

Recycling, demand for materials, and landownership at villas in Italy and the western provinces in late antiquity

Beth Munro

Introduction

Numerous studies in recent years have sought to explain the changes that occurred at villas between the 3rd and 5th c. A.D.¹ Since the villa was an essential economic and social component of the Roman rural landscape, tracking the changes and eventual demise of this type of settlement and landholding has been viewed as a key part of understanding wider political, economic, and social changes in late antiquity. Yet by their very nature as private dwellings and places of production in different kinds of landscapes, villas were diverse in their architecture, size, and function. When, why, and how villas went into decline varied depending on the circumstances of the owners, the location of the estates, and their regional and provincial contexts. Each site underwent changes in different ways and at different times. It is these differences that have made general or comparative studies on the 'end of the villa' challenging.

Previous work on villas in Italy and the western provinces has identified three general changes that occurred from the 3rd c. onwards. Firstly, in the 3rd c. there appears to have been a general decline in the number of villas except in provinces such as Spain and Britain. Secondly, among those villas that persisted, there was a monumentalisation in the 4th c., which included the addition of apsidal halls and elaborate bathing complexes. This has been demonstrated by C. Balmelle, C. Sfameni, and A. Chavarria Arnau, who have provided excellent discussions of the evolution of villas down to the late-antique period in Aquitania, Italy, and Hispania, respectively.² The villa of Piazza Armerina is one of the best known examples of the late-antique villa 'type', with many elaborately-decorated apsidal rooms on a large scale. Other examples include Séviac (Aquitania) and Almenarade-Adaja (Valladolid).³ Thirdly, the 5th to 6th c. marked the start of the demise of villas as a settlement type. The phases of decline show evidence of a lack of maintenance and repair, abandonment, destruction, and/or functional transformation. Included in this final group are villas that were bought as or transferred to Church property, such as San Vincenzo al Volturno, and villas that appear to have undergone "productive" transformations, such as El Ruedo (Almedinilla) or the so-called "Villa di Augusto" on the slopes of Vesuvius.⁴

This final phase of activity, to be referred to as the 'post-villa' phase, forms my focus here. This terminology is used because many of the structures in the 5th-6th c. phases are indicative of a fundamentally different function of the sites. Most villas were no longer

1 Studies on the Late Roman villa as a type, and the 'end of the villa', include Brogiolo 1996; Ripoll and Arce 2000; Balmelle 2001; Francovich and Hodges 2003; Lewit 2003 and 2006; Sfameni 2003 and 2006; Chavarria 2004a, 2004b, 2005 and 2007; Brogiolo and Chavarria 2005; Arce 2006; Brogiolo, Chavarria and Valenti 2006. See also Van Ossel 1992 for a more general discussion of late-antique rural settlement types, including villas, in N Gaul.

2 Balmelle 2001; Sfameni 2003; Chavarria 2004a. Christie (2006) illustrates these changes in a flow chart (fig. 99) demonstrating the possible transformation of villas.

3 Monturet and Rivière 1983; Mañanes Pérez 1992.

4 Hodges and Mitchell 1993; Hodges and Mithen 1993; Vaquerizo and Noguera 1997; Aoyagi, Angelelli and Matsuyama 2010, 219.