

Monumental villas and villa monuments*

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According to a story told in early imperial times about Scipio Africanus and the coastal estate at Liternum to which he withdrew, embittered and disillusioned, in his old age, Scipio one day spied a group of pirate chiefs approaching the villa and began deploying his household staff along the roof to ward off an attack. When the pirates saw the reception awaiting them, they put down their arms and sent word that they had come not as enemies but as admirers, whereupon Scipio ordered the gates to be unbarred and the visitors to be admitted. Before entering the villa, so the story goes, the pirates worshipped at the doorposts as if at an altar or sacred shrine; then, after grasping and repeatedly kissing Scipio's hand, they laid gifts of the sort generally consecrated to the gods before his vestibule and departed, happy to have seen the divine man.¹

The tale belongs to a store of legendary material built up around the elder Scipio, and we need not believe that anything of the sort ever happened (cf. Walbank 1967). For our purposes, the historicity of the story is of little importance. What matters is that such an anecdote attached to the man who emerges as the first prominent Roman known to have possessed a country villa (D'Arms 1970: 1) and the first known to have established a residence in the immediate suburbs of Rome (Coarelli 1981: 183, 187). So great was Scipio's majesty that his seaside villa was treated like a temple by those who might have been expected to view it as nothing but booty. The house is regarded as an extension of the man, a tangible symbol of his accomplishments, and thus a suitable object of veneration. In the time of Nero a freedman, Vetulenus Aegialus, won public esteem by cultivating Scipio's estate, which was located in a notoriously swampy and unproductive region, and the younger Seneca made a pilgrimage to the site, where he worshipped at a monument believed to be the general's tomb.² The well-known letter in which Seneca compares the austerity and sturdy functionalism of Scipio's dwelling with the indulgent fancies of contemporary villa architecture (*Ep.* 86) reminds us that for Romans of the educated and propertied classes a man's country house, like his manner of speech, was a reflection of his character: *qualis villa, talis vita*, as Seneca might have put it.³

* This paper, like those of Purcell (1995) and Dunbabin (1996), was originally presented in April 1990 at the First Williams Symposium (on the Roman villa) at the University of Pennsylvania and, like them, was meant to be published in the proceedings of that gathering. Much has been written on the topic of the symposium since then, and I have not been able to take account systematically of even the best of it, but I have tried to mention important new evidence, where relevant, and, where possible, to add updated bibliographical references. Among many friends who provided helpful comments at the symposium and on a subsequent written version of the manuscript, I must thank in particular Bettina Bergmann, Andrea Carandini, Kathleen Coleman, Nicholas Horsfall, Giuseppe Pucci, Richard Saller, and Susan Treggiari.

1 Val. Max. 2.10.2: qui (sc. praedones) postes ianuae tamquam aliquam religiosissimam aram sanctumque templum venerati cupidine Scipionis dexteram adprehenderunt ac diu osculati positae ante vestibulum donis, quae deorum immortalium numini consecrari solent, laeti, quod Scipionem vidisse contigisset, ad flares† (*naves* Torrenius : *rates* Gertz : *classes* Kempf) reverterunt.

2 Vetulenus: Pliny, *NH* 14.49; for the date, cf. Sen., *Ep.* 86.14 with Hanslik 1958. The marshes and sand dunes of Liternum were infamous: see Livy 22.16.4, Ovid, *Met.* 15.714, Stat., *Silv.* 4.3.66, Sil. Ital. 6.653-54, 8.530-31, Plut., *Fab. Max.* 6, and Frederiksen 1984: 18-19. Seneca: Sen., *Ep.* 86.1, in ipsa Scipionis Africani villa iacens haec tibi scribo, adoratis manibus eius et tara / arca†, quam sepulchrum esse tanti viri suspicor. Modern editors print *ara* (altar), but *arca* (sarcophagus), attested in a manuscript of the 9th c., better accords with the burial practices of the Cornelii Scipiones: cf. Coarelli 1972: 74 n. 94.

3 Cf. Sen., *Ep.* 114.1: talis hominibus fuit oratio qualis vita. The notion was, as Seneca says, proverbial: cf. Otto 1890: 257 s.v. "oratio."