

Origin and development of the Roman landscape: the *Suburbium* “experiment”

PAOLO CARAFA, ANDREA CARANDINI AND
MARIA CRISTINA CAPANNA

Recent topographical surveys in northern and southern *Suburbium*, carried out by the University of Rome “La Sapienza” research team, provide a notable database for evaluating the development of settlement in this area from prehistoric times until the beginning of the Medieval age. Unexpected discoveries, followed by extensive stratigraphical excavations – such as the villa under the new Auditorium in Rome – have greatly improved our knowledge of rural settlements and related land exploitation as well.

From the mid eighth century BC there are clear signs of a stable settlement hierarchy; in the course of the following two centuries, this develops and proper “open sites” appear, foreshadowing a parallel evolution in social and political relationships (such as the so-called Servian reform), which in turn affected land ownership and land use. Until some time around the middle of the sixth century BC it is still possible to distinguish some relevant differences in which rural settlements developed in different areas of the Roman *Suburbium*, the northern and southern parts respectively.

After this date, and in particular during the fifth century changing historical and political conditions, which foreshadow the battles between Rome and Veii, give rise, for the first time, to different models of rural population. At the dawn of the Republic major changes in settlement typology and pattern occur in the Roman *Suburbium*. Despite the generally assumed decrease in land occupation around the *Urbs*, the number of rural sites remains stable or increases slightly. From this time on, the archaeological evidence shows a permanent increase in rural population, reaching its highest peak in the early Imperial age.

Together with a denser settlement distribution a “new” landscape emerges. A number of survey identified sites (c. 15 % in the fifth century BC up to approximately 60 % already in the second half of the fourth century BC) are now represented by scatters of artifacts, conspicuous for their large extension (always more than 1000 sq. m. with an average of between 5000 and 10000 sq. m. or more) and

the relevant presence of fine pottery and/or other luxury elements (painted plasters, decorated floors or mosaics, marble objects, architectural decorations). Many of these sites (nearly 80 %) have been previously occupied, either by possible farms (nearly 30 %) or villages (nearly 50 %) of Archaic or even Orientalizing age. Nonetheless, if we look at the overall site locations, this general impression of continuity should be reconsidered. In fact, during the fifth century BC the number of new-born sites is just slightly higher than the number of abandoned sites, thus indicating substantial differences in site locating strategies and, possibly, in suburban rural property assessment. The appearance of the so-called “Catonian villa” in late Republican times, could well be considered one of the main issues of this long term process of changing structures, meaning and circumstances of land exploitation and occupation.

In this paper the possibility of interpreting these archaeological remains as villas will be discussed, in many cases dating back to the early Republican period. A possible typology of early as well as later villas will be proposed, also taking into proper account the evidence from recent excavations (first and foremost the Auditorium villa).

In a broader historical perspective, it can be assumed that Rome seems to have been able to effect a profound renewal of its production systems at the end of the regal period, and, consequently, to establish its own settlement model on neighbouring territories. In this respect, the history of the Roman suburban landscape from the early Orientalizing period to Republican times may be seen as the history of the earliest Romanization of communities outside the city and its original ager.