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The Auditorium site in Rome and the origins of the villa

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Introduction

The archaeology of Roman villas is based on a very rich body of evidence found across the entire Roman world and dating to a very broad chronological spectrum. Yet there are still crucial related issues, such as that concerning the origins of this type of settlement, not to mention the problem of its very homogeneity as a category, that have been debated on the basis of a surprisingly limited amount of factual information. In situations of this kind it is only to be expected that even individual new discoveries can alter the current wisdom. As a case in point, some recent discoveries made in Rome seem to contribute to our understanding of early Roman élite rural settlements and their relationship with Late Republican villas. As frequently happens, the new material has also stimulated a reconsideration of the existing evidence from a different perspective.

An attempt will be made here at re-assessing the state of the question on the origins of villas by building on a summary exposition of the findings made at the Auditorium site. However, a few preliminary general remarks are necessary. Roman villas have been the focus of a great deal of scholarship and archaeological research in widely different geographical and historical contexts. The term 'villa' has been given to a variety of sites that differ in size, architecture, function and chronology, to the point where the boundaries of the type and terminological consistency appear today blurred and in need of a comprehensive redefinition. For present purposes, the term villa will be used to refer to élite Republican rural residences in central Italy, without subscribing to any empire-wide normative concept.

Field surveys, whilst providing a more extensive and balanced understanding of Roman rural organization, have added a further level of complexity. A large number of artifact scatters, interpreted as villas on the basis of quite diverse criteria, now need to be taken into account alongside monumental remains and the references in the ancient sources. If generalizations about this type of settlement are to be advanced, they must cover such diverse entities as (to remain just within Italy) the villa at Laurentum mentioned in the letters of the Younger Pliny (Förtsch 1993; Bergmann 1995), the Villa of the Mysteries outside Pompeii, and site 21 of Wesleyan University's Ager Cosanus Survey (Dyson 1978, who includes one of the few explicit definitions of the criteria used in a survey to identify an artifact scatter as a villa). Notwithstanding this obvious difficulty, several recent books have striven to present a global picture of Roman villas. They have ranged from broad architectural analyses that pay little attention to the particular historical and geographical context (e.g., Smith 1997 or, to a lesser extent, McKay 1975) all the way to more comprehensive (if synthetic and somewhat simplified) treatments of the phenomenon as a whole (Mielsch 1987; Carandini 1989b), to simple catalogues of sites with brief conclusions (e.g., Rossiter 1978), or collections of essays (Reutti 1990; Frazer 1998). In other works, villas have been discussed within a general architectural review of both urban and rural houses in the Roman world (De Albentis 1990; McKay 1975).

A whole other series of related issues touches on the rôle of villas within the development of Roman agriculture. Structural traits (such as the presence, function and size of productive facilities) are combined with topographical observations (for instance, on the probable size of the estate or its access to commercial routes) and occasionally with palaeo-environmental analyses to produce detailed reconstructions of the economy of individual sites (e.g., Carandini and Ricci 1985; Small 1994). In broader works based on those case-studies, the spread of villas during the Late Republic is seen as part of a complex and wider process involving Roman expansion, the decline of small ownership, the slave market, long-distance trade of wine and oil, and other related phenomena. In this perspective villa architecture is only one of the indicators of