

Planning and Investment in a Peasant Landscape: the Site of Podere Marzuolo (Tuscany, Italy)

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The site of Podere Marzuolo (Grosseto, Tuscany) highlights the precariousness of making firm typological distinctions between villa and peasant economies in Roman Italy. Situated c. 35 km away from the coast and from the nearest urban settlement of Roselle, Marzuolo finds itself in a fragmented Tuscan topography, which is populated by sites associated with small-scale peasant activity. Marzuolo exhibits many features traditionally ascribed to villa economies. The site, which covers c. 2–3 ha, was carefully planned and experienced a sudden, large-scale investment in construction in the early to mid-Augustan period. This included a central building in *opus quasi-reticulatum* masonry, and a material assemblage testifying to supra-regional connections (e.g., amphorae). However, neither the layout of the site nor its material signature conform to the image of a traditional *villa rustica*. Instead, recent excavations by the Marzuolo Archaeological Project (2016–2017) have revealed a purpose-built and multi-craft community, geared towards production and distribution. In particular, Marzuolo produced *terra sigillata* pottery, the emblematic fine ware of the Roman empire, in both an experimental phase (final quarter of the 1st century BC) and a later, standardized phase (mid-1st century AD). In addition, there is firm evidence of blacksmithing on site, as well as indications of carpentry and other crafts.¹

As a site without type – and thus without disciplinary history – Marzuolo throws into relief questions about the nature and drivers of the Roman rural economy, and about the agencies at stake in Roman history. Investment at Marzuolo concerned not only infrastructure but also human capital, a much-overlooked factor in the Roman rural economy. While the extent of elite investment in agriculture and rural production more generally has been a long-standing concern, Marzuolo urges us to ask whether such models leave space for experimentation and innovation. Did large landowners invest in sites other than villas and activities other than agriculture, perhaps on a more modest scale than the elite-run brick manufactories or mines? Were they interested in developing new productions and new techniques? To what extent did they depend on the labour, and the skills, of smallholders? Or, alternatively, could peasants innovate? Was bottom-up innovation a viable option in the Roman rural economy? In short, where did risk taking reside in the Roman rural economy? Based on the current evidence, Marzuolo cannot conclusively answer these questions. However, its data refuse to comply with existing explanatory narratives, and encourage the development of more nuanced models of the Roman rural economy together with the consideration of more diverse agencies.

Notes

¹ Vennarucci – Van Oyen – Tol forthcoming.

References

Vennarucci – Van Oyen – Tol forthcoming

R. G. Vennarucci – A. Van Oyen – G. W. Tol, Cinigiano (GR). Una comunità artigianale nella Toscana rurale: il sito di Marzuolo, in: A. Pizzo – V. Nizzo (eds.), Volume per i 70 anni di Giuseppe Pucci (Sesto San Giovanni forthcoming) 563–570.