

MOSAICS
OF VILLA "ERCUZIA"
IN
PIAZZA ARMERINA
- MORGANTINA -



EMPEROR
MAXIMIANUS HERCULEOS/
OWNER OF THE VILLA

— CAUSES AND REASONS —
FOR THE
DESTRUCTION
OF THE
IMPERIAL VILLA

In 1060 count Ruggero D'Altavilla the Norman freed Sicily from the yoke of two centuries of Saracen domination and in so doing he also freed the multitude of villages making up the ancient Platia (former name of the present Piazza Armerina). Many Lombard, Norman and Piacentine soldiers in Ruggero's pay wanted to remain in Sicily and thus also occupied the area known as Casal dei Saraceni (a group of Saracen dwellings), where the Imperial Roman villa is located.

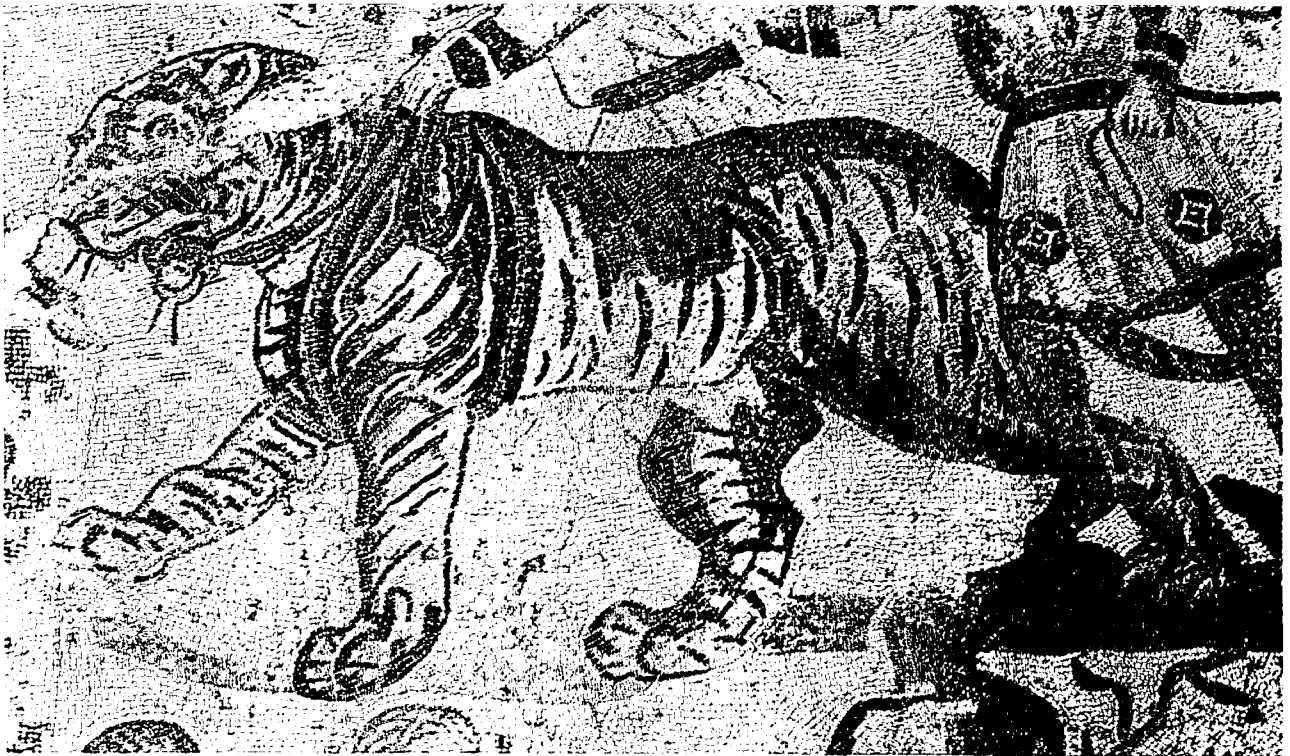
The most important of these villages was the one belonging to the Saracens. It was surrounded by the hamlets of Rambaldo, Aliano, Polino, Rabiato, Rabugino, Montagna di Marzo, Rossomano, Filosofiana and Monte Naone. In 1160 the Lombard militias of Piazza and Butera, led by Ruggero Sclavo and Tancredi d'Altavilla, rebelled against the king known as William the Evil, but failing in their plan they sought refuge in the ancient city of Platia - against the will of its citizens - took possession of the Norman Castle and pillaged the surrounding territory. On this occasion, the imperial villa was destroyed by a fire. Subsequently an avalanche of debris falling from Monte Mangone, which rose above it, covered it almost completely and protected it from further destruction until archaeological diggings brought it back to light. King William the Evil, accompanied by his army, marched upon Platia and after evacuating the city destroyed it completely. Later, in recognition of the innocence and valour of the citizens of Platia, who had distinguished themselves in the battle for the conquest of Catanzaro when the latter had rebelled against the Norman Monarchy, William the Evil issued a decree for the reconstruction of Piazza with the same stones and materials that had been used to build the former Platia, so that it should not be considered another city but rather the same one brought back to life. This task was assigned in 1163 to the tutor Alexander, whose opinion was that the city should be built on the hill of Mira, the present-day Monte.

— DISCOVERY AND REBIRTH —
OF THE
IMPERIAL VILLA
OF
CASALE DEI SARACENI

Around the 17th century A.D., the historian G. Paolo Chiarandà, a native of Piazza, wrote «in the area of Casal dei Saraceni, numerous structures belonging to a very old building appear above the ground». This news attracted a great many people to the place; among them was a certain Sabatino del Muto who in 1812 carried out diggings in the area of the basilica, finding there numerous objects in gold and silver that were passed around the upper-class families of Piazza Armerina. In 1881, upon realizing the importance of the building, the City of Piazza Armerina promoted digging campaigns of a scientific nature, entrusting them to the engineer Pappalardo. In the 1930's and 1940's further work was carried out by Paolo Orsi - Cultrera - Biagio Pace and finally, in the 1950's, following an intervention by the regional government of Sicily, the entire complex that made up and makes up the noble part of the villa was brought to light by Gino Vinicio Gentili. With its 3,500 square metres of mosaic flooring - the work of African craftsmen - this villa represents the largest complete record we have of African mosaic art and further broadens our knowledge of the art from the Tetrarchic period. Still today there is much to discover; in fact, several aerial photographs taken by the Italian Air Force in 1963 revealed that adjacent to the villa there are the ruins of a large settlement that the Piazza historian Litterio Villari has identified as Ibla Geleate, a city of Sicilian origins, later Hellenic, and famous for the production of honey. Archaeological research has shown that the imperial villa was built upon the ruins of a more modest building dating from the 2nd century A.D. whose surface it covered almost completely.

The part of the corridor which opens up toward the peristyle features a series of marble columns with capitals in a composite style (Corinthian Ionic). These were joined by marble plutei (today missing), upon which, during the diggings of the villa, professor GINO VINICIO GENTILI founds fragments of an inscription with the name given to Maximianus, «HERCULEUS VICTOR».

Farther ahead there is another sailing vessel, in the port of ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT. An elephant and a bison, rendered harmless by a piece of wood placed over its horns, are being forcibly driven on board by some servants (SETTIS 1975). The animals captured also include: DROMEDARIES - TIGERS - HIP-POTAMUSES and RHINOCEROSES in the delta of the river Nile (Carandini 1970 - Settis 1975).



Capture of a tiger.



Capture of a rhinoceros.