

Villas, Peasant Agriculture, and the Roman Rural Economy: An Introduction

Annalisa Marzano

The Roman villa can be defined as the unit of agricultural exploitation that combined a working farm with well-appointed residential quarters. Such villas were characteristic element of the Roman world, just as much as urban baths, amphitheatres, and monumental architecture. The appearance and spread of villas, both in various regions of Roman Italy and abroad, have been linked to various historical phenomena: Rome's territorial expansion, the establishment of colonial settlements, as well as the readiness and desire of indigenous elites to participate in forms of Roman life. In other words, the villa lies at the centre of the discourse on 'Romanization' or on acculturation, depending on what aspect of the phenomenon one wishes to emphasise. In addition to studies focussing on the architectural typology of villas and their visual and sculptural decoration, villas themselves have been the object of a vast number of works investigating the Roman economy and society. This is because the Roman villa has not been understood simply as the result of the diffusion of specific architectural forms, building techniques, and visual vocabulary. At the same time, it also exemplifies a particular type of agricultural production, which is centred on the use of slave labour.

Past scholarship on villas has approached the subject from a range of perspectives. Marxist-inspired interpretations claimed that slave labour was the basis for the Roman villa, and that this was the unit denoting a particular type of agricultural exploitation and 'mode of production'. Other studies aimed at understanding how settlement hierarchy and modes of landownership changed over time. In all of these approaches, archaeological evidence (from excavations and field surveys) has been central to the debate. As is well known, the traditional historiographical interpretation of the socio-political changes that Rome underwent during the Republic viewed the influx of booty and slaves brought by Roman imperialism as the main driver of the diffusion of villas. Thus, the spread of large villas in Republican Italy has been interpreted as a phenomenon that displaced small and medium landowners from the land. As a result, it contributed to Rome's socio-political problems and the ultimate crisis experienced by Republican institutions from the time of the Gracchi onwards. Recent studies, however, have in fact stressed that large villas and farms were not at variance with each other. Alessandro Launaro's research in Italy has shown that the number of villas and farms in a given territory grew or diminished at the same rates. Therefore, we cannot automatically consider the appearance of large villas as a sign that small farmers had been displaced.¹ Within peninsular Italy, there are only very limited exceptions to this.

The productivity of peasant farmers and the degree of competition they had within economic markets have also been the subject of important recent investigations

and reassessments. Geoffrey Kron has repeatedly argued that Roman agriculture in general achieved very high levels of productivity thanks to things like their reliance on manuring and crop rotation. Following this argument, peasant farmers, far from being simply ousted by big landlords, actually managed to be competitive in the market. His positive appraisal of Roman agriculture appears to have been confirmed by the results of the 'Excavating the Roman Peasant Project'. The investigation of a number of small rural sites in southern Tuscany together with the associated paleo-environmental data suggest that the peasant farmers who lived there practiced ley farming. The project also showed that these peasants were connected to the wider regional economy.²

In the light of these relatively recent studies and re-evaluations of the Roman rural economy,³ the triple-panel 'Villas, Peasant Agriculture, and the Roman Rural Economy' was organized at the Bonn/Cologne 19th International Congress of Classical Archaeology. It aimed at offering a more organic evaluation of how the 'villa economy' and the 'peasant economy' operated, and to what degree, if any, the two were integrated. One question at the core of the papers presented in the panel was whether and how villas and small and medium farms were part of two productive and distributive systems which supported each other. This could occur for instance, by giving access to agricultural processing facilities present on large estates, or by growing complementary crops. Another issue investigated was to what extent the picture emerging from provincial territories compares with the situation in Roman Italy. Addressing this aspect seemed particularly timely considering the advancement of research concerning Roman rural Italy, and because many studies in provincial archaeology / history still take for granted the direct transfer of Italian models to the provinces.

The papers delivered at the conference, of which a good selection is included in this volume, therefore have focussed not only on Roman Italy, but also on key provincial territories, such as the Iberian Peninsula, Roman Britain, and the Balkans. This diverse geographic overview has offered some surprising results. The data presented for Roman Britain and for a portion of the territory of Hispania *citerior* (corresponding to modern coastal Catalonia) invites us to radically reconsider the idea that the 'villa' was a ready toolkit exported to various territories. Instead, it was the villas, that is rural settlements of a certain size, that were always the centre of market-oriented agricultural production.

The first paper by Werner Tietz takes a text-based approach to explore the fundamental issue of the type of manpower employed in villas. Slavery was an important component of Roman society, but large-scale agricultural exploitation cannot be reduced to the exclusive use of slave labour. Tietz's discussion reminds us of the role played by seasonal labourers and by the small farmers who could work on the large estates at given times of the year.

From Roman Italy, the paper by Maria Stella Busana and Claudia Florin on Roman Cisalpine Gaul presents the analysis of 203 rural sites dating from the 2nd century BC to the 5th century AD. Although there are some differences in the types of settlement

between east and west Cisalpine Gaul, the data discussed by Busana and Florin suggest that small and medium farms and villas formed part of a single productive system until the end of the 2nd century AD. Smaller sites disappeared only with the wider changes that occurred in the second part of the 2nd century AD / early 3rd century AD.

The results of the Podere Marzuolo project by Astrid Van Oyen et al. are presented in this volume in the form of an extended abstract. They highlight the difficulty in relying on firm typological distinctions between villas and farms, or between villas and peasant economies. Excavations at Podere Marzuolo have uncovered a rural site where large-scale investment in construction took place in the Augustan period. The site has many features normally associated with villa economies, and yet its layout, physical appearance, and material assemblages are not those of a villa.

Four papers in this volume discuss the provincial territories: two focus on *Hispania citerior* (Alvarez Tortosa and Olesti), one on *Pannonia inferior* and *Moesia superior* (Ilić), and one on Roman Britain (Lodwick).

Juan Francisco Álvarez Tortosa examines the northwest of *Hispania citerior* between the 2nd century BC and the 2nd century AD, with a particular focus on commercial viticulture, which formed the main part of the local economy. His PhD work tackled a huge dataset comprising 1,380 rural sites and elaborated a complex classification system to systematize the wealth of data. The paper presented here offers two main points for reflection. First, the start of commercial viticulture in Laetania, a region which was a great exporter of wine in the imperial period, was not in the context of villas/farms; rather it was through the indigenous proto-farms and administrative centres that played a role in the military organization of Rome during the conquest. Second, when a great boom in rural settlements and viticulture occurred in the Augustan period, various types of connections can be identified among the different types of rural settlements (villas, farms, kiln centres, etc.). Small farms provided amphorae to bottle the wine of large villas, kilns supplied different kinds of sites, and so forth. In other words, we have a complex pattern of integration and collaboration, suggesting that villas and smaller farms were all part of the same system and complemented each other.

Oriol Olesti discusses the wine production of the *ager Barcinonensis*, the territory of the Augustan colony of Barcino (mod. Barcelona). This paper focuses on the relationship between colonial foundations and rural production centres, which entailed a reorganization of land division. When compared with the abundant epigraphic record for the Roman period, the study of toponyms attested in the region's medieval documentation suggests that a number of the medieval names of *fundi* refer to the original Roman landlords of the *ager Barcinonensis*. This documentation shows a strict correlation between the main families documented in the cities (particularly in Barcino) and the known rural estates, where wine production for export took place. However, in a number of cases the epigraphic evidence and the medieval toponyms also show that freedmen owned the estates and/or *figlinae*. This demonstrates the phenomenon of social mobility well attested in other parts of the Roman world.

Olivera Ilić's paper discusses the transformations that occurred in the territories of *Moesia inferior* and *Pannonia superior* during the Roman period. It brings to the fore another form of rural settlement less known archaeologically, but on which much has been written by experts of Roman law and institutions: the *vici*. In the region Ilić discusses, the *vici* resulted from the settlement of veterans and were important production units in supplying the urban centres before the appearance of agricultural villa estates in the same areas. However, these two very fertile provinces had a very low level of urbanization and we do not see the same dynamics and complex social exchanges between city and countryside that characterized other more urbanized provinces.

Lisa Lodwick's paper brings us to the northmost of the Roman provinces: Britain. Her study focuses on grain-drying ovens, which were widely distributed in Roman Britain from the 2nd century AD onwards at a range of site types. These structures can be used to quantify cereal production. The preliminary results of Lodwick's study place farms and farmsteads in a different light: not only were innovative forms of grain-drying ovens attested at both farms and villas, but clusters of this type of ovens have been recorded at farmsteads in proximity to the road network. This shows that technological innovation was not something that occurred only at one type of sites (e.g. innovation at the large villas required considerable capital, such as for water mills), but also at smaller settlements. While archaeology cannot tell us who the owners of these farmsteads were (they could have been part of larger landholdings), their proximity to the road network suggests two things. First, that the clustering of grain-drying ovens addressed specific cereal processing needs in an area that experienced high amounts of road traffic (e.g. cereals needed at inns and/or road stations; the relationship with military settlements should also be considered). Second, it may also indicate that the movement of people along the road network helped the diffusion of new grain-drying oven designs and technical knowledge.

This selection of the papers delivered at the Cologne/Bonn conference closes with a longer contribution by Antoni Martín i Olivera and Víctor Revilla Calvo. Their study combines data and methods for calculating grape and wine yields from modern viticulture with the information contained in the Latin agricultural treatises. As a result, they propose a new method for quantifying ancient wine production. They take as their case study the Laetania region of *Hispania citerior*, and in this respect their paper supplements the ones by Alvarez Tortosa and Olesti. The methods and the formulas they use are not exclusive to this region and can, with some adjustments, be deployed to other regions of the Roman world. It is a serious attempt to quantify ancient wine production, which, as we know, was one of the most important market-oriented agricultural productions in antiquity. Once refined further, their approach can produce more accurate results than estimating the potential wine production of an estate from the size of the *lacus* and/or the number and dimension of the containers for the must to ferment. This has important consequences for the study of regional economies.

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Notes

¹ Launaro 2011.

² Bowes 2017.

³ For recent thought-provoking studies on rural communities, see the papers in Tol – de Haas 2017.

⁴ <<http://www.sdep.ugent.be/>> (06.03.2019).

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de Haas – Tol 2017

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