

# The moral architecture of villa storage in Italy in the 1st c. B.C.

Astrid Van Oyen

## Towards a morality in action

The Late Republican villa acted as a scene for the projection and contestation of moral values.<sup>1</sup> Villas continued a long-standing association between the physical appearance and the concept of the house, on the one hand, and the moral positioning of its owner, on the other.<sup>2</sup> Ancestral homes in particular proved symbolically salient mechanisms for claims of identity. In a Late Republic characterised by the extension of citizenship and influx of new wealth, this moral and socio-political representation became more contested.<sup>3</sup> Physically and conceptually at some distance from Rome, rural estates provided a canvas for self-definition by old landed aristocrats and *nouveaux riches* alike, on which the boundaries of an ever-changing 'elite' were sketched, as well as the sense of belonging to that élite.<sup>4</sup>

Various architectural strategies responded to this need for self-definition that was fulfilled through moral positioning. Monumentalisation of the physical fabric of villas catered to their increasing rôle as "personal monuments", guarding the legacy of their owners in life and death.<sup>5</sup> Elements of *luxuria* in villa building, challenging and reconfiguring the dominant moral rhetoric, were critiqued in the writings of Cicero, and later in those of Seneca and Pliny,<sup>6</sup> though also praised by the poets Statius and Martial.<sup>7</sup> An architectural mirroring between town houses and villas (for example, the latter were surrounded by fortifications reminiscent of the former) stretched the moral notion of self-sufficiency.<sup>8</sup>

There remains a tendency to discuss the material evidence as reflecting an (im)morality that was defined and maintained elsewhere, in an ideological realm far removed from action in the material world. Villas provided a moral canvas, but not a moral action ground — or so it seems. Their action ground was economic: villas represented moral values, but were engaged in practical production and consumption. The relation between these two aspects of the villa — what they represented and what they practised — has been seen as either deterministic or irrelevant.

---

1 J. Bodet, "Monumental villas and villa monuments," *JRA* 10 (1997) 5-35; C. Edwards, *The politics of immorality in ancient Rome* (Cambridge 1993) 137-72.

2 J. Bodet, "Villaculture," in J. A. Becker and N. Terrenato (edd.), *Roman Republican villas: architecture, context, and ideology* (Ann Arbor, MI 2012) 47; Edwards *ibid.* 143 on the rôle of house-based analogies; S. Hales, "At home with Cicero," *G&R* 47 (2000) 44-55; ead., *The Roman house and social identity* (Cambridge 2003).

3 T. Habinek, *The politics of Latin literature: writing, identity and empire in ancient Rome* (Princeton, NJ 1998) 34-68, for an analysis of how literature responded to this, and how Cato's work fits in this context.

4 Edwards (*supra* n.1) 2 and *passim* on the key rôle of (im)morality in Roman self-definition; Habinek *ibid.* 34-68; B. Reay, "Cato's *De agri cultura* and the spectacle of expertise," in Becker and Terrenato (*supra* n.2) 61-68 on how Cato's *De agri cultura* is involved in self-representation.

5 Bodet (*supra* n.1) 9.

6 Edwards (*supra* n.1) 137-72.

7 Bodet (*supra* n.1) 16; Edwards *ibid.* 142; Z. Pavlovskis, *Man in an artificial landscape: the marvels of civilization in Imperial Roman literature* (Leiden 1973).

8 N. Purcell, "Town in country and country in town," in E. B. MacDougall (ed.), *Ancient Roman villa gardens* (Washington, D.C. 1987) 187-203.