

Rethinking the later Roman landscape

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Introduction: the terms of the debate

T. Lewit's article in *JRA* 16 on the continuity of élite rural settlement in the Late Roman West is a welcome evaluation of the current state of the field.¹ Many of the arguments it advances are undoubtedly correct and will force us to reconsider a host of sites and their interpretative 'baggage'. This response does not contest Lewit's basic premise that members of the social élite continued to occupy rural sites; instead, it challenges some of her assumptions and methodologies and offers an alternative approach to thinking about the Late Roman rural landscape.

Lewit argued that the well-documented changes in post-Roman villas — the conversion of luxurious living spaces to subdivided poorer-quality housing, industrial/agricultural functions or mortuary space, and the gradual replacement of mortared structures with dry-stone or timber buildings — indicate not the replacement of élites by poor 'squatters' but simply reflect the élite's new material face.² She points to similar material changes in urban space. Insisting that élites must have existed and therefore must have lived somewhere, she suggests that neither urban nor rural contexts experienced decline but simply underwent a transformation of élite "fashion".³ The monumental *pars urbana* of the 2nd-4th c. had become, as Lewit describes it, "socially irrelevant", and its post-built, subdivided, grave-riddled successor was the new garb of the same Roman landowning élites who, in step with changing times, had simply changed their monumental clothing.

As Lewit herself describes, her interpretation is part of a broader debate over the fate of the Roman countryside in the 5th-6th c., one which, like its sister debate on the nature of late-antique urbanism, has been cast in terms of 'catastrophe' versus 'continuity'.⁴ The catastrophist position points to the many instances of total abandonment of rural sites during the 5th and 6th c., positing significant population decline and topographical discontinuities in rural settlement patterns.⁵ It interprets the material changes discussed by Lewit as the (enforced) adoption of generally lower standards of living for those who remained, and identifies these people not as transformed élites but as 'the poor', whose simpler material footprint defines a late-antique culture that has 'declined' in quality from that of the High Empire. The continuist paradigm objects to this narrative as 'Gibbonist decline-and-fall', rife with valuations that hold Roman

1 T. Lewit, "'Vanishing villas': what happened to élite rural habitation in the West in the 5th-6th c.?" *JRA* 16 (2003) 260-74 (henceforth Lewit).

2 Lewit 260-63.

3 Lewit 263-67.

4 On the countryside, see G. P. Brogiolo (ed.), *La fine delle ville romane: trasformazioni nelle campagne tra tarda antichità e alto medioevo* (Documenti di archeologia 11; Mantua 1995); N. Christie (ed.), *Landscapes of change: rural evolutions in late antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Aldershot 2004); M. Fixot and É. Zadora-Rio (edd.), *L'église, le terroir* (Monographie du CRA 1; Paris 1989); R. Hodges, "Rewriting the rural history of early medieval Italy: twenty-five years of medieval archaeology reviewed," *Rural history* 1 (1990) 17-36; P. Van Ossel, *Établissements ruraux de l'Antiquité tardive dans le nord de la Gaule* (Paris 1992); G. Ripoll and J. Arce, "The transformation and end of the Roman villas in the West," in G. P. Brogiolo, N. Gauthier and N. Christie (edd.), *Towns and their territories between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden 2000) 63-114. On the continuity versus catastrophe debate in general, see B. Ward-Perkins, "Continuists, catastrophists and the towns of post-Roman northern Italy," *PBSR* 65 (1997) 157-76.

5 E.g., J.-G. Gorges, *Les villas hispano-romaines* (Paris 1979); T. W. Potter, *The changing landscape of South Etruria* (London 1979).