

The Enigma of ‘Catonian’ Villas: the *De Agricultura* in the Context of Second Century BC Rural Italian Architecture

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In recent years, ‘Catonian’ villas have become more and more of an elusive entity, both on the ground and in the texts, in sharp contrast with the emergence of early Republican large rural sites as a new important element that seems to characterize the emergence of Roman landscapes in central Italy. This is brought out by a review of the major known villa sites in Italy that date to before the Gracchan period, which reveals that, while there is growing evidence for elite residences dating to the early Republican period (such as the Auditorium site), there is an enigmatic scarcity of villas created in the third and second centuries BC. The few sites that were traditionally associated with a hypothetical ‘Catonian’ phase in the development of villas, like Selvasecca di Blera or Francolise, can now be shown to be either earlier or later in date than the period of Cato. The typical Roman villas on the other hand, in the light of recent fieldwork and scholarship, appear instead to be a phenomenon that only takes off towards the very end of the Republic.

All of this evidence puts into question the conventional reading of Cato’s works as literal descriptions of prevailing contemporary typical agricultural establishments. Many of the recommendations contained in the *De Agricultura* simply do not find any material correlate known to us, but rather appear as fictitious constructs that at best combine and amplify existing elements and arrangements. For instance, the scale of wine and oil production envisioned by Cato appears not to have existed in sites occupied during his lifetime. His prescriptions for wine presses on his farm call for sizes and capacity that will not be equaled even in the heyday of Italian winemaking, two hundred years after him. Also, Cato’s unawareness of the vitally important amphora system needed to trade wine and oil (which in his time was just starting at some sites in southern Italy) casts serious doubt on his understanding of the realities of the new trade process. His suggestion instead that grapes be sold on the vine and that wine be sold from sunken jars is radically at odds with the developing new long-distance trade, where the real profits could be made. More generally, Cato’s economic philosophy appears in any case to be very far from the kind of investment mentality that would be necessary to make this kind of enterprise successful.

Observations of this kind can help in defining the actual nature, purpose, and audience of Cato’s treatise, supporting those recent readings that emphasize its literary and political dimensions. More than writing to teach his readers about agriculture, Cato seems to be fashioning a public persona for himself that will support his political efforts in Rome, made difficult by his condition as a *homo novus*.