

Villa settlements in Roman Transylvania

I. A. Oltean and W. S. Hanson

This paper aims to synthesise and re-interpret the evidence for villa settlements in SW Transylvania, integrating new survey data with that from traditional accounts and limited excavation. The new data was generated by a fieldwork project funded by the Leverhulme Trust and the British Academy between 1998 and 2004, which sought to apply aerial reconnaissance techniques to this area for the first time.¹ The geographical focus is the middle Mureş valley, the major river that runs E–W through the central Transylvanian plateau and the plain of Haţeg (Tara Haţegului) to the south. This area is considered to be the most populated zone of Dacia, lying at the heart of both the Iron Age kingdom and the Roman province. The main road of the province runs through the Mureş valley. Within the area are a number of important Roman and pre-Roman centres, including Sarmizegetusa Regia (Grădiştea Muncelului), the pre-Roman Dacian capital; Sarmizegetusa Ulpia (the modern village of Sarmizegetusa), a colonial foundation and capital of the province; and Apulum (modern Alba Iulia), a legionary fortress which became both a Roman colony and a *municipium* (fig. 1).

Outside the areas occupied by such major urban centres, Roman Dacia's settlement pattern has traditionally been interpreted as consisting of a simple dichotomy of villas and villages or *vici*. However, settlement size, established on the basis of surface scatters of artefacts, varies from over 10 to less than 1 ha, which might therefore suggest considerably greater variation of settlement type.² For the large majority of reported sites, the archaeological evidence is extremely limited and the research methodology traditionally employed, dominated by unsystematic fieldwalking and partial excavation, far from satisfactory for defining the nature of settlement. The dominance of the Roman element is clear since that is more readily identified by virtue of the distinctive pottery and the use of mortared stone, brick and tile. Some 402 sites of broadly Roman date are reported in the study area, of which 266–270 are likely to represent settlements. Of these, some 214 show clear evidence of Roman building materials, sometimes even with painted wall-plaster or elaborate flooring. The primary focus of this paper will be the 111 which might generously be termed villas (Appendices 1–2).

Terminology

Scholars' use of the term 'villa' has been strongly influenced by the phenomenon of Italian luxury villas and ancient literary descriptions.³ Scholarly interest was aroused especially by the lavish artistic expressions of luxury life in villas. Yet such an approach does not do justice to the large majority of buildings in the rural landscape of the provinces, especially those in non-Mediterranean Europe; nor could it cover the functional complexity of the villa phenomenon, especially in relation to its economic activities. It is commonly stated that villas were farms, though many recognize that this is an over-simplification of the close link between villas and rural landholding as the main manifestation of wealth.⁴ The identification of economic functionality is usually based on detailed post-excavation analysis, with the result that construction technique or site plan remain the most common modes of identification and research into rural sites. J. T. Smith's extensive survey of villa sites in Europe is concerned entirely with plans, even chronological developments being accorded only minor importance.⁵ Thus presumptive interpretation of a site as a villa still relies primarily on architectural data.⁶ Nonetheless, a rural setting is one of the main defining features, along with stone architecture, though even the latter need not be preclusive, for villas built wholly or partly in tim-

1 Hanson and Oltean 2002 and 2003.

2 Size: Gudea and Moţu 1994, 512; type: Oltean 2004a, 161.

3 Dyson 2003, 13–18.

4 Villas as farms: e.g., Collingwood 1930, 113; Rivet 1969, 177; Biró 1974, 23; Wightman 1975, 624; villas and rural land-holding: e.g., Percival 1975, 13–14; Millett 1990, 91–92.

5 Smith 1997, 19–20.

6 E.g., Scott 1993, 3–6.