

Villaculture

(John Bodel)

The world of sophistication associated with Roman villas, systematically explored by John D'Arms in his ground-breaking book, *Romans on the Bay of Naples*, more than thirty-five years ago, has continued to attract interest over the years (recent monographs by Romizzi on *Ville d'otium* and Lafon on the *Villa maritima* provide up-to-date overviews), but in the past few decades, apart from important studies of particular features of villa adornment (Neudecker on sculptural programs, Higginbotham on *piscinae*), attention has more often focused on questions of agricultural use and productivity than on the cultural life of the *villae urbanae*. Major advances to our knowledge of the development of Roman Republican farmsteads have come from archaeological surveys in central Italy, and important (and controversial) historical arguments have been built around archaeological investigation of particular sites (Carandini's "slave mode of production" at the villa of Settefenestre has become a focal point of discussion). Purcell's idea of a "landscape of production" (first explored in his essay of 1995 in *Urban Society in Roman Italy*) makes the important point that evidence of productive exploitation is as much a part of the show as of the substance of villa life among the élite.

Somewhat lost in recent discussion, however, has been a more basic consideration of what, precisely, Roman writers meant when they spoke of *villae*. It is clear that the term meant different things to different authors at different times, that the broader cultural and economic associations of the term by the end of the Republic were not intrinsic to it, and that modern scholars disagreeing about this or that aspect of villa use are not always talking about the same things. This paper traces the development of the concept of the villa from its linguistic origins through the first century CE by examining the variable usage of the term by Roman writers of the period. The argument, *in nuce*, is that, just as Roman landowners developed specific notions about farming, so too did Roman writers systematically cultivate the idea of the *villa*; that beside agriculture, horticulture, and viticulture, we must also recognize a specific practice of "villaculture" if we are properly to understand the significance of the properties the word described and the cultural and economic world it evoked.

The *locus classicus* for our discussion, and the passage from which the argument begins, comes from the introductory scene of the third book of Varro's *Res Rusticae*, where the avian interlocutors (Merula, Pavo, Pica, and Passer) assemble in the Villa Publica on the southern Campus Martius to await the results of the aedilician elections (*Rust.* 3.2.1-11). All three details—the setting, the *dramatis personae*, and the occasion—are relevant to our theme. Writing at the end of the Republican tradition of villaculture, Varro sets a discussion of contemporary *pastio villatica*, especially aviaries, among the most effete features of the late Republican luxury villa, among four characters with 'speaking' names, in one of the oldest and most venerated public spaces in Rome, the Villa Publica, allegedly founded by the censors of 434 BC to house the first historical census (Livy 4.22), on the occasion of the election of the magistrates whose duties included the curbing of private extravagance and public upkeep of the city. The discussion begins with a controversy over the meaning of "villa" itself, which (it emerges) is not just a residence outside the city (3.2.6) nor necessarily either a simple working farm of the sort Varro describes in Book 1 (11-13) or an elaborate country mansion of the sort he alludes to in the introduction to Book 2 (Pr.1-3) (3.2.9). No single answer is ultimately agreed upon, but the debate covers the range of issues that constitute the substance of the "villaculture" it is the purpose of this paper to elucidate.