



Rendering by Architect Giuseppe Morganti, 2021

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## THE SWIMMING POOL OF LIVIA: *NATATIO* AT *DOMUS LIVIAE*

The Villa of Livia at Prima Porta is indisputably unique among Roman villas. The familial estate of Livia, wife of the first Roman emperor, the villa at Prima Porta rose in importance during her husband Augustus's principate from a country retreat to an important symbol of empire, and the first imperial villa. Indeed, it is here where the best-known portrait of Augustus, the "Augustus of Prima Porta," was discovered; it was a discovery that announced simultaneously the statue's continued display here and the villa's ongoing importance after Augustus' death. As historians may attest, it is rare to be able to identify with certainty physical remains that are mentioned in the ancient sources. With the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta, we have just this situation. Indeed, it is the ancient author Suetonius who tells the story of the portent that announced to Livia, here at the villa, that her son Tiberius would be the eventual emperor. It is also an ancient author, Pliny the Elder, who tells of the singularity of the villa's garden, for as empire began, new traditions grew along with it, and it would be from the gardens at this villa that laurel would be gathered for the emperors' wreaths – each emperor had his own laurel tree.

An unassuming property perched upon a ridge, the villa complex and its gardens were surrounded by and integrated with lush greenery and blooming nature. In the first centuries BC and AD, Roman villas were typically luxurious locations aimed at welcoming and impressing guests, and were filled

with manmade and natural wonders that delighted the senses. The villa of Livia had several entertaining rooms and spaces whose confines were natural or, if manmade, were adorned in such a way as to make that distinction ambiguous. The *natatio*, or swimming pool, of this villa was a centerpiece of one such entertaining area. Beautifully adorned with a black and white mosaic with an aquatic theme typical to Roman bathhouses at the time, the pool was an addition to the villa made in the first century AD. Roman villas, even those located on the sea or close to the coast, often included swimming pools for the private use and enjoyment of the owners and their visitors. Archaeological finds attest that such pools were often as ornamental as they were utilitarian, as we have evidence of elegant examples of rooftop pools, 'infinity' pools, and swimming pools that merged into the waters of the sea. The Romans were no stranger to innovation, or to incredible extravagance and luxury. To have a swimming pool in the privacy of your own home (especially a home located far from natural waterways), and one placed delicately within surrounding greenery and sumptuous gardens, was the height of comfort and magnificence. The swimming pool in the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta was certainly an example of such a beloved element that provided both visual pleasure and a precious remedy for the heat of the summer.