

Family-oriented Farms Along via Egnatia. The Case of Ancient Lete

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One of the cities of Macedonia listed by Claudius Ptolemaeus (Geography 3, 12. 23) and Pliny the Elder (N.H. V, 10, 17) in the Imperial age is Lete. Although the ancient authors provide little information about this Mygdonian town, inscriptional evidence and archaeological research led to its location 12 kilometres NW of Thessaloniki. The city and its cemeteries sprawled over the hills of the Derveni pass and the western part of the fertile plain of Langadas. This strategic position on two main roads – leading from the Aegean into the central Balkans and linking the Thermaikos Gulf with eastern Macedonia – justifies the long, continuous habitation of the site, from the Middle Neolithic period. As with the other cities of the Macedonian kingdom, here too, the Roman occupation began with the defeat of its last king, Perseus, at Pydna (168 BC) and acquired a legal and systematic character 20 years later, with the establishment of the Roman province of Macedonia (148 BC).¹

The key factor in the city's economic development in the Roman age was its position on the Via Egnatia, the great Roman road running from the Adriatic Sea through northern Greece to the Bosphorus.² Gnaeus Egnatius, the Roman proconsul of Macedonia, ordered its construction in the late 140s BC. This great road, apart from serving military needs, also facilitated the movement of trade and cultural goods and the settlement of Romans along its length. Another factor in Lete's prosperity was the immediate proximity of Thessaloniki, which was the seat of the provincial governor and the province's most important centre for maritime and overland trade.³ Throughout its history, Lete controlled an extensive agricultural *territorium*, from which it derived much of its wealth. As research has repeatedly shown, cities cannot flourish without a substantial agricultural surplus to supply their markets.

The strategic place occupied by Lete in securing the province's northern borders is attested by the civic decree honouring the Roman officer Marcus Annius, whom the city honours with a wreath and the organisation of games along with other benefactions, 119/118 BC. The decree explains that he had driven back the Galatians, who were invading the province, and during a second attack had inflicted upon them a shattering defeat.⁴

There are also inscriptions documenting Roman business activity in the city. Roman *negotiatores*, who are named in Greek inscriptions as *Ῥωμαῖοι συμπραγματευόμενοι* or *Ῥωμαῖοι πραγματευόμενοι*, choose to settle in cities with an existing civic organisation and a stable economic system. While most of the evidence from Lete date from the Imperial period, merchants and businessmen, both Roman citizens and freedmen, seem to have begun settling in and around the city before the end of the Republic era, and, adopting Greek as their language, to have set up banks and commercial activities and

acquired land.⁵ Their arrival modified the demography of the place and led to the emergence of the new elite comprising both native Greeks and Roman settlers. This local aristocracy is associated with creations of an elite art depicting and naming important local personalities.⁶ Their incorporation into the social and political life of the city is attested by their presence at the gymnasium, their assumption of public office and their benefactions towards their new homeland. Inscriptions from Lete, especially from the 1st–2nd century AD, record the *gentilicia* of many Italian-Roman families, such as the Salarii, the Alfidii, the Annii, the Eppii, the Fabii, the Muttanii and the Pomponii.⁷

Further evidence of the Roman presence in the area appears to be furnished by four farmhouses, built within a short distance of one another (ca. 350 m.), which came to light during the construction of the modern Via Egnatia (fig. 1). Their excavation was a salvage process, and thus necessarily limited and incomplete.⁸

The earliest of these four dwellings was Farmhouse C (690 m²), whose two wings and other spaces were arranged around a central and a smaller courtyard (fig. 2).⁹ It is clear from the finds that Wing A, which contained dining and reception rooms and had a second storey, was the main house. Wing B served the rural economy. Fragments of pithoi on the southwest side link it with the processing and storage of agricultural products.

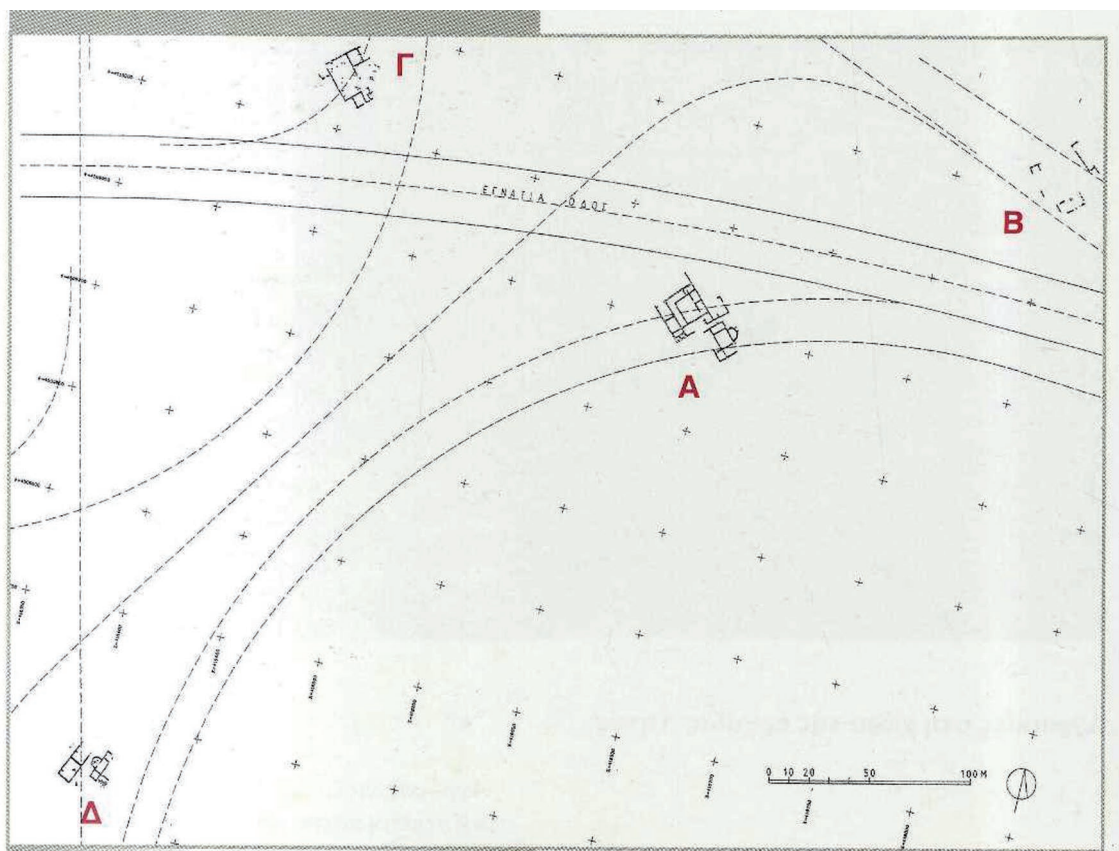


Fig. 1: Lete. Plan with the sites of the four country houses.

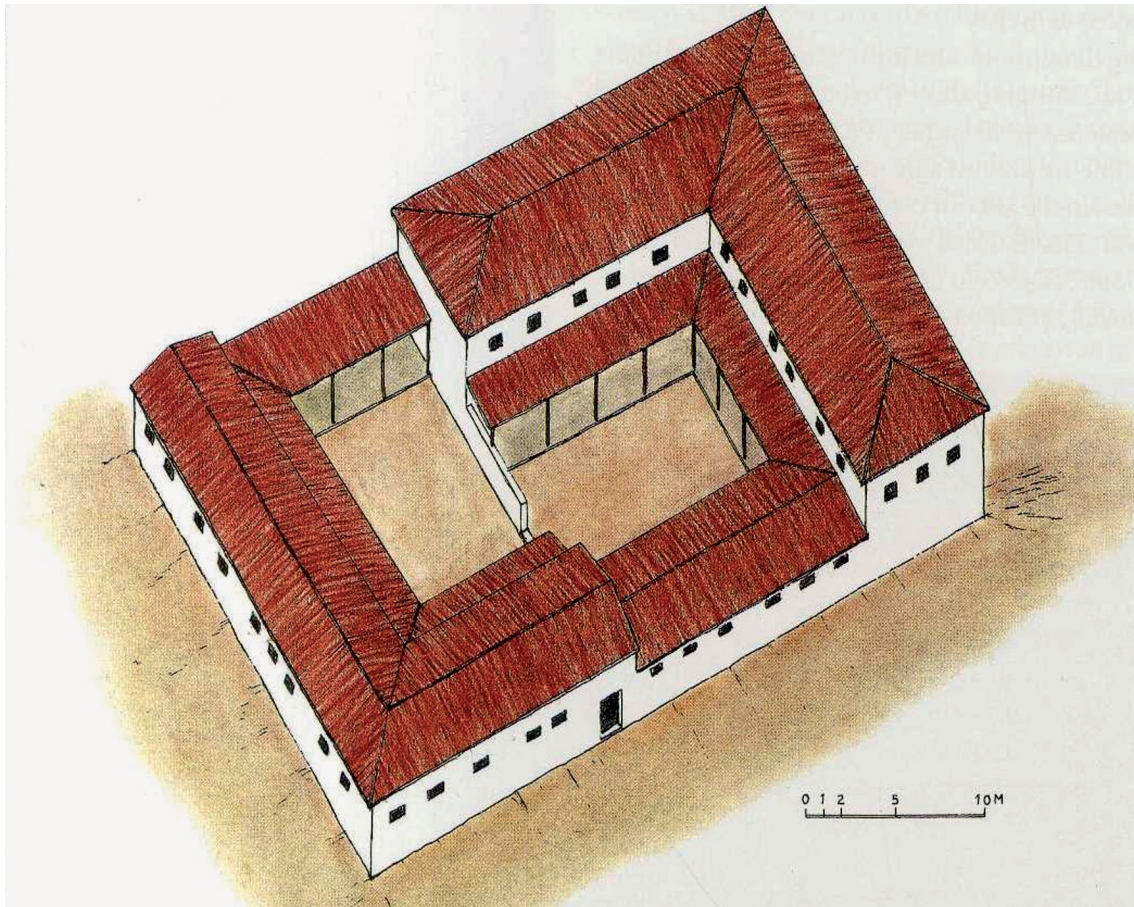


Fig. 2: Country House C. Graphic reconstruction.

The establishment of this farmstead in the late Hellenistic period coincides with the first arrivals of Roman settlers in the area. Its abandonment, around the middle of the 1st century BC, is probably connected with the civil wars between the armies of Julius Caesar and Pompey (49–48 BC) or Antony and Octavian (42 BC), which were fought in northern Greece. The disastrous effects of those wars are evident in other Macedonian cities as well.

Farmhouse B (430 m²) appears to have been in use during the period between the end of the 1st century BC and the end of the 1st century AD (fig. 3). Its main courtyard is flanked by two rectangular rooms. However, the fact that fragments of wall paintings with floral motifs were found in the lower decorative zone identifies the room on the west side as belonging to the main house (fig. 4).¹⁰ The fact that the same decorative system occurs at Pompeii and elsewhere suggests a western influence.¹¹

Farmhouse D belongs to the period between the middle of the 3rd and the end of the 4th century AD.¹² Here excavation revealed a larger homestead with two separate auxiliary buildings, one a triclinium (207 m²) and the other a two-roomed building (150 m²)

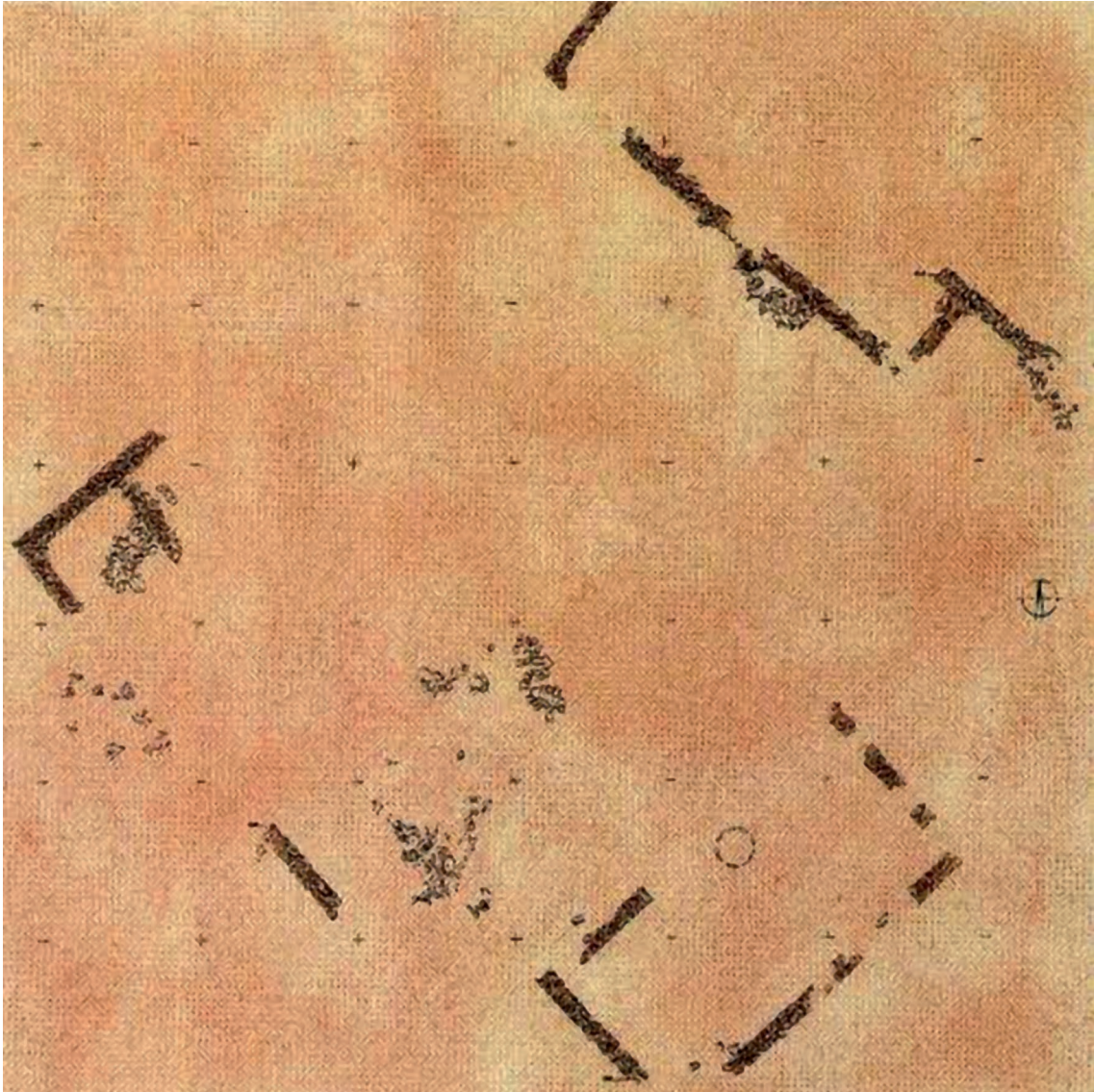


Fig. 3: Country House B. Plan.

(fig. 5). The discovery of the simultaneous burial of a pair of horses outside of the triclinium and of a warhorse inside the oblong building enables us to identify the latter with the horses' stable. Examination of the skeletal remains of the pair of horses showed them to have been male packhorses of about 15 years old, a type of animal that played an important role in economic life and land transport. From written sources, we know that large farms had stables for raising horses, mainly as draught animals.¹³

The most important finds relating to the management of the wealth produced by farming activities, however, came from Farmhouse A (total area 808 m²), which was more extensively excavated. This farmhouse was built in the middle of the 2nd century



Fig. 4: Country House B. Plasters with floral motifs.



Fig. 5: Country House D. Plan. Stable and triclinium.

and abandoned temporarily a hundred years later, as indicated by the concealing of a hoard of coins of the emperor of Gordian III and his wife Tranquillina (238–244 AD).¹⁴ This is connected with the invasion of Goths and Herulians (267 AD), a time when many agricultural farms in ancient Greece were destroyed.¹⁵ Later, the house was repaired, and a triclinium (248 m²) added for receiving guests and holding banquets. It then survived until the end of the 4th century, when was finally abandoned because of a new wave of barbarian raids. In the main building (460 m²) the arrangement of rooms around a central court follows the standard pattern of the typical Greek house (fig. 6).¹⁶ But it also meets the specifications for Roman farmhouses laid down by the Roman architect Vitruvius in his treatise *De Architectura*.¹⁷ Thus, the residential part of the farmhouse occupies the north wing, while the south wing is set aside for activities connected with farm work. A continuous passageway flanks the central court and gives access to the stairway leading to the upper storey. The living and dining rooms of the house were thus quite separate from the areas associated with rural economy, the storage and the processing of agricultural products. These activities were housed in the west wing too, which had its own entrance, with a gate wide enough (3.50 m) for the transporting of items and for a farm cart pulled by a pair of animals to pass through. Also, we can assume that domestic animals were kept in the rectangular area to the west. Finally, the

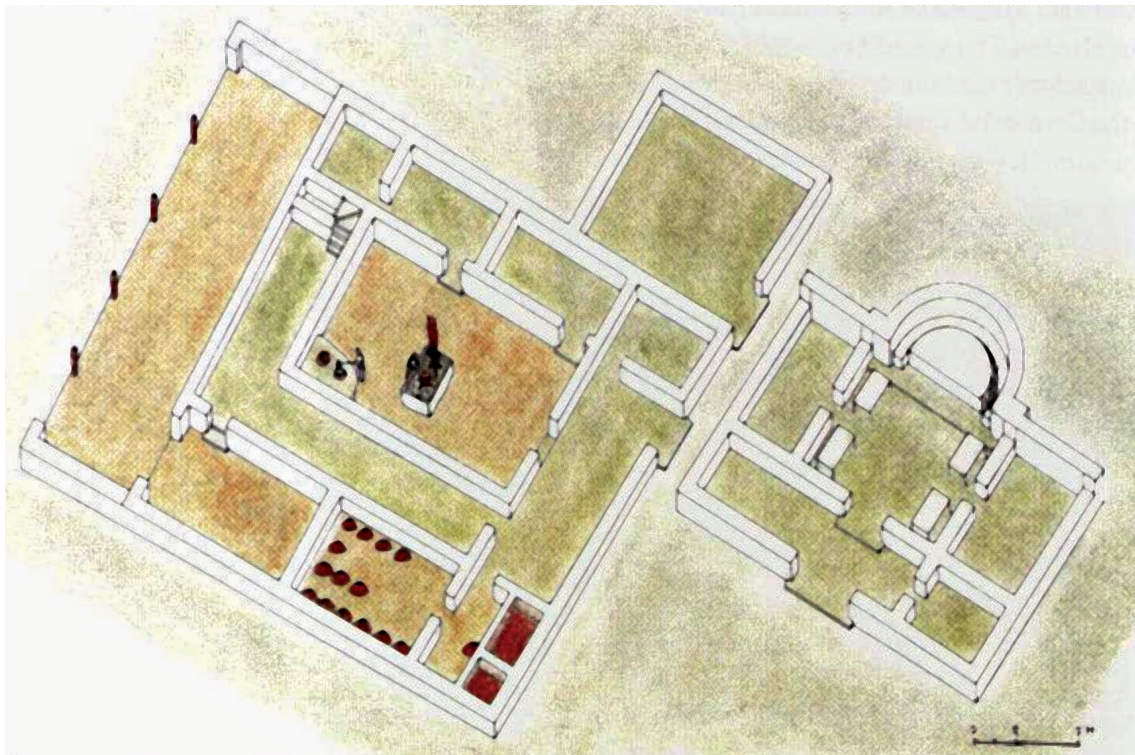


Fig. 6: Country House A. Plan. Axonometric drawing of the second building phase (late 3rd - 4th c. AD).

square room on the northeast side, with a separate entrance, was probably the kitchen of the villa.¹⁸

The archaeological evidence indicates that this farm's economy was based on household production, mainly agriculture and animal husbandry. Its economic activity was directed towards full and organised exploitation of the natural resources of the region, with the supplying and processing of raw materials. The farm buildings were equipped with everything needed to support this domestic economy, both in permanent installations and portable tools and utensils. Grain was ground in a semi-circular construction¹⁹ in the southwest corner of the court, with hand operated rotary millstones.²⁰ The hearth, placed in the centre of the court, was used for cooking or heating meals, which, judging by the wide variety of ceramic vessels must have been remarkably lavish.²¹ The items found here included cooking pots with lids, dishes and handles of frying pans, with visible traces of soot.²²

The primary processing of agricultural produce at Farmhouse A is confirmed by the discovery of a wine-making cistern for crushing grapes and extracting the must. The wine cistern, an essential piece of the farm equipment, was found in the east wing.²³ The cistern (1.60 × 4.80 m) had two compartments, lined with strong hydraulic mortar. The sloping floor allowed the must to run off, through lead pipes, into a portable vessel placed beneath it.²⁴ The small size of the cistern suggests a limited production, for family consumption. Once collected, the must was transferred into underground clay pithoi (*dolium defossum*) for fermentation. Storage jars were found arranged in rows in the wine cellar. The traditional Mediterranean triad of wheat, olive oil, and wine was supplemented by the cultivation of fruit, vegetables and pulses, while the household also made use of the forest, from which they harvested fruits and timber. The tools that were found, iron pickaxe and an axe, were used for these two purposes – cultivating the land and cutting wood. Another find associated with farm produce, was a marble mortar with a stone pestle, suitable for crushing grain, pulses and herbs.

The meat and milk required by the household were obtained from the sheep and goats they raised, an activity still practised by the local population today. Surplus milk was used to make white cheese, a common rural craft.²⁵ This activity is indicated by perforated vases of local manufacture for the production of cheese (fig. 7).²⁶ The holes are arranged in horizontal rows over the entire surface of the vase, down to its base. It is thought that the clay played an essential role in cheese-making, as an inert material that could prevent spoilage. A larger vessel of the same type found at Pharsala, in Thessaly, is thought to have been used for the same purpose,²⁷ while the same process using similar vessels persisted into the modern times.

Fishery products also accounted for a significant proportion of the household's diet.²⁸ Various species of fish and eels could be obtained from the nearby lakes of Koroneia and Volvi. Some clay loom weights that were found in the farmhouse were probably also used as weights for fishing nets. The consumption of shellfish, as *cerastoderma glaucum* and *murex trunculus*, a luxury food in the ancient world, is attested by the shells found



Fig. 7: Country House A. Perforated vases for the production of cheese, 3rd cent. AD.

at the site.²⁹ Additional meat was obtained from hunting in the hilly country north of Lete, where deer and wild boar were abundant. The tusks and bones found at the farmstead³⁰ suggest that boar was indeed a common prey.

In sum, it seems fair to say that the economy of this farm was based on a variety of activities: agriculture, viticulture and wine-making, animal husbandry, fishing, weaving and ceramic production. These activities, which have been attested elsewhere as well,³¹ were clearly intended to ensure the self-sufficiency of the household, and they express the traditional value system of the aristocratic class.³²

The data yielded by the archaeological investigation, namely the size of the villas, the luxurious decoration of the reception rooms, with their marble cladding and wall paintings, the separation of uses in different buildings, the triclinia³³ and the stables, suggest that these were permanent residences providing a very comfortable lifestyle. This is further borne out by the use of fine imported tableware (fig. 8),³⁴ glass vessels and bone small items of everyday use.³⁵ Similarly, the transport amphorae from places, like Tunisia and the northeastern Aegean, indicate a preference for particular varieties of wine to complement the household's high dietetic standard.³⁶ Diet was in any case an indicator of cultural, economic and social distinction.³⁷

The topographical diagram indicating the position of the farmhouses shows a cluster of building complexes with the same orientation. This is likely to mean that they fronted onto a main road, perpendicular to the Via Egnatia, leading into the hinterland and linking other similar farmsteads or small villages.³⁸ We know that farmhouses were generally built close to a road, a finding that also confirms the view that the Romans built new roads to serve the transport of agricultural products. One further element that should be stressed here is that the very construction of these luxurious villas would



Fig. 8: Country House A. Red-glaze dish. Eastern Sigillata B.

have invigorated the local economy. Their construction and decoration required specialised craftsmen, and we know that specialised painters of murals travelled the length and breadth of the Roman provinces, spreading motifs and techniques, as seen in the case of Lete.³⁹

While there is nothing in the archaeological data to tell us who the owners of these villas were, instead, it is possible to draw a general picture of them. The luxury of the villas we have described is hard to reconcile with the density of farmsteads in the *territorium* of Lete. The wealth of their owners cannot be derived from the limited land between the buildings. Some other source of wealth, for example mines,⁴⁰ quarries or the exploitation of forests, all factors that influenced the installation of Roman citizens and the building of rural villas,⁴¹ while not documented directly in the area of Lete, cannot be excluded.

It is more probable, however, that the owners of our farmhouses were in fact farmers, who owned and exploited large tracts of farmland in the fertile plain nearby. The existence of large estates on the plain of Langadas is documented by two inscriptions, mentioning two persons, whose duties must have been connected with the financial side of estate management.⁴² One is the steward – *actor Zosimus*, a slave, who erected an inscribed marble bust for his master *Aelius Nikopolitanus*.⁴³ The other is *Onesimus*, the overseer of the landed property of *Aelius Menogenes*, who is depicted with his family on an inscribed funerary stele.⁴⁴

There can be no doubt that the owners of the rural villas belonged to the aristocracy of Lete. The ownership of land and the wealth generated by its exploitation were hallmarks of the urban elite in the Hellenistic and even more so in the Roman period. Part of that wealth was invested in self-promotion, as reflected in the construction and decoration of those villas. The urban elite also played a leading role in civic administration. One typical representative of this aristocratic class, who also happens to be of Roman descent, is Marcus Salarius Sabinus. An inscription from Lete refers to his benefactions for the city.⁴⁵ Not only did he serve as gymnasiarch, but he also distributed grain to the people in times of shortages. In addition, he supplied troops presumably campaigning in the East with wheat, barley, broad beans and wine from his own stores.

The creation of farmsteads with the arrival of Roman settlers in the vicinity of Lete reflects the new model of organisation of agricultural land, following the Roman system and based on the land register used in the provinces for record-keeping and taxation purposes.⁴⁶ Through their production and the tax revenues they generated, moreover, those farms and rural estates constituted one of the main levers that move the state machine of the *imperium Romanum*.

Notes

For their help I would like to thank my colleagues Dr. P. Adam-Veleni + Dr. E. Stefani and professor E. Sverkos.

¹ Le Glay 1986, 21–37; Vanderspoel 2010.

² On Via Egnatia, Laurence 2013.

³ Rizakis 2002, 110–112.

⁴ Archaeological Museum of Istanbul. Papazoglou 1988, 213–215.

⁵ Greene 1986, 64. 65; Temin 2013, 176–189.

⁶ Burial reliefs, Despinis et al. 1997, nos. 56. 57. 62–64.

⁷ Rizakis 1996; Sverkos – Tzanavari 2009.

⁸ Tzanavari – Philis 2000; Tzanavari 2003.

⁹ Tzanavari 2003, 85–87.

¹⁰ On the role of decoration to distinguish the use of rooms, Ellis 2000, 139–141; Tzanavari 2003, 84. 85.

¹¹ Barbet 1985, 236–241 fig. 175, 62–70 BC; Ling 1990, 71–100; Thomas 1995, 112–114 fig. 62.

¹² Tzanavari 2003, 87–89.

¹³ White 1984, 128; Schareika 2007, 101; cf. Zinn 2001, 190. 231 fig. 60, 200–230 AD.

¹⁴ Tzanavari 2003, 82–83.

¹⁵ Nachtergaele 1977.

¹⁶ Tzanavari 2003, 78–82.

¹⁷ For the differences between the Greek *oἶκος* and the Roman *domus*, Hales 2003, 207–209.

¹⁸ Dupont 2004, 94.

¹⁹ Tzanavari 2003b.

- ²⁰ Amouretti 1986, 144 pls. 24. 25; Runnels 1990; Watts 2002, 11–14; Adam-Veleni 2003.
- ²¹ Koukouvou 1999, 572, 2nd – 3rd cent. AD.
- ²² Adam-Veleni et al. 2003, 198. 199 nos. 105–109, 3rd – early 4th cent. AD (K. Tzanavari).
- ²³ Matijasić 1993, 248–250. (Dalmatia); Petropoulos 2013a (Patras).
- ²⁴ White 1975, 112–115; Poulaki 2003, Petropoulos 2013a, 163 fig. 6.
- ²⁵ Brothwell 1969, 52; Dalby 1996, 39; Dalby 2003, 80. 81.
- ²⁶ Adam-Veleni et al. 2003, 199 nos. 110. 111, 3rd cent. AD (K. Tzanavari); Tzanavari 2003a, 129; cf. Gerlach 2001, 51.
- ²⁷ Karapanou – Katakouta 2000, 112–115 fig. 1 (St. Katakouta).
- ²⁸ Bresson 2010, 259–261; Déry 1998, 94–97a.
- ²⁹ Adam-Veleni et al. 2003, 251. 252 no. 416 (K. Tzanavari); Tzanavari 2003a, 128; Prummel 2003, 206; Dalby 2003, 245–247; Déry 1998, 99. 104. 105. For the importance of water resources as a factor for the choice of habitation sites, Stefani 2007, 564. 565.
- ³⁰ Adam-Veleni et al. 2003, 251 no. 415 (K. Tzanavari); Tzanavari 2003a, 128; Badel 2009, 43.
- ³¹ Percival 1988, 161.
- ³² McKay 1975, 101. 102; Percival 1988, 146; Raab 2001, 16. 17; Zoumbaki 2013, 73; Rizakis 2016, 54.
- ³³ Tzanavari 2003c, with bibliography.
- ³⁴ As Italian sigillata, Eastern Sigillata, Sigillata B, Çandarlı, Macedonian grey terra sigillata, African red-glaze ware, etc., 2nd – 4th cent. AD. For the various uses of these vases, Allison 1999, 68–70.
- ³⁵ Adam-Veleni et al. 2003, 211. 212 nos. 191–194; 214. 215 no. 209, glass vessels, 2nd–3rd cent. AD, 217 nos. 219. 220, pins, handle and spoon, 218 nos. 222. 223; cf. Deonna 1938, 228–230 pl. 75.
- ³⁶ It is well known that imported amphorae were re-used to store other types of products, Lawall 2011; Philis 2016, 787. 788 n. 4.
- ³⁷ Garnsey 1999, 113–127; Tzanavari 2003a.
- ³⁸ For the late antiquity rural settlements of Macedonia, Dunn 2004.
- ³⁹ Percival 1988, 158.
- ⁴⁰ Sverkos 2017.
- ⁴¹ Samsaris 1985/1986, 38; on the forest wealth of Chalcidice, Greene 1986, 89; Rizakis 2002, 124.
- ⁴² On the different names of these persons, as actor, dispensator, procurator, *oikonomos*, *vilicus*, *phrontistai* et al., Rizakis 2013, 48.
- ⁴³ Nigdelis – Lioutas 2009, 225–250 AD.
- ⁴⁴ Voutiras 1997.
- ⁴⁵ SEG 1 (1923) l. 1–12; Nigdelis 2006, 273, 121/122 AD.
- ⁴⁶ Rizakis – Touratsoglou 2011, 26; Vanderspoeel 2010; Petropoulos 2013b, 319. 324.

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