

I

THE ROMAN VILLA: AN OVERVIEW

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THIS INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER DISCUSSES SOME of the themes pertaining to Roman villas: their relation to urban and rural infrastructures, their relation to urban houses, and how they contributed to Roman imperial expansion economically and socially. Many of the themes we have broached here are taken up in specific detail in the book's contributions. The reader will find further areas of interest for more intensive investigation: prompting such further research is a purpose of this book. The Romans themselves were conscious of villas and commented on them frequently, most especially with regard to their relation to the biographies of great, noble, ignoble, or notable persons, or else their own villas in relation to themselves. For that reason, this introductory chapter includes a very brief section on villas and biographies.

The work of the agronomists is invaluable to understand elite ideology, attitudes toward agriculture and villas, types of production, and so forth, but it is not so helpful when it comes to precise descriptions of the architecture of the villa. Our discussion of the treatises on agriculture in this section is general and limited to how these may have impacted villas and their interpretation.

Another important aspect of villas is their prominence in literature, where they are the venues of praise (*encomia*), subjects of description in poetry and prose (*ekphrasis*), or a means to self-expression and friendly invitation (especially in letters). Again, a very brief section on these topics is included here.

Because this book deals mainly with villa architecture, we have omitted discussion of hardware inventories (tools and farm or transport vehicles), husbandry (herds, flocks, transport animals), and other agricultural methods and techniques. However, slavery in antiquity, especially agricultural slavery, is of great historical importance and a matter of ongoing discussion, so we have outlined some of its historiography. We have had to limit ourselves to discussion of how the interpretation of slavery relates to the interpretation of certain villas and certain architectural features: The issue is broad and not completely resolved, and while villas certainly housed slaves, discerning their presence and determining with precision the role played by slave labor and free labor on agricultural estates continue to be challenges.

Finally, because this book includes – as it must – some aspects of the later history of Roman villas, we have summarized in a rapid fire way the main characteristics of the persistence of the phenomenon as it inflected villa architecture, life, and culture in later Western architectural and social history; the topic is vast and is merely outlined by us with a few references.

ROMAN VILLAS AND RURAL AND
COASTAL INFRASTRUCTURES

Amenities such as roads, aqueducts, bridges, warehouses (*horrea*, sing. *horreum*), jetties, and port facilities

on rivers or the sea passed through rural landscapes and along coasts to connect urban centers with one another: They also connected villas with other villas and villas with towns and markets overseas. Shipbuilding itself in various shapes and tonnage (from rowboats to sea-going vessels) was strongly developed in antiquity.¹ These physical expressions of Roman infrastructure were accompanied by spatial organization: regions in which land was surveyed and subdivided into agricultural units (centuriation) in different ranges of size or local practices, often with standardized definitions of property types (farm, forest, pasturage) and valuation for taxation or other purposes, had been effected by Greek colonial *poleis* but became a distinctively Roman practice.² In its origins, the intention of such building activity and spatial arrangements may well have been military, namely as means to establish a sustainable Roman hegemony over great distances and to provide viable plots of agricultural land for veteran soldiers, the citizens of newly established towns, or newly colonized existing urban centers, some in Italy, many overseas. The new infrastructures ultimately allowed several cities to grow beyond the constraints of their immediate hinterland; facilitated travel of all kinds; bolstered private, official, and commercial communications; enhanced transport of agricultural and manufactured goods, including raw or partially prepared materials such as timber and marble; and, ideally, fostered stable rural and urban populations. As a result, cities flourished wherever Rome laid down its solid and spatial manifestations, in a seemingly never-ending process of conquest and, later, of continual expansion of colonial and municipal rights and responsibilities to new provinces. Conquest, construction, and coordination of urban centers with rural space and production were the means by which the Republican empire grew beyond Italy in the second century BCE, and these were the premier devices of the expanding imperial system later on. Proud cities and towns came to be no less a Roman phenomenon than they had been for the Greeks, and the success of urban centers in turn prompted further expansion of infrastructures by municipal, provincial, and imperial authorities.

VILLAS, URBAN ARCHITECTURAL TYPOLOGIES, AND ROMAN ECONOMIC EXPANSION

Roman architectural forms – the most famous ones, at least – are associated with towns and cities. Their components were for specific institutions: *fana* or temples, big and small, in various architectural orders and plans, for local or Latin gods and later for the imperial cult; *fora* for commerce and assembly; *basilicae* for law-courts and places for the exchange of commercial information; *curiae* for the meetings of city-councils; *macella* (sing. *macellum*) or market-buildings for shopping and goods-exchange; fountains, sewers, and latrines for urban hygiene; large or small (public or private) baths (*balnea*, *thermae*) for sociable relaxation and personal hygiene in grand or intimate venues; theaters, amphitheaters, and music buildings (*odea*, sing. *odeon*) for entertainment; paved roadways for urban convenience; ceremonial streets for processions and semi-sheltered pedestrian traffic; arches for commemoration; and fortifications and camps for military deployment. The architectural forms could be very specific (*basilicae*, for example, usually required a dais for the magistrate to set up his chair and *macella* might have a fountain for washing goods for sale, building clean-up, and hygiene). However, the architectural language used – columns in various orders, porticoes, pilasters, ceremoniously decorated doors, and so on – could be readily swapped among different kinds of buildings. Such buildings and the institutional entities they housed and promoted were essential to Roman presence: places of assembly, points of trade and commerce, government officialdom, bureaucracy, some standardization of languages and laws, permanent or periodic military presence, universal taxation, and civic and business organizations. These physical and institutional components were among the distinctive contributions of the later Roman Republic when, starting in the second century BCE, Rome established an empire in the Mediterranean basin in Hispania, North Africa, Greece, and Asia Minor and, later, in Gaul, Germany, and Britain. All were intensified, multiplied, and expanded geographically

and architecturally with the unification of powers in the imperial period, which began with the principate of Augustus (after 29 BCE) and continued for some five centuries through the late antique period (later third through the fifth century) until the ultimate and definitive “loss” of the Latin-speaking Western provinces of the empire, namely in the late sixth century CE.

Urban houses – *domus* – were also essential components of Roman architectural forms, in part because houses themselves became bearers of meaning and movement, a signifier of and for the family and its inhabitants. Their importance was not reserved for the elites. The urban houses of Pompeii, Herculaneum, Cosa, and Ostia could be grand or very simple, but even the simplest ones had touches of amenities: one room with a pretty mosaic floor, a decorated door, a small garden. For the upper classes, the *domus* (pl. *domus*) was, throughout the empire, the main shelter for private citizens within a *familia* (an immediate family and its extensions together with servants, slaves, and *liberti*, these last being manumitted slaves under continuing obligation to their former masters). As such, *domus* could be very grand affairs, sometimes in sober old-fashioned décors and honorific objects (wreaths, statues, inscriptions) proclaiming the antiquity of a family, at other times in up-to-date modern styles advertising wealth and fashionability. *Domus* were venues of public representation and political transaction between an incumbent head of the family (*paterfamilias*) and/or his wife (*matrona, domina*) and the incumbent’s supporters and adherents (*clientes*) in a strong system of social relations known as clientage as it developed in the mid- and late Republic and was maintained, in varying ways, during the empire.³

Villas were also bearers of distinctively Roman meaning. They were venues of social interaction as well as centers of profitable activity – in all its meanings – in the countryside or the littorals. Like the *domus*, they were sites of personal and political hospitality of all kinds, places of retreat, pleasure, and even learning, but most often justified by their productive capacity in the way of agriculture or other lucrative endeavors. Pliny the Younger commented that he had a full granary (*horreum plenum*) at one villa

and a full bookcase (*scrinium*) at another, the villas being profitable agriculturally and productive intellectually.⁴ The expansion of villas into the Mediterranean was an important aspect of Roman economic presence and organization to supply food for cities, government, and armies, but with their proliferation came a social and cultural sharing of values that bound the elites of the empire into a recognizably Roman society. And while villas could be expressions of sophisticated wealth and cultural achievement, they could also provide a backdrop of rustic wholesomeness (either real or affected) and traditional values based in ancient morality.

With these assets and advantages, villas unsurprisingly came to dominate the Roman countryside and coasts. Strabo (late first century BCE) noticed that villas were increasing in number and changing the aspect of the landscape: of the coastline on the Bay of Naples, he said that their solid walls made it look like a city.⁵ A century later, Pliny remarked on the view of villas from his own villa at Laurentum, just south of Ostia, that it had “the aspect of many cities.”⁶ This repletion of the coasts and the countryside of Italy with villas corresponded to the fully domesticated environment of the peninsula by Varro’s day in the 30s BCE: Varro comments that all Italy resembled a huge single orchard.⁷

What was good for urban centers was good for villas. The Roman Mediterranean was largely an agricultural entity of villas and their estates with strong physical, transportation, and monetary infrastructures that facilitated seaborne and land transport commerce for several centuries and over fairly long distances.⁸ Villas depended on this. Consistent, diverse, quickly transportable production of food on well-capitalized and prudently developed farms is the normal expectation of all manuals describing villas and their agricultural estates, from Cato in the second century BCE to that of Palladius in the late fourth to early fifth century CE. Producing raw agricultural materials (mainly wheat or other grains) to satisfy merely local subsistence needs had long been bypassed: Instead, villas shipped ready-to-store grains for local milling or processing elsewhere as well as other produce, in addition to providing commercial

brokers with processed agricultural goods with a longer shelf-life – notably wine, olive oil, table-ready olives, various preserved or pickled fruits and vegetables, salted fish and fish sauces (*garum*, *allec/hallec*, *liquamen*) – which could be graded and traded, often through middlemen, off the agricultural estates themselves and away from the villas. Pliny the Younger, for instance, sold his grapes on the vine in advance of harvest time, thus leaving to the buyers (*negotiatores*) the harvesting, processing, transport, and the risk of possible crop failure due to bad weather or pests.⁹

Villa owners needed a place to sell their produce, either in fixed town or urban locations equipped, in some cases, with convenient, sometimes impressive permanent market buildings or in periodic market days organized regionally called *nundinae*.¹⁰ Known cases of villa owners organizing periodic markets on their villa estates included the future emperor Claudius himself, the ex-praetor Bellicius Sollers (a contemporary of Pliny the Younger), and the senator Lucilius Africanus, this last authorized by decree of the senate, in 138 CE, to have a market on his African estate.¹¹ Significantly, Lucilius Africanus' property was in *regione / Beguensi territorio Musulumianorum* in Byzacena (el-Bejar), that is to say, in the modern Kasserine region of Tunisia, where abundant archaeological evidence for intensive olive cultivation, and possibly wine production, exists in the form of many Roman rural sites equipped with multiple presses.¹² This was one of the regions whence olive oil was exported to Rome and other areas of the empire, and the trade in these staples was important to the food supply in both the open market and the government-subsidized distribution systems. Earlier, Sollers may have been organizing a market on his estate to attract brokers or government agents and thereby establish a price for his product.¹³ In any case, owners of villas and farms were at all times in competition with one another and anxious to get their produce off the villa estate and on its way to get the best possible prices at markets, auctions, and/or from brokers.

Fresh and longer shelf-life produce were also concerns. Assuring food supplies both locally and in

Mediterranean-wide markets animated the productivity of rural estates for fresh comestibles of all kinds, storable commodities such as grains and flax, meat (mammalian, avian, and piscatorial, fresh and salted) from husbandry, hunting, fishing, and finished products like olive oil, wine, fish/fish-sauce, and tanned or untanned hides. If they were in a good location near cities or towns, villas produced seasonal goods with a short shelf-life called *pastiones villaticae* (sing. *pastio villatica*) for choosy urban gourmets or great private or public feasts, but also for ordinary but demanding urban consumers. *Pastio villatica* included perishable fruits, meats, game-birds, fish and shellfish, honey, even flowers and plants. Such goods could be a source of considerable revenue from villa agriculture.¹⁴

Other urban needs were fulfilled by villas and estates. Depending on their location and what the estate offered (clay beds, stone quarries, woods), villas often produced bricks and roof-tiles, amphorae, timber, charcoal, barrels for transporting goods, bins, and other useful things essential to the local economies and the new Roman economy of the Mediterranean. These products required all the infrastructures that cities and towns – and for that matter, the military – also required: roads, bridges, and so on, as well as such special interventions (often imperial) as irrigation systems and draining of marshes. Assuring, implanting, and expanding the productivity and animation of inland and coastal landscapes were important economic functions in the Roman Mediterranean, and villas were one of their means. Villas and their estates also dominated and came to clarify the countryside, making it comprehensible and meaningful – these are issues to which we will return in several different ways.

VILLAS IN OFFICIAL LANDSCAPES: CENTURIATION, DISTRIBUTION, AND THE ALIMENTA

Villas existed in landscapes, and Roman landscapes were conditioned by being subjected to official organization. Such supervision most often took two forms: the first was centuriation, a series of physical

and legal acts that defined agricultural land in terms of measurable standard units and in view of its character (marginal, hilly, marsh-land, woods, and so on) and catalogued it in recordable form for administration by local authorities. A second specific measure was the *alimenta Italiae*, a scheme apparently devised by the emperor Nerva but implemented by his successor Trajan in the second century CE. This was a means of local charity, paid for with a perpetual obligation incurred by (or on) local owners of estates in Italy. The scheme was as follows: to local municipal authorities, the imperial *fiscus* sent a certain sum to be disbursed as loans to Italian proprietors, with the annual interest payments on the loan principals used for the monthly maintenance of local children, especially boys. Various similar private schemes, which took their cue from this imperial initiative, are attested epigraphically in Italy and the provinces.¹⁵ One such famous case is the scheme devised by Pliny the Younger in support of freeborn children in his hometown, Comum.¹⁶ Because the *alimenta* were limited to Italy (perhaps not in all regions of the peninsula) and the length of their existence is uncertain, we omit discussion here.

A third condition of the landscape affecting villas and estates was certainly the distribution of settlement and habitation in relation to the local topography, proximity to rivers, roads, sources of water and irrigation, towns and cities, and many other variables. Modern exploration in the form of aerial and field surveys – for the most part noninvasive – have contributed mightily to our knowledge of villas and the rural landscape, and below we give a very brief account of ongoing Mediterranean-wide projects.

CENTURIATION

Agricultural production of all kinds was the principal generator of wealth – small, middling, and large – in Greek and Roman antiquity. In consequence, the structure of the productive landscape came to be a matter of official cognizance and technical intervention, associated with the *ager publicus* or “public land” made available to

Roman citizens in annexed regions beyond the City itself or its immediate territory.¹⁷ These lands were reorganized with new surveying, along Roman lines, of territories adjacent to, and administratively dependent on, newly conquered old towns or else newly founded urban centers. In part, the purpose of such surveying was to define parcels to be awarded to soldiers upon demobilization or to attract settlers to newly formed colonies or new drafts of citizens to existing towns, both in Italy and elsewhere. The award of agricultural land became an important aspect of late Republican politics.

The acts of mensuration were very well developed technically, capable of both universal uniformity of application and flexibility vis-à-vis special circumstances of topography and local land practices. It was applied in Italy, Gaul, Hispania, Greece, and Africa; its application elsewhere is less certain, and it may have been flexibly applied, or not applied at all, to respect and accommodate local practices. Trained personnel called *agrimensores* (“land-measurers”) were developed together with specialized handbooks and mechanical devices for sighting, finding true north, and estimating heights.¹⁸ The result was a system of physical divisions of agricultural land in more-or-less equal, measurable, cataloguable, and registerable units reducible to valuation for tax estimates (for land outside Italy) or commercial sale prices. Once established, the divisions could be assembled in municipal lists of properties called *cadasters* for administrative purposes. The act of divisioning itself was termed *centuriatio* (sometimes also *limitatio*), from an original delimiting into square “centuries” corresponding to an old assemblage of 100 individual properties (*heredia*, sing. *heredium*), each *heredium* (consisting of 2 *iugera* or c. ½ ha or 1.3 acres) capable, in theory and antique tradition, of sustaining a nuclear farming family. In practice even quite small farms were much larger (18–20 *iugera* or more = 4½–5 ha = 12–14 acres), and medium-sized farms at some 100–250 *iugera* (50–125 ha = 130–325 acres).¹⁹ The centuriation units developed in size and layout according to local needs, but usually toward larger defined plots of agricultural land. Ultimately, by the late second century BCE, official grants in

units of 500 *iugera* (250 ha or 650 acres, quite ample at any historical period) were offered to Roman citizens willing to take up residence overseas in the environs of Carthage.²⁰

How centuriation related to villas is not certain, because by the second century BCE or later, when villas clearly surface in the archaeological and written historical record, the amalgamation of originally separate smaller properties may already have occurred, and the neat divisions of agricultural land intended for distribution to farming families had been bypassed. It may well be that the proliferation of villas actually disturbed or overthrew the original intention and purpose of the *centuriatio*. For that reason, the technical issues of centuriation need not occupy us here. Rather, their discovery in quite disparate parts of the empire is part of the recordable expansion of Roman hegemony and thus of the villas that eventually occupied the surveyed territories.

Archaeologists become enthusiastic when traditional and new disciplines coincide and mutually confirm one another: the discovery of centuriation is an example. Its existence and processes had been known from the texts of the *agrimensores* and from certain inscriptions that seemed to be lists of local properties; historical land divisions could also be inferred as the underpinnings of existing divisions from modern large-scale maps that seemed to show a ghostly divisioning underlying visible land features and delimitations of more recent date.²¹

However, the discovery of centuriation is one of the most exciting stories of modern archaeological investigation by technical means. In the late 1940s and 1950s, aerial photography from low-flying military, map-making, or tourist aircrafts began to register what seemed to be man-made interventions on natural or agriculturally developed land in rural or suburban areas.²² Among many others, these could be in the form of topographical discontinuities (buried remains of walls and terraces invisible at ground level), hydrological anomalies (e.g., ruined cisterns retaining some water), and color or height variations in modern monocultural planting due to subsurface structures. For centuriation, the foot-worn tracks between surveyed fields could appear strikingly

visible, as could the low earth ridges and/or ditches defining units of the divisions. Substantial structures including villas, but also rural temples and other buildings, could be revealed. The results of aerial photography were clinched early on by epigraphic evidence, most specifically in the cadastral lists, inscribed in 77 CE on marble slabs, of properties in the region of Arausio (mod. Orange) in Gallia Narbonensis.²³ This had been a *colonia* or newly founded town set up for veterans of the *Legio II Gallica*, and the regular divisioning and apportionment described in the inscriptions coincided with the design of field boundaries revealed by aerial photography.

The discovery of centuriation patterns has resulted in significant new understandings of Roman territorial expansion – and therefore proliferation of villas – in the western provinces and Africa. The analysis of rural space as *Roman* space has proved fruitful for both local phenomena and for imperial history; Monique Clavel-Lévêque is a significant exponent, as is Emilio Gabba.²⁴ Methodological considerations began early and are ongoing.²⁵ Other noninvasive geophysical methods for archaeology were developed in early form around the same time as aerial photography, also to the advantage of documenting Roman villas and with ongoing refinements of technique and results.²⁶ In recent years, the most notable new noninvasive techniques that are greatly contributing to archaeological mapping and planning of field campaigns are LIDAR (= light detection and ranging) and remotely operated cameras on drones.²⁷ The former has the ability to detect man-made structures (or micro-topographical features) even under very dense forest canopy; the latter allows the capture of low altitude images (even using a heat-sensing camera) much more quickly and cheaply than in traditional aerial photography.

FIELD SURVEYS: DISTRIBUTION OF VILLAS IN LANDSCAPES

Where are villas in their landscapes? What kind were they? How were they related geographically to other rural structures such as villas (clustering for reasons

beyond the impetus for social proximity), means of irrigation, and means of transport and access (roads, rivers, and coastlines)? What did they replace, and what replaced them? These are the questions that can often be addressed (if not completely answered) by modern techniques of field survey. Like centuriation in aerial photographs, field surveys can be large scale. They can be reduced to maps keyed with symbols for the various man-made and natural phenomena to reveal patterns not fully visible on the ground. However, centuriation maps and field survey maps differ: Centuriation maps show the traces of administrative structures over large areas, while field-survey maps show how ancient societies distributed themselves – people, structures, and resources – in the landscape, sometimes in territories, sometimes in minute areas. Field surveys have contributed greatly to the knowledge of the ancient territory and gathered a large amount of archaeological data on rural settlement patterns and chronological trends. Over large areas, the landscape presents itself as a palimpsest, natural, then by man-made elements written on it, erased, and overwritten many times with interventions of all kinds. In consequence, field-survey results can be presented both in historical layers and as types of presences (farms, villas, cisterns, roads, and so on) when the visible remains are datable or identifiable. The effectiveness of field survey as an investigative tool depends on the type of terrain: Relying on teams of people walking through transects at regular intervals and noting what is visible on the ground, it is most effective in plowed fields and less so in areas with dense vegetation. The ability to date the use of a given location with some degree of precision depends on the recovery of diagnostic finds, most notably pottery sherds, which are both durable and common in the archaeological record.

Of course, villas are by no means the principal topic of field surveys, because the landscape is a chronological overlay of phenomena: Surveys can go from prehistoric times to the present. Still, the first case of an intensive and large-scale survey conducted in the Mediterranean regions did, in fact, prioritize villas in its results, mainly because it was undertaken in the *ager Veientanus* north and east of Rome, a region rife with ancient farms and villas.

The South Etruria Survey, directed by J.B. Ward-Perkins from the 1950s to the 1970s, was and became a milestone in Mediterranean archaeology.²⁸ In field surveys, tell-tale signs can both reveal villa sites and differentiate them as to type, date, and even social status. For example, a spread of *tesserae* for mosaic floors in association with certain types of fine pottery can denote a villa of some decorative pretension and therefore higher status, whereas fragments of lesser-quality floors and crude pottery may indicate a farm and even a date.²⁹ In combination, a residential part (*pars urbana*), namely a residence with some claim to comfort or even luxury, and a service quarter (*pars rustica*), namely an agricultural section devoted to farm processes, can be inferred. In turn, even small traces of masonry are datable and give evidence of Roman rural presences at various times; sporadic finds of inscriptions or hardened tracks and road pavements can make connections among settlements both chronologically and geographically. The reach of such material in relation to the hydrography and proximity of villas to landscape and habitation centers can establish when and why villas were built and what their sustainable existence might have been. The processes of field survey are, in principle, non-invasive, but they can also locate important sites for excavation or preservation.³⁰

VILLAS IN AGRICULTURAL TREATISES AND IN VITRUVIUS

In discussing rural domestic architecture, writers on agriculture as well as Vitruvius had something to say about villas, but only something. Agricultural treatises were an important literary and practical genre in Latin literature, and its practitioners (except for Cato) combined the authority of previous Greek and Punic writers as well as earlier or contemporary authors with their own knowledge. For that reason, Latin agricultural treatises preserve, in ways that often seem adapted to Italy or, at least, to the southern parts of the northern Mediterranean coasts, an international culture of agriculture from at least the time of Theophrastus, the successor to Aristotle in the philosophical school of the Lyceum at Athens in

the fourth century BCE. Most of the very numerous works on agriculture (some very specialized as to geography and topic) from Greek, Punic, and even Roman antiquity have not survived, but four Latin treatises spanning some six centuries are extant, namely:³¹

1. The *De Agricultura* of Cato (Marcus Porcius Cato, 234–149 BCE, whose treatise appeared in the mid-second century BCE),
2. The *De Re Rustica* of Varro (Marcus Terentius Varro, 116–27 BCE, who published his treatise in 37 BCE when he was in his 81st year),
3. The *De Re Rustica* of Columella (Lucius Junius Moderatus Columella, c. 4–70 CE, whose book was written mid-first century CE and published with an earlier treatise on trees, *De Arboribus*), and
4. The *De Re Rustica* (also called the *Opus Agriculturae*) of Palladius (Rutilius Taurus Aemilianus Palladius, fl. Late fourth–early fifth century CE, with a similar date for his treatise; the treatise includes a book on veterinary medicine in sheep and a book [*De Insitione*], in verse, on grafting for stable product and optimum harvest).

To the agricultural treatises can be added:

5. The *De Architectura* (book 6.6–7) of Vitruvius (Vitruvius Pollio, fl. late first century BCE, with a dedication to Augustus as emperor, therefore after 27 BCE), in which the author, a military and civil architect, discussed some characteristics of rural dwellings in relation to urban *domus* in very abbreviated form, with a longer section on the *villa rustica* and its utilitarian buildings.

The authors of the Latin agricultural treatises borrowed from earlier ones or from other sources, except for Cato, who cited no earlier or contemporary authorities and appears to have relied on his own experience. Still, Cato became the touchstone for later agricultural writers and apparently an impetus for others whose works have not survived.³² The advice he gave to an owner (whom he calls *pater familias* and whom he assumes is an absentee landlord but one intimately involved with the operation of the property) was continuously cited for six centuries by later authors despite his haphazard and disorganized presentation in twelve books and some

162 sections. The authority of Cato's text may come from the fact that his is a very early example of a prose book in Latin as well as his reputation, long after his death, as the cynosure of traditional values and antique achievement, the embodiment of the *mos maiorum*. Cato speaks at some length about crops, vine- and olive-cultivation and processing, as well as giving contract language, prayers, and recipes. Other topics – specifically about the villa itself – are telegraphically conveyed: selection of soil types, general location of the farm (at the foot of a hill and facing south, near a town for markets, nearby water for irrigation, available manpower, and close to a river, the sea, or a reliable road for transport).³³ A tabulation of building costs (whether for the residential part or the farm is not certain) is also included.³⁴ That's about it. Almost nothing is said about the villa itself, neither the dwelling for the *pater familias*, his relatives, and guests, nor the facilities for the personnel, beyond two economical but cursory prescriptions: “When you build, seek not [to build] the villa less than the farm, nor the farm less than the villa,”³⁵ and a vague recommendation to build a good *villa urbana* so the owner will want to visit it and keep an eye on the farm, thereby mitigating absenteeism.³⁶ The recommendation may be sarcastically intended, a rebuke to town-dwelling owners of rural properties.

In fact, despite the generosity of their insights, the clarity of their writing, and their evident experience, agricultural writers are quite laconic as regards the architecture of residential villas, and apart from moralistic judgments, there is nothing specific about decoration or contents, either physical or in terms of meaning. Their silence must have been intentional, because by contrast they wrote at length on how *horrea*, stalls for livestock, and presses of various kinds are to be built, and Vitruvius – similarly brief on villas – included detailed instructions on the construction of foundations, *cryptoporticus* (covered or below-grade passages and rooms), terraces, and terrace walls, the architectural elements of the platforms of *basis villae* and other villa structures, but not much on the villas themselves.³⁷

The silence is understandable: Treatises on agriculture focus on agriculture, agricultural processes,

and nonresidential farm buildings. Still, Cato, Varro, Columella, and Palladius all assumed that a residential villa for the owner was an essential part of the estate even though their comments on the topic are very limited. Indeed, there may have been a commonplace in elite morality that regarded villas – and especially luxury in villas – as indecent and typical of vile modern attitudes: Tremellius Scrofa, who wrote on agriculture and husbandry in the late first century BCE, remarked sarcastically that present-day owners were more concerned with the orientation and temperature of their summer and winter *dining rooms* than with the best placement of windows in their wine and oil *warehouses*.³⁸ Scrofa's remark at least shows that owners of villas were concerned – if obtusely and epically – with the architecture and comfort of their residences. However, because the agricultural activity at villas was held in the respect that tradition deserved and that recalled ancient simplicity, describing modern grandeur or even comforts such as baths or rooms with pretentious Greek names was avoided, except to mock or excoriate them.

In addition, with very few exceptions, actual financial return on capital or agricultural investment is lacking in much detail in these authors,³⁹ possibly because talk of money was regarded as vulgar among the elites and thought of as the distinctive mark of freedmen (*liberti*, former slaves liberated by their masters but still considered socially inferior no matter how wealthy or high up in administrative hierarchies).

AGRICULTURAL WRITERS AND ROMAN OR ITALIAN “ANTIQUITIES”

The success of Roman military ventures and the expansion of Rome's Mediterranean power had an effect on both Hellenistic Greek and Latin writers: they began, with some complacency, to define Rome's identity. In the aftermath of the victory over Carthage in the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE), Romans began to ruminate their own history and cultural phenomena (both ancient and contemporary), in part prompted by Greek

historians – notably Timaeus of Tauromenium and Polybius – who had included what we might call anthropological or ethnographic material in their accounts of the expansion of Roman power. Cato, besides his *De Agricultura* and other writings, wrote a long account called *Origines* on the antiquities and traditions of Italian cities with special regard for Rome itself.⁴⁰ Cato's treatise on farming was a self-contained compendium combining his experience with what he claimed was traditional practice as well as good tips and recipes for his fellow villa owners, but it came from the same impulse that prompted his recording of antique lore.

A little more than a century later, Varro's *Antiquitates* dealt mainly with Roman lore and ancient curiosities. Its publication was followed by his three books on contemporary agriculture, *De Re Rustica*, written, he tells us, in his 81st year of life (c. 34 BCE). The association between picturesque antiquities of Rome and Italy and current Italian agriculture formed a strong bond. According to these authors, the frugal and moral exemplars of the past found their prolongation into the present by means of farming methods and the morality of farmers themselves, Romans of the old stripe. The connection between farming and the nearly mythical social and moral vigor of the past – in Latin, the *mos maiorum* (literally, the custom of the ancestors) – seemed obvious to them. Cato gives a list: men who are good farmers are brave men and eager soldiers, they are held in respect and make a good livelihood; they are rarely dispirited. The list is, for all practical purposes, the personal characteristics of those who embodied the *mores maiorum* (including Cato himself).

Latin itself – its locutions associated with farming that were still in use – could also be cited as living instance of antique tradition. Varro wrote extensively on the Latin language, the etymology of its words and the derivations of its grammar and syntax. Not a few of his topics concerned the derivation of words from agriculture, and it was no accident that for the word *villa* he claimed an origin in the *movement of produce from and to the production-site*, as follows: the word for the manager of an estate was *vilicus*, related whence and to the place agricultural goods

were transported (*convehuntur fructus et evehuntur*). Simple workers (*rustici*) called cartage roads for produce *vela*, and the place whence and to which produce was conveyed *vella* rather than *villa*, and “to haul produce” was “to do *vela*” (*facere velaturam*). In another passage, Varro bases the family names of the most ancient Romans in the quaint traditions of husbandry (*Porcius* [pig], *Equitius* [horse]) and the branch designations of families from the same: He cites the *Annii Caprae* [goats], *Statilii Tauri* [bulls], *Pomponii Vituli* [oxen].⁴¹ History, agricultural language (ancient and in current usage), and famous ancient names were proof of the antique prestige of agricultural pursuits and, by implication, villas. The priority and superiority of life in the country over city dwelling was a commonplace in Latin literature, and villas were venues to smoothly recreate antique *mores* in modern times.⁴²

VILLAS AND THEORY IN THE AGRICULTURAL WRITERS AND VITRUVIUS

Cato’s lead in agricultural writing had assumed that owning a villa was a *sine qua non*, a necessity at a certain social status: any discussion of its theory and/or morality except the fact of proprietorship was so obvious as to be otiose. However, later authors targeting different, perhaps more educated but more dispersed readers at other social levels sought to provide a mild theoretical and moral framework with which to give meaning to the agricultural and villa-owning activity.⁴³

Setting aside the specifics of its discourses on agriculture, Varro’s agricultural manual *De Re Rustica* urges a balanced approach: the usefulness of a villa and its estate (*utilitas*) is primary, but its pleasurable aspect (*voluptas*) is important as well, as much for its own sake as for discouraging absenteeism by the owner (the anxiety about owners’ indifference and absenteeism was universally present in Latin agricultural treatises). Then again, frugality in management (*diligentia*) trumps mere luxury (*luxuria*) in villas.⁴⁴ Indeed, Varro is critical of excessively lavish villas (*villae urbanae*, mostly located in the immediate

environs of Rome, also called *villae perpolitae*) whose owners disdained agriculture: He considered that their negligence drove up prices of food staples.⁴⁵ In his work, which takes the form of an imaginary dialogue between various characters, Varro juxtaposes the “unproductive” (*inutilis* in Latin) villa of Appius Claudius Pulcher, crammed with works of art and not much else, with Quintus Axius’ villa, which, while elegant, retained its original function as a unit of agricultural production, including breeding of pigs and horses.⁴⁶

Varro’s treatise had the advantage of clarity in describing the deployment of the discrete parts of villas: He distinguishes the categories of space and use, though he does not fully describe them. Thus, his term, like Cato before him, for the residential villa is *pars urbana*). Other buildings devoted to agricultural processes of all kinds are termed the *pars rustica*, and storage facilities, larders, grain bins, and so on are the *pars fructuaria*. These designations entered the language of agricultural manuals and became permanent.

Of course, there were exceptions to frugality in villas: interest by owners in the architecture, decoration, and pleasure of villas was endemic. Freed from the constraints of confined urban real estate and the traditions of *domus*, space and imagination could be fully deployed at villas. Varro himself – the proponent of *utilitas* – is his own prime example. In the third book of his agricultural treatise, he describes a special aviary-dining room connected to the peristyle of his own villa at Casinum (mod. Cassino), south of Rome. Here, the owner and author combined literary *ekphrasis* with design ingenuity and simplicity: With some delight, he describes a garden with two long pools framed by wooden columns on three sides. Netting enclosed the spaces both between the columns and facing the garden to form cages for his collection of birds, and the colonnade continued in a semicircle (also netted for more birds) at the end of the garden. The semicircle framed a circular pool surrounding a ring of columns enclosing a round *triclinium*, the whole complex having devices for convenience and diversion without pretension.⁴⁷ Villas could make for originality within a tradition of plain elements (the wooden structures)