

# "Grand Tour" at Veleia

**Nicola Criniti – Daniele Fava**

This *peregrinatio* around Veleia made in 2009 is entitled "Grand Tour" in honour of our 18th and 19th century predecessors. It aims to be a concise, up-to-date and accurate guide to this important settlement in the Ligurian-Apennine mountains, of interest to researchers, enthusiasts and *hospites* of any provenance or type.

The itinerary is practical in nature; more detailed information about Veleia can be found on the *AGER VELEIAS* website, especially the page "Veleia/Cisalpina".

Starting from the modern entrance to the site and the Macinesso church in the south-west, the accessible and clear itinerary covers the basilica and Foro in the north before returning to the Cisternone in the south. Numbers on the map refer to the pictures and texts in this file.

Texts are by Nicola Criniti and icons by Daniele Fava. The two authors are extremely grateful to members of the Gruppo di Ricerca Veleiate, especially Luca Lanza, whose original idea led to the creation of the itinerary, and to Giuseppe Costa and Romano Zanni who provided assistance in the construction. Nicola Criniti is also grateful to the students of Roman History and Latin Epigraphy at the University of Parma who for more than twenty-five years have taken part in stimulating field visits and who continue to show enthusiasm for the ancient site and the little-known history of its daily life.

We would also like to thank Lois Clegg of the Settore Abilità Linguistiche of Parma University for the translation into English, the staff of the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Parma and the Veleia site for their generous help and the Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici dell'Emilia Romagna for permission to reproduce pictures shown here.

## 1. Veleia / site

Veleia developed from the late Iron Age up to the early centuries of the Roman Empire first as a Ligurian *oppidum* and then a Roman *municipium*. It is situated in the heart of the Apennine mountains in the Piacenza area in the valley of the Chero, a minor right-hand tributary of the River Po. Slightly less than 500 m above sea level, at the foot of the mountain called Monte Rovinasso [858 m] from the north-west and Rocca di Moria [901 m], from the south-east, it is about 50 km south, or 30 km as the crow flies, from Piacenza. In the last two decades of the 20th Century at least five different phases in building during the later Republican and early Imperial periods were identified on the site.

## 2. Veleia / road links

From prehistoric times Veleia was an important and somewhat mysterious junction. Half way between the western side of Emilia (*Regio VIII*) and Lunigiana (*Regio IX*), it linked western Emilia with the Apuan Alps on the Tyrrhenian coast, from where marble was imported. Veleia was linked to the Via Emilia road about 30 km away by two smaller roads, one down the valley of the Riglio towards Piacenza and one down the valley of the Chero towards Fiorenzuola d'Arda .

### 3. Veleia / site entrance

The entrance to the archeological site is today at the southern end of the road perpendicular to the porticoed street. In later Republican times, the monumental entrance was situated to the north of the Forum, but few remains are visible today. A second entrance was added on the eastern side in the at the start of the Imperial period.

### 4. The 'pieve' Church at Macinesso

The ancient Church of St Anthony at Macinesso has stood in the municipality of Lugagnano Val d'Arda since 1815, and lies about 15 km from the village on a hill south of Veleia. It dates back to at least the 11th Century. At this time, all trace of the Roman settlement had vanished, although its land covered the same area as Veleia and throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was considered to be synonymous with the archeological site. The church was rebuilt in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and restored several times. In 1842, Michele Lopez, Director of the Parma Museum of Antiquities, led excavations to search for the remains of a Roman sacred site which he believed, without any proof, to lie under the church. The adjoining priest's house was destroyed by this excavation.

### 5. The "lawn", site of the first excavations (and the southern housing area)

In the lawn around the Church, where the last homes visible in the small housing area to the south on the walls can be seen, the *Tabula alimentaria* was discovered in spring 1747 during digging by priest Don Giuseppe Rapaccióli who wanted to "repair a small landslip that was ruining the lawn". To the south of the porticoes along what was probably the *decumano* of the centre of Veleia, there was a small group of medium-sized houses on an artificial terrace against the natural slope of the ground. This quarters are divided by the Church of St Anthony set on the walls of the last visible houses.

### 6. The Forum from above

Early excavations were unplanned and ad hoc. They started on 14 April 1760 in the "Courtyard" (458 m), or the small rectangular Forum from early Imperial times. It is the only one of its type of the *Regio VIII* to be so well preserved. More than half of the indigenous epigraphs have been found

here. It was surrounded by storehouses and rectangular *tabernae*. With the *Basilica* and the other public and private buildings it constitutes a rare example of an urban mountain centre dating from antiquity. It is a complex site and included all the features needed by a town situated in the Ligurian-Tuscan-Emilian Apennines .

#### 7. Road to the south (Eastern *cardo*)

Slightly south of the *Basilica* is the eastern *cardo* running along the whole eastern side of the Forum. The *cardo* was one of the two main roads that characterized the *forma urbis* of most Roman *municipia*.

#### 8. Baths

The baths go back to early Imperial times and consist of a large building divided into two apsidal rooms, the *caldarium* and the *tepidarium*. Each room measures about ten metres in length and slightly less on the apse side. To one side is a small unheated tub *frigidarium* for ablutions, showing traces of marble paving. First discovered and excavated south-west of the Forum from 1762, the baths were larger than they appear today as part of the remains were covered over by the 19<sup>th</sup> century excavation headquarters, today the Antiquarium. A second baths complex may have been situated east of the Church of St Anthony, and it is certain that these were not the only baths in Veleia, which proves that the *municipium* could count on a regular water supply. To date no evidence has been found of "mineral" waters, or their use for therapeutic purposes, although they were probably used in the area as far back as ancient times. Mono-axis buildings of this type are so frequent in Roman sites that these cannot constitute proof of the existence of a modern type of spa.

#### 9. Baths / *caldarium*

#### 10. Baths / *tepidarium*

#### 11. Baths / *frigidarium*

The dressing room or *apodyterium* is not distinguishable today, but an entrance from it leads into *caldarium*, the large room for hot bath, and from there into the *tepidarium*, the room passing into the *frigidarium*, the small room for the cold bath. Hot air was blown under the floor, *suspensurae*, raised on small circular brick pillars and then inside the walls through small tubes (*tubuli*). The air was heated by a stove which also heated the water (*hypocaustis*) This has not yet been identified but it could be located a few feet to the north of the baths where today a small maintenance building stands. These baths were public, used by all the inhabitants of Veleia at a small charge, and separate for males and females. They were the scene of social life and sports were practiced in the gymnasium, which here however does not exist.

#### 12. *Thermopolium* / building

#### 13. *Thermopolium* / "counter"

The *thermopolium*, at the intersection of the road to the baths and the porticoed road, is worthy of note. It was a sort of café or snack bar where hot wine and raw and cooked food was eaten standing up. The marble shelves and pottery containers for food can still be seen.

#### 14. Southern porticoed street (Southern *decumanus*)

The remains of the southern *decumano*, central to the plan of a town, can be seen just south of the *Basilica*. This was one of the two main roads characterizing the *forma urbis* of most Roman *municipia*. On raised ground, lying in the space between the terrace of the Forum and the residential quarter to the south, it bears the remains of the plinths and capitals of the columns that formed the portico. Houses and the *thermopolium* lined the street. The northern side was separated from the *Basilica* by a thick wall covered in crock fragments (*opus signinum*), of which clear traces can be seen inside the *Basilica*.

15. Domus "Wild boar house" / *ostium*

16. Domus "Wild boar house" / *atrium*

17. Domus "Wild boar house" / *peristylum* (?)

A small residential complex of medium sized *domus* grew up on the artificially raised area of land to the southern side of the porticoed street. The complex was divided by St. Anthony's Church built on the walls of the last visible houses. These include the larger "House of the Wild Boar" with steps up to the entrance (*ostium*). To the right and left of the entrance in the two side rooms two independent structures were inserted, probably *tabernae* to be rented out, as was done everywhere from Ostia to Pompeii. The house had a colonnaded *atrium* or *tablinum* with tessellated paving stones picturing a wild boar, destroyed at the end of the 18th Century, and possibly a small *peristylum* although the absence of a propylon makes this uncertain. To the rear a small chamber seems to have been used as a *hortus* for the family.

#### 18. Raised Eastern road

This road was probably wide enough to allow the many chariots and freight vehicles to travel along it in different directions without difficulty.

#### 19. The Forum

20. The Forum / Eastern entrance

21. The Forum / Monumental entrance (?)

The *Foro* (458 m.) was the heart of every Roman city, and the centre of commerce and administration. Citizens carried out public and private business in this common space. Civic life and trade took place here, the site of the manifestation of municipal ideals. It was closed to vehicles in accordance with the classical "Vitruvian" scheme. This is the best preserved Forum from *Aemilia* and was an important theatre of history in the late Republic. More than half of the *Veleia* inscriptions were unearthed here. The columns of the Forum propylon underwent thorough restoration 1950-1951:

the only original remains are the Corinthian capitals and plinths from the 1st Century in Luni marble.

22. The Forum / Southern area

23. The Forum / Northern area

More than half of the inscriptions in Veleia have been found in or around the Forum. Many bear the official mark *DD* [*d(ecreto) d(ecurionum)*]. There are about twelve citations, which are all connected to the Empire except for the *titulus* L. Celio Festo, from half way through the II century A.D.

24. The Forum / *platea* looking south

25. The Forum / *platea* looking north

26. The Forum / *platea*: rainwater drainage system

The *platea*, the rectangular open area of the Forum from early Imperial times, measures about 50m x 75m. Of local grey sandstone, it came to light in 1760. The large paving stones are softer than the sandstone still mined at Piane di Carniglia in the Upper Taro Valley today, and probably come from Groppoducale about twelve km south of Veleia. At the same time in the Julio-Claudian period, drains were constructed to carry waters away in four channels running from a single point in the centre of the space.

27. The Forum / Eastern *mensa*

28. The Forum / Western *mensa*

Two large pink Verona marble benches (*mensae*) discovered in 1760 show that the citizens of Veleia conducted their private and public affairs inside the Forum. They were set symmetrically to the sides of the middle axis of the *platea*. The entire population of *ager Veleias* made use of them in carrying out their financial and commercial business.

29. The Forum / *tabernae* to the east

30. The Forum / storehouses and service areas to the west

Rectangular shops *tabernae* and storehouses lay on the east and west sides of the Forum. In 1760, the steps giving access to the *platea* were found, as well as the only fragment of mural painting in Veleia. It shows an enclosed garden and was perhaps part of the portico of the Forum.

31. The Forum / memorial - Sabinia Tranquillina

32. The Forum / memorial - Probo

The last remnant of Veleia of certain date, a rough dedication to the newly elected Emperor Probo (277 AD) for a now lost statue is engraved on the back of the base of the marble statue of Furia Sabin(i)a Tranquillina, wife of emperor Gordiano III (241/244 AD), also now lost.

33. The Forum / paving and floor inscription of Lucilio Prisco

The *duoviro* of Veleia L. Lucilio Prisco, pre-Flavian financier of the paving of the Forum in local sandstone, had an imposing inscription about himself (*caelatae*) written in flowing letters from side to side of the *platea*. Brought to light in 1760, it was clearly intended to be best seen by the élite leaving the *Basilica*. But the bronze characters inserted in the sandstone paving stones were ripped out in the 19th Century to be fused into bullets, and today all that remains are a few triangular punctuation marks and the cavities left by the lettering.

34. The Forum / equestrian statue plinth- Vespasiano

35. The Forum / equestrian statue plinth - Claudius

In the centre of the *platea* of the Forum, the plinths of the equestrian statues of Claudio (42 AD) and (70 AD) with engraved dedications can be seen in the southern and northern sectors respectively

36. The Forum / monuments – Emperor *Numen*

In the first half of the I Century BC, Cn. Avillio, of the *seviri Augustales*, left in his will a Verona marble memorial to the divine strength of the Emperor (*numen Augusti*), of which the plinth is today lost.

37. Forum portico

A large fragment of an architrave in white marble from Luni (501 cm x 32 cm) commemorates the noble *evergete* Bebia Bassilla, who generously financed the Calcidico and perhaps part of the portico of the Forum with brick columns. In the 1860s a proto-Imperial bronze head of a young woman, plausibly believed to be Bebia Bassilla, was discovered nearby.

38. *Basilica*

39. *Basilica* / view from the north

40. *Basilica* / building – looking eastwards

The great *Basilica* is rectangular with a single nave, and stood along the south side of the Forum. It was excavated in 1761. It measures 34.85 m x 11.70 m, although the length is about 51 m if the side exedra are included; only the plinths and travertine capitals now remain of these. There were two entrances. The southern side rests on the back terrace of the southern part of the city. From the start it served as *curia*, *tribunal*, "*tabularium*", the legal and administrative centre for the Apennines in Liguria, Tuscany and Emilia. It was financed by the indigenous noble Caio [---] Sabino, one of the few equestrian nobles for which there is evidence in Veleia and a tribune in Germany in Julio-Claudian times.

41. *Basilica* / building – looking westwards

The *Tabula alimentaria* (107/114 BC) was discovered by chance in 1747 close to the ancient Church of St Anthony. It is of bronze, rectangular, 136/138 cm by 284/285.5 and 0.8 cm thick, and was probably displayed on a wall of the *Basilica*. In 1760, the *lex Rubria de Gallia Cisalpina* (42/41 BC) another large bronze fragment 54 cm x 72 cm was found about seven metres away in an adjacent portico.

#### 42. La *Basilica* / building –row of "Julio-Claudian" statues

In 1761, twelve statues of Luni marble were found at the foot of a podium against the long south wall of the *Basilica*. It is believed that they may have been made in the area of Piacenza or Parma, about the time of Tiberius (14 - 37 AD) and Claudius (41 - 54 AD). They represent members of the Imperial family, and the *evergete* L. Calpurnio Pisone *pontifex*, who may have commissioned the statues. The names, and the public offices held by the men, were engraved on a *titulus* in Luni vulpinite stone, although only five of these inscriptions survive. The statues today are held by the Museo Archeologico di Parma. The discovery took great hold of public imagination, and aroused even more interest than the finding of the *Tabula Alimentaria*.

#### 43. 19th Century Headquarters of Excavations (Antiquarium)

The modern Antiquarium replaced the Antiquarium built on the ruins of the *Calcidico*, and occupies the ground floor of the 19th Century headquarters of excavations in the time of Empress Marie Louise. On display are plasters and findings from the pre-Roman *ager Veleias* as well as a limited number of recently discovered Roman items.

#### 44. "Cisternone" / looking east

#### 45. "Cisternone" / looking west

This important "public" structure was found lying under more than five and a half metres of earth during the main excavations south-west of the Forum 1763 - 1765. It is not known if it was a "*castellum aquae*" cistern or an "amphitheatre". Rebuilt several times between the XVIII and XX centuries, 18th Century measurements give the building as practically round (27.8 m x 28.8 m) although today it is oval (54.85 m x 44.10 m) It has been suggested that it is a rare example of a round "amphitheatre" but no *memoriae*, steps or stairs for the public remain to support this theory. If it was a *castellum aquae*, it was dangerously and unusually close to the Forum and the residential quarters, and out of proportion to requirements. It would in fact constitute the largest antique circular reservoirs for water ever discovered, and there are no connections to the urban centre or with the spa spring in the south-west. The question is currently undecided, and the structure itself is usually closed.

#### 46. *Capitolium*

It is not certain whether the third area of the *forma urbis*, the *Capitolium*, existed at Veleia. However, as the *Capitolium* was the centre of official religious life, with the Capitoline triad of gods Jupiter, Juno and Minerva

being worshipped here, the “eminently lay character” of the community could explain its absence.

#### 47. Private burials

There are few records of Roman *memoriae* funerals or private burials in *ager Veleias* and none in the immediate area of the town. No funerary monuments have been found; all funerals were indirect incinerations and most of the dead were simply buried in the earth. Three incineration areas were found around the necropolis in the 1960s and 1970s and the simple style dates them from the 1st century BC and the 1st or 2nd century

© – Copyright — [www.veleia.it](http://www.veleia.it)