

Construction Workers Find Pliny the Elder's 2000-Year-Old Villa

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Construction workers in the town of Bacoli on the Italian coast spent three years working on a new park, recreation area, and children's playground. But that work came to a grinding halt when they made an historic discovery.

Beneath the earth, they found the ruins of an opulent villa on the cliff overlooking the harbor. The ruins date back more than 2,000 years, making it highly likely that they discovered the former home of Pliny the Elder. Who was Pliny the Elder and why is this find so significant? Let's find out.

Bacoli, a Roman Resort Town

The coastal town of Bacoli has roots that go back to the 2nd century BC. The beautiful views of the Mediterranean Sea and the balmy breezes made this the ideal place for luxury villas. In fact, during that time, Bacoli, which was known as "Bauli" back then, was nearly as popular as the nearby resort town of Baiae.

Bacoli was so popular among the Roman elite that in the late 4th century AD, the Roman statesman Symmachus wrote of the place, "I left that place because there was a danger that if I became too fond of Bauli, all the other places I have left to see would not have pleased me."

A Strategic Location

In addition to being an idyllic setting for rest and relaxation, Bacoli was a strategic location with military and defensive value. From the cliff top, one has almost a 360-degree view of the Gulf of Naples and a clear view of the port at Misenum.

For several centuries, a fleet of ships was stationed at the port to maintain Roman control of the Tyrrhenian Sea. This was a key defense in the western side of the Roman Empire, and it was up to the fleet of some 70 ships to hold this flank.

A Spacious and Posh Villa

The ruins of the 2,000-year-old villa that were recently found offer evidence to suggest that this was a grand, spacious, and posh villa. From the thick, stone perimeter, archaeologists could see that the villa once had ten large rooms.

In addition, there were remnants of tiled walls and floors, and a series of outdoor terraces. The villa must have belonged to a wealthy person who had power and clout. There was one person who historians say fits this description, lived during the right time, and had another notable reason for having a cliffside villa ... Pliny the Elder.

Who Was Pliny the Elder?

Although history remembers him as Pliny the Elder, his real name was Gaius Plinius Secundus. He was born in either 23 or 24 AD and died, as we will soon see, during one of the defining moments of antiquity. During his lifetime, Pliny the Elder was a jack-of-all-trades.

Pliny the Elder was a scholar, scientist, and naturalist, but he was also a philosopher and historian. He absorbed knowledge through reading, studying, and his own scientific observations. But he was also a brilliant military mind who served as both an army and naval commander.

Pliny's Greatest Work

As a member of the wealthy elite, Pliny had the luxury of devoting his time to studying and writing. His greatest and best-known work was *Naturalis Historia*, or *Natural History*, a comprehensive encyclopedia containing information covering a wide range of scientific disciplines.

Naturalis Historia, which was written in Latin, included information on botany, astronomy, history, geology, zoology, and geography. This book, one of the most influential works of the Roman era, was the go-to reference for several centuries.

Pliny the Elder's Distinguished Military Career

Pliny the Elder held several different military and political positions that showcased his leadership and organizational skills. He was stationed in Africa and Germania, and a few other locations.

Pliny accepted the appointment to be the naval commander of the Bay of Naples fleet. This was the appointment that coincided with the construction of the grand villa in Bacoli and the reason why archaeologists believe the villa was Pliny's residence. The size and opulence of the home fit his style, plus its location allowed him to watch over the fleet.

Pliny the Elder's Heroic Death

While serving as the commander of the Naples fleet, Pliny would have been able to see the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD from his home. This is the volcanic eruption that buried the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum under a thick blanket of ash.

When the eruption began, Pliny rushed toward danger, intent on saving the lives of his friend and his friend's family. By the time his ship arrived, the volcanic activity was reaching its peak. Pliny the Elder, the crew of his ship, and the family he was hoping to rescue all died from the toxic gas and superheated ash.

A "Majestic Villa"

According to Simona Formola, the lead archaeologist at the art heritage of Naples, "It is likely that the majestic villa had a 360-degree view of the gulf of Naples for strategic military purposes." The villa also overlooked the islands of Ischia and Procida.

Today, both of these islands are picturesque tourist attractions. In Pliny the Elder's era, the islands were under the jurisdiction of the Duke of Naples. The villages on the islands were fishing communities.

An Underwater Phenomenon

The ruins of the villa also revealed a small dock, constructed of stone, that is now more than 14-feet below sea level. This dock, and other parts of the villa, have fallen below the water level because of a phenomenon called “negative bradyseism.”

Negative bradyseism describes a slow sinking of the land into the sea that happens in areas that experience frequent volcanic activity. In addition to the nearby Mount Vesuvius, volcanologists point out that Bacoli and Naples are located along an ancient caldera.

Business and Pleasure

While the villa would have been an ideal lookout for Pliny the Elder, the naval commander probably used the villa for pleasure as much as for business. Private boats carrying high-ranking and socially elite delivered Pliny's guests to the now-submerged dock.

Pliny the Elder enjoyed entertaining guests and often hosted lavish parties at his homes. Bacoli, as a resort town and geologically active area, had thermal spas and baths that attracted the well-to-do.

The “Fire Plains” of Italy

The region where Bacoli is located has an ominous nickname. It is called the “Phlegraean Fields” or the “Fire Plains.” There are geysers, fumarole vents, and occasional earthquakes in this area. In fact, in the first century the area belched sulfur vapors and sparking lava so often that ancient Romans believed it was a portal to the underworld.

The “Fire Plains” have long been associated with the Roman god, Vulcan. Vulcan, as the name suggests, was the god of volcanoes, as well as fire and metalworking. Vulcan served as the blacksmith of the gods and people believed his blacksmith shop was located beneath the “Fire Plains.”

A Villa with Extraordinary Craftsmanship

When the 2,000-year-old villa was excavated, the archaeologists were amazed by the style and craftsmanship they found there. In particular, the walls were constructed with diamond-shaped limestone blocks that were arranged in a decorative pattern.

According Formola, “We think the excavation of deeper layers could reveal more rooms and even frescoes – potentially also precious findings.” She added that “the discovery is even more exceptional” than they first thought.

Local Legends Hinted at the Villa’s Existence

The construction workers building the park and playground, along with the archaeologists, were surprised when the 2,000-year-old ruins were discovered, but the locals living in Bacoli weren’t. Local legends say that there was an underground treasure at the site.

In fact, there is an ancient brick wall by the beach not far from the ruins. This wall has been called the “talking wall” for generations and, according to the locals, it was evidence that a large, important residence once stood at the location.

From Playground to Open-Air Museum

The site of the discovery was slated to be a public space ... a park and a playground. In light of the recent discovery, it will also be an open-air museum. The ruins will add another attraction, one that will highlight the town’s fascinating history.

It was important to town officials that the site remain accessible to the public. As Josi Gerardo Della Ragione, the mayor of Bacoli, explained, the ruins will be “the core of this beautiful space which our citizens and visitors will get to admire.”

Further Excavations Are Planned

Formola reported that further excavations at the location are being planned. The archaeologists hope to discover more information about the villa to see if it was, in fact, the residence of Pliny the Elder. But they also hope to learn more about the port at Misenum.

Ragione explained, “The ruins of the Roman villa will be cleaned and cordoned off with wooden fences. The goal is to protect the ancient site while also providing visitors with the opportunity to view the significant find with connections to the town’s long and fascinating history.