

Martin Tombrägel, **Die republikanischen Otiumvillen von Tivoli**. Palilia, volume 25. Publisher Dr. Ludwig Reichert, Wiesbaden 2012. 256 pages with 139 black and white figures, and numerous tables.

In this excellent monograph, based on a Marburg dissertation completed in 2005 (few publications subsequent to that year have been taken into account), Martin Tombrägel analyses a category of Roman rural residence which has hitherto been studied principally from ancient written sources. The term »otium villas«

is a modern fabrication designed to indicate those non-productive country mansions to which the late-Republican nobility retreated in the summer months to escape the heat and negotium of the capital. Examples are known in many regions of Italy, especially in Latium and Campania (though Campania was visited preferably in the springtime rather than the summer), but a global study of the phenomenon in all its variety of forms and topographical contexts would have been unmanageable.

The author has chosen, instead, to focus on the territory of Tibur (Tivoli), twenty-five kilometres east of Rome. The reason for choosing the Tivoli region is because it boasts a dense concentration of Roman rural buildings and because the archaeological evidence is conveniently assembled in the relevant volumes of the *Forma Italiae* series, written respectively by Cairoli Fulvio Giuliani (1966 and 1970) and Zaccaria Mari (1983 and 1991). Filtering out other types of rural residence such as working farms or *villae rusticae*, Tombrägel is able to identify sixty sites of *otium villas*, all but seven of which are situated in the low hills to the west of Tivoli (see the catalogue on pp. 233 f. and the map in fig. 3). These constitute the raw material on which his study is based, and they are subjected to meticulous analysis in terms of three main aspects: (1) their building techniques and what these can tell us about the chronology; (2) their topographical and architectural characteristics; (3) the historical conclusions that can be drawn from combining the archaeological and literary evidence.

Tombrägel's most important contribution is made in regard to chronology: the emergence of *otium villas* with their attendant luxury is pushed back firmly into the first half of the second century B. C. (if not earlier), whereas the *communis opinio* has been to see them as a product of the later years of the second and the early first century. This conclusion rests ultimately on the evidence of building techniques, the first of the three main aspects of the volume's analysis. Here the visible structures of the sixty villas are classified according to a typological sequence which enables them to be divided into earlier and later foundations and sometimes into multiple phases of alterations and enlargements. The earliest villas were constructed wholly in polygonal dry-stone masonry, but this tended to give way to the monolithic concrete of *opus caementicium*.

Caementicium can, in turn, be phased on the basis of its different forms of stone facing, beginning with various types of »irregular incertum« and progressing to »regular incertum«, then to »irregular reticulate«, and finally to »regular reticulate«. The relative chronology suggested by these techniques can be given some fixed points by reference to their incidence in public and sacred buildings, notably (since local works are most likely to offer valid parallels) those of Tivoli itself. Here a major role is played by the sanctuary of Hercules, where certain phases are dated by inscrip-

tions. Particularly useful are some inscriptions giving the titles and names of magistrates who held office in the eighties B. C. and who can be linked with a phase of construction in irregular reticulate: they place the change from incertum to reticulate in the early first century. By contrast, the beginnings of the major enlargement of the sanctuary, using irregular incertum (phase 3a), may be associated with an extensive urban redevelopment which took place in the northern part of the city in the second half of the second century B. C. This gives a date-span for the currency of the incertum technique.

The second aspect of the *otium villas* to be examined is their topographical setting and architectural form. In regard to topography, the siting of the vast majority of sites in the hills to the west of Tivoli is not accidental. These are the most desirable locations, enjoying panoramic views in attractive landscape settings. At the same time, whilst being close to Tivoli, they tended to be situated on Rome-facing slopes and thus to maintain both visual and symbolic contact with the metropolis. Along with this preferred location goes a range of specific architectural appointments. Most striking were the building platforms terraced into the hillsides, often at two levels, the lower of which can be identified as a garden area, while the upper carried the main residential block or blocks. Among the accompanying luxuries, already found in some of the earliest villas, were a pool designed either as a swimming bath or as an ornamental pond, projecting bastions which served as vantage points from which to admire the view, and shady grottoes or *nymphaea*.

With the introduction of the *caementicium* technique, new possibilities were opened by the use of concrete to model internal space. This period saw the introduction of vaulted ramps, stairs, *cryptoporticoes* and other subterranean rooms, all of which transformed the treatment of the terraces: they enabled the creation of space-economical means of communication between the garden terrace and the principal residential buildings behind it, besides offering cool chambers for the storage of perishable goods or as refuges from the heat. At the same time the arched openings of vaults came increasingly to form a decorative device, used in rows to enhance the outward appearance of the terrace wall.

These innovations place Tiburtine villa architecture in the vanguard of architectural innovation, and Tombrägel goes so far as to argue that the *otium villas*, commissioned by the great magnates of Rome, may have provided inspiration for the sacred and public architecture of Tivoli; thus the major replanning of the sanctuary of Hercules in its second *caementicium* phase (3a–b), involving the roofing-over of the Via Tiburtina and the construction of an impressive multi-storey arched façade, may have been a response to the grand terracing of Villa 17 (the so-called Villa of Quintilius Varus) which faced it across the Anio valley.

The third aspect to be explored is the historical context: it is necessary to review the dates obtained from architectural criteria in the light of social history. Here the author highlights the ideological biases of the late-Republican literary sources, which give rise to a myth of second-century aristocrats concentrating on working the land and living a life according to old peasant values. This scenario has led to a down-playing of the luxury of early country houses in comparison with the monumental grandeur and philhellenism of villas in the first century.

A dispassionate review of the evidence suggests another picture: the second-century nobles were profiting from the spoils of conquest by accumulating country estates to be exploited not just for agriculture but also (and primarily) for pleasure. They could not indulge their taste for domestic luxury within the city of Rome, given the lack of space for dominant dwellings and the moral restraints imposed by the *mos maiorum*, so they gave vent to their ambitions by constructing palaces in the countryside in places such as the environs of Tivoli. The term »villa urbana« used by Cato (*Agr.* 6, 1) implies that urban comforts were being transplanted to the country already at the time that he was writing his *De agri cultura* (c. 180–150 B. C.). Similarly Plautus's use of the term »piscina« in a play performed in 186 B. C. (*Truc.* 31–42) chimes with the presence of a pool in the early *otium villas* of Tivoli. It was in this period that Rome was engaged in her wars with Macedonia, and the Hellenistic palaces of Macedonia may well have been a source of inspiration for the grand *otium villas* commissioned by wealthy senators.

A bare summary does scant justice to the range and thoroughness of Tombrägel's study. The reviewer can think of few research projects which have achieved such a successful synthesis of archaeology and history. The arguments are careful and persuasive, and the conclusions, expressed with due caution, may well be right. Admittedly, the chronology depends on a typological sequence of building techniques which is supported by very few external dating criteria, and the author himself warns of the danger of an over-rigid application of typologies (as in the works of Giuseppe Lugli). But his approach is suitably flexible, taking into account the range of variations dictated by the use of differing sorts of stone, by the relative care shown in their working, and by conscious choices for artistic or semantic effect; for example, rugged polygonal masonry was visually associated with substructures. And, where relationships between different techniques are discernible, the comparative chronology fits the typological sequence that Tombrägel has postulated. If the results can be trusted, there is an enormous gain for our understanding of late-Republican architecture. The idea that the *otium villas* may have led the way in introducing Hellenistic palace architecture to Italy, and that they may in their technical innovations have anticipated the great sanctuaries of central Italy (Her-

cules at Tivoli, Jupiter Anxur at Terracina, and Fortuna at Palestrina), is a major thesis.

The main problem is that almost none of the sites has been excavated. Many of the relationships between different building techniques cannot be established because direct conjunctions are not visible. The most we can say is that the chronology can work, not that it is secure. A further problem is that many of the sites are too poorly preserved to display the features that are deemed characteristic of *otium villas*: often, it is only substructures that remain, and items such as the *piscina*, the *belvedere* and the *nymphaeum* no longer survive. In short, the picture painted by Tombrägel is credible, but it is well to bear in mind the shortcomings of the evidence.

Amid so much that is good, it seems churlish to pick on weaknesses. There are, however, a number of minor inconsistencies in the citation of numbers or statistics. It is sometimes difficult, for example, to match the phases given in the text with those listed in the tables: for example, Bauphase 3 in Villa 36 (pp. 84 f.) becomes Bauphase 4 in the table on p. 86, because an extra phase of polygonal construction has been added at the beginning of the sequence. More seriously, the plans of villas are often defective: some lack features which are referred to in the text (fig. 106 fails to show the buttress *b*₄ cited on p. 83; fig. 134 lacks labels for *nymphaea* F and G), others lack orientation (figs. 63 and 99; fig. 63 also lacks a scale), others fail to identify the different building techniques indicated by the shading of the walls (figs. 104, 106, 108, 109 and 112). A repeated problem is the total absence of contours or section drawings: without these, it is hard to distinguish the higher and lower levels of a site. Many of these deficiencies are doubtless explained by the difficulty of carrying out measured surveys on ruinous sites, but they seriously mar the usefulness of the book.

The reviewer will be forgiven for referring to a couple of matters within his sphere of competence.

On p. 158 comparisons are drawn between Villa 44 and the treatment of the atrium in the second phase of the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii. The latter is assigned to the »first quarter of the first century B. C.«, then to the »early first century B. C.«, before being used to place Villa 44 »in the time around 100 B. C.« But, even accepting Volker Michael Strocka's early dating of 80–70 B. C. (in place of the traditional 60–50 B. C.), this Pompeian parallel hardly justifies dating Villa 44 round 100 B. C.

On p. 177 the author draws attention to the popularity of the Second Style paintings of sacro-idyllic landscapes »in the first half of the first century B. C.«, and implies that they were inspired by the »huge parks« of *otium villas*. The point is stated more specifically in note 703: »Die Architekturmalerie des 2. Stils bezieht sich konkret auf die real vorhandenen Landschaftsgärten der *Otiumvillen* und nicht abstrakt auf sakrale Phantasielandschaften.« I would argue the op-

posite: the sacro-idyllic landscapes of the Second Style (most of which probably belong to the second, rather than the first half of the first century B. C.) are primarily religious or exotic in their character; it is only the villa landscapes of the Third Style, datable to the first century A. D., that were inspired by reality.

All quibbles aside, this volume represents a remarkable achievement – and not just for its main theses. It also offers many perceptive observations on technical details, for example on the practical reasons why the first wall-facings in reticulate were irregular (pp. 70 f.) and why the types of facing in villas were more varied and more rough-and-ready than those of urban buildings (pp. 95–98), on the use of relieving walls and buttresses to counter thrusts in the first caementicium terraces – a precaution that was later recognised to be unnecessary (pp. 99 f.), and on the advantages of caementicium construction when it came to opening access from the lower to the upper terrace (p. 126).

Martin Tombrägel is to be congratulated on his mastery of a complex body of material. He has written a rich and subtly nuanced analysis which opens a new chapter in our interpretation of the architectural and social history of late-Republican Italy.

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