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CONTENTS PAGES

EDITORIAL

5

DOSSIER - ARCHAEOLOGY: FROM THE AGENDA 2030 TO THE WORLD POST-COVID

G.P. Brogiolo, A. Chavarrfa Arnau Archeologia e sostenibilità nell'era
post (?) COVID-19

7

P. Gould Resilience and innovation: an economic contemplation
on public-facing archaeology after COVID-19

21

P. Gelabert Past diseases: present questions and future perspec-
tives from an archaeogenetic approach

35

C. Holtorf An archaeology for the future: from developing contract
archaeology to imagining post-corona archaeology

57

P. Everill *Quo vadis?* What next for British archaeology?

73

D. Henson Archaeology's place in education: under threat or an
opportunity?

91

A. Rey da Silva Sailing the waters of sustainability. Reflections on
the future of maritime cultural heritage protection in
the global sea of development

107

R.J. Williamson, M. Nevell, B. Humphrey-Taylor Increasing the
resilience of cultural heritage using novel technolo-
gies: the perspective from a UK volunteer-led site

135

C. Rynne Waterpower and sustainable energy in 19th-century
Europe and the USA. An archaeology of the water
turbine

147

RESEARCH - RETHINKING THE LATE ANTIQUE COUNTRYSIDE

C. Corsi The villa-*mansio* in the Late Antique Mediterranean:
between historiographical creation and archaeological
impotence

165

T. Lewit "*terris, vineis, olivetis...*": wine and oil production after
the villas

193

N. Conejo	Coins and <i>villae</i> in late Roman Lusitania: collapse of the Roman currency economy?	219
A. Carneiro	Adapting to change in rural Lusitania: zooarchaeological record in the Horta da Torre Roman villa (Portugal)	247
R. Montagnetti, D. Pickel, J. Wilson, F. Rizzo, D. Soren	New research in the Roman villa and late Roman infant and child cemetery at Poggio Gramignano (Lugnano in Teverina, Umbria, Italy)	279
J.M. Nolla, M. Prat, A. Costa, N. Corominas, L. Palahí	La visualización de los visigodos en Gerunda y sus entornos. Datos significativos de un problema sin resolver	303

BEYOND THE THEME

N. Tsivikis	Moving beyond the Invisible Cities of Byzantium	325
P. Todaro, G. Barbera, A. Castrorao Barba, G. Bazan	<i>Qanāts</i> and historical irrigated landscapes in Palermo's suburban area (Sicily)	335
S. Bianco, E. Allué, S. Riera Mora, A. Fernández, M. Soberón Rodríguez, C. Miró Alaix	The evolution of wood fuel exploitation in the El Born Market site (Barcelona, Spain) during the 15 th -18 th centuries starting from charcoal analysis	371
A.R. Staffa	La transumanza in Abruzzo fra tarda antichità e medioevo	401
P. Marcato	Analisi diacronica del paesaggio storico delle malghe di Brentonico (TN) tra XIX e XXI secolo	449

REVIEWS

E. Dodd , <i>Roman and Late Antique Wine Production in the Eastern Mediterranean: A Comparative Archaeological Study at Antiochia ad Cragum (Turkey) and Delos (Greece)</i> - by T. Lewit	473
M. Cavalieri, F. Sacchi (eds) , <i>La villa dopo la villa. Trasformazione di un sistema insediativo ed economico in Italia centro-settentrionale tra tarda antichità e medioevo</i> - by G.P. Brogiolo	
F. Grassi, J.A. Quirós Castillo (eds) , <i>Arqueometría de los materiales cerámicos de época medieval en España</i> - by C. Citter	
G.P. Brogiolo, A. Chavarria Arnau , <i>Archeologia postclassica. Temi, strumenti, prospettive</i> - by A. Guidi	
C. Giostra (ed) , <i>Migrazioni, clan, culture: archeologia, genetica e isotopi stabili</i> - by V. La Salvia	
E. Guttmann-Bond , <i>Reinventing Sustainability: How Archaeology Can Save the Planet</i> - by M. Fecchio	
I. Huvila (ed) , <i>Archaeology and Archaeological Information in the Digital Society</i> - by L. Durjava	
C. Holtorf, A. Pantazatos, G. Scarre (eds) , <i>Cultural Heritage, Ethics and Contemporary Migrations</i> - by A. Borsato	

Cristina Corsi*

The villa-*mansio* in the Late Antique Mediterranean: between historiographical creation and archaeological impotence

In the traditional “topographical” approach, centred on the identification of the places recorded in the ancient *itineraria*, several rural complexes perfectly matching the model of *villa rustica* were classified as «*mansiones*», a term conventionally used to define an idealised type of road-station. Consequently, some villas have been withheld as a typological model of “*mansio*”. More recently, an increasing number of rural complexes has been classified as *villa-mansio*. The topic has attracted the attention of a few scholars, but a systematic review and a critical discussion is still awaited. This will be attempted here in the light of a few case-studies of rural complexes from late-antique South-Western Mediterranean.

Keywords: Roman *villae*, road-stations/*mansiones*, rural settlements, Late Antiquity, south western Mediterranean

Nel tradizionale approccio “topografico”, centrato sull’identificazione dei luoghi citati negli antichi itineraria, parecchi complessi rurali che si adattavano perfettamente al modello della villa rustica sono stati classificati come mansiones, un termine convenzionalmente usato per definire un tipo idealizzato di stazione di posta. Di conseguenza, alcune ville sono state trattate come modello tipologico di mansio. L’argomento ha attratto l’attenzione di qualche studioso, ma una sistematica revisione e una discussione critica sono ancora a venire. Un primo esame viene affrontato in questo articolo, prendendo in esame alcuni casi studio di complessi rurali dal Mediterraneo sud-occidentale tardoantico.

Parole chiave: villa romana, mansiones, insediamenti rurali, tarda antichità, Mediterraneo sud-occidentale

1. A brief review of the state of the art

In the early days of “ancient topography”, when the identification of the places recorded in ancient *itineraria* (place-names automatically classified as “post-stations”) was a priority, several rural complexes perfectly matching the model of *villa rustica* were classified as “*mansiones*”, a term traditionally used to define an idealised type of road-station. These identifications were paralleled with a few sources that confirmed the habit of

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Fig. 1. Schematic map with location of the sites cited in the text: 1: Torrox, lighthouse, Spain; 2: Valdetorres de Jarama, Spain; 3: L'Hostalot (Vilanova d'Alcolea, Spain); 4: Les Buisnières-Panossas, France; 5: Saint-Ariès (Ventavon), France; 6: Albissola, Italy; 7: Brentino Belluno, Italy; 8: Massaciuccoli, Italy; 9: Collesalveti, Italy; 10: Vignale (Piombo), Italy; 11: Pauciuri di Malvito, Italy; 12: Loc. Palazzi (Casignana), Italy; 13: Piazza Armerina, Italy (elaboration: author).

ancient travellers to stop over at *villae* or *villulae* – starting from Horace, ending with Rutilius Namatianus: *infra* – which, on the other hand, clearly had to be considered structures for commercial hospitality. In this way, while a *statio*¹ was located at Piazza Armerina (fig. 1, n. 13) without a critical approach to the realia of the arrangements², *villae* like the one of

¹ Indeed, one of the critical points of the whole discussion is the assumption that each of the place-names listed in the three surviving documents reporting road-itineraries indicates a road-station. As argued elsewhere (CORSI 2019, pp. 170-171), the list of place-names could be more simply considered as a route-finder, a navigation tool listing the resorts that have to be reached when moving from the starting point to the ending destination. In this specific case, however, the mention of "*mansiones nunc institutae*" (*It. Ant.*, 94.2) could effectively indicate that in the course of the 4th century AD (when this update to the pamphlet of *itineraria* was done) a series of infrastructures for supporting traffic along the alternative route from Catania to Agrigento was included among the possibilities for travellers. Whether these *mansiones* have to be considered (exclusively?) facilities of the Late Roman *cursus publicus* is a question that goes beyond the aims of this contribution. Incidentally, we have to highlight that the study of the "road" terminology shows that the term *statio* is one of the less common in ancient sources to address a road-station (CORSI 2000a, pp. 51-52, 59, 70-73).

² This identification is clamorously advertised in the title of one of the first editions of the complex of

Albissola in Liguria (Italy, fig. 1, n. 6), identified with the road-station of *Alba Docilia*, along the *via Aurelia*, were elevated to the status of typological model of “mansio” (Mezzolani 1992, see Corsi 2000a, p. 182). The processing of this model has been so unquestioned, that even in extensive works aimed at investigating the characteristics of Roman villas, the plan of *Alba Docilia* has been used as benchmark to assess the function of “mansio” of other sites, such as the villa of the Volusii in *Lucus Feroniae*, along the *via Salaria*, north of Rome³.

More recently, the attitude of extending the definition of *mansio* to rural complexes has gained popularity, and the number of *villae-mansiones* featuring in literature (occasionally *praetoria* or *stationes*, rarely *mutationes*) has increased at fast rate (*infra*)⁴. The two approaches to the definition of “villa-mansio” are often combined, especially when the rural complex is also identified – more or less arbitrarily, with a more or less complicated process of “adjustments” to the mileage of ancient *itineraria* – with one of the toponyms recorded in ancient sources⁵.

The *discrimen* between *villa* and *mansio* is predictably even more elusive when dealing with survey data. Recent attempts to establish “guidelines” to classify rural estates as villas or *mansiones* on the basis of the dimension of the surface scatter of artefacts or on their assemblage turned out to be not adequately conclusive⁶.

Additional implications are brought in with the process of Christianisation, since we can highlight the role played by roads (and road-stations) in the Christianisation of the countryside⁷. Thus, it has been argued that several of those villas that laid in proximity of a trafficked road and that in Late Antiquity were equipped with buildings for Christian worship, have to be considered *mansiones*⁸.

the Villa del Casale (CARANDINI *et al.* 1982). Today the identification of *Philosophiana* (or *Filosofiana*) has been ascertained at Contrada Sofiana, around 6 km SW of the Villa, where recent investigations have confirmed the presence of a large settlement (VACCARO 2012).

³ MARZANO 2007, pp. 145-147. Here, the identification of the function of part of the estate as *mansio* – the large courtyard surrounded by rooms that would have been used “to house family guests and/or travellers” – is argued on the basis of the presence of “the lavish *lararium* in such a prominent position understandable as a powerful self-assertion of the family’s importance”.

⁴ Definition, however, unknown to MANSUELLI 1958 and GROS 2017.

⁵ E.g. the villa at the site of Salvatierrabide de Vitoria, in the *conventus Cluniacensis* (nowadays province of Alava), identified with the *mansio Suessatio* and the ruins from Vega del Ciego, loc. Mamorana, in the *conventus Asturum*, located 500 m from the road connecting Oviedo to León, identified with the *mansio Memoriana* on toponymy basis: GORGES 1979, pp. 178-179, 334.

⁶ BARBOSA forthcoming. On the theoretical framework: MORENO ESCOBAR, WHEATLEY 2016, pp. 39-41.

⁷ Still actual CERRILLO 1995 (Lusitania); CANTINO WATAGHIN *et al.* 2007 (Italy); CODOU, COLIN 2007 (Gallia). Very recently: CHAVARRÍA ARNAU 2019 (Iberian Peninsula).

⁸ E.g. S. Stefano at Garlate in Italy according to CHAVARRÍA ARNAU 2010, p. 651; S. Massimo at Collegno along the road linking *Augusta Taurinorum* in Italy to Gallia is instead better described as a “place of the road”: CORSI 2016, p. 51.

The topic has predictably attracted the attention of a few scholars⁹, mainly in relation to the wider theme of “road-stations” (Corsi 2000a, p. 182) but a systematic review and a critical discussion, in the light of the textual and archaeological sources, is still awaited¹⁰.

Unfortunately, the debate often loops in circular argumentations: e.g. the site of Vignale, near Piombino in coastal Tuscia (fig. 1, n. 10), is classified as *villa-mansio* because it is said to border the Roman road (labelled *via Aurelia* in late Antiquity) except that, on the contrary, since archaeological survey has not been able to prove the actual presence of the ancient road, the latter is expected to be there since there is the *mansio*... (Giorgi, Zanini 2009-2011, pp. 29-31).

Furthermore, the discussion is still marred by an outdated vision of the relationship between road-network and infrastructures for assisting travellers, for the latter are automatically attributed to the *cursus publicus*, i.e. what is generally intended as the imperial postal service. Finally, after almost a century of repetitive scholarly debate and uncritical acceptance of the direct relationship between the *cursus* and the three main surviving itinerary documents (*Itinerarium Antonini*, *Itinerarium Burdigalense* and *Tabula Peutingeriana*), the study of the Imperial office in charge of the management of the communication and transportation system has been renewed. Indeed, first, we should start to use the definition of “Imperial Transportation and Communication System” to replace the terms of *vehiculatio* and *cursus publicus* (Lemcke 2016, pp. 11-12), to address the office that was in charge of the transfer of people travelling on behalf and in the interest of the State and to the transport of the objects that belonged to it. Second, we have to detach the study of the structures to assist travellers from the above-mentioned documentary sources and the connection with the transportation system itself, adopting a renewed approach to the analysis of the archaeo-topographical aspects linked to the services for travellers in the Roman world¹¹.

Therefore, even recent contributions aiming at sorting out a “typology” of rural settlements still linger in dismissible classifications that include *mansiones* and *mutationes*, in addition to *vici*, *conciliabula*, *fora*, *pagi*, villas, farms, etc.¹²

⁹ E.g. LEVEAU 2002 (more focussed on the dividing line between *villa* and *vicus*); PANAITE 2004; GONZÁLEZ 2008 for Galicia, and BROGIOLO, CHAVARRIA ARNAU 2014, more specifically for northern Italy.

¹⁰ To refresh the debate, different case-studies will be discussed here, neglecting milestone sites for the state of the art (e.g. the so-called *mansiones* of *Fossis* in the river Po delta and *Tres Tabernae* along the Appian way south of Rome in Italy).

¹¹ On all these aspects see the summary of the state of the art in CORSI forthcoming a.

¹² E.g. COLLEONI *et al.* 2013, p. 217; FERNÁNDEZ *et al.* 2014; HIDALGO 2019.

The debate keeps on shifting from a material to an immaterial dimension; the study of the material culture as well as the analysis of the structural remains is conducted from the traditional (respectively: typological/economical and architectural/decorative) or innovative (respectively: functional/anthropological and spatial/phenomenological) points of views. It is evident, then, that progress will only be made when the table will be cleared up from any sort of incorrectness and factoids (e.g. the *cursus publicus* created by Augustus, the *cursus publicus* as postal service, road-stations as post-stages, etc.).

2. Textual sources and ancient *itineraria*

The issue is particularly thorny since ancient sources, specifically “agronomists” like Varro and Columella, debate the question of the relationship between rural estates and road-network in a somehow contradictory, surely problematic way. Indeed, ancient authors agreed upon the fact that a proximity to a frequented roadway exposes the domain to the annoyances of travellers and uninvited guests (Colum., I.5.7¹³, in this way confirming the habit of stopping over at private villas in the course of journey, at least when dealing with “peers”: Corsi 2019). At the same time, however, Cato (I.2.1-3)¹⁴, Varro (I.16.6)¹⁵ and Columella (I.2.3¹⁶; I.3.3¹⁷) stressed the convenience of the location of the estate in the proximity of an efficient communication axis. Naturally, this convenience was related to the ease of transporting goods from the production centre to the main urban markets (see, e.g., Varro, I.16.3)¹⁸, but Varro

¹³ “Haec autem praetereuntium viatorum populationibus et adsiduis deuertentium hospitibus infestat rem familiarem”.

¹⁴ “In bona regione bene nitere oportebit. Et uti eo introeas et circumspecies, uti inde exire possis... loco salubri, operariorum copia siet, bonumque aquarium, oppidum validum prope siet aut mare aut amnis, qua naves ambulant, aut via bona celebrisque” (“Go to the area and keep your eyes open, so that you may be able to find your way out... (the area of the estate) should be well watered, and near it there should be a flourishing town, or the sea, or a navigable stream, or a good and much travelled road”).

¹⁵ “Eundem fundum fructuosiore faciant vecturae, si viae sunt, qua plaustra agi facile possint, aut flumina propinqua, qua navigari possit, quibus utrisque rebus evehi atque invehi ad multa praedia scimus” (“A farm is rendered more profitable by convenience of transportation: if there are roads on which carts can easily be driven, or navigable rivers nearby. We know that transportation to and from many farms is carried on by both these methods”).

¹⁶ “Agrum habebimus... nec procul a mari vel navigabili flumine, quo deportari fructus et per quod merces invehi possint” (“We shall have a farm... not far from the sea or a navigable stream, by which its products may be carried off and supplies brought in”).

¹⁷ Confirming the prescriptions of Varro: “Post haec duo principalia subiungebat illa non minus intuentia: viam, aquam, vicinum” (“After these two primary considerations he added, as deserving no less attention, the following: the road, the water, and the neighbourhood”).

¹⁸ A first analysis of the relationship between villas distribution and communication network in Roman

expands the range of opportunities offered by the proximity to the communication network to the revenues arising from the traffic by establishing a (detached?) pavilion for hospitality business along the road (Varro, I.2.23)¹⁹. This mechanism could be at the origin of the transformation of a rural building on the shores of the Lake of Massaciuccoli (not far from Pisa, in Italy, fig. 1, n. 8) into a *villa-mansio*. Following the initiative of the rich family of the Venulei, who occupied the luxurious scenographic villa just uphill (fig. 2, A), this building, located not far from the road connecting Pisa to *Luca* and *Luna*, would have been transformed into a guest-house. The transformation, that implied the construction of thermal facilities, supplied by a newly built cistern, and a *sacellum*, would have taken place between the mid-first and the beginning of the 2nd century AD²⁰ (figs. 2, B-C; 3).

As anticipated, Latin literature provides many examples of the habit of travellers to stop over at private villas, even in the context of an official journey²¹. However, most of those episodes refer to stays at private mansions²² and only a few ancient sources can be effectively related to the habit of providing accommodation and services to travellers. Among them, the poetic humoristic report of the mission that Horace undertook from Rome to *Brundisium* shows very clearly that both options were at hand: put up at friends, relatives and peers at their private residences, or overnight at inns labelled as *villae* (Hor., *Sat.* 1.5.113) or *villulae* (Hor., *Sat.* 1.5.61-629; Apul., *Met.*, I.21), terms that might refer to the original function of a private house turned into a sort of *gîte d'étape* or rural guest-house.

Almost 450 years later, Rutilius Namatianus reports on very similar circumstances, since, among the stops along the Tyrrhenian coast, he mentions a *villa*, managed by a *conductor* who overcharges the group for

Spain is in FERNÁNDEZ CASTRO 1982 (esp. pp. 209-2010), of course in need of an update. This aspect of convenience is highlighted in the work of Vasco Mantas about Roman roads in Lusitania: e.g., the case of the villa de Santiago de Bencalíz, not far from the location of *Ad Sorores* depicted on the *Tabula*, only 500 m from the trace of the *Via de la Plata*, the Roman road connecting *Augusta Emerita* with *Asturica*: MANTAS 2012, pp. 296-297.

19 "Si ager secundum viam et opportunus viatoribus locus, aedificandae tabernae devorsoriae, quae tamen, quamvis sint fructuosae, nihilo magis sunt agri culturae partes" ("As further, for instance, if the farm lies along a road and the site is convenient for travellers, a tavern might be built").

20 The complex would already at the end of the second century AD have been converted in a centre devoted almost exclusively to production, but would have been frequented until at least the fourth-fifth centuries: PARIBENI 2012.

21 For a catalogue of Latin sources referring to the use of the term villa in a travel context, see: CORSI 2000a, pp. 36-37.

22 Some passages are actually open to misunderstanding: in the letter *ad Fam.*, VI, 19, 1, Cicero praises the amenities of Macula's property as *deversorium*, i.e. as a physical place where he is hosted during a trip with his large entourage, but it is precisely clear from the context that it is a private villa.

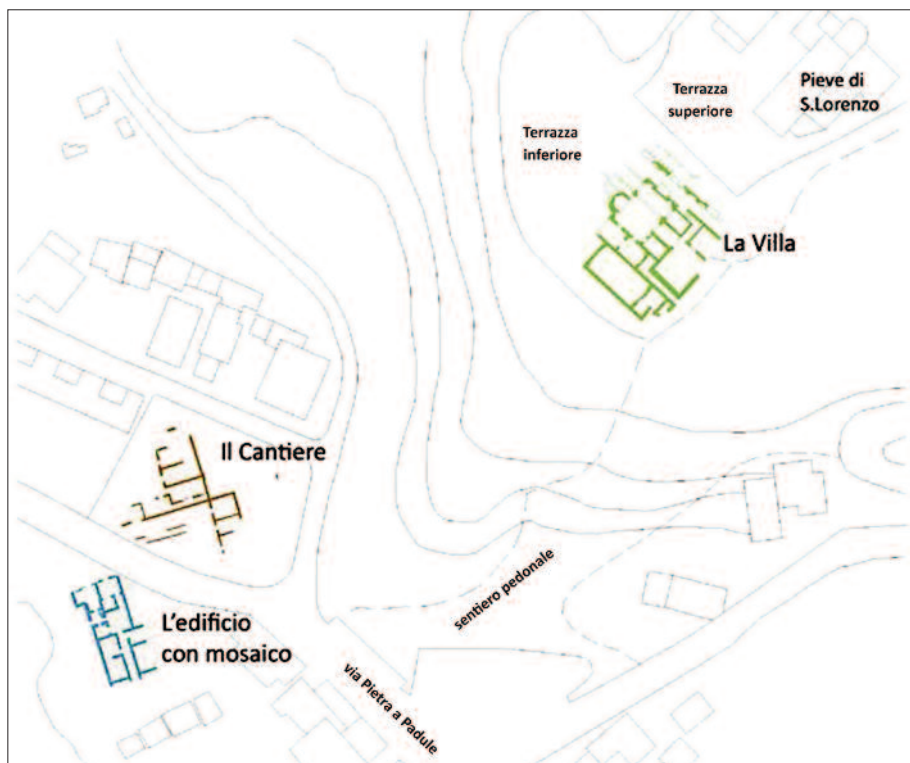


Fig. 2. The archaeological area of Massaciuccoli, Italy. A: the villa, B-C: the "mansio" (from Anichini, Paribeni 2009, p. 6).

any sort of service (Rut., I.377), a *villa* that is, therefore, to be understood as a public guest-house.

On the other hand, Ammianus Marcellinus, reporting on the dramatic events of AD 374, informs us that Constantia, daughter of emperor Constantius II, on her way to her marriage with Gratian, "was very nearly captured while she was taking food in a public villa called *Pristensis*", and that she managed to escape the ambush thanks to the readiness of the governor Messalla who had her taken to *Sirmio* in a state-carriage²³. In this case, the explicit reference to the *cursus publicus*, the specifica-

²³ Amm. 29.6.7: "Evenisset profecto tunc inexpiabile scelus, numerandum inter probrosas rei Romanae iacturas [...] paulo enim afuit, quin filia caperetur Constanti cibum sumens in publica villa, quam appellant Pistrensem, cum duceretur Gratiano nuptura [...] ni favore propitii nmninis praesens Messalla provinciae rector eam iudiciali carpento inpositam ad Sirmium vicensimo sexto lapide disparatam cursu reduxisset effuse".

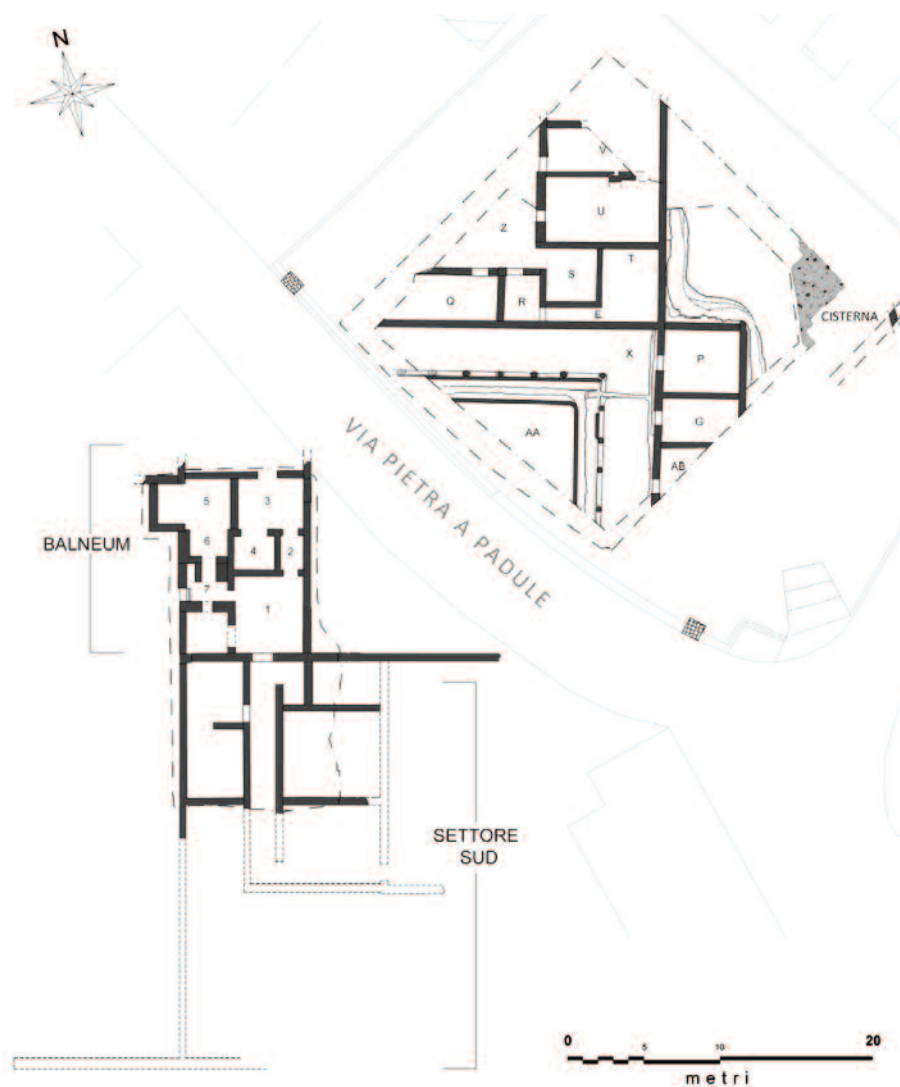


Fig. 3. Massaciuccoli, Italy. Plan of the complex of the so-called “mansio” during period III, phase 3 (post-Neronian phase) (from Anichini *et al.* 2012, tav. 6, p. 48).

tion of the adjective “*publica*” and the mention of the dining leave no room for doubt on the nature of the establishment.

It is already clear from these introductory notes that, given the complexity, inextricability and convergence of different functions, the archaeological evidence will rarely provide clear markers for interpretation. However, a critical review of a few case-studies from the western

Mediterranean of rural complexes with late antique (4th to 6th-7th centuries) occupation might shed light on the *vexata quaestio* and could lay the groundwork for a renovated scientific debate on the topic.

For the sake of clarity, intending to investigate the nature of the *discrimen* – if any – between rural estates that fulfil the definition of “*villa rustica*” (alas, an object of debate per se) and road-stations, we will only marginally touch upon the sites definable as “places of the road”, i.e. more complex settlements where the functional aspects related to assisting travellers have more weight than the material features. Consequently, only a restricted number of archaeological settlements from Iberia, Southern France and Italy will be discussed here, while extending this review of case-studies to the most recent excavations from rural complexes defined as “villa” that present important late Roman and early Medieval occupation phases²⁴.

3. *Ex-ante* vs *ex-post*: topographical and architectural features, facilities and amenities

As pointed out above, one of the main obstacles in the debate is the “circularity” of argumentations, for rural estates are being classified as “road-stations” once they fulfil some parameters of architectural nature or related to their material culture considered as essential for any given road-station, in a sort of *ex-ante* selection. The former concern for instance the presence of large open spaces, a connection with a main road – eventually through a *diverticulum* –, evidence for small workshops, especially for smithing or metal works, etc., the latter can imply the occurrence of certain finds related to transport or food and drink and retail sale. On the other hand, however, the occurrence of these elements justifies the classification of any given settlement as road-station on the basis of an *ex-post* assessment.

Thus, the research questionnaire should start from the topographical features, prioritising the complexes that have a clear, direct relationship with a much-frequented communication axis, or a connection with cross-roads or river crossings²⁵.

²⁴ Actually, a villa can be part of one of these agglomerations, where however the role of service area is held by another building: e.g. the so-called Building 1 at the site Auf Schissel (municipality of Perl, Kreis Merzig-Wagen, at border of Luxemburg, France and Germany), positioned along the road connecting Trier to Metz, not far from the Roman villa of Borg, an “axial villa” very typical of the Rhine region (BIRKENHAGEN 2010).

²⁵ Availability of drinkable water for the settlers and passers-by and animals is of course essential, as well as water is needed for irrigation.



Fig. 4. Brentino Belluno, Italy. Plan of the complex of the “villa-mansio” (from Zaccaria Ruggiu 2016, fig. 2, p. 133).

The close proximity with a main road is surprisingly the element that is generally given for granted but the presence of a trafficked road is archaeologically documented only in a very few cases. For example, the Brentino Belluno (Val d’Adige, province of Verona, Italy, figs. 1, n. 7; 4) rural estate is said to be “in an area characterized by the presence of the *via Claudia Augusta*” (Zaccaria Ruggiu 2016, p. 131), but actually the short stretch of *via glareata* is most probably a secondary road connected to the important axis of the Roman road heading to *Raetia* and *Vindelicia* (Zaccaria Ruggiu 2010, pp. 91-93). However, the settlement is hypothetically defined as *mansio* on the basis of the presence of the road, while at the same time the hypothesis that the *via Claudia Augusta*

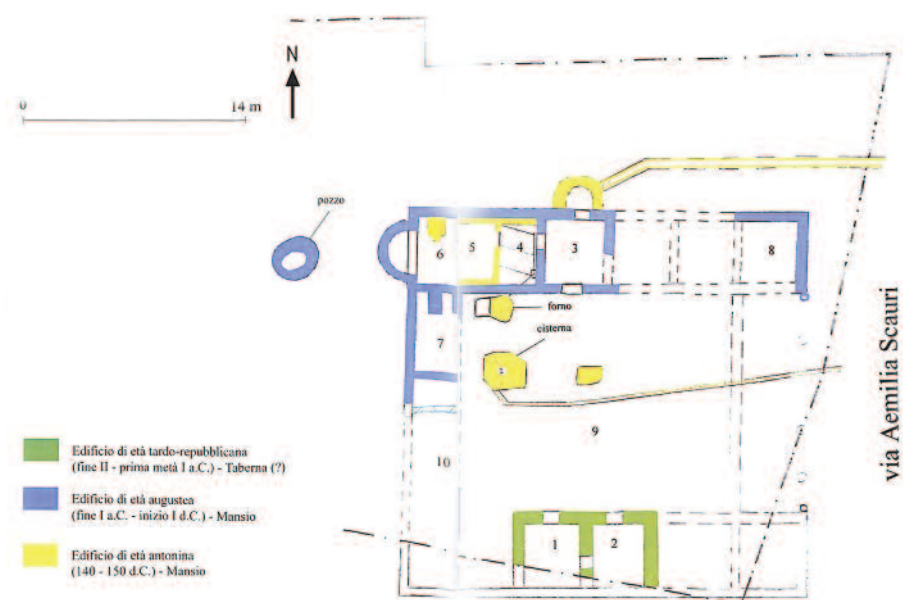


Fig. 5. Collesalveti, loc. Torretta Vecchia, Italy. Interpretative plan of the complex during the late republican (green), Augustan (yellow) and Antonine (blue) phases (from Palermo 2007, tab. 11).

ran on the right bank of the river Adige is said to be confirmed by the presence of the *mansio*²⁶.

It is again on the basis of the proximity to a main road and the mileage counting performed on the basis of the ancient itinerary sources that the only partially excavated archaeological complex at Torrita near Collesalveti, 19 km south of Pisa, along the *via Aurelia* in Tuscany, is defined *villa-mansio* (Palermo 2007) (fig. 1, n. 9). Actually, this definition combines the interpretations given to the different phases that are fragmentarily documented by excavations. A sort of *taberna* would have been established aside the road, which is only hypothetically argued to be located under the modern *Strada Statale* 206. The establishment would have been replaced during Augustan times by a “postal station of the *cursus*

²⁶ Like most villas in the Italian peninsula, the complex originated between the 2nd century BC and the beginning of the 1st century AD. It was active until the 3rd century but there are traces of occupation dating to the end of the 5th-beginning 6th century (ZACCARIA RUGGIU 2005). The rooms opened onto the porticoed courtyard are said to be designated to residential, productive and service use, but all functional identifications are hypothetical and not a single find can be directly reconnected to the presence of vehicles or animals.

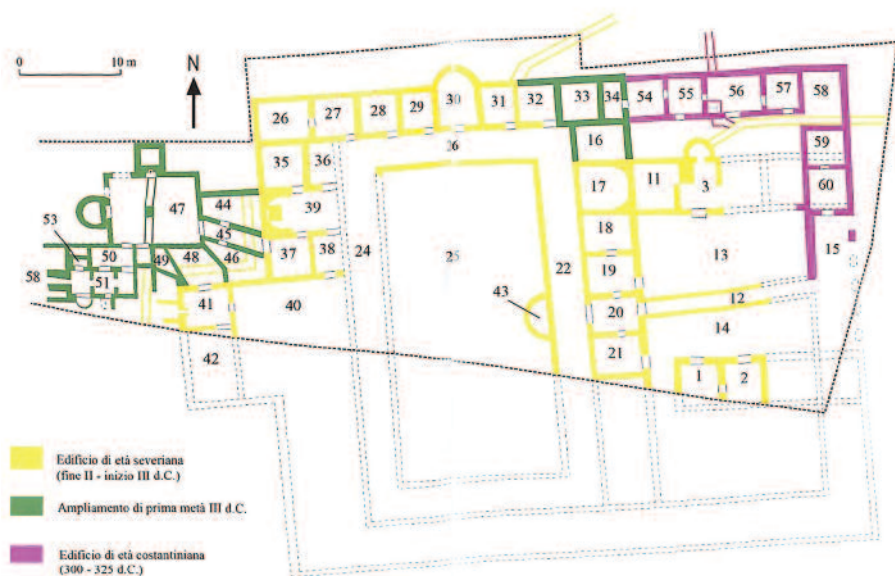


Fig. 6. Collesalveti, loc. Torretta Vecchia, Italy. Interpretative plan of the complex during the later phases: Severian (yellow), 3rd century AD (green), Constantinian (purple) (from Palermo 2007, tab. 2).

publicus", with the typical model of a rectangular building with inner courtyard, opened on the road by means of a portico (only partially visible: fig. 5). The *mansio* would have gone through renovation works during the reign of Antoninus Pius. During this phase, an oven for baking bread would have been built in the courtyard (Palermo 2007, pp. 18-22). Between the end of the 2nd and the beginning of the 3rd centuries AD, the complex would then have been radically transformed, reaching an extension of 2000 m² (fig. 6). In this phase, it was characterised by a vast porticoed courtyard (ca. 83 m on the E-W axis), and a new western wing occupied by thermal installations, with many rooms with mosaic floors (Esposito, Palermo 1995). The complex, which included some burials "*alla cappuccina*" spread along the road, went through some important renovation works again in the first quarter of the 4th century, when it would have reached a surface of around 3000 m² (Palermo 2007, p. 50). In this phase (see fig. 6), it is defined as a "rural residential mansion", probably owned by one of the rich families of the region, but it is hypothesised that the complex could still provide services to those travelling for official business. From the second half of the 5th century, part of the large building was abandoned, while its eastern sector was still

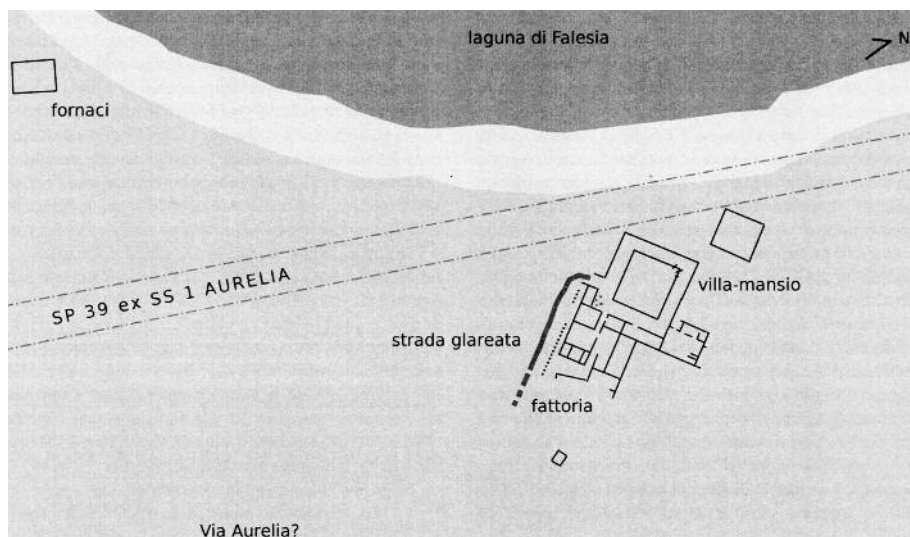


Fig. 7. Vignale (Piombino, province of Livorno, Italy). Schematic plan with the location of the several archaeological areas (from Giorgi 2016, fig. 2, p. 175).

frequented until the 6th century AD (Palermo 2007, p. 60). However, since the direct connection with the road is not proven by archaeological evidence, the identification with the site of *Turrita*, mentioned in ancient itineraries (*Tabula Ravennatis* and Guido) along the road connecting *Vada Volaterrana* to *Pisae*, is not unquestionable. Therefore, we should be prudent in considering this a model, especially taking into account the incompleteness of the excavations.

As anticipated, a preliminary screening of the innumerable case-studies should be performed and only the complexes directly connected to the main road should be considered, since the presence of specific architectural features like paved *diverticula* leading to large driveways that gave way to open courtyards and were metalled with large stones like *basoli* or had beaten earth floors, where the animals could have been stabled and vehicles could have been parked, is a common feature for all properties with productive activities. It is, therefore, imprudent to make of these topographic-architectural features the pivotal element for classifying rural establishments as *mansiones*, as was done in some recent syntheses for France (Colleoni 2016a) and the Iberian Peninsula (Hidalgo 2019).

For example, the metalling with *basoli* of the porticoed yard of Vignale attests its utilitarian function, as well as the presence at the side of the *via glareata* of an hypothetical drinking-trough confirms the occurrence of transport animals (Giorgi, Zanini 2009-2011, p. 35), but the excavated

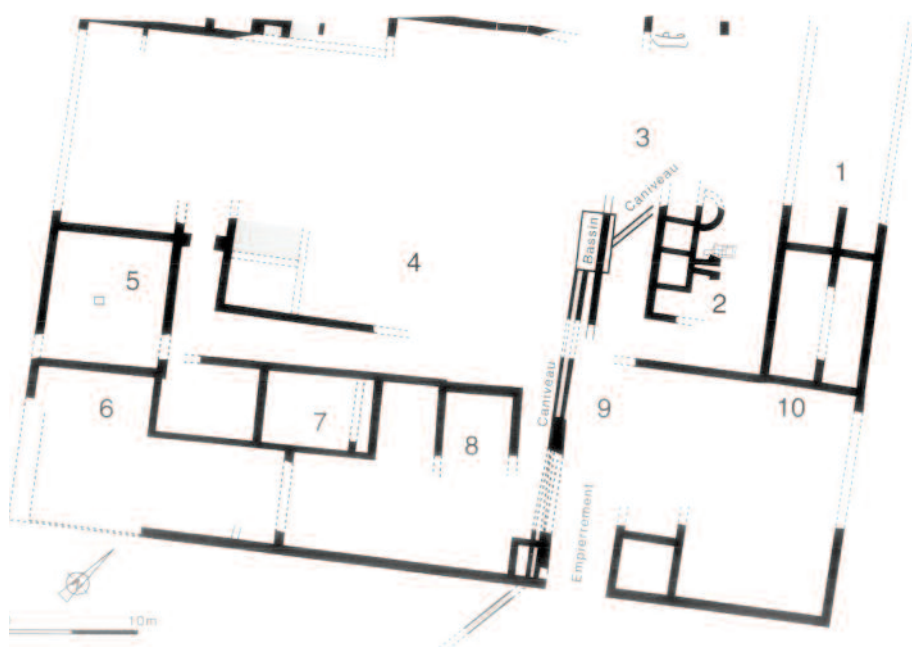


Fig. 8. Saint-Ariès (Ventavon, France). Schematic plan of the Roman complex classified as a “villa-mansio” (from Leveau 2002, fig. 8, p. 67).

area is still too limited to allow a full understanding of the spatial organisation of the large site (ca. 3 ha), even if the direct access to this open space from the *diverticulum glareatum* that reaches the complex has been located at the southern side (Zanini, Giorgi 2017, p. 524) (fig. 7).

Most of these courtyards are surrounded by series of rooms with residential, functional or thermal functions, as documented at the site of Saint-Ariès (municipality of Ventavon, southern French Alps: Leveau 2002, pp. 67-68; figs. 1, n. 5; 8), which was still occupied between the 4th and the 5th century. Regardless the lack of any clear evidence, the complex is “reasonably” considered as a *statio* (Leveau 2002, p. 68), accepting the original model of Albissola, a process replicated at the nearby site of La Bègue, known only by aerial photo-interpretation (Leveau 2002, pp. 68-69).

At the same time, not even the presence of large thermal facilities demonstrates with certainty the attendance by patrons and travellers, since in most cases it remains impossible to establish whether they were public facilities or luxurious private amenities. Such is the case of the articulated settlement of Pauciuri at Malvito, in northern Calabria (Italy)

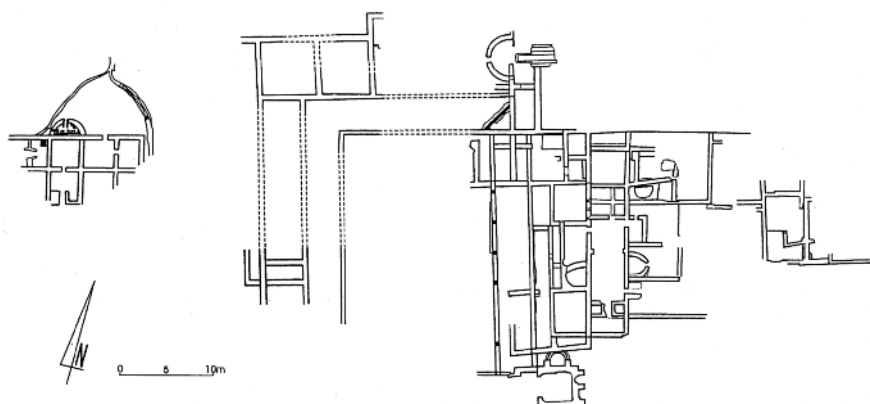


Fig. 9. Pauciuri at Malvito (Italy). Schematic plan of the archaeological complex with the thermal installations (from Crogiez 2000).

(fig. 1, n. 11). Here the rural domain, installed in the 2nd (or even 3rd) century BC, is expanded in the course of the 2nd century AD with the construction of a large thermal pavilion that remains in use until the 4th-5th centuries (fig. 9).

From southern Italy comes another interesting example of a complex definable as a typical villa with separated buildings scattered in an ample area. After the renovation of the buildings, dated at the end of the 4th to beginning 5th centuries AD, the complex of Casignana, loc. Palazzi (fig. 1, n. 12), underwent an articulation of the bathing *parcours* of the thermal complex which was then divided in two for different categories of attendees. This seems to infer a public use (Malacrino 2014, p. 296) (fig. 10).

At Vignale, where transformations and refurbishing of the rooms are generically dated between the 2nd and the 4th century, the chronology of the construction of the small bath in the courtyard is not known and it remains impossible to locate the large baths excavated in the 19th century and, therefore, to establish the end of their use. Both limitations prevent to formulate a hypothesis on the effective sequence of events; i.e. did the frequentation of the settlement shrink to the point that the large thermal complex was abandoned and a small bath was built just to fulfil the needs of a small group of residents? Or was the additional bath installed to comply with an increased demand of users?²⁷.

²⁷ The finds confirm that the complex was in use until the 5th century, when the collapse of the portico would have started a process of occupation of these spaces for funerary purposes: GIORGI, ZANINI 2009-2011, p. 29.

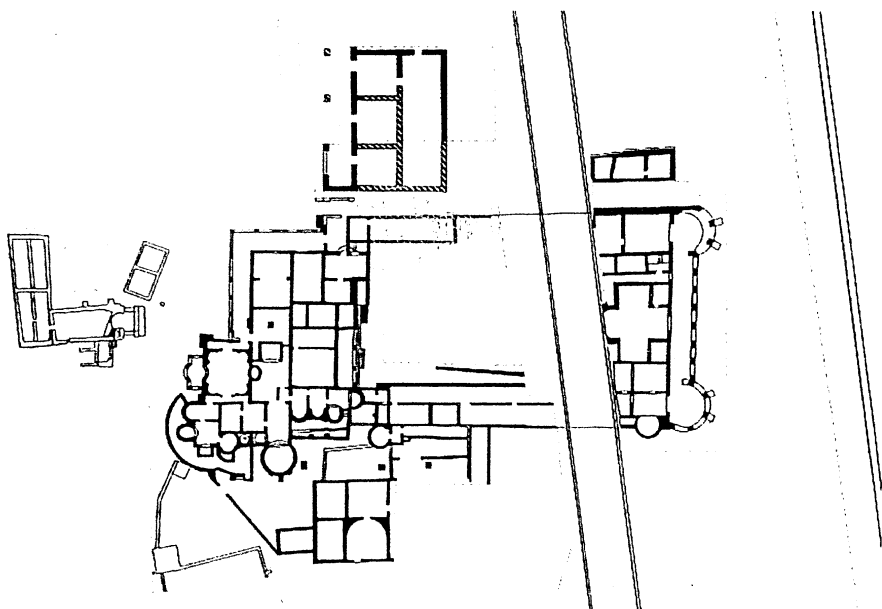


Fig. 10. Casignana, loc. Palazzi (Italy). Schematic plan of the archaeological complex (elaboration: author after Sabbione 2007).

Furthermore, at Vignale the recent analysis of a large mosaic that survived the loss seems to lead to interpreting the thermal sector as part of a rich residential villa, with a late antique remake of the mosaic floor of a reception room (Giorgi, Zanini 2018).

On the other hand, buildings planimetrically shaped with a series of parallel rooms with independent entrance, adhering to the model of *hospitalia* and not dissimilar from the *contubernia* of military camps, are considered conclusive evidence to claim the function of road-inn (Corsi 2000b). As a matter of fact, the presence of elongated buildings of this type is used in a circular way to demonstrate that a given site is a road-station, as well as that such buildings were used to host guests since they were found at road-stations. The actual case-study where this interpretation is almost undisputable is the road-settlement of *Ad Vancanas*, along the *via Cassia* north of Rome (Corsi 2000a, pp. 151-152). In our review, the most suited example comes from the French site of Buissières at Panossas (in the French region of Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, Isère, France, fig. 1, n. 4), where the *bâtiment J*, of over than 60 m long and characterised by an alternation of wide double rooms and narrow partitioned rooms, is considered an inn (fig. 11). Alas, this complex, built



Fig. 11. Panossas, site de Buisnières (France). Schematic plan of the archaeological complex. H: the granary that replaced building E (workshops); J: the so-called "stabulum", a building for collective accommodation (from Poux, Borlenghi 2016, fig. 16).

in the course of the 1st century BC and renovated during the 1st century AD, does not seem to continue after the construction of the residential and thermal complex²⁸.

The site of Valdetorres de Jarama, north of Madrid (fig. 1, n. 2), provides a very peculiar widening of the debate. The topographic setting fulfils all requirements, since the complex occupied a large part of a terrace that dominates the ancient road connecting *Talamanca* and *Complutum*, even if the road running along the Jarama is rather considered as an axis with intraregional range (Gimeno 1993, pp. 371-372). The most peculiar edifice of the complex is an octagonal building, conceived since its origin as a combination of porticoes and rooms gravitating around the central (pseudo)octagonal porticoed patio (fig. 12). In its peculiarity, the plan of this building seems very regularly designed, with four of the eight sides opening onto large rooms connected to apsidal spaces and opened on

²⁸ POUX, BORLENGHI 2016, pp. 155-156. However, complexes with many "cells" regularly displayed around a courtyard are elsewhere interpreted as lodgments for slaves: e.g. at Settefinestre, in Tuscany, such a complex is considered a cluster of *cellae familiae*: GROS 2017, p. 282.

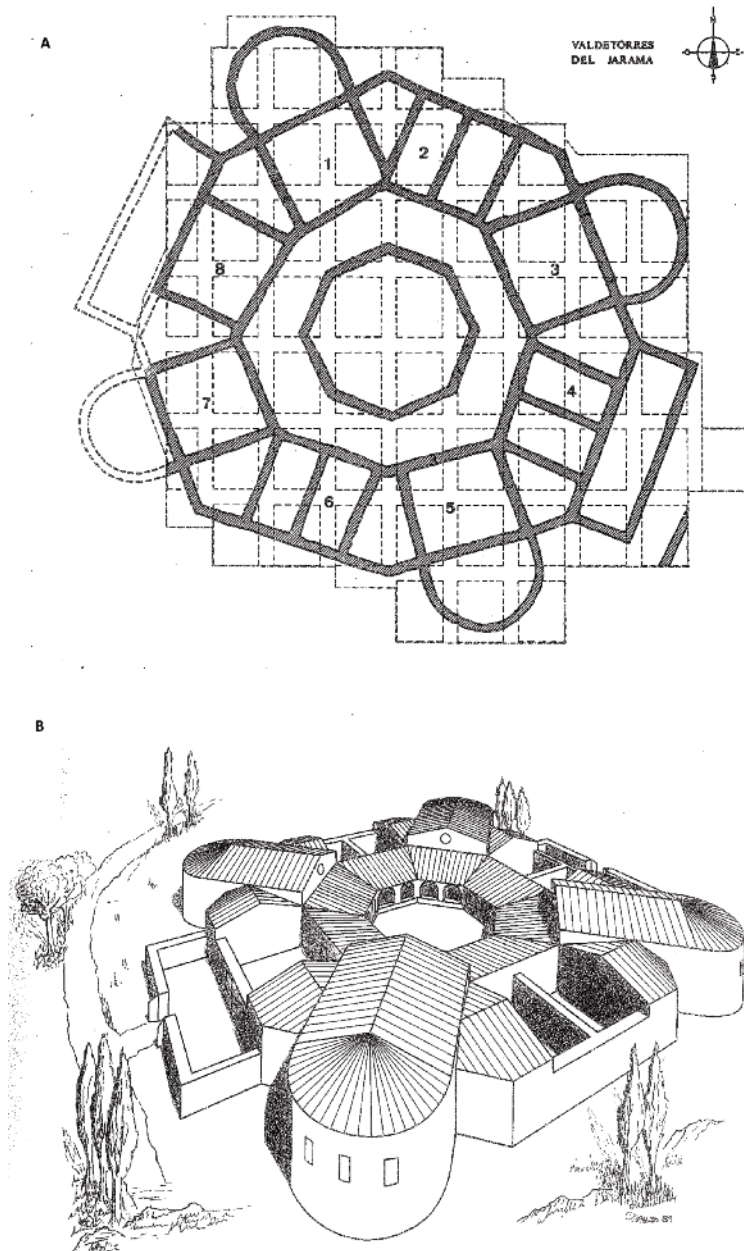


Fig. 12. Valdeterres de Jarama (Spain). A: schematic plan of the octagonal building; B: hypothetical reconstruction of the octagonal building (from Arce *et al.* 1998, figs. 1, 2A, pp. 322-323).



Fig. 13. Panossas, loc. Buissières (France). View of foundation the granary (building H), built atop the building E (from Poux, Borlenghi 2016, fig. 18).

both sides with irregularly shaped rooms interpreted as “sitting-rooms” (Arce *et al.* 1997, p. 324)²⁹. Of the other four sides, two opened on un-roofed patios, one on a room with a small pool and the fourth was probably the main entrance of the building. Rooms were decorated with frescos and possibly wall mosaics, and the whole complex was ornamented with several statues (Arce *et al.* 1997, p. 327).

Predictably, the presence of storehouses is as inconclusive, to the point that archaeological complexes like the one of Les Buissières, where the presence of an imposing granary (fig. 13), built at the end of the 1st century AD, has, among other factors, been used to motivate one or another identification, keep on shifting from a definition of rural estate to the one of road-station (Poux, Borlenghi 2016, pp. 156-157). This uncertainty dissipates only in different types of settlement, as is the case of the Roman complex excavated at L'Hostalot, in the municipal territory of Vilanova d'Alcolea (Castellón, Spain, fig. 1, n. 3), and identified with

²⁹ From the planimetrical point of view, this building finds comparison in the octagonal pavilion excavated at the site of Gran Via-Can Ferrerons in the municipality of Premià de Mar (Barcelona). The building, which includes thermal installations and a series of rooms of different dimensions, is considered as part of a rural residence, originally devoted to reception. Likely built in the first decades of the 5th century, the complex would have been converted in a productive sector active between the end of the 5th and the beginning of the 6th century. However, notwithstanding the fact that the rural estate of which this building was part was located a few hundred metres from the via Augusta, now retraced by the Gran Via, no relationship with assistance to travellers is inferred (PREVOSTI, COLL 2017; COLL *et al.* 2019).

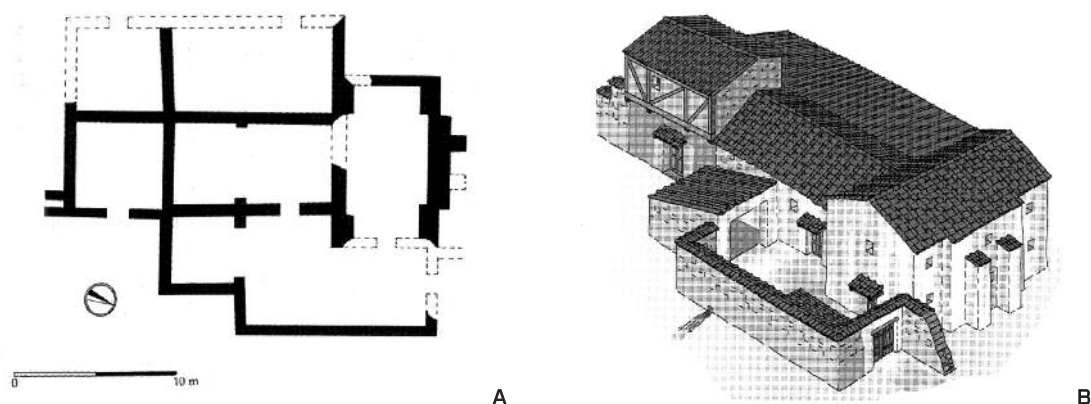


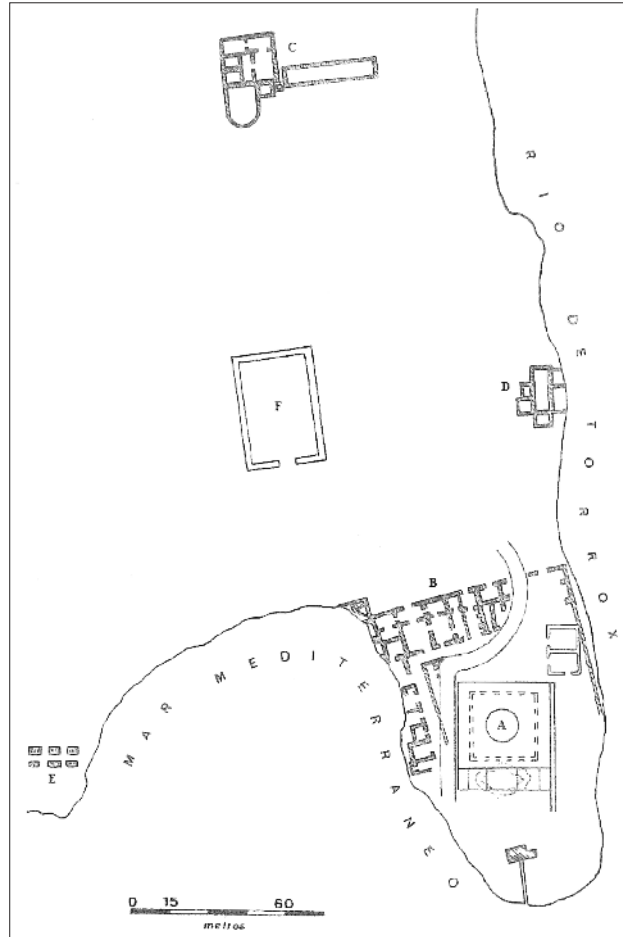
Fig. 14. L'Hostalot (Vilanova d'Alcolea, Spain). A: schematic plan and B: hypothetical reconstruction of the building identified as *horrea* and warehouse (from Arasa 2008, p. 9).

Ildum, a site recorded along the so-called *via Augusta*³⁰, which ran from *Valentia* and *Saguntum* northbound along the eastern Spanish coast (*It. Ant.* 399, 6). Of the several clusters of archaeological structures, the better-preserved ones are the two on the eastern side of the modern road, identified with a combination of *horrea* and warehouse (fig. 14). To the east is a building measuring 23.60 x 19.50 m, orientated NW-SE and divided in several rooms. It is accessible from the NE side where was located also a "L" shaped patio, but other accesses are as well documented on other sides. The second and only partially excavated cluster had also a front decorated by a patio. Finds show that the building was in use until at least the 4th century, while the burial of a young woman dating to the 5th century was installed in one of the rooms (Arasa 2008, pp. 6-7). In this case, the plain layout of "place of the road" leaves no room for interpretative doubt.

The presence of small workshops (mainly for blacksmithing) is also considered as an indicator for a possible public function. Again, only a very specialised operational target, like the smithy of Les Buissières that in the earlier phases seems to be specialised in wheelwright activities (Poux, Borlenghi 2016, pp. 151-156), could be linked to a restricted category of custom-travellers. On the other hand, the occurrence of facilities for productive activities more reasonably points toward a rural es-

³⁰ The Roman road is said to correspond here to the modern CV-10, that crosses the archaeological site: ARASA 2008, p. 6.

Fig. 15. Faro de Torrox, Spain. Schematic map of the archaeological evidence of the area of the lighthouse according to the sketch of Tomás García Ruíz of 1908. A: modern lighthouse; B: villa; C: thermal complex; D: fish salting production area; F: modern house; E: necropolis (from Rodríguez Oliva, Beltrán-Fortes 2016, fig. 7, p. 634).



tate. The case of the Roman villa at the lighthouse of Torrox (therefore, Faro de Torrox in Spanish), located not too far from Malaga (fig. 1, n. 1) and identified with the site of *Caviclum*, a site listed on road XXIV of the *Itinerarium Antonini* following the coast from *Malaca* to *Urci*, which was automatically considered a post-station, again shows how the qualification of *villa-mansio* is ambiguous. The complex (fig. 15), which was positioned on the coastline (nowadays called Costa del Sol) and was composed of a residential building (with many rooms paved with mosaics), a detached pavilion with baths and a few productive areas (Rodríguez Oliva, Beltrán-Fortes 2016) – among which: a fish-salting establishment, producing *garum*, and an oven for pottery – stands out as one of the most complete *villae maritimae* of Spain (Beltrán 2008 with references) and extends its chronology well into Late Antiquity, with coins dated until

the 6th century. Admittedly, nothing distinguishes this complex from a typical Roman villa, and it is therefore only the link with the place-name of the itinerary source, based on the heatedly disputed mileage calculation (Rodríguez Morales 2009) that pushes forward the identification³¹.

Also at Vignale, the presence of kilns for the baking of building ceramics and amphorae – uncertainly documented from the second half of the 1st century BC but surely attested for the second half of the 1st century AD – is used as evidence of the function of road-station and, at the same time, of the high rank of the owners' family (Zanini, Giorgi 2017, p. 523), while it could be as well read as the more conventional indicator of the role of rural productive estate.

At the above-mentioned site of Massaciuccoli, the recovery, in the western sectors of the excavation, of a good quantity of processing waste and slags attributable to the production of pottery and bricks proves that some manufacturing production was paralleled to the other activities conducted at the site (Bertelli, Ghizzani Marcia 2012, p. 79).

More in general, it is the presence of infrastructural equipment that seems to push archaeologists to argue for a settlement acting as *mansio* and not as private estate. Such are the cases, for example, of the rural complexes of Cambre and Moraime (Muxia) in Galicia, where the imposing conduits for water provisioning motivate the attribution to public thermal installations, even in the absence of the documented presence of road axes (González 2008, pp. 610-612).

4. Material culture

The scholars who have attempted the definition of the parameters that can lead to the identification of a road-station have pointed out a few categories of finds that can prove the function as road station for rural establishments. The list includes objects related to transport, such as parts of harnesses and pieces of vehicles, but also of writing instruments and small objects (e.g.: Colleoni 2016b).

However, reviews carried out elsewhere (Corsi forthcoming b) show that these finds cannot be exclusively related to establishments devoted to assisting travellers.

Other parameters appear equally questionable: at Valdetorres (*supra*), the extravagance of the architectural model, paralleled with the large va-

³¹ HIDALGO 2019, p. 509. Elsewhere, rural sites with manufacturing facilities are interpreted as *mansiones* but there is no clear argument for such interpretation: e.g. Podere del Pozzo, a site on the northern side of the river Cecina in Tuscany, active from the Hellenistic period to Late Antiquity, with kilns for building ceramic, dolia, amphorae and common ware: CHERUBINI, DEL RIO 1995, pp. 371-372.

riety and richness of the finds – among which several inlaid pieces of furniture and ivory caskets, glass cups, decorated pottery and other metal objects –, shows with clarity how late Roman elites coped with “rural” life and, being framed between the typical domestic assemblage, rather testify in favour of a residential building (Arce *et al.* 1997, pp. 321, 334-5). The numismatic finds, counting only 24 coins, are rather scanty, but their proportion, heavily unbalanced toward the second half of the 4th century, shows that the site was not occupied after the beginning of the 5th century (Gimeno 1993, pp. 372-373). This record is considered slightly abnormal. However, the economic trends indicated by the coins circulation find comparison in the region and the assemblage is said to be coherent with what would be expected in any given rural estate (Gimeno 1993).

On the other hand: can the numismatic record testify of small business, catering and retail sale?

Indeed, the analyses performed at the above-mentioned site of Vignale seem to confirm such evidence, even if the numerous small coins collected under the debris of the collapsed roof of the portico are connected to some activities for the recovery of the lead pipework (Zanini, Giorgi 2017, p. 525), and are therefore situated in a phase when the original function of the site was already lost.

5. Chronological issues, generating factors and ownership

Since the focus of this paper is on post-classical evidence, we can only comment on a few factors, still trying to avoid the circular argumentation. Firstly, I would like to stress that it is dangerous to discuss the matter of continuity. The fact that the Calabrian sites of Pauciuri and Acconia turned into late Antique and Medieval villages can possibly prove that the nature of the late Roman settlements transcended the “simple” villa (Malacrino 2014), but at the same time is not a conclusive element. Secondly also factors regarding the genesis of the sites need to be addressed. I would, for instance exclude that at Vignale the fact that building ceramics were produced on site and exported to Rome, and that the *opus reticulatum* technique was used in an area where it is not widely spread, can prove a public commission, while agreement exists on attributing the ownership of the estate to one of the most prominent families of the region (Zanini, Giorgi 2017, pp. 529-530).

In this respect, the remark that the “private management of the *mansio* at Massaciuccoli ended together with the fortunes of the owners’ family of Venulei” (Paribeni 2012, pp. 14-15) leads us on the one hand to reflect on the practice of landlords to open a sort of branch for

assistance to traffic (*supra*, section 2); on the other hand, the possibility that the management of the complex would have been taken over by the state appears rather unlikely, also considering that the archaeological evidence for restoration works (3rd century AD) and later frequentation (4th century AD) is scanty.

6. Conclusions

It is clear that the puzzling and contradictory evidence presented above cannot be analysed without discussing more thoroughly the theoretical framework for defining a “*mansio*”, a concept that remains elusive, given the ambiguity of archaeological and textual sources. So far, only the anthropological theory of Marc Augé about the *non-lieu* has been applied to the interpretation of a *mansio*, but the stimulating and innovative approach is undermined by the incorrect assumption that *mansiones* were artificially established by means of a sudden decision taken by central authorities³².

It is evident that the semantic polyvalence of terms like “*mansio*” allows room for misunderstanding. As long as the mention of a place-name explicitly addressing a “central place” like forum is considered synonym of *mansio*, discussion will be pointless, and spatial arrangements will not be taken into proper consideration³³.

At the same time, it is evident that the analysis of the material evidence has to be carried out with a more rigorous method, avoiding drawing conclusions from undocumented circumstances, such as the only hypothetical presence of a road. As long as the presence of an ancient trafficked road is not proven, it would be prudent to refrain from giving certain interpretations for granted. Unavoidably, these interpretations turn into models; from these models, the step towards creating a historiographic invention is very short.

Sadly, all the arguments piled up to motivate the definition of *villa-mansio* fade in the light of a tight critic, starting from the statement that the function of assistance to travellers performed at rural estates is proved by the diffusion of praedial toponyms in the itinerary sources (Italy, Pan-

³² ZANINI, GIORGI 2017. It is by now proven that the initiative of Augustus to formalise the detachment of men, animals and vehicles along the main roads of the empire can be considered only as the embryonic organisation of the *vehiculatio*, and that the construction of road-stations on the initiative of the imperial office is not documented before the 2nd century AD: CORSI forthcoming b.

³³ E.g. at A Cigarrosa (A Rúa, Galicia) dispersed archaeological structures have been classified as parts of a villa but also as parts of the *mansio Forum Gigorrorum*, mentioned along *It.Ant. Via XVIII*: GONZÁLEZ 2008, pp. 613-614.

nonia, Sicily, Africa: Arnaud 1998, pp. 212-214; *Hispania*: Sillières 1990, pp. 802-803). As has already been clarified above, this statement takes for granted the relationship between these documents and the state mobility management system, and the fact that each toponym would refer to a road-station, and not merely to a location that has to be crossed when heading to a certain destination. On the other hand, the affix of the qualification of "villa" to place-names, attested in Italy only once at *Rostrata Villa* next to Rome, features enough regularly in the African segments of the *Itinerarium Antonini* (e.g. *It.Ant.* 59.7: *Agma sive Fulgurita Villa*; 60.3: *Villa Magna, Villa privata*; 61.2: *Casas villa Aniciorum*, etc.).

Even when a refined interpretative framework is attempted, the theoretical construction runs aground against the impossibility of motivating the definition of a rural settlement as a *villa-mansio* instead of a simple villa: there is no element supporting the interpretation of the one sector of the excavated area at Vignale as villa and the other as *mansio*, rather than the residential and productive areas of one rural estate, especially when in the later phases of the beginning of the 5th century AD the first appear still fully active and supplied by imported goods and the latter cluttered with burials (Zanini, Giorgi 2017, pp. 526-527).

However, regardless the fact that, contrary to modern scholarship, individual hospitality at private mansions and *accueil mercantile* (Le Guennec 2019) are not confused in ancient sources, but given that the term *villa* is used for both occurrences, we should accept that *villae-mansiones* and *fermes-auberges* might have existed, as long as these definitions are used to conveniently address complexes that are openly and doubtlessly displayed aside a trafficked road, eventually at the core of a small hamlet definable as a "place of the road". In most cases, these revenues would have paralleled those coming from the main productive activities carried out at the estate.

Unfortunately, however, not a single case-study can be pointed at, and all proposals remain hypothetical. In other words, if it is true that the definition of "historiographical creation" is definitely an extreme exasperation, our inability to define guidelines for both architectural features as well as material culture can only lead to the admission of the impotence of archaeological theory and tools, at least for this specific topic.

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