

Hadrian's Villa: new secrets found

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Archeologists digging at Hadrian's Villa north of Rome say they've recovered a monumental staircase complete with huge columns and a giant sphinx.

The stairway was found at what is believed to have been the entrance to the sprawling complex known as the Gymnasium, the Italian news agency ANSA reported Monday. A statue of an athlete and a huge theatrical mask, both in marble, were also found at the site.

"These are extraordinary finds," said Zaccaria Mari, the archaeologist who made the discoveries. "The colored marble on the columns is simply superb, while the sphinx is an amazing work."

Mari said the nearly 28-foot-wide staircase and the statuary were most likely made about 130 A.D., but the eight-foot-long sphinx might be even older.

Hadrian's Villa, a few miles north of Rome at Tivoli, was the largest and richest Imperial Roman villa ever built, ANSA reported. Taking 10 years to construct and consisting of more than 30 buildings, one of the villa's best-preserved parts is a recreation of the famous statue-lined pool shrine at Canopus in Egypt -- one of many memorials to the emperor's boy-lover Antinoos.

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