

The villas of the Vallée des Baux and the Barbegal Mill: excavations at la Mérindole villa and cemetery

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Introduction

The Barbegal Mill in the Vallée des Baux northeast of Arles (figs. 1, 2) is recognized as perhaps the best surviving example of ancient water-powered milling technology.¹ Among the many questions surrounding the mill's history is that of the source of its grain. Because the Vallée des Baux is a natural wetland, F. Benoit, who excavated the mill between 1937 and 1939, suggested that cereals were shipped to the mill from the upper Rhône valley via Arles (Benoit 1940: 70-71). Benoit's view has prevailed, despite lingering doubts by some scholars (Sellin 1981), for almost 50 years. The results of a recent program of excavations on the mill and aqueduct bridges in the vallon des Arcs and environmental studies in the Vallée des Baux directed by Philippe Leveau suggest, however, that climatic conditions during the early first millennium A.D. were sufficiently dry to support Roman drainage and land-reclamation in the valley for agricultural purposes (above, p. 149f).² That farming was practiced in the Vallée des Baux in the Roman period is no longer in doubt, as recent field surveys have identified a number of Roman-period villas and other settlement sites.³

Among the Roman sites in the valley is the recently-named La Mérindole villa, 400 m east of the Barbegal Mill (figs. 1-3).⁴ The site, visible as an extended scatter of stone rubble, tile, and pot, rests on a slight rise formed by an ancient alluvial cone that passed through a gap in the Rochers de la Pène, the low limestone ridge defining the N side of the valley. Most of the site lies in a heavily cultivated field that cuts through the cone.

The Mérindole site is first mentioned by Benoit in his report on the excavations of the mill (Benoit 1940, 45). He identified it as a "centre industriel" associated with the mill on the basis of its proximity to the facility and the presence of lead pipes among the surface finds suggesting that water from the mill was perhaps carried to the site. Since 1940 the site has yielded a number of interesting finds, including a rectangular stone trough or settling tank apparently *in situ*,⁵ and a small amphora burial found by O. Badan, a local amateur archaeologist.⁶ Field-walking has revealed a scatter of pottery, tile and other material, covering an area of c.22 500 m² in the cultivated field to the south of and slightly to the east of the excavations discussed below. The pottery includes amphorae, imported (African Red Slip) and Gaulish sigillata wares, and local coarsewares ranging from the 1st to the 5th c. A.D. Other material found included painted plaster, hydraulic cement, brick and tile (including combed tiles), marble fragments including *opus sectile* and a fragment of sculpture, a millstone, and glass.⁷ On the

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- 1 For a discussion of the mill and relevant bibliography see the article by Leveau in this volume. See also Wilson 1995.
 - 2 The results of Leveau's excavations have shown that the mill was constructed in the early 2nd c. and continued in operation until the late 3rd c.
 - 3 See Gazenbeek 1995 and Nicholson 1995.
 - 4 The name of the site is derived from its location on the property of the Mas de la Mérindole.
 - 5 Tiles were found attached to the tank to aid drainage into it. The tank was located in the cultivated part of the site about 30 m S of the line of cypress trees and irrigation canal that bisect it. The burial was found about 40 m E of the tank.
 - 6 A large number of Roman coins and other small artifacts have been found at the site.
 - 7 See in particular Nicholson 1995 pp. 275-78 and Gazenbeek 1995 (Annexe: la base de données archéo-