

Polygonal Masonry and Republican Villas: the Problem of the *basis villae*

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In the compilation of the *Forma Italiae* for Anxur-Terracina, G. Lugli coined the architectural category of *basis villae* as a way to classify the remains of massive rural podiums and terraces built in polygonal masonry that were otherwise difficult to explain. This paper aims to assess Lugli's categorization by examining some of the sites in question, with a particular interest in determining what relevance, if any, *basis villae* sites have for Republican villas. This examination of an important class of sites is overdue and its outcome has considerable implications for the study of villas in Central Italy.

Basis villae sites range in size, with the largest exceeding 500 m² in area. The sites are identifiable on the basis of polygonal masonry terrace walls and diffuse scatters of ceramic finds, most often including *dolia*, tile, and coarse ware pottery. Some *basis villae* also have remains that indicate a continuity of use in the late Republic, as suggested by lead pipes and *opus caementicium* fittings. In spite of these categories of finds, virtually all *basis villae* sites recorded thus far are devoid of architectural remains, even those that would be indicative of a crude farm building of nonpermanent construction. This evidentiary problem further highlights the need for this category to be reassessed.

P. Vittucci and M. Andreussi advanced the case for *basis villae* further, following Lugli's lead. Vittucci cataloged sites in the hinterland of Cora, while Andreussi collected previously classified sites in order to suggest that these platforms were meant to support rustic agricultural buildings. As a result, hundreds of sites have been assigned to this classification without adequately testing the veracity of this typology or of the implications of labeling these sites as "villas". Some of the problems presented by this approach result from a somewhat idealized vision of the Roman countryside, with Vittucci and others envisioning an idyllic landscape of *villae rusticae*, while Andreussi's approach is framed by the intense interest in slave-based agricultural production fueled by the Italian excavations at Settefinestre.

The most recent approach to these sites is that of P.A.J. Attema and the Dutch Pontine Region Project. During a field survey project in the Pontine plain, Attema identified additional *basis villae* sites in the area of Cora, Norba, and Setia and classified them in accordance with the typology of Lugli and Vittucci. Attema, followed by P.M. van Leusen, added more complexity to the discussion. Even though the field survey yielded no substantive archaeological data that would help to confirm that *basis villae* sites did have something to do with villas, the Dutch team created an operative theory for this scatter of sites, namely that they were part of a centrally orchestrated system of landscape control on the part of the Romans. Attema even imagines a hierarchy among the *basis villae* sites, with certain "strategic" villas having greater regional control. This theory is fanciful, especially since the archaeological material that would be required to back it up seems to be nonexistent.

If villas did occupy these sites, the number of extant villas known in Central Italy would then increase dramatically and alter our understanding of the villa phenomenon. If the term *basis villae* is a misnomer, then these structures need fresh archaeological interpretation to clarify their place and function in the landscape, especially in light of new analysis of polygonal masonry. In any case this classification

needs to be considered within the context of Republican villas, as well as in relation to the Roman conquest of Italy. The outcome promises new viewpoints on Republican architecture and urbanism.