 7,000 m<sup>2</sup>, 3 m deep, completely cut into the rock. It has been calculated that 60,000 m<sup>3</sup> of stone were removed,<sup>4</sup> and a new harbor that could host small and medium-sized ancient merchantmen was created inside the ancient coastline. The more external ring of rocks

<sup>4</sup> De Rossi 1995, 20.

was preserved to provide a natural breakwater against the destructive force of the sea.

This complex system of breakwaters, docks, warehouses, bollards, and underwater canals was so-well designed in antiquity, that it survives almost intact at present, and it is still used by modern sailors and fishermen (Figs. 9-11). A marble head of a young emperor Tiberius, currently on exhibition at the local museum, represents a remarkable find from the harbor's basin. (Fig. 12).



Figs. 9-11. The Roman harbor of Ventotene, entirely carved in the rock. The ancient basin, the arcs of the warehouses, and bollards cut into the tuff. (Photos: Annalisa Zarattini).

Fig. 12. Marble portrait of a young Tiberius, found in the basin of the Roman harbor. (Photo: Ayse Atauz).

### **The Roman Fishpond**

Close to the entrance of harbor, in front of the modern lighthouse, the remains of the Roman fishpond are entirely carved in the rock, following Columella's advice to

have them built in this way in order to maximize their productivity (Fig. 13).



Fig. 13. Aerial view of the northern extremity of Ventotene, with the Roman harbor and the fishpond in the foreground. In the picture are visible also Punta Eolo and Villa Giulia, the modern harbor, and the archaeological museum. (Photo: Valeria Diana©)

Built contemporaneously to the other maritime infrastructures of the island, the fishery is divided in three main pools. Two of them were covered with vaulted ceilings now partially collapsed (Fig. 14), and the third one lies in the open (Fig. 15).



Fig. 14. One of the two covered pool of the Roman piscina complex. The water level, in the first century A.D., was ca. 1 m lower than at present. The wharf used for walking around the pool was then emerged, the tunnels visible in the picture dry. The niche for a statue is visible at the end of the room (Ph: A. Atauz).



Fig. 15. Aerial view of the fishpond complex. To the right are visible the two rooms with partially collapsed ceilings, to the center the main, open, pool. The circles carved into the rock were used to sun-dry the sea water and produce salt for evaporation. The yellow lifting balloons mark the spot where the Roman statue was raised to the surface. (Photo: Annalisa Zarattini).

A series of underwater canals, grids, and lock systems allowed for regular exchange of water with the sea, preventing at the same time the fish from swimming out into the open sea. Circular holes carved on the surface of the tuff platform facing the fishery allowed to collect salt thanks to sea water evaporation.

An aedicula is cut in the rock at the larger room, and it probably hosted a statue, maybe of Isis as Jacono suggests. It is inside one these two rooms that the statue of the Roman magistrate was found, still resting in the original spot where it was lost, in the spring of the year 2000.

Text by Dante Bartoli

### Works Cited

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