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DEBATE

Footprints in the later Roman countryside: a response

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The response by K. Bowes and A. Gutteridge ("Rethinking the Later Roman landscape," *JRA* 18 [2005] 405-13) to my article "Vanishing villas: what happened to élite rural habitation in the Roman West in the 5th and 6th c. A.D.?" in *JRA* 16 (2003) 260-74, introduces new avenues for discussion and undoubtedly advances our thinking on this topic. I wish here to review and revise my central points regarding what they aptly describe (405) as the "post-built, subdivided, grave-riddled successor" to the Roman villa in the West.

My central argument is that, in interpreting the typical late-antique transformations to western villa sites, we must discard such dismissive terms as "squatter occupation", "de campements", "habitats de type précaire", or "capanne". This terminology implies that activity at the site was historically insignificant, economically and socially marginal, casual, and temporary. The phenomenon of transformation is so widespread that it deserves far more attention. I argue that it was a significant phase in rural occupation.

I agree that it is time to move on from the tired "catastrophe *versus* continuity debate" (Bowes and Gutteridge 406), and I do not believe that the phenomenon of villa transformation represents either of these two extremes. Manifestly there were profound political, social, economic, settlement and material transformations in the 5th-7th c. West, and I argued that these are reflected in the transformations to villas. Archaeological evidence suggests that there was a diminution in trade and in the intensive, commercial farming of which villas had been a central part. However, I have also argued that economic change alone cannot fully explain the transformations to villas. I believe that this can be most vividly illustrated by the phenomenon of habitation alongside burial.¹ Surely impoverishment alone could not prompt such a radical departure from custom? Here we see a socio-cultural element to change.

Bowes and Gutteridge rightly point out that I did not specify the exact identity of the socio-economic group to whom I referred as the "land-owning élite". It was not my aim to enter into this area of debate, which, though important, I felt lay beyond the scope of my study. This lack of clarity, however, led to some confusion regarding my argument. I did not intend to claim "a specific continuity of the people themselves" or that this "material footprint" was necessarily planted by "the same élite in different clothes" (Bowes and Gutteridge 406, 411-12). I agree with Bowes and Gutteridge that the changes are more complex and profound than this. My argument (270-71) was that changes in fashion reflected deeper social and political changes. These must have had consequences for the composition and character of rural society, including the nature of élites. One such change which I emphasised in my article was the process of Christianisation. I would now place equal emphasis on the process of 'militarisation' of the Late Roman and Early Mediaeval élites.²

Bowes and Gutteridge's identification of "a new sociology of settlement ... marked by agglomerations of élites and non-élites living together in multi-family groups" seems to me to be a helpful and productive addition to our understanding of late-antique settlement in the West, and one which confirms a picture of changed cultural attitudes and settlement styles, resulting from the broader changes in the late-antique world. While in 2003 I argued strongly for 'élite' occupation of transformed villa sites, I would now place less emphasis on an élite presence, and would focus more on my repudiation of the term "squatter occupation" and on the need to recognise the late-antique pattern of settlement at villa sites as a significant phase within a changed cultural, social and economic world.

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1 Discussed in my article at 262, 266, 268 and 270.

2 C. Wickham, "Un pas vers le Moyen Âge? Permanences et mutations," in P. Ouzoulias *et al.* (edd.), *Les campagnes de la Gaule à la fin de l'Antiquité. Colloque 1998 (Antibes 2001)* 560, comments that the abandonment of such luxury features as hypocausts reflects the living styles of the *castrum*. G. Halsall, *Settlement and social organisation. The Merovingian region of Metz* (Cambridge 1995) 250, has noted that Merovingian élites appear to have expressed their status in elaborate burial (particularly weapon burials), rather than in the houses they occupied.