

'Vanishing villas': what happened to élite rural habitation in the West in the 5th-6th c?

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Introduction

At the height of the Roman Empire, the characteristic form of wealthy rural habitation was the villa. Throughout the empire, villas were characterised by a separate stone-built habitation (the *pars urbana*), a standard floor-plan (e.g., a corridor or courtyard plan), obedience to a classical aesthetic (e.g., marble, wall-paintings, and mosaics) and features reflecting a classical lifestyle (e.g., baths and hypocausts). They were the rural residences of land-owners of different levels of wealth and rank, and varied from the relatively small and simple to huge, sprawling mansions adorned with every conceivable luxury.¹ The date of the initial wave of villa construction varies from the 1st c. B.C. to the 2nd c. A.D. in different parts of the empire, correlating with their dates of Roman conquest. In the 4th c. imposing reception areas, apsed rooms, and peristyle courts were often added.²

Throughout the West, regardless of their date of construction, excavations have revealed an overwhelming transformation during the 5th and 6th c. in the style and nature of occupation at villa sites: the typically Roman forms of building and use disappear at site after site, to be replaced by radically altered functions (e.g., industrial use or use for burial), and building in a quite different style and ephemeral materials, often described as 'squatter occupation'.

This transformation has been universally interpreted as evidence of the abandonment of villas as habitations by the land-owning élite. This article aims to re-interpret the transformation of villa sites in the West. I will argue that rich urban houses in many regions underwent the same overwhelming change in occupation style in the 5th-6th c. as did villas. Any interpretation of the transformation of rural villas must take into account the parallel developments in towns. It is now generally agreed that urban change was the result of socio-cultural and political transformation. It will be suggested here that the transformation of rural villas took place as a consequence of similar factors, and that villas were not abandoned or occupied only by poor 'squatters' but, in many cases, continued to be occupied by land-owners living in a different, non-classical style.

The transformation of villa sites in the West in the 5th-6th c.

Excavations of villa sites throughout the West reveal a series of characteristic transformations during the 5th or 6th c., and sometimes as early as the 4th c. These transformations appear in every region, including Britain, Gaul, the Iberian Peninsula, and Italy.

The use of rooms (often even the richest and most decorative) in the *pars urbana* for new purposes associated with agricultural or industrial production is a recurring feature in the 5th-6th c. These new patterns of use defy classical aesthetic traditions and lifestyle, destroying mosaics, converting decorative areas to agricultural or industrial uses, and ignoring the distinc-

1 On the definition, typology and development of the villa, see Percival 1976; Smith 1997, and Terrenato 2001. The question of whether the size of a villa residence can be considered to reflect the rank of its owner and size of his estate is a vexed one. Clearly, farmland could sometimes be part of a huge estate but have been worked by a *vilius* or *colonus* living in a small dwelling. Some rich land-owners might also own many but scattered parcels of land, so that huge homes were not necessarily located on huge, agglomerated estates. However, most of the stone-built and substantially decorated buildings labelled 'villas' look more like owners' showy houses than the functional habitations of supervisors or tenants, while evidently huge mansions were the residences of the most important land-owners, whether their estates were consolidated or scattered parcels of land.

2 For the ostentatious architecture of the 4th c., see Ellis 1997.