



9. Aula dei giganti

visitors can admire one of the most beautiful panoramic spots of the entire complex. From there you can see the lake and, in very clear days, as far as the promontory of Manerba, the Rocca di Garda, and Mount Brione at Riva del Garda.

This area was probably home to the most elegant public rooms, which opened onto a large terrace, completely in ruins from hundreds of years ago, of which only parts of the floor that collapsed into the room below have survived. This room beneath is called **"aula dei giganti" (9)**.

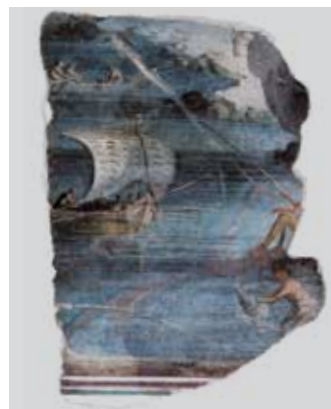
From the northern part of the villa, only the majestic substructures (support arches) remain, almost 12 metres high. To get to the arches, one must climb down to the middle floor and walk along the **long corridor (8)**, which opens to 15 small rooms (*cubicula*), probably used as bedrooms.

Climbing down one of the two sets of stairs to get to the so-called **"aula dei giganti"**, where one can see the majestic structure from below, and then explore some of the service areas, such as the **"horse grotto"**, a room completed by a barrel vault which contains several remains of plaster recovered from the villa, and the **botteghe**, vaulted support structures arranged linearly and open towards the outdoor area, and thus called *botteghe* – workshops – an evocative, fantastic term, a very common habit in the 19th century.

Finally, starting at one of the most consistent foundation elements of the villa, the so-called **"grande pilone" (10)**, visitors can walk towards the exit following defence walls built with rocks recovered from the villa itself, then no longer used. These are the first fortifications of the peninsula, built in



10. Grande pilone



Fragment of fresco showing fishermen boats

the late Imperial Age, between the 4th and 5th centuries AD. As one continues towards the exit, one can visit the **Archaeological Museum (2)**, which displays the most significant findings recovered from the archaeological digs that have taken place at the site. In addition, visitors are guided through the most ancient history of the Garda by a sequence of archaeological findings, from pre-historical times to the Middle Ages, illustrated by a multilingual video, didactic panels and captions.

Aerial photographs by banfimirko.it

GROTTE DI CATULLO E MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO DI SIRMIONE

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Opening times for the Grottoes and the Museum vary according to the season of the year. Please visit the official website for details:

www.musei.lombardia.beniculturali.it

Ticket

Full price: € 8.00 Discount: € 2.00 for Italian and EU citizens between 18 and 25 years of age.

Free entrance for visitors up to 18 years old.

For the full list of the categories entitled to free entrance, please visit www.beniculturali.it >luoghi della cultura >agevolazioni



GROTTE DI CATULLO AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM OF SIRMIONE



At the tip of the Sirmione peninsula, in a fantastic panoramic location, one can find the remains of the largest and most well-preserved Roman villa in northern Italy, which has been known for centuries as **Grottoes of Catullus**. Its name dates to the late 15th century, when ancient structures used to be called grottoes to indicate underground places.

The reference to Catullus, a Latin poet from Verona who died in 54 BC, can be explained by the fact that in Carme XXXI Catullus celebrated Sirmione as a jewel among all the islands and the peninsulas of seas and lakes. Recent studies have denied that the villa belonged to the poet, although local tradition has always associated it to his name. The first digging operations carried out at the site for scientific reasons date to the mid-19th century, and were led by Veronese Count Giovanni Girolamo Orti Manara. These digs were crucial to gather informations on the past conditions of the villa.



Archaeological Area of the Grottoes of Catullus

1. Entrance. 2. Museum. 3. Cryptoportico. 4. Pool. 5. Cisterna. 6. Grande cisterna. 7. Grande uliveto. 8. Long corridor. 9. Aula dei giganti. 10. Grande pilone.



3. Cryptoportico 4. Pool

Only after the State acquired the villa, between 1947 and 1949, was extensive research carried out, leading to the publication, in 1956, of the first guide to the complex, correctly interpreted as a sumptuous Roman villa.

The most recent surveys have made it possible to accurately determine the chronology of the villa, built at the time of Augustus (last decades of the 1st century BC - early 1st century AD) and abandoned between the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. It has thus been confirmed that the structure was built with a unitary project that defined its orientation and spatial distribution according to precise criteria of axiality and symmetry.

The villa open to visitation today covers an overall area of about two hectares. The layout is rectangular (167×105 m), with two foreparts on the shorter sides. It has three floors. The first one was built by extensively breaking the rocky subsoil. The different floors are supported by powerful structures (substructures) that can be traversed as if porticos, and are partially exposed. A survey made to the southern part of the villa revealed the existence of rooms belonging to a previous building, intentionally abandoned and demolished down to its foundations when the new villa was built. These remains date back to the 2nd and 1st centuries BC.

By taking the narrow walkways leaving from the upper exit of the **museum (2)**, one finds oneself near a long underground corridor, subdivided into two naves, the so-called **cryptoportico (3)** (hidden portico), obtained by digging the underlying rocky bank. The central spine, formed by arches, partly made of bricks and partly of limestone, has survived. On this spine once rested a double barrel vault necessary to support the overhead portico. The powerful cut on the rock had two advantages: it made it possible to store rocks to build the wall of the villa and increased viable space on the middle floor.

Next to it was a vast **thermal bath system**, probably built between the end of the 1st and the beginning of the 2nd century AD, during a restructuring of the great villa. The complex consists of a larger room, indicated as **pool (4)**, probably with a hypocaust, i.e. floor supported by short fire brick pillars (*suspensurae*), communicating with the space between the walls that surround the pool. The hot air produced by a boiler (*praefurnium*) circulated around the pool and beneath the floor, heating the water.

The so-called **“cryptoportico of stuccos”** is a service passage that slightly descends carved out of the rock. It was probably used to transport fuel (firewood and coal) towards the boiler. This name dates to the 19th century, as when, digging inside

the gallery, many fragments of decorated relief stucco were found, displaying plants and figurative elements. Near this hall, visitors can see a well-preserved structure slightly higher than the rest: its original name, “bathroom”, actually indicates a **cisterna (5)** used to store water.

The southern forepart has been interpreted as the **main entrance** to the villa. Traces of the foundations of its perimeter walls can still be seen. The *atrium* is surrounded by several different rooms with black and white mosaic floors. The largest of these rooms (room 88) was probably the *triclinium*, the hall used for banquets, able to sit numerous guests at one time.

The **grande cisterna (6)**, 47 metres long, is an underground space covered by *opus spicatum* flooring (rectangular bricks laid in a fishbone arrangement). It divided the rooms described above from the large *peristilio*, a vast patio surrounded by porticos, now completely destroyed, where today the **“grande uliveto” (7)** is located. The large garden surely boasted statues, fountains and other decorative elements, all removed over the centuries and taken elsewhere. The beautiful marble head of Dioscuro, on display at the museum, is the only sculpture that has survived. After the olive grove,