

Economy and Production Systems in Roman Cisalpine Gaul: Some Data on Farms and *Villae*

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Aims and Methods

In the past years, part of Claudia Forin's PhD project carried out a systematic census of isolated extra-urban sites (from the 2nd century BC to the 5th century AD) excavated in Roman northern Italy.¹ The data come from published documentation that is supplemented whenever possible by archival data. We analysed more than two hundred sites that offer a representative picture of the sparse settlements in this area. The data were stored in a database that featured several sections, including the environmental and topographical context, the buildings in general, and individual rooms. The database is linked to a GIS, with the aim of undertaking a distributional analysis and to connect the dataset with environmental and topographical data. The 203 sites are distributed throughout the entire study-area, with the greatest concentration in the plain. The collected data were studied both from architectural and functional perspectives in order to understand the cultural models (local or external) and the economic role. When possible, we attempted to give a socio-economic assessment of the owners.

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Data Analysis

The analysis of many different aspects has led to the definition of six principal settlement types, distinguished on the basis of the criteria summarised in the table (figs. 1–2):

- Geographical and topographical setting
- Dimensions (smallest possible overall area occupied by site)
- Ground plan and architectural characteristics
- Specialised zones (residential and productive)
- Decorative elements (both fixed and portable) and infrastructure (such as baths and heated rooms)
- Productive equipment and indicators of production (fixed and movable)
- Construction materials and building techniques

It was possible to suggest an interpretation for 138 out of 203 sites. The first major split is between farms (Types A and B) and villas (Types C, D and E): the fundamental differentiating element is the scale, both in terms of architectural form and economic capacity. The analysis identified a total of 25 farms of different sizes, situated in inland rural areas, particularly in the western and eastern parts of the study-area.

	Settlement type	Geographical and topographical setting	Dimensions	Ground plan and architectural characteristics	Specialised zones	Decorative elements and infrastructures	Productive equipment and indicators of production	Construction materials and building techniques	N° Sites
Type A	Small farms	Rural setting (plain)	130 to 230 sq.m.	Small compact building with no internal court	No (multifunctional spaces)	-	-	Local materials in the substructures and walls in perishable materials	10
Type B	Medium farms	Rural setting (plain and hills)	>350 to >480 sq.m.	Different buildings or main building with additional annexes	Domestic and artisanal activities in specific spaces	Small decorative elements	Artisanal activities in specific spaces or in courtyards	Local materials in the substructures and walls in perishable materials	15
Type C.1	Villas with residential and productive areas	Rural setting (plain, hills and lagoon)	>750 to 3.000 sq.m.	Building organized around a central courtyard; different buildings; terraces; annexes	Clearly differentiated areas	Quite pleasant living areas (baths and heating plant)	Modest productive facilities	Local materials in the substructures and walls in perishable materials; buttresses	74
Type C.2	Villas with residential and productive areas	Rural setting (plain, hills and coasts)	>3.000 to 7.700 sq.m.	Building organized around a central courtyard or more courtyards; terraces; annexes	Clearly differentiated areas	Pleasant living areas (baths and heating plant); adoption of central italic models	Well-developed productive areas	Local materials in the substructures and walls in perishable materials; buttresses; no-local materials	
Type D.1	Representation villas	Rural hilly setting; suburban villas	>2.700 to 4.000 sq.m.	Compact building employing <i>basis villae</i> and terracing	Residential spaces	High quality decorative equipment; baths and heating plant; adoption of central italic models	No evidence	Local materials in the substructures and walls in perishable materials; no-local materials	27
Type D.2	Representation villas (including Late antiquity villas)	Coastal and suburban setting (including rural positions)	Until 18.000 sq.m.	Compact building employing <i>basis villae</i> and terracing or linear building with scenographic front	Residential and representative spaces	High quality decorative equipment; baths and heating plant; adoption of central italic models	No evidence	Local materials in the substructures and walls in perishable materials; no-local materials	
Type E	Villas-mansiones	Rural and coastal setting; close to road network	> 620 to 7.700 sq.m.	Building organized around a central courtyard or more courtyards	Differentiated areas	Quite pleasant living areas (baths and heating plant)	Productive facilities	Local materials in the substructures and walls in perishable materials; buttresses	8
Type F	Specialised productive centres	Rural setting, close to waterways and transit routes, not far from cities	Smallest overall area occupied: 4000, 2500 sq.m.	Different buildings	Minimal or absent residential quarters; well-developed productive areas	-	Production in the external areas or in specialised spaces	Local materials in the substructures and walls in perishable materials; buttresses	4

Fig. 1: Table of settlement types.

Modest dimensions (130–230 m²) characterise Type A farms and they tend to have fairly simple architecture (fig. 3). A total of 10 have been identified. We can imagine that the small farms met the needs of a single-family group, given the presence of only a few rooms and one hearth. However, it is not possible to say whether the inhabitants worked a small *fundus* of their own or whether a larger villa employed them as workers. It is also possible that these buildings were only used seasonally. Such farms must have been very widespread, but they are not very visible on the ground and may also have been built-over by later villas.

Type B farms (15 cases identified) are larger and complex structures, with a main building (350–480 m²) and additional annexes, sometimes delimited by enclosures. This type of farm has traces of both domestic and artisanal activities, carried out in specific spaces or in courtyards. The farm's economy was based on the processing of agricultural and husbandry products, indicated by the presence of storerooms and stables, such as at the Rosta (Turin)² and Roncade-Ca' Tron (Treviso)³ sites (fig. 4). It should be noted that many of these sites lie within a 15 km radius from urban centres or near terrestrial and fluvial communication routes.⁴ These farms seem to have provided for the needs of their occupants plus a small surplus destined for rural or urban markets. The connection to markets, even though limited, is probably the key-factor favouring the longer habitation of these sites in comparison to smaller farms.

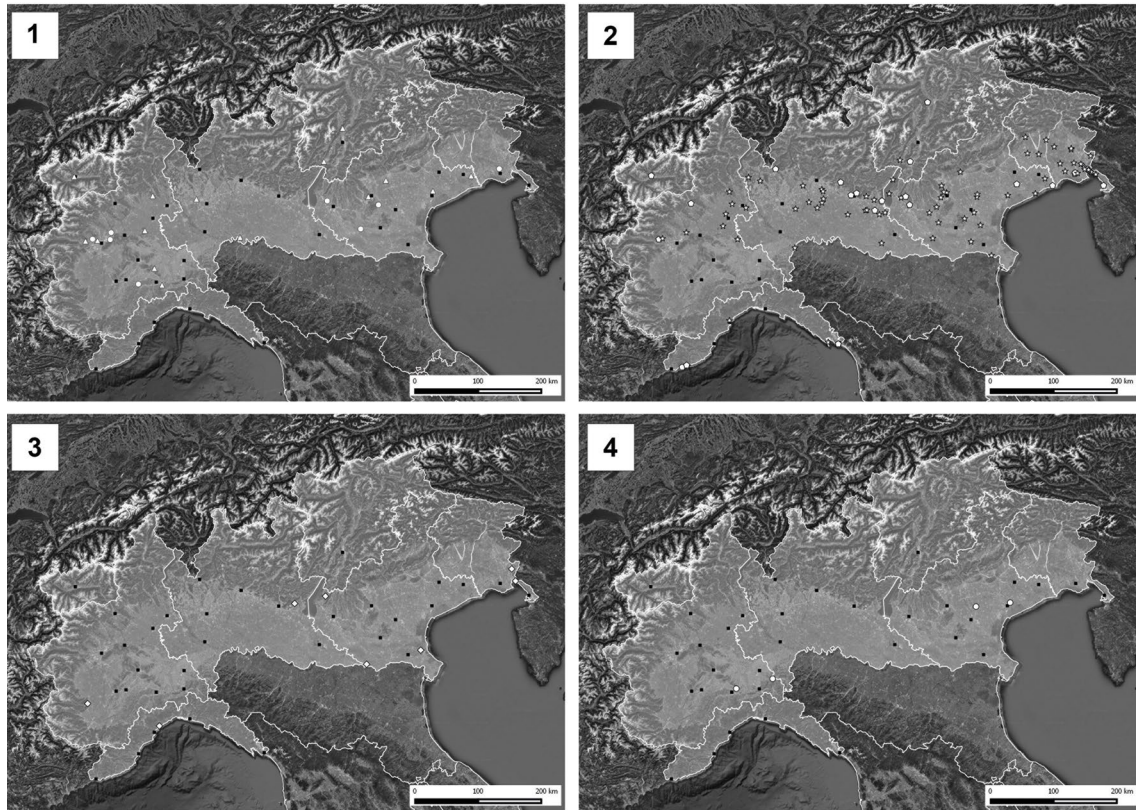


Fig. 2: Distributional maps of the sites attributed to the six settlement types. The black squares represent the main ancient urban centres. 1) Type A farms (circle) and B (triangle) – 2) Type C villas (star) and D (pentagon) – 3) Type E *villae-mansiones* (diamond); 4) Type F production centres (circle).

The *villa*⁵ is the typical unit of rural settlement in northern Italy and is found everywhere, particularly on hills and plains. There are a variety of types differentiated according to their scale and main function.

The Type C villas (74 complexes) feature the presence of clearly differentiated areas between residential and productive activities. The smallest villas (Type C.1) present pleasant living areas, with baths and heating systems, and have relatively modest productive facilities. These are linked to an agricultural-pastoral system, which indicates a more market-focused role in comparison to the farms. Some villas (the Type C.2) are larger, better built, and decorated, and they display urban models and non-local building materials. Furthermore, productive activities are very well-developed in this group, with the presence of wine production (like at Costigliole Saluzzo, Cuneo),⁶ cereal processing (Villabartolomea-Venezia Nuova, Verona),⁷ or sheep-farming facilities (Vicenza-Dal Molin)⁸ (fig. 5). Sometimes, there is the clear adoption of Central Italic models, both in terms of residential architecture (the *atrium* type) and of productive aspects (presence

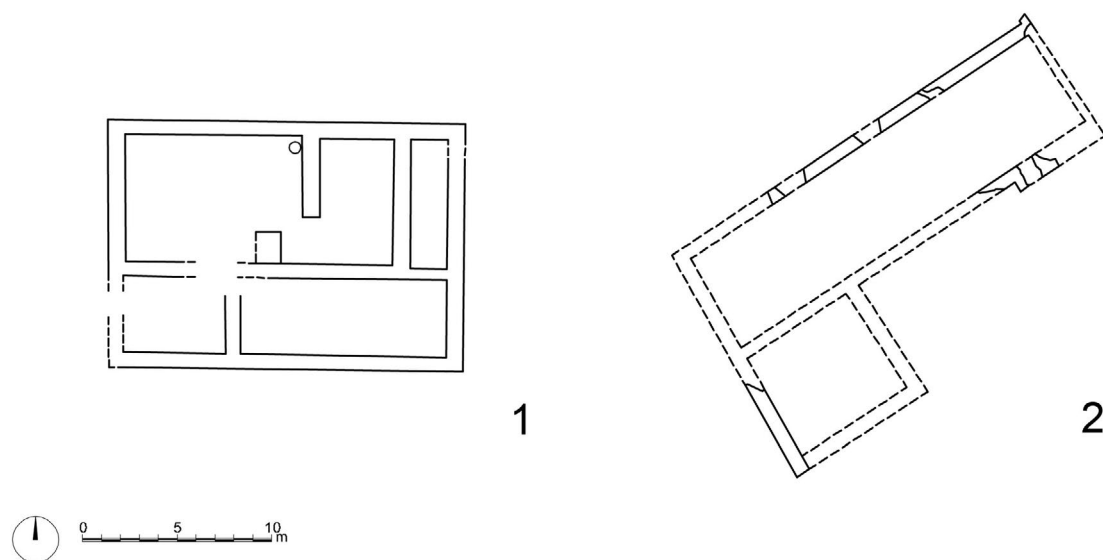


Fig. 3: 1) S. Pietro in Cariano, Archi di Castelrotto (Verona). 1st–2nd century AD – 2) Pianezza (Turin). Roman era. Plans of Type A farms.

of *torcularia*). A notable example is the famous maritime villa of Varignano,⁹ in the territory of the colony of Luna, which was founded in 177 BC.

The Type D villa (27 sites are known) can be seen as a proclamation of its owners' status. Two sub-groups exist for this category, based on their dimensions and architecture. Most of these villas show good-quality construction techniques, the use of *basis villae* and artificial terracing, together with high-quality décor and architectural apparatus (Type D.1). No evidence of production activities was found, but this could be due to the limits of the excavations. The recorded complexes were always located in commanding positions: on the hills, as in the case of the Almese villa (Turin),¹⁰ or along sea- and lake-shores. The same status claims can be seen in the suburban villas, which are located in proximity to the city. Despite this, they still offer tranquillity and privacy, while surely also representing excellent investments for the members of the higher social classes.¹¹ Some coastal villas, especially the ones located on the shores of Lake Garda, stand out for their exceptional architectural and decorative elements (Type D.2). Examples of this type come from the so-called Grotte di Catullo villa, in Sirmione (Verona),¹² and the Toscolano Maderno villa, which is attributed to the Nonii Arii, a prominent family of Brixia (mod. Brescia).¹³ Considering that Verona and Brescia were not *coloniae*, these villas provide evidence of the so-called "self-Romanisation" phenomenon. This group of villas (Type D.2) that proclaimed the social status of the owner also includes some villas that underwent major reconstruction in Late Antiquity. At least four sites fall within this category, and were linked to the new centres of power in Milan and Aquileia. These sites are very large and show a high

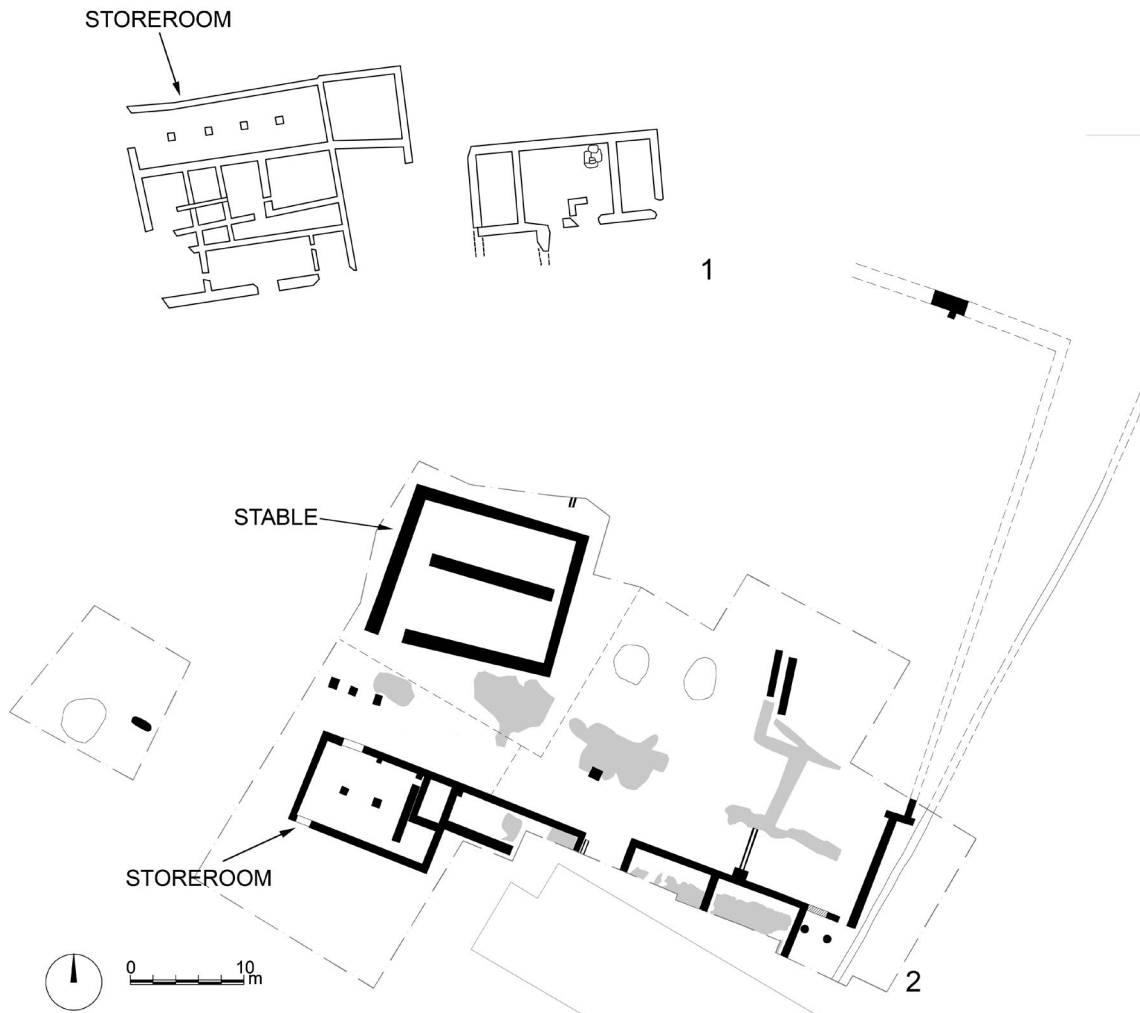


Fig. 4: 1) Rosta (Turin). 1st–4th century AD – 2) Roncade, Ca' Tron – sito A (Treviso). 1st–5th century AD. Plans of Type B farms.

degree of complexity in their architecture and decorative elements.¹⁴ The most striking cases are Palazzo Pignano (Cremona) and Desenzano-Borgo Regio (Brescia), where one can fully appreciate the updated architectural scheme (the pavilion villa type) and the use of a common artistic language attested throughout the Empire.¹⁵

A further type of villa (Type E) consists of structures that seem to have had a dual purpose as both unit of production and inn,¹⁶ as mentioned in sources such as Varro¹⁷ and Columella.¹⁸ The eight complexes identified as *villas-mansiones* feature good-quality lodgings and services that are separated from the living quarters of the villa itself. Such complexes also were in close proximity to the road network. Excavations at Albisòla Superiore (Savona) have revealed the most interesting *villa-mansio* (fig. 6); it is located close to the *Via Iulia Augusta*, between Genua

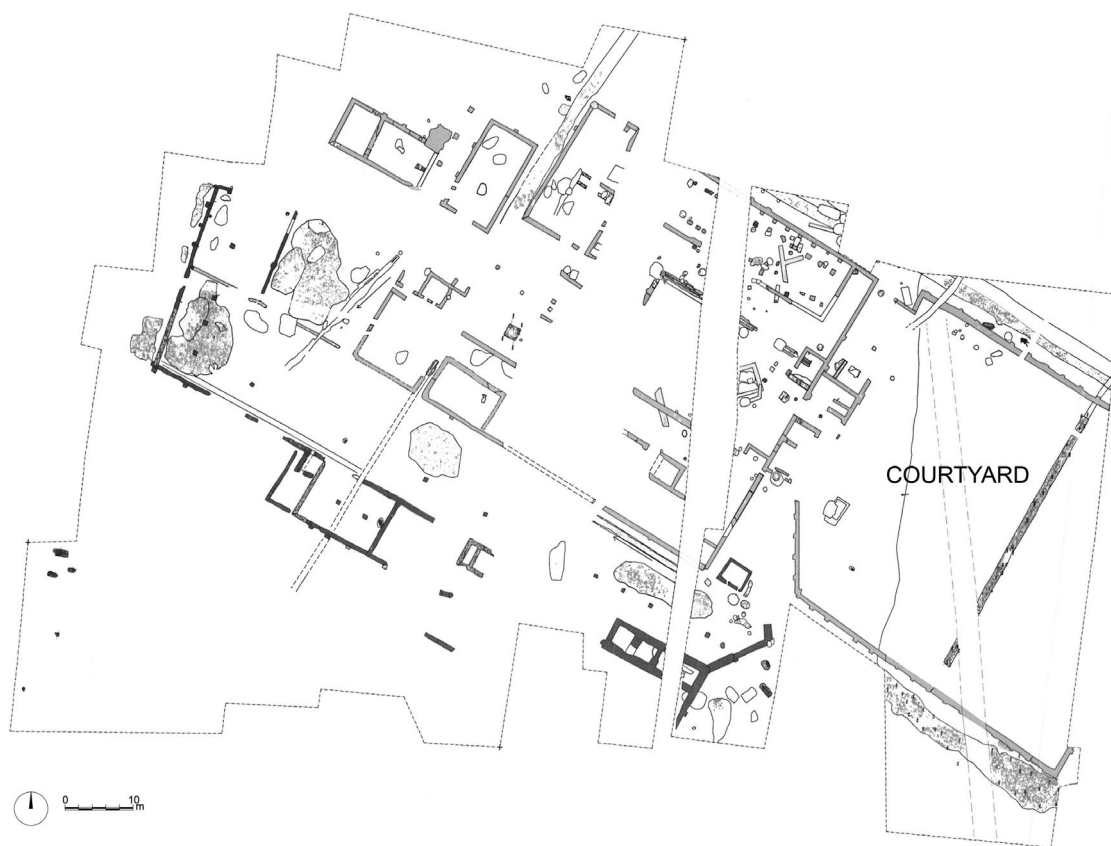


Fig. 5: Vicenza, Dal Molin: plan of the complex.

and Albingaunum. This site is commonly identified with Alba Docilia,¹⁹ mentioned (without an illustration) in the *Tabula Peutingeriana*. This complex has all the characteristics of a big farm: the living quarters and baths lie to the southwest, while to the north and northwest we find storage rooms and production facilities all arranged around a courtyard.²⁰

A sixth category (Type F) comprises only four examples, and is tentatively proposed for sites that were specialised production centres.²¹ Large size and an absence of residential quarters characterise this type, which often were located close to waterways and to other transit routes and not too far from the city (i.e. in strategic areas for the supply of resources). An example is the Roncade-Ca' Tron complex (Altinum area, near the northern Venice Lagoon), which specialised in the rearing of sheep (fig. 7).²² It remains an aim for future work on this type of villa to assess how they were managed and to what extent such complexes can be considered autonomous or as part of larger landholdings.

C.F.

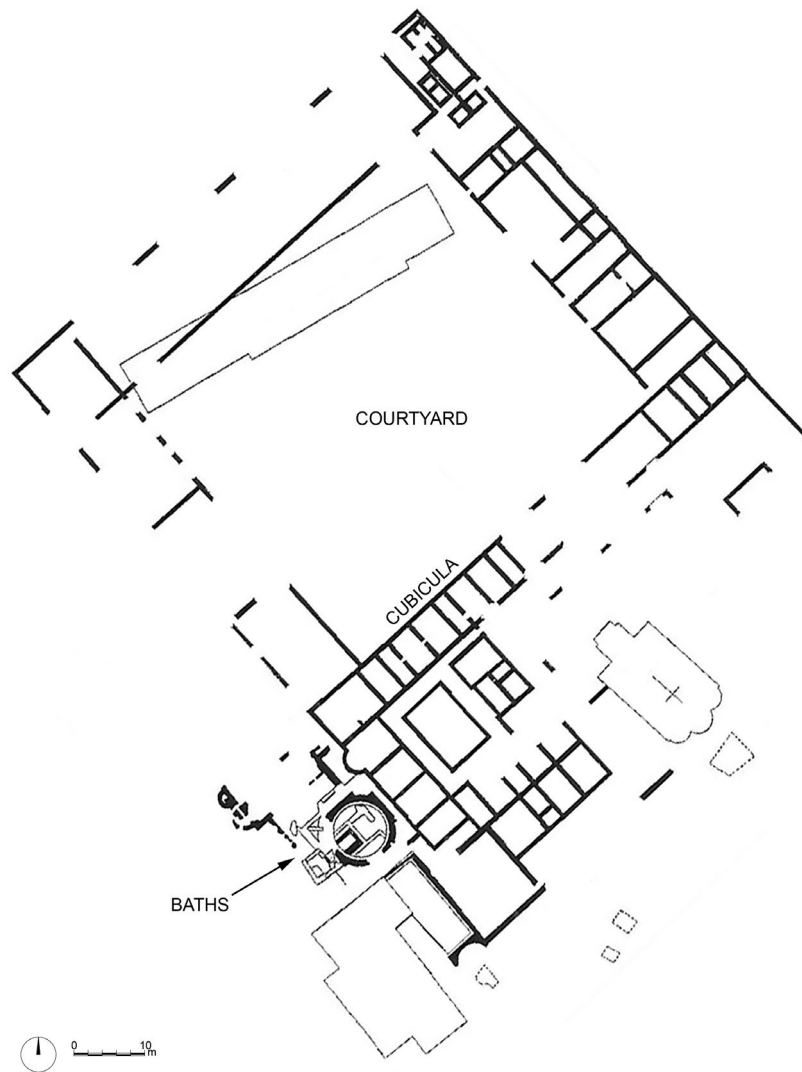


Fig. 6: Albisola Superiore (Savona): plan of the complex.

Historical and Social Aspects

The graph (fig. 8) shows the evolution over time of the different site types. This graph should be treated with considerable caution given the great variety in the quality of the documentary evidence, and in the dating criteria and the excavation methods employed. It should be emphasized that artefacts have rarely been studied systematically.

With the exception of Aquileia and Luna, *coloniae* founded in 181 and 177 BC respectively, northern Italy became part of the Roman state during the 1st century BC.

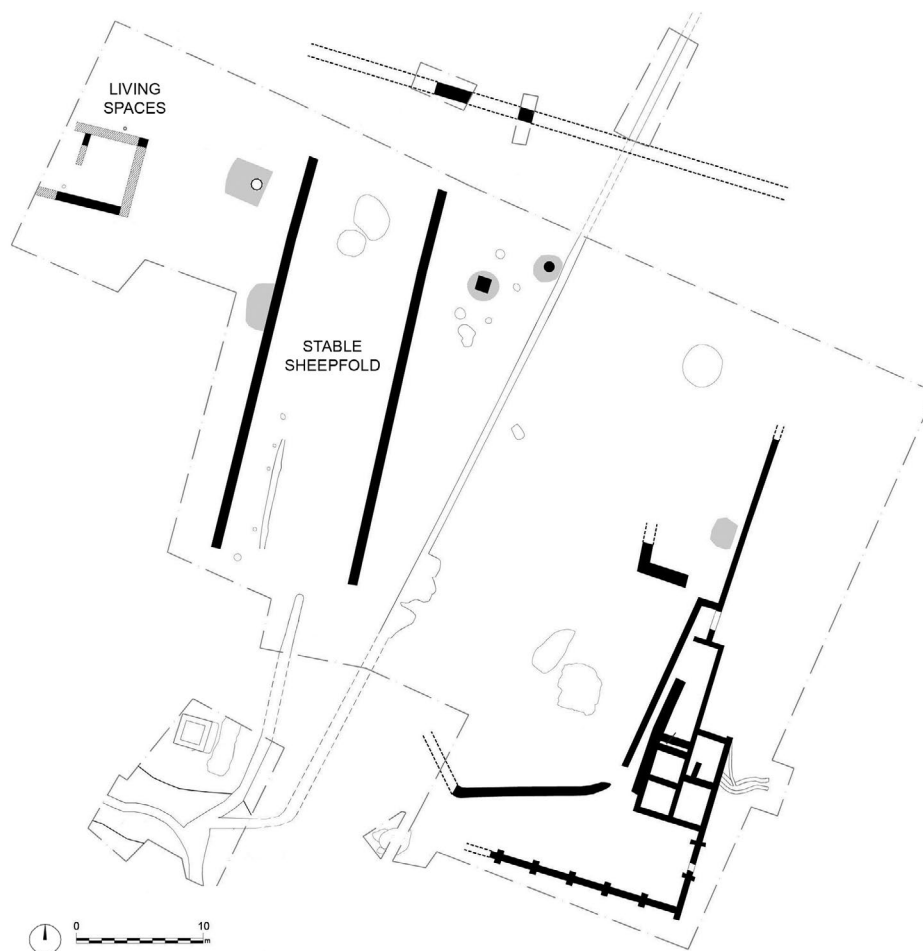


Fig. 7: Roncade, Ca' Tron – site M (Treviso): plan of the complex.

Both the farms and the first villas appeared during the Romanisation phase (2nd–1st centuries BC). In the 1st century BC, the archaeological evidence reveals the co-existence of farms (Types A and B), *villae* (Types C and E), some villas as symbols of social status (Type D), and the first productive centres (Type F). The distribution of these is strongly linked to the process of Romanisation. From the middle of the 1st century BC to the end of the 1st century AD there was a constant growth. The peak in AD 100 shows the success of the villa model.

Between the end of the 1st century AD and the mid-2nd century AD we see the first abandonments, particularly of farms, with the almost total disappearance of the smaller ones (Type A) from the 3rd century onwards. The more complex settlements (Types C and D) were able to resist better, but we still see a reversal in the earlier growth trend and, a real decline particularly for the Type C villas. These sites disappeared by the 5th and 6th centuries, bringing about the gradual depopulation of the countryside.

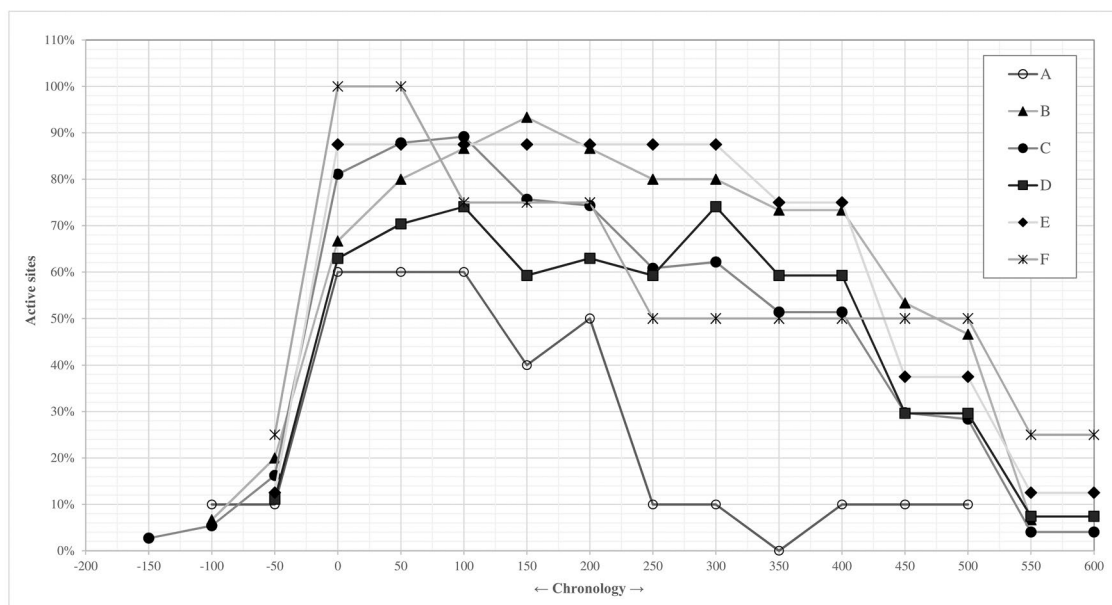


Fig. 8: Chronological trends per settlement types. The ratio of active sites is calculated on the basis of the total number of interpreted sites per each type.

It can be inferred, with due caution, that, until the end of the 2nd century AD, small and medium farms and *villae* formed part of a single productive system, perhaps complementary to each other. The signs of the crisis that troubled Italy in the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries AD – a changing economy and the merging of landholdings into ever-larger units – may have permitted the survival of the larger, more structured entities (*villae*). However, this also may have brought about the end of the smaller ones. We see this phenomenon particularly in the eastern areas, where major restructuring and transformations of their productive facilities helped large villas to survive. At the same time, the quality of their living areas greatly declined.

At this point we stop to consider a fundamental aspect: the problem of ownership and management. Given the sample of excavated sites, at the height of the villa's success in the 1st century AD, the most impressive and complex sites are concentrated heavily in *Regio X*. This result fits well with the socio-economic analysis by Marco Maiuro,²³ who noted that the documented presence of imperial property is very different between east and west. This is suggested by the near total absence of relevant epigraphy in the west. There also seems to be no documents attesting to investment by non-local senators in *Regio IX* or *XI*.

The strategic role of the north-east, where financial interest appears to have been focused, depended on the position of the *Regio X* near provinces with stationed legions. It was also supported by Aquileia's role as a point of contact between the Adriatic-Aegean regions and the Transalpine one since Republican times. Productive villas,

mostly from the Augustan era onwards, perhaps were the source of supplies for the provincial areas in which the army was stationed.²⁴

The analysis shows the complex nature of settlement in the area as well as the difficulty of defining a “typology of settlements”, even when focussing on the main role of the complex. This work represents a first step towards understanding the organization of extra-urban areas in Roman times, including the so-called “small towns”. A continuation of this project should involve wide-ranging research agendas, including surveys and a systematic study of artefacts, something that until now has seldom happened in northern Italy.

M.S.B.

Notes

¹ Forin 2017.

² Brecciaroli Taborelli 1993.

³ Busana et al. 2012, 130–135.

⁴ There are eight farms located near urban centres (within 15 km). In three other cases, the farms were further away but still near a road or river path. In two cases, the complexes were located near presumed second-tier agglomerations.

⁵ For a critical analysis of the terminology used in the sources: Carandini 1989, 107–108; Gros 2001, 265–267.

⁶ Elia – Meirano 2012.

⁷ Busana 2002, 368–377, with previous bibliography.

⁸ Gamba et al. 2012.

⁹ Gervasini – Landi 2002.

¹⁰ Barello 2014.

¹¹ Adams 2006, 9–24. The distance of the residences from the city is commensurate to the size of the city itself. For example, the villas of the suburb of Rome are located within a radius of 30–40 km from the city, while the villas of the suburb of Pompeii are known to lie at a distance of 4–5 km.

¹² Roffia 2013, 129–135.

¹³ Roffia 2015; Roffia – Simonotti 2015.

¹⁴ Romizzi 2003, 74.

¹⁵ Romizzi 2003, 74; Romizzi 2006, 38; Sfameni 2006; on the empire-wide use of common architectural and decorative schemes, see Marzano and Métraux 2018.

¹⁶ Basso – Zanini 2016; Basso 2010, 156–157.

¹⁷ Varro rust. 1, 2, 23.

¹⁸ Colum. 1, 5–6.

¹⁹ Tinè Bertocchi 1978.

²⁰ Bulgarelli 2001, 743–752.

²¹ An important comparison for this type of complex comes from the provinces in particular from the

coastal territory of Catalonia, where several examples of settlements have been documented, mostly specializing in wine production: Revilla Calvo 2008, 112–113; Revilla Calvo 2010, 36–38; see also Alvarez Tortosa in this volume.

²² Busana et al. 2012, 135–139.

²³ Maiuro 2012.

²⁴ Similar considerations have been proposed for the eastern sector of the *Regio VIII*, where the *classis praetoria* was assigned to *Classis*, a town close to *Ravenna* at the end of the 1st century BC. In the Augustan age, numerous production complexes were built or rebuilt here: Scagliarini Corlàita 1989, 33.

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Fig. 1: C. Forin. – Fig. 2: C. Forin; DTM by Google Maps. – Fig. 3: Drawing by C. Forin after (1) Busana 2002, p. 342, fig. 140 (2) Barello 2004, tav. LVIIa. – Fig. 4: Drawing by C. Forin after (1) Brecciaroli Taborelli 1993, tav. CXV (2) Busana et. al. 2012, p. 146, fig. 17. – Fig. 5: Gamba et al. 2012. – Fig. 6: Bulgarelli 2001, p. 744, fig. 1. – Fig. 7: Busana et. al. 2012, p. 147, fig. 18. – Fig. 8: C. Forin.

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