

Productive Facilities of Roman Villas in Italy Revaluated by Refined Architecture and Decoration

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Installations for the processing of wine and olive oil were an essential part of Roman villas in Italy and left a clear mark on their remains in the form of extensive pressing and storage areas. In general, these facilities are characterized by functional designs, furnishings and logistically appropriate layouts that aimed at an effective organization of the productive processes.¹

However, several facilities stand out from the normal installations due to their extravagant furnishings, unusual layouts and elaborate architectural framings. The productive installations here seem to have been revalued and elevated into the sphere of leisure and representation of the villa owner. On closer inspection, the heterogeneous character of the materials, architectural forms and décor elements used in the furnishing of single sites reveal very different motives and intentions behind the enhancements.²

A prominent case study is the recently excavated winery of the large imperial “Villa Magna” (fig. 1).³ The extensive facility was paved with *opus spicatum* made of marble and consisted of a treading platform and *cella vinaria* with numerous *dolia*, as well as

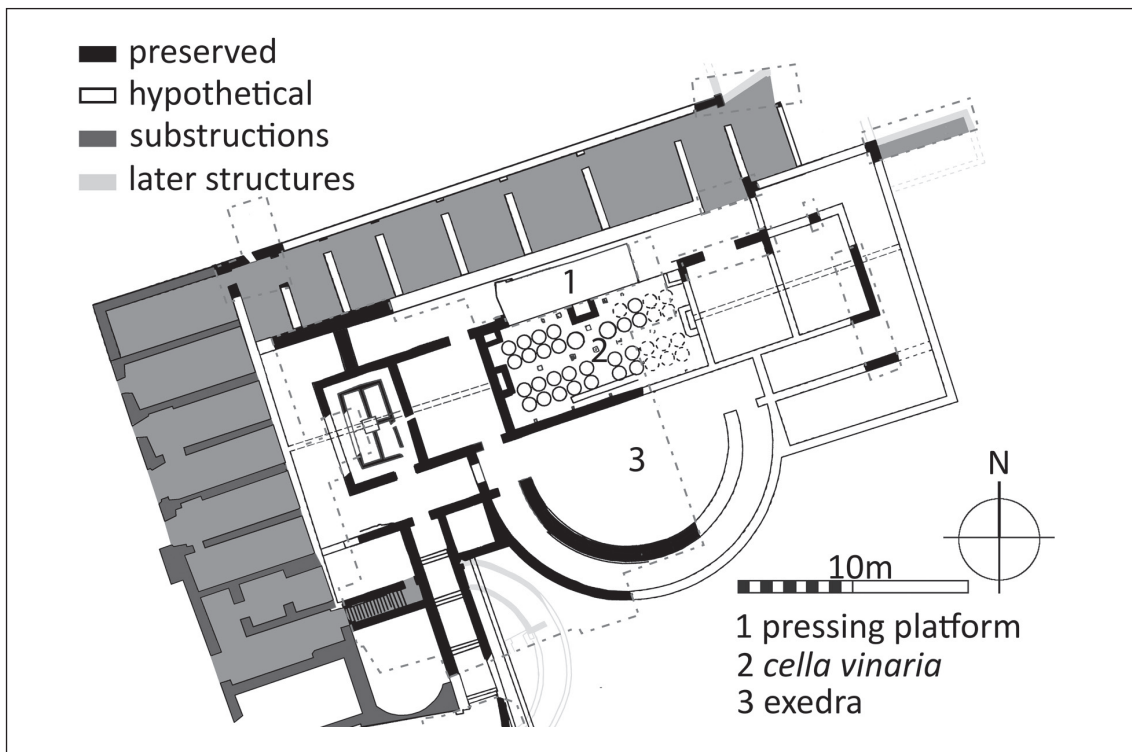


Fig. 1: Anagni, Winery complex of the Villa Magna.

five vats that were arranged symmetrically in the room. In combination with a semi-circular exedra to its south, the production area developed a unique layout reminiscent of a Roman theater. Based on a series of letters from the young M. Aurelius to Fronto,⁴ Elisabeth Fentress convincingly explains the complex as a stage for the Emperor's representation and his ceremonial duties in connection with various official sacrifices during the vintage season.⁵

Other archaeological finds, such as Dionysian wall paintings and small altars in pressing rooms of farms around Pompeii,⁶ show that not only the highest aristocratic elite, but a wide range of social actors were authors and recipients of this materialistic and idealistic revaluation of productive spaces. In contrast to the very artificial and inefficient arrangement of the Villa Magna site, these facilities show the typical structure of regular market-oriented wineries and provide insight into the economic worries and the piety of the more ordinary rural population.

While elaborate furnishings often express the need to stage productive processes, some sites also reveal the attempt to conceal them behind representative façades. This seems to be the case at an octagonal building excavated at Asinello.⁷ It houses a complete and functional pressing installation and four storage rooms arranged to fit a building layout, which was in itself not particularly suitable for the purpose. The interest of the owner here was to create an externally appealing, and for its time, modern, building on his property, while maintaining the functionality of the facility.

These various solutions in dealing with the external perception of the productive facilities indicate a very lively and real discourse that took place between the villa owners concerning the economic efficiency of their estates – a discourse that is reflected also in the ironic dialogue about the “proper villa” in Varro's books on agriculture⁸, and which was crucial for the Roman self-image.

Notes

¹ M. Feige, Die Landwirtschaftsanlagen römischer *villae rusticae* in Mittelitalien vom 2. Jh. v. Chr. bis 2. Jh. n. Chr. (in preparation).

² Fundamental and valuable research with a compilation of ancient written records relating to the link between agricultural facilities and the self-image, prestige and entertainment of the Roman aristocratic elite in: Purcell 1995; Fentress et al. 2016, 196–228 (with previous literature).

³ Fentress et al. 2016, 89–123.

⁴ Front. ep. IV, 4–6.

⁵ Fentress et al. 2016, 204–208.

⁶ A collection of the known sites in: Baratta 2005, 120–122. See also the pressing room of the Villa of N. Popidius Narcissus Major in Scafati: De' Spagnolis 2002, 40–58.

⁷ Broise – Jolivet 2000.

⁸ Varro rust. 3, 2.

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Fig. 1: Michael Feige, based on: Fentress – Goodson – Maiuro 2016, Taf. 5.5.

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