

DISCOVER

# Hunting for Horace's Humble Home

Did the Poet Live as Modestly as He Said He Did? An Archaeological Team in Lazio Takes Him to Task

By John Moretti  
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The Roman poet Horace once wrote: "Let him who has enough wish for nothing more."

For two centuries, archaeologists have searched for the source of those words and the environment that surrounded their author. Because Horace was more autobiographical in his writing than many of his contemporaries, he left clues as to where he made his home.

He wrote of a modest farmhouse in a letter to a friend, enticing her to visit the "Valley of Ustica" in the shadow of Mt. Lucretius. In the 1700s, a site in eastern Lazio was pinpointed, and in the 1900s, archaeologist Angleo Pasqui started digging there, looking more closely.

Pasqui and his team turned up some intriguing Roman walls. Although the excavation revealed a building of palatial dimensions, which could in no way be considered modest, the archeologist was convinced he had found the 1st-century B.C. farmhouse nonetheless.

In 1914, Pasqui's state money ran out and the dig was closed. He concluded was that this was indeed Horace's home, and future generations would base their studies on his conclusions; most notably, Giuseppe Lugli, the leading authority on Roman topography.

In his texts, Lugli would express surprise at the way the poet actually lived, casting doubt on Horace's accuracy.

But these days, a privately funded dig led by Bernard Frischer of the University of California Los Angeles is re-examining the site and testing those claims. By digging deeper, Frischer has shown that Pasqui's work was only half-done.

"In the 1990s, I accepted Lugli's conclusions as did everyone else in the field," Frischer says. "But I was making a new argument, which now you can see in a different light."

"Horace had always described his villa as a modest farmhouse. But with about 20,000 square feet of living space, [what Pasqui found] would have been the biggest mansion in Beverly Hills."

As Frischer exposed more of the rocks,



there appeared a patchwork masonry known as *opus mixtum* — associated with a period 100 years after Horace's death — and not the net-like *opus reticulatum* of the day.

But beneath the layers of *mixtum*, Frischer found a smaller set of walls displaying *reticulatum*, suggesting that an older structure did exist there and that someone had actually built around it. Eventually, he came across a small atrium within the palace, revealing Augustan features and a floor plan more in line with the abode Horace described.

Frischer's colleague, Kathryn Gleason of Cornell University, also unearthed two layers of vegetable garden dating to Horace's time. By analyzing the seeds in and around the perfectly intact flower pots, she hopes to learn more about how Roman poets went about their gardening.

Frischer notes that Pasqui's method would not have led him to the same information anyway. Those of the old school were interested only in what they were looking for, and other layers "just got in the way," Frischer explains. The modern stratigraphic method, he says, uses each layer to date nearby artifacts with more precision.

It is still not entirely certain that this is Horace's villa. But the location is unmistakable, scholars agree, and the Augustan walls and the small dimensions would suggest that Horace was telling the truth about his lifestyle.

"Why would Horace have misled us about where he lived?" Frischer asks. "In fact, it seems everyone else was misled by Lugli."

The question that now arises is: Who would have built such a lavish palace around the poet's country home?



At left, the site. Above, Charlie Steinmetz makes one of his frequent trips to the dig that his family is sponsoring. Below, Frischer on location.

Frischer has an answer to that, too, though he stresses it is purely hypothetical.

About one kilometer from the site by Mt. Lucretius is an inscription on an ancient water pipe, mentioning the restoration of a temple by the emperor Vespasian.

"Now, Vespasian was not a big builder of temples," Frischer notes. "So why would he have built a temple in such an out-of-the-way place?"

The villa, he reasons, sits halfway between Rome and Rieti, the village once known as Reati where Vespasian grew up. It would have made a suitable resting place for an emperor travelling from the capital to the countryside.

With respect to other imperial palaces, the one built around what is presumably Horace's hut is not especially large. But its marble is suspiciously abundant and displays a craftsmanship indicative of the Flavian dynasty.

"If you see that much marble that far

from the sea, it is almost by definition by imperial order," Frischer says.

There is another clue that might link Horace's home to Vespasian, this time gleaned from the poet's writing.

Horace mentioned that his father was a freedman, a former slave who went on to middle-class wealth by becoming an auctioneer. He moved from Venusia, — now Venosa, in Basilicata — to Rome, so as to give his son the best education.

At school, Horace met the poet Virgil, who in turn introduced him to his patron, Maecenas. Maecenas was a good friend of Caesar Augustus and through these lofty connections the young middle-class poet would not only land himself a patron, but would befriend the emperor himself.

In his will, Horace the bachelor bequeathed his farmhouse to Augustus. The property would eventually be passed down to Vespasian.

"Like today," Frischer remarks on Horace's social windfall, "education was the great equalizer."

The UCLA archeologist would also meet an important patron through campus contacts. One of his students was a Steinmetz, from the Los Angeles family of airplane-frame builders, who would become his principal sponsor.

Frischer believes the money is well-spent because it answers an important historical question: How reliable are ancient scribes and poets? A dig like this, he says, is the only way to find out.

"He's talking about X. X still exists," he says. "Let's see if it corresponds."

## Horace's Villa Licenza, Lazio Open Tues. through Sun. 9 A.M. to an hour before sunset

www.humnet.ucla.edu/horaces-villa

The villa of Quintus Horatius Flaccus (65–8 BC) — Horace, in English — is in a valley below the little town of Licenza, about 25 miles northeast of Rome. The first known soundings on the site were undertaken by Allan Ramsay, the court painter of George III, who dug here in 1775. The state undertook the first large-scale excavations on the site from 1911-1914. The American Academy in Rome sponsored the next dig

on the site from 1930-1931, led by Thomas Price, a Fellow of the Academy at the time. Despite these projects, much remained to be discovered.

Frischer's excavation was at first funded by the Vincenzo Romagnoli Group, The American Academy in Rome, the Superintendency of Archaeology for the Region of Lazio and by the town of Licenza. When Vincenzo Romagnoli died in November, 1999, the Steinmetz Family of Los Angeles and the Samuel Kress Foundation stepped in.

On July 1, a ceremony was held at the site to inaugurate the 2001 excavation season.

Recently, many improvements to the site have been made. Lighting, pavement of roads leading there, and park benches have been added. A fence and a guard house with restrooms have been built and a visitors' reception center is in the works. Recently, Frischer's team erected signs explaining the phases of the construction of the villa site over the centuries, from the Classical through the high Middle Ages, when a monastery occupied the site. These signboards are particularly interesting because they show by color codes what the excavations since 1997 have revealed.

— Norman M. Roberson

ON THE GROUND

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## G-8 Was No Boon For the Birds Either

The widespread use of teargas by police in two days of rioting during the Genoa G-8 summit last weekend has decimated the city's pigeon population. Il Secolo XIX reported Monday.

After the riots, the Genoa daily observed, locals began to see dead bird carcasses piling up on the streets, stunned squabs stilled into immobility on cornices or drunkenly staggering around in circles.

Some ventured that maybe the birds were keeling over because of lack of food — after all, many Genoese abandoned the city during the summit, meaning fewer munchies for their feathered friends.

But while locals may have flown the coop, pigeons do not live by bread alone, and it's unlikely that insects, or inanimate seeds and fruits — favorite pigeon snacks — would have mysteriously dematerialized for a week.

According to the paper, the pigeons began meeting their maker on Saturday. Putting two and two together, it quickly pinpointed the culprit — teargas, which was so noxious Saturday that some demonstrators had to be placed in decontaminating showers to get rid of its after-effects.

City officials, however, were more doubtful.

"We'd love to know if teargas was the reason, because then we could bombard Genoa every day and do away with the pigeon problem altogether," said Paolo Albonetti of the city's urban fauna office, responsible, among other things, for pest control.

He was kidding. In fact, he does blame the G-8 for the recent pigeon slaughter, but reckons the preparations for the summit were more lethal than the teargas.

His office began to record an increasing number of bird deaths six months ago, when all the restoration work began in the city center.

"Downtown pigeons, finding their usual habitat thrown upside down, had to migrate to the suburbs where there was much more traffic than the birds were used to," said Mr. Albonetti. Not known for their intelligence, the pigeons were nothing other than sitting ducks. "There were a lot of squashed pigeons around," he said.

City officials delighted in noticing a similar migration among rats.

Besides, Genoa has had some success keeping their pigeon population under control by administering food laced with contraceptives, which makes the birds sterile. Mr. Albonetti says that in the last three years the population has diminished by 30 percent.

"The problem with Genoa," he said, "is that it's a narrow city, with small streets and piazzas with means that a small number of pigeons, even 50, can create a huge problem." As last weekend's events showed, the same can be said of protestors.

Weather		
temp	min c/f	max c/f
Bologna	20/68	29/84
Bolzano	20/68	26/79
Brindisi	19/66	31/88
Cagliari	20/68	30/86
Catania	20/68	31/88
Florence	19/66	29/84
Genoa	24/75	28/82
Milan	21/70	29/84
Naples	17/63	30/86
Palermo	24/75	30/86
Rome	17/63	28/82
Trieste	18/64	27/81
Turin	19/66	28/82
Venice	21/70	28/82

  

Weather		
temp	min c/f	max c/f
Bologna	20/68	30/86
Bolzano	20/68	29/84
Brindisi	16/61	30/86
Cagliari	21/70	33/91
Catania	19/66	31/88
Florence	19/66	30/86
Genoa	24/75	29/84
Milan	21/70	31/88
Naples	19/66	32/90
Palermo	17/63	29/84
Rome	18/64	30/86
Trieste	18/64	29/84
Turin	21/70	29/84
Venice	19/66	30/86

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