

Villae tardorromanas y rus: interrogando las interdependencias rurales en el valle del río Ebro (Navarra, España)

Late Roman villae and the rus: *Interrogating Rural Interdependencies* *in the Ebro River Valley (Navarra, Spain)*

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Resumen: En el último siglo de excavaciones, muchas *villae* tardoantiguas (siglos III-V d. C.) han sido descubiertas en el Mediterráneo occidental, y la investigación ha analizado el modo en que estas *villae* refuerzan visualmente las relaciones entre comitentes y clientes, que se creen más tensas en la Antigüedad tardía que en el periodo imperial. Este artículo cuestiona esas suposiciones, se utiliza la arqueología y la cultura material de las *villae* tardorromanas para proponer una relación más compleja y de simbiosis entre comitentes y clientes, y entre las *villae* tardoantiguas y el campo. En la Antigüedad tardía el campo era estratificado, pero suponer una relación especialmente opresiva entre las *villae* y las poblaciones rurales es perpetuar el estereotipo de la Antigüedad tardía como un periodo de decadencia al igual que supone ignorar las realidades de la arqueología. Para demostrarlo, se analizan los edificios de culto de tres *villae* tardorromanas del valle del Ebro en la provincia Tarraconense. Se discute que las *villae* proveyeran espacios de culto a las personas del campo (algunos que no pertenecientes a la élite); esas personas eran receptivas a estos servicios. Este estudio pretende recalcar las interdependencias entre *villae* y las poblaciones rurales, y comprender mejor los mecanismos que organizan el campo tardorromano.

Palabras Clave: Antigüedad tardía, campo, culto doméstico, Navarra, privado, *rus*, *villa*.

Abstract: The last century of archaeological exploration has brought to light many late antique *villae* (mid-3rd – early-5th centuries CE), and much has been made of the ways these sites visually reinforce the increasingly fraught patron-client relations that characterize the late antique world in scholarship. My paper challenges these assumptions, using material evidence to illustrate a more complex, symbiotic relationship between late antique *villae* and the *rus*. The late Roman countryside was stratified, but to presume an especially oppressive relationship between estates and rural populations is to perpetuate synthesis of this period as synonymous with decline, and to disregard more nuanced evidence in the archaeological record. I discuss cult structures on three estates in the Ebro River Valley in ancient *Tarraconensis* (Spain) to argue that *villae* courted and catered to sub-elite rural population groups, who were themselves receptive to such offerings. By highlighting these interdependencies, this paper aims to bring greater contour to our understanding of the mechanisms animating the provincial countryside in late antiquity.

Keywords: countryside, cult, domestic, late antiquity, Navarra, private, religion, Roman, *rus*, Spain, villa.

ALTHOUGH the late Roman villa boom is now well-attested in archaeology,¹ and typically late antique aggrandizements – polychrome mosaics,² marble décor,³ and apsidal constructions⁴ – are commonplace throughout the western empire, few scholars have challenged the standard interpretation of domestic space as demonstrably more hierarchical in late antiquity versus the early Roman Empire. Indeed, most syntheses of the late Roman villa interpret the furnishings of the *pars urbana* (residential quarters) and the renovation of spaces for small audiences – reception halls, dining rooms, entrance courtyards, and bath complexes – as material manifestations of an increasingly stratified society.

The ubiquity of the apse from the mid-3rd century on in *villae* and *domus* alike has played a pivotal role in this historiography. In the late 1980s, for example, Y. Thébert and S. P. Ellis argued independently that the apse gained popularity in domestic contexts because of its ability to impress the homeowner's station upon visitors, and thereby reinforce and reify the social gulf between *domini* (landowners) and their guests.⁵ Although several scholars have taken issue with this argument,⁶ most understand the apse as an architectural form of subordination, and treat its appearance in domestic structures as a window onto increasingly vertiginous social relationships between the elite class and their social inferiors: patrons and clients; owners and laborers; those who have and those who do not.⁷

Yet this conceit, that late antique domestic space was a tool for advancing social stratification, is based primarily on select material forms (e.g. the apse) and cherry-picked literary excerpts.⁸ Both Thébert and Ellis, for example, bolster their still influential claims about the hierarchical character of late Roman housing with comments from Salvian's mid-5th century *De gubernatione dei*, in which rural *domini* appear as miserly tyrants who derive pleasure from seizing peasant farms and forcing poor farmers into proto-serfdom.⁹ Both scholars take Salvian at his word and fail to contextualize the author's comments – in the larger work to which they belong, but also against broader traditions of Christian proselytizing.

¹ Scott, 2000. Balmelle, 2001. Baldini Lippolis, 2001. Mulvin, 2002. Sfameni, 2006. Chavarría Arnau, 2007. Hidalgo Prieto, 2016. See also Bowes, 2010.

² Kondolean, 1991. Dunbabin, 1999. Balmelle, 2001: 238-301.

³ N.B. marble paneling and pavements are more common than three-dimensional sculpture. See Stirling, 2005, and Beckmann, 2022.

⁴ For discussion see Lavin, 1962; Ellis, 1988 and 1991; and Morvillez, 1995.

⁵ Thébert, 1985, and Ellis, 1988, 1991, and 1997. For early comments in this vein see also Lavin, 1962, and L'Orange, 1965.

⁶ Notably Bowes, 2010: 54-60. On the communicative function of earlier apsidal constructions in the palace of Domitian, see also Pflug and Wulf-Rheidt, 2022.

⁷ E.g. Scott, 2004.

⁸ E.g. Wickham, 2008.

⁹ Salv., *DG*, V, 38-45.

But *De gubernatione dei* was not written as a guide to late antique domestic architecture, let alone social relations in the late Roman countryside; it is an unfinished treatise that chastises Christians for their moral failings, written for a mid-5th century Christian audience. In *DGD* Salvian attempts to make sense of many evils befalling his world (e.g. barbarian invasions), the world in which the Christian god reigns supreme. For Salvian, these evils are the natural consequence of sinful behavior, and thus the author charges professed Christians with recommitting themselves to the faith and the fledgling church.¹⁰ The emphasis on sinful actions is such that the text itself is heavily reliant on negative exempla, which accounts for Salvian's characterization of wealthy landowning *domini* and their poor rural clients – *domini* are self-serving sinners whose clients, having given up everything, are devoid of power, agency, and voice.

Historians have long argued that Salvian's prose should not be taken objectively as the preacher's primary aim was to shame practicing Christians into reforming their behavior.¹¹ By and large, however, archaeological syntheses have excised the Christian author's comments to support interpretations of apsidal structures and the domestic sphere broadly as autocratic spaces in late antiquity. Thus for most late antique archaeologists, decorative renovations – apsidal constructions, mosaic pavements, polychrome marbles, and architectural aggrandizements broadly – are material expressions of class distinctions, real or intended. These structures and their luxury furnishings were put in place, scholarship has contended, to project their owners' high status, to amaze elite guests, and to intimidate social inferiors, i.e., the farmers (tenant or free), poor clients, laborers, and traveling artisans who comprise the rural populace living in the vicinity of these elite *villae*. Their access to these sites was, putatively, limited and tightly controlled.

Such sweeping conclusions, however, obfuscate important truths about the rapport between *villae* and the surrounding *rus* (countryside), by which I mean by the land itself and the people inhabiting it. Both the top-down, owner oriented approach to late antique villa sites, and, among archaeologists, interpretive bias towards the *pars urbana* together with deference to the literary record, have obscured various interdependencies that exhibit frequently in the material record for late antique villas. For example, stand-alone estate structures, like bath houses and cult sites, certainly served both resident and non-resident populations.¹² The presence of such constructions, I argue, intimates a more symbiotic relationship between *villae* and the surrounding countryside than previous scholarship has admitted.

¹⁰ On Salvian's approach versus Augustine's: O'Donnell, 1983.

¹¹ For recent work on Salvian's discussion of patronage, tenancy, and the colonate see Grey, 2006, and Goffart, 2009.

¹² For private baths open to a larger public: Maréchal, 2016.

This paper surveys the archaeological evidence for private cult sites located on or near three villas in northeastern Spain, a decidedly rural corner of the western Empire, and offers a glimpse into the reciprocity that characterizes hierarchical relations in the late Roman *rus*. The late antique construction and maintenance of these cult sites, I argue, is material proof of efforts made by *villae* and their owners to court the attention of social groups beyond the elite class, and to serve persons of myriad social stations inhabiting the surrounding *rus* in various ways. These cult structures complicate previous readings of *villae* as domineering, self-serving estates, and impel systematic investigation of the late antique villa's role in providing certain commercial, socio-cultural, and economic outlets for the rural populace – not because the *urbs* (city) was in decline, but because such amenities had reciprocal benefits for the villa owner and the surrounding rural population.

RECOVERING RURAL POPULATIONS IN NORTHEASTERN SPAIN

The *villae* with estate cults that are treated in this article cluster in the Ebro River Valley in and around the modern province of Navarra, a fecund and categorically rural region in what was once *Hispania Tarraconensis*.¹³ The largest Roman city in ancient Navarra was *Pompelo* (modern Pamplona); other smaller, nucleated settlements appear in central and southern Navarra near the Ebro River and its various tributaries, which facilitated inter-regional transport. Archaeological surveys of the countryside have permitted tentative reconstructions of both local roads and thoroughfares leading to extra-regional locales, like *Caesar Augusta* (Zaragoza), the largest city in inland *Hispania Tarraconensis*, located about 170 km southeast of *Pompelo*.¹⁴ Ancient Navarra thus appears rural but comfortably well-connected.

As far as evidence for rural inhabitants is concerned, M. A. Mezquíriz Irujo's study of late antique *villae* in the Ebro valley broadly documents almost 30 villa sites in Navarra, with another half-dozen in the splash zone of this modern province (figure 1).¹⁵ Most of these villas are known from survey as opposed to excavation, and thus occupation chronologies are largely unknown. Yet the inherently fragmentary character of archaeological remains is such that 30 identified villa sites is significant; to this number we can and should assume smaller habitation sites like peasant farms, which are less likely to survive and to receive concerted archaeological investigation.¹⁶

¹³ Wine and oil were standard crops in the region, and presses and storage facilities have been found at many villas: Mezquíriz Irujo, 1995/96; see also Andreu Pintado, Lasuén Alegre, and Jordan Lorenzo, 2009.

¹⁴ Calonge Miranda and Santos Yanguas, 2016: 40–41; Armendáriz Martija, 2013; Andreu Pintado, Lasuén Alegre, and Jordan Lorenzo, 2009.

¹⁵ Mezquíriz Irujo, 2009.

¹⁶ Calonge Miranda and Santos Yanguas, 2016. On the challenges of identifying rural non-elite residences see also Bowes, 2021.

At the macro-level, contemporary demographic studies of the Iberian Peninsula's population in the Roman period – roughly 4 million inhabitants – suggest that that 75% of the population was based in the *rus*. Using published excavations together with surveys, historical data,¹⁷ and statistic modeling, C. Carreras Monfort estimates rural population densities for the Peninsula as a whole.¹⁸ By his count, the extra-urban territories of ancient Navarra housed a minimum of 19.3 inhabitants per 100 km². A conservative estimate based on the modern provincial boundaries of Navarra would therefore suggest approximately 200,000 rural inhabitants in this region in the High Roman Empire (roughly the mid-1st – early 3rd centuries CE). They presumably located themselves near water and a city or a larger rural node, a *vicus* (village) or a villa.¹⁹

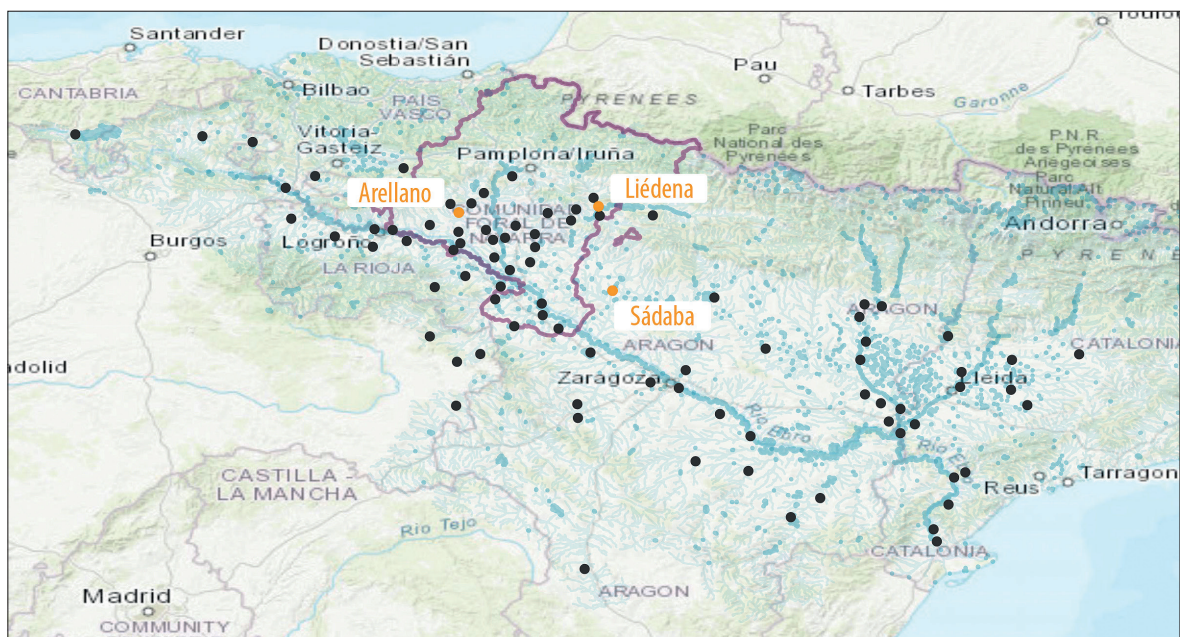


Figure 1

Plan of late Roman villas in the Ebro River Valley, with the province of Navarra marked. Villas in this article are marked in red. After Mezquíriz Irujo 2010. Basemap using ArcGIS software by Esri, Ebro River network generated using the EU's Copernicus Land Monitoring Service information: <https://doi.org/10.2909/393359a7-7ebd-4a52-80ac-1a18d5f3db9c>

¹⁷ Pliny the Elder records 240,000 inhabitants in the *conventus Asturum*, 166,000 inhabitants in the *conventus Lucensis*, and 285,000 in *Braccarenensis* (HN, III, 4, 28). Carreras Monfort (2014: 63–64 and annex 2) has proposed a medium rural density in the Peninsula of 7.1 inhabitants / km², or 7.4 inhabitants / km² in Iberian territories broadly (using population density estimates in both urban and rural locales).

¹⁸ Carreras Monfort, 2014.

¹⁹ This estimate is based on both the modern provincial boundaries of Navarra, and Carreras Monfort's modeling (2014: 68–69, fig. 6), which is admirably cautious about the limitations of rural population density modeling using scarce survey and excavation data. N.B. Carreras Monfort's estimate for urban population densities in ancient Navarra are demonstrably *lower* than those in other areas of Iberia that are known for agricultural production in the Roman era, like the central Meseta, *Baetica* and territories around Guadalquivir River (2014: 55–63, figs. 3–4, annex 1).

In an effort to build space for synthetic discussion of the workings of the *rus* in inland *Tarraconensis* in late antiquity, I note that I am dependent on population estimates for the High Empire versus the late Roman period. There are no demographic studies of either urban or rural populations in the latter period, in part because late antique Iberia has unfairly and uniformly been associated with population declines until quite recently, because of the presumably disastrous effects of the 3rd century crisis. Contemporary historians, however, are increasingly finding cause to mark the 3rd century as a relatively peaceful and prosperous century for the Peninsula's inhabitants. As M. Kulikowski has argued, population decline is not characteristic of the Iberian Peninsula broadly in the late Roman period; arguments in this vein are more often rooted in the historiographic traditions than in concrete archaeological and historical evidence.²⁰ Kulikowski has even speculated that rural inhabitants grew in number in late Roman Spain broadly.²¹ I therefore extrapolate that the *rus* of ancient Navarra had a similar population density in late antiquity, with at least 200,000 inhabitants. The presence of such persons – whose number may be even greater than present modeling allows us to propose – correlates with the construction of architectural structures on late Roman *villae* that court a relationship with rural audiences, like cult buildings.²²

ESTATE CULT IN ANCIENT NAVARRA: THE CULT COMPLEX AT LAS MUSAS

Several excavated villas furnish architectural evidence for quasi-public sacred amenities, albeit in a variety of forms. Perhaps the most striking in Navarra is a stand-alone complex associated with the villa of Las Musas at Arellano, located about 17 km west of the nearest Roman town at *Andelos* (near modern Mendigorriá) and 24 km north of the Ebro River. Systematic excavations in the 1980s and 1990s document

²⁰ Kulikowski (2004: 65-129) suggests that discussions of urban decline are somewhat unproductive and difficult to substantiate (contra, e.g., Mezquíriz Irujo, 2008, 404-405). What is true vis à vis urban decline is that cities receiving imperial patronage fared better in late antiquity than those that did not; new constructions, civic maintenance, and renovation are more evident in the former than the latter.

²¹ Kulikowski, 2004: 130-131. See also Andreu Pintado (2015b: 14-17) for rural occupation in parts of Navarra in the 4th c. CE based on survey data and excavated finds.

²² N.B. Fentress (2009) proposes population numbers for different types of Roman habitats. If we were to assume 1) that large villas were capable of housing 50 persons according to Fentress' model, and that 2) the 33 identified villas in Mezquíriz Irujo's study (2010) are all large *villae*, we would have to concede that these sites probably held less than 0.1% of Navarra's rural population.

at least two phases of occupation (figure 2).²³ The first phase witnesses the construction of a modest peristyle villa in the Imperial period, oriented towards production. The remains of an aisled building off the northeastern corner of this peristyle suggest a *pars rustica* (productive quarters);²⁴ a wine press and other production structures were identified in rooms off the northern gallery.²⁵ In the western gallery, the residential quarters that likely stood above a subterranean storage cellar filled with *dolia* (storage vessels) have been lost to erosion, but their presence is suggested by fragments of wall-painting and by table ceramics scattered across the site.²⁶

A fire damaged the villa in the final quarter of the 3rd or first quarter of the 4th century, precipitating a rebuilding that excavators date to the Constantinian Era based on coin finds.²⁷ In the peristyle villa, erosion prevents any significant reconstruction of the western gallery, but there is evidence for the conversion of phase I's pressing

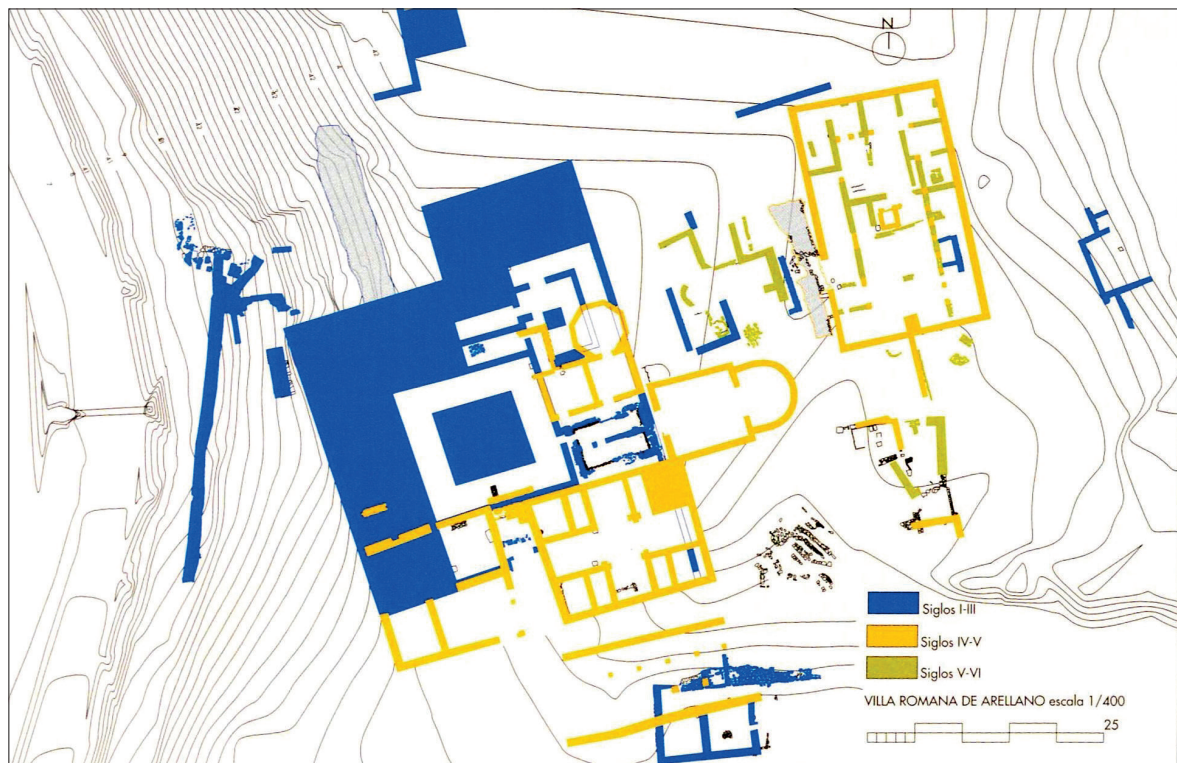


Figure 2
Plan of the villa of Las Musas at Arellano (Mezquíriz Irujo 2003)

²³ Mezquíriz Irujo, 2003 for the concise publication of these excavations.

²⁴ Mezquíriz Irujo, 2003: 32-34.

²⁵ Mezquíriz Irujo, 2003: 67-107

²⁶ For Phase I structures and finds see Mezquíriz Irujo, 2003: 31-142.

²⁷ Mezquíriz Irujo, 2003: 147-148.

area into a kitchen.²⁸ Constructions that are more typically touted in discussions of late antique *villae* appear off the southern end of the eastern gallery: an octagonal room decorated with a fine mosaic of the muses; and a vestibule leading to an apsidal hall outfitted with similarly high quality mosaics of Cybele and Attis.²⁹ From the use of polychrome figural pavements and curvilinear architecture, excavators argue that these spaces entertained elite guests.

Other structures built in this period beyond the *pars urbana*, however, intimate significant attention to visitors with perhaps more varied backgrounds and/or interests than a typical “elite” guest. Foremost among these is a rectangular building, built east of the *pars urbana*, which appears to have functioned as a cult site (figure 3). This stand-alone complex, 377 m², is marked by an open-air altar which is itself surrounded by three porticos to the west, north, and east. Remains of animal bones

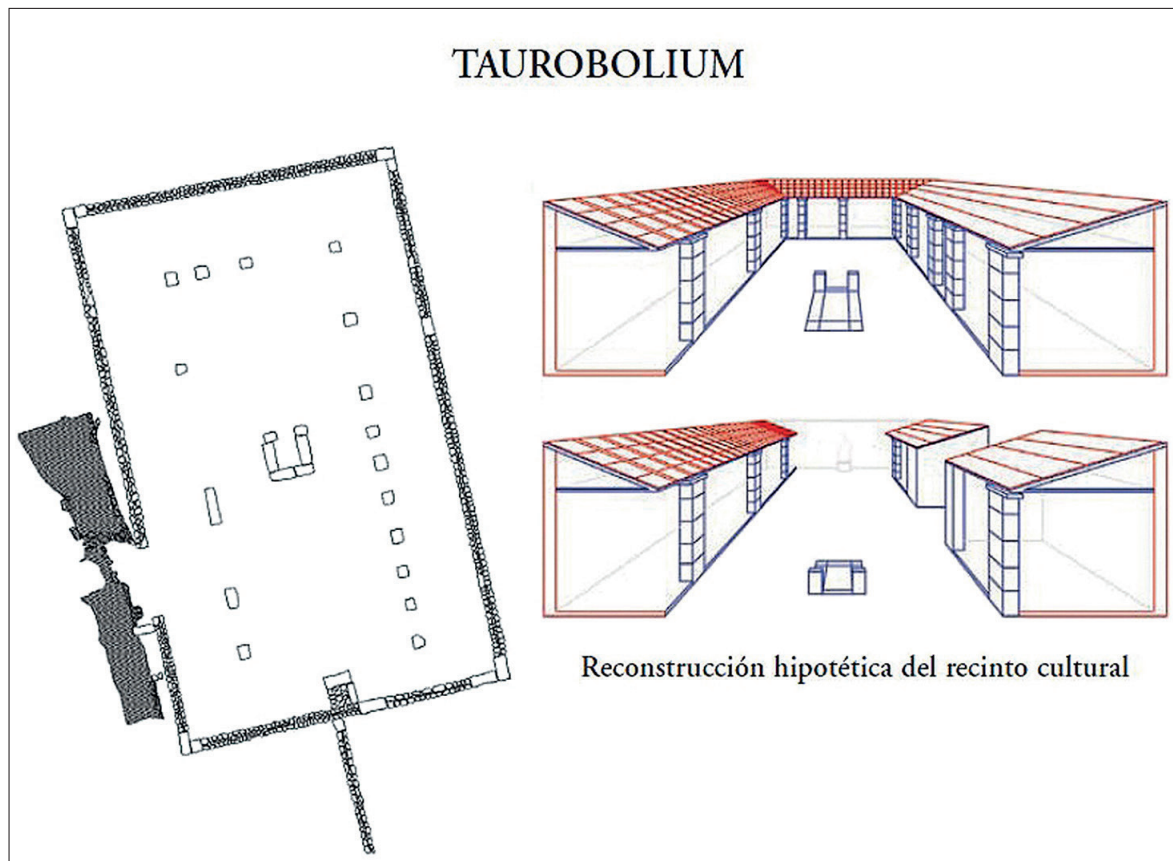


Figure 3

Plan and reconstruction of the cult building at Las Musas, Arellano (Mezquíriz Irujo 2009)

²⁸ Finds include brick hearth, a mill wheel, and sherds of cooking vessels and ceramics (Mezquíriz Irujo, 2003: 147-148).

²⁹ Mezquíriz Irujo, 2003: 148-152. The central panel in the octagonal room seems to depict the arrival, or *profectus*, of Attis with Cybele seated on a throne; the marriage of Cybele and Attis is the subject of the apsidal mosaic floor (Mezquíriz Irujo, 2003: 227-235).

found in the eastern portico support arguments for animal sacrifice, and excavators highlight the high number of male bovids among the faunal remains. This, together with bas-relief etchings of bulls on stones that served either as small altars or votive dedications (figure 4), has prompted the complex's identification as a *taurobolium* – a site for the ritual slaughter of bulls – dedicated to Cybele.³⁰ At less than 20 meters from the *pars urbana*, this *taurobolium* is a distinctly separately entity – one that can accommodate worshippers beyond the elite villa owner and their elite guests.

The archaeological evidence at Las Musas for non-elite housing structures at the eastern end of the southern gallery of the *pars urbana* corroborates this argument.³¹ Excavations in this zone revealed a rectangular building constructed at the same time as the cult building, with a central hallway (a Greek cross) paved in *opus signinum* (see again figure 2). Four rooms paved in packed earth lie on either side of this hallway, set at a lower level and accessible by stairs. Inhabitation is intimated by finds scattered across these rooms – cooking ceramics, common ware vessels, and *terra sigillata*. In the northeastern-most corner of the complex, excavations also uncovered a room with hypocaust supports, which may have functioned as a storage cellar.



Figure 4

Stone block engraved with the low-relief head of a bull (60 by 40 by 40 cm)
(Mezquíriz Irujo 2003)

³⁰ Faunal remains: Altuna and Mariekurrena, 2003: 315-341. Mezquíriz Irujo, 2003: 161-169.

³¹ Mezquíriz Irujo, 2003: 157-160; 2008, 400.

It is not clear whether this particular complex was a locus for short-term versus long-term habitation. The director of excavations at Las Musas, M. A. Mezquíriz Irujo, believed that this building was designed to accommodate persons passing through the estate to be initiated in Cybele's cult. Yet it is also possible that this structure housed individuals working at the estate, given the plausible connection between the aforementioned storage cellar and a vestibule leading to the apsidal hall.³² At any rate, the spartan décor in these living quarters, paved in earth rather than polychrome mosaics, suggests non-elite persons – individuals who are rarely mentioned in literature on elite villas and their guests.³³

EVIDENCE FOR TEMPLE-MAUSOLEA IN INLAND *TARRACONENSIS*: SÁDABA AND LIÉDENA

Although the open-air sanctuary at Las Musas is presently a *unicum*, other variations of stand-alone estate cult sites, like temple-mausolea, are known in and around ancient Navarra. Mid-20th century excavations at a Roman-era site 1 km south-east of modern Sádaba, for example, have associated the vestiges of a modest *pars urbana* with a late antique temple-mausoleum (figures 5-6), known colloquially as “La Sinagoga”. The temple-mausoleum – a cruciform building with a bi-apsidal arm and a square entrance vestibule – is situated 80 meters east of its villa; fragmentary walls stand over one meter in height.³⁴ Its identification as a temple-mausoleum is suggested by niches for statuary display on its north and east walls, and by evidence for burials. A fragmentary, roughly worked, monolithic sarcophagus, dated loosely to the 4th or 5th c. CE, was recovered in excavations in the entrance vestibule of the temple amidst evidence for other later burials and animal bones.³⁵

Whom did this temple-mausoleum honor? Within Iberia more broadly, this building shape suggests a mausoleum,³⁶ presumably built to memorialize a single family. And yet, the presence of later, seemingly non-elite burials in the entrance vestibule, together with a necropolis in the vicinity of La Sinagoga,³⁷ encourages a more flexible reading of the site as a sacred complex, perhaps combining familial cult and devotion to one or more deities with whom the villa-owning family aligned themselves. Indeed, the aforementioned niches may have been decorated with cult images of various deities, prompting later populations to bury their dead in and around this temple-mausoleum. Whatever gods or personages were honored at La Sinagoga, moreover, its detachment from its probable *pars urbana* invites populations beyond the estate.

³² For illustrated plans see also Mezquíriz Irujo, 2003, 34-35.

³³ Cf. Ellis, 1991. Kondolean, 1991. Brown, 2012: 185-207. Beckmann 2022.

³⁴ García y Bellido, 1963. For recent documentation and plausible 3D reconstructions of La Sinagoga see also Valle Melón, *et al.*, 2016.

³⁵ García y Bellido, 1963: 4-8.

³⁶ Cf. Bowes, 2008: 135-146.

³⁷ For the necropolis and further bibliography: Andreu Pintado, 2015a: 138-140, and 2015b: 17.

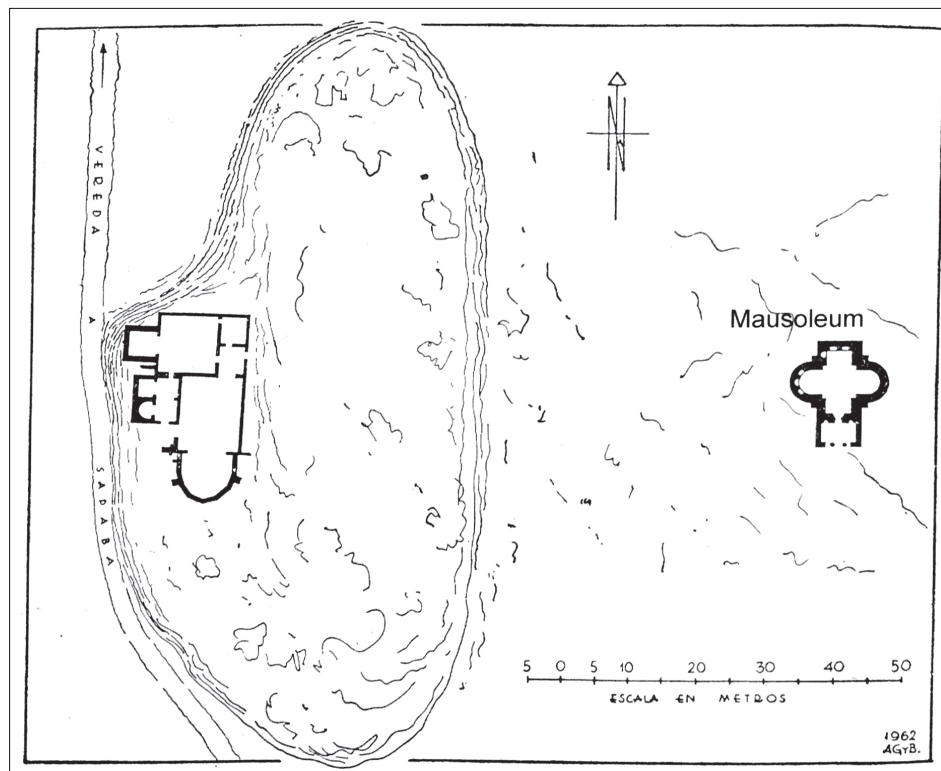


Figure 5
Plan of the villa and temple-mausoleum at Sádaba (García y Bellido 1963)

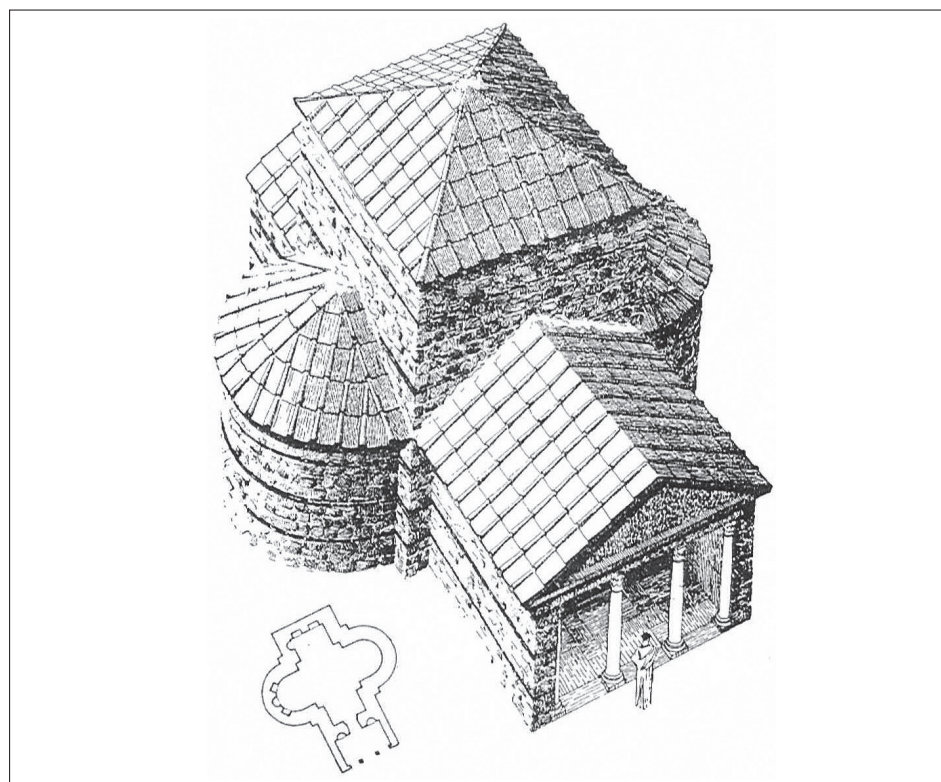


Figure 6
Reconstruction of the temple-mausoleum at Sádaba (García y Bellido 1963)

What remains of the so-called *pars urbana* at Sádaba intimates additional attention to the needs of the surrounding rural community, if in different ways (figure 7). This villa and La Sinagoga are contemporary, loosely dated to the 4th century by their construction – both are built using concrete faced with ashlar masonry, although bands of bricks are used in the temple-mausoleum, and some scholars judge its construction as superior to that in the villa.³⁸ The preserved remains of the *pars urbana*, which cover approximately 200 m², include two rooms with hypocausts belonging to a thermal complex; four rooms of varying sizes that may or not be associated with the former by passageways; and a large hall of 18 by 9 m terminating in a ribbed octagonal apse, the thin walls of which betray a flat roof.

These vestiges mark a departure from the villa at Las Musas with regard to the outfitting and ornamentation of the *pars urbana*. Indeed, it is difficult to reconstruct plausibly any kind of permanent habitation at the villa of Sádaba; rather, the extant architectural evidence betrays a series of spaces designed for visiting groups (e.g. baths; a large hall). While it is possible that other structures necessary for long-term residential use – habitation quarters, service areas – have been lost to erosion,³⁹ positive evidence for a bath suite, an apsidal salon, and a temple-mausoleum recommend identification of the Sádaba estate as a rural locus outfitted with quasi-urban amenities, a nexus for social mixing among rural actors of varied statuses.

One of the earliest late antique villas to be systematically excavated in Navarra, the villa of Liédena, is likewise associated with a stand-alone temple-mausoleum. This site is located near the Irati River, approximately 4 km west of the modern city for which the site is named. Excavations in the 1940s brought to light a peristyle villa built in the Imperial period, with different sectors devoted to production and to habitation. Architecturally,

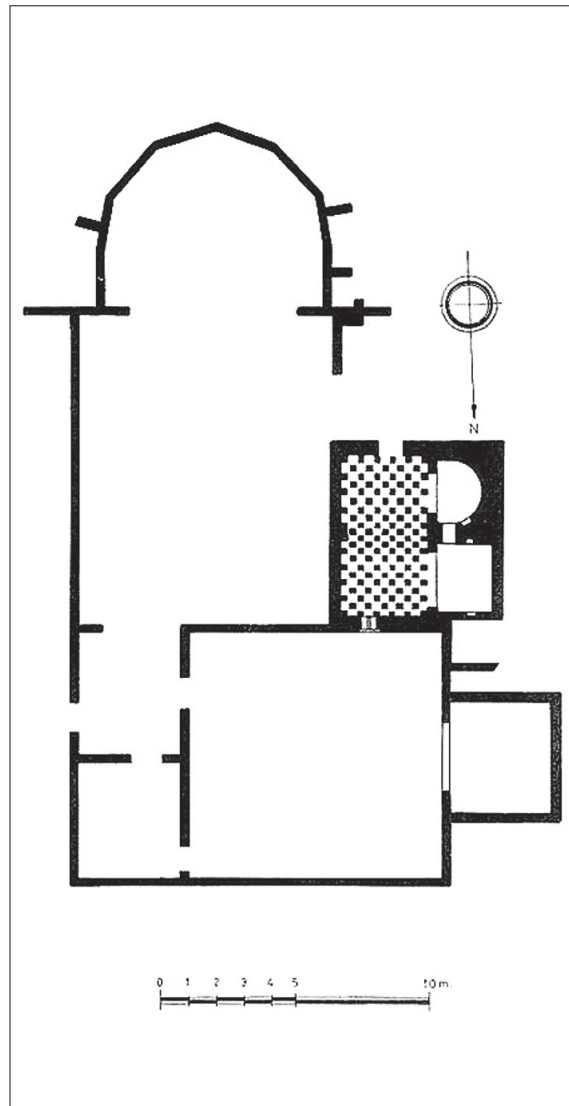


Figure 7
Plan of the villa at Sádaba
(Mezquíriz Irujo 2009)

³⁸ Georges, 1979: 351, and García y Bellido, 1963: 10.

³⁹ García y Bellido, 1963; cf. Fernández Castro, 1982: 98.

however, the antique iteration of the site is better known (figure 8). Aggrandizements to the *pars urbana* in this period, loosely dated to the 4th century, include an apsidal room off the western gallery of the peristyle, and significant additions south of the peristyle, including a bath suite and a gallery of rooms organized around a long pool.⁴⁰

And yet, late antique aggrandizements at Liédena extend well beyond the core of its *pars urbana*. The footprint of the estate is increased significantly by with the construction of a long eastern corridor, which connects the *pars urbana* to agricultural storage buildings at the estate's eastern boundary. The two porticos that constitute this corridor contain 44 sizable rooms, approximately 3 by 3.5 m each. Their regularity has led some scholars to associate them with military barracks, but scattered finds – agricultural tools, storage vessels, and table ceramics – suggest storage and civilian dwelling.⁴¹ In other words, non-elite workers were housed on the estate, but in spaces that were physically distinct from the peristyle *pars urbana*.

The sacred site associated with Liédena – a small temple *in antis* with a crypt at the back, located about 150 m east of the residence – is also separate from the *pars urbana*. This distance seems to mark the extent of the owners' territorial domain. But it also manifests visible investment in the provision of cult space for passersby and the rural community broadly, as much as for Liédena's elite and non-elite residents. Although the plan and extant superstructure suggest a temple, the crypt and several fragments of undecorated sarcophagi (one of which may have been placed in the crypt, according to excavator A. Garcia y Bellido) reveal the building's dual function as a burial complex.⁴²

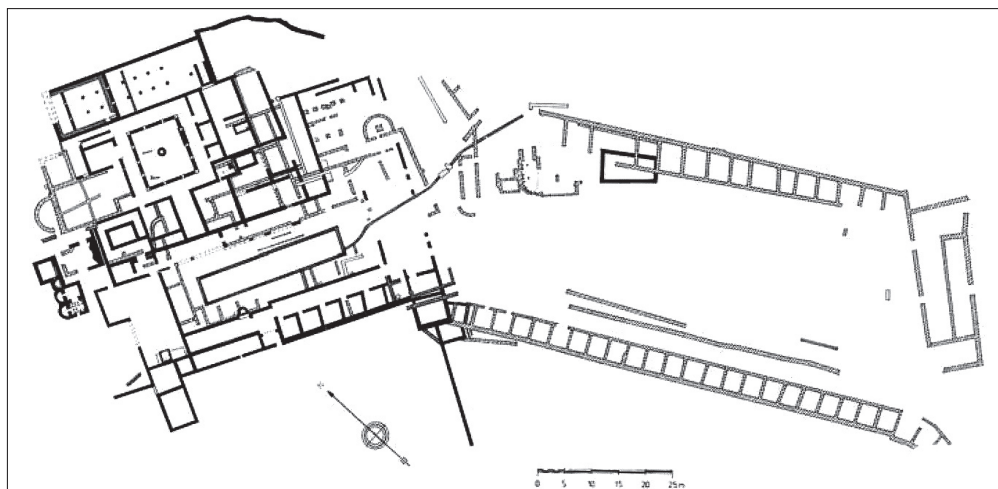


Figure 8
Plan of the villa of Liédena (Taracena Aguirre 1950)

⁴⁰ For the revised dating of these structures see Mezquíriz Irujo, 2009: 221–225; cf. Taracena Aguirre, 1950.

⁴¹ Taracena Aguirre, 1950: 31–34, and Mezquíriz Irujo, 1954 for the finds. For identification of these rooms as military barracks see Taracena, 1949, and Zuza Astiz, 2013. The argument for both storage and housing is encouraged by the presence of similar courtyards (if with different layouts) at other late antique villas, e.g., the villa of Montmaurin or the villa of Valentine across the Pyrenees (Balmelle, 2001: 379–385; 424–426).

⁴² Taracena Aguirre, 1950: 35–39.

SACRED ECONOMICS IN THE *RUS*

The more specific offerings of a temple-mausoleum versus a complex dedicated to sacrifice and mystery cult demand full synthetic consideration, but let us begin analytical investigation of these sites by exploring the probable currency of the sacred in rural *Tarraconensis*, and the motivations behind late antique investment in the construction of quasi-public sacred amenities of various kinds on private estates. K. Bowes' work on this subject argues that late antique *domini* built sacred spaces with diverse functions – churches, mausolea, temples, and temple-burial complexes – to advertise their seigneurial power, especially to themselves and their elite peers.⁴³

And yet, the provision of space for cult activities operates differently from advertisements of elite status in the *pars urbana*, that is, from mosaics, marble décor, or apsidal halls. Indeed, rural cult complexes – especially those associated with *villae* but located well beyond their *partes urbanae* – reveal the reciprocal networks that animated the Roman *rus*, and the myriad social groups on which the elite class (and their identification as such) was dependent. These structures differ from other icons of elite status insofar as they foster, inculcate, and even sanctify the hierarchical relationships that define the Roman *rus* broadly: those between patrons and clients, and between elite villa owners and the non-elite estate-based community, together with the so-called peasant class.⁴⁴ Cult structures recognize social hierarchies animating the countryside in a more positive mode than previous scholarship on late antique villas broadly admits.

With regard to patronal-client relations and benefits afforded to villa owners as the financial patrons of cult sites, the construction of cult space is a basic expression of rural *euergetism*. Sacred complexes located at the probable edge of *villae* allow landowners to assert themselves as wealthy and influential patrons of communities on but also beyond the boundaries of their estates, within the local *rus* broadly. These structures are physical manifestations of patronal beneficence.

Moreover, the construction of a cult site versus, e.g., a quasi-public bath house, permits a villa owner effectively to capitalize on the economic benefits of religious ritual in the Roman world, for sacred structures had value beyond the basic provision of space for cult practice, dedications, and pilgrimage. Sources suggest that in rural environments, they were important sites for economic interactions and transactions. B. Shaw's work in rural North Africa has shown that market exchange was a frequent occurrence at rural temples; rural temples were organizational nodes around which rural communities assembled, sometimes independently and for their own needs as much as for their patrons'.⁴⁵

⁴³ Bowes, 2006, and 2008: 125–88.

⁴⁴ On the term "peasant" see Bowes, 2021.

⁴⁵ Shaw, 1981 on periodic rural markets in North Africa.

In the late antique *rus*, I argue, cult sites associated with *villae* were designed consciously to build iterative relationships of this kind between villa owners and the surrounding rural populace. That is to say, cult structures sought to ensure the loyalty of rural communities and their dependence on the estate by providing those same persons with space to gather, interact, connect, and commune in various ways. A communal gathering at a sacred locus built by an individual *dominus* strengthened the latter's position both in competitive peer polity dialogues with other owners, and in the hierarchies organizing the countryside broadly. Moreover, the involvement of the gods and/or ancestors in these relationships – the connection to such groups via sacred space and practice – is such that strong but admittedly mutable connections between a villa owner and rural clients are witnessed by higher powers, thereby making the symbiotic interdependency of the parties deeper and more difficult to dissolve.

ESTATE CULT: USAGE AMONG THE SUB-ELITE

The benefit to landowners vis à vis the construction of cult structures on their estate is paramount, and yet, I caution readers from assuming the dominance of the *dominus* in the quotidian interactions that likely characterized these structures. Frequent visitations to these cult sites by the probable villa owners who funded them did not happen, as the vast majority of Roman landlords were absentee villa owners, especially in provincial territories of the far western empire.⁴⁶ Most elite *domini* would have been forced to maintain residence in town to have a voice in civic dialogues, to participate in large-scale commercial enterprises, and to maintain their status as “elite” in socio-economic networks with imperial importance.⁴⁷ For these reasons, the Roman elite class resided primarily in towns and cities, well into the late antique period. Accepting this to be true, the following section investigates benefits accruing to rural residents from their more immediate ability to visit the aforementioned cult sites, whether those persons came from sub-elite housing structures at Las Musas and Liédena, or the countryside broadly.

At the most basic level, the distance of these cult buildings from their *partes urbanae* grants a degree of independence to any persons engaged at them, whether practicing cult or gathering for secular purposes, e.g. conversation and commercial exchange. The distance of the temple-mausolea in this study for their villas, and also the nature of the cult practice at the *taurobolium* is such that any interactions occurring at these different sacred sites are necessarily removed from any watchful eye of the *villa* owner, who was likely present symbolically but not physically.

⁴⁶ Many late antique landowners possessed multiple *villae*. For Ausonius' wealth and half-dozen estates: Sivan, 1993. For Melania the Younger's estates: Clark, 2021. To my knowledge absentee landowning is regularly mentioned in passing by historians (e.g. Jones, 1964: 781–784, and Brown, 2012), but archaeologists rarely note this information in their interpretations of, e.g., decorative programs and elite peer-peer competition. N.B. the so-called ruralization of the late Roman elite has been effectively disproven, see Bowes, 2010.

⁴⁷ Heather, 1994, and 1998; Marcone, 1998.

There is no positive evidence for votive dedications at either the temple-mausoleum of Liédena or La Sinagoga, but at Las Musas, the aforementioned low-relief images of bulls on small stones recovered in the *taurobolium* are suggestive (see again figure 2). Their form recalls commemorative *cippi*. R. Turcan's work highlights a broader tradition among Cybele's followers of erecting such objects in the Gallic provinces, presumably in honor of previously performed rights;⁴⁸ we may therefore infer that the small bull-relief blocks at Las Musas are votive commemorations, rather than functional altars. The social standing of the patron(s) of these objects may further be inferred from synthesis of the stylistic discrepancies between these blocks and the figural polychrome mosaics that decorate the *pars urbana*. The simple figural etchings on the *cippi* do not suggest a trained artisan or an expensive commission so much as a devoted patron of modest means. This, together with the aforementioned residential complex for non-elites in the *pars urbana* – whether its inhabitants were transient or permanently housed in less luxurious spaces – points to patronage of the cult site by persons of lesser means.

Lending support to this argument is the standing identification of the cult complex as a site for the mysteries of Cybele. Such a cult is significant in a discussion of the social dynamics of rigidly hierarchical relationships because – like the mysteries of Mithras, Dionysus, or even early Christianity – it was open to every section of society, from senators and slaves.⁴⁹ The tenets of Cybele's mysteries are difficult to reconstruct, but most scholars assume that it was attractive to persons of lesser means because it offered some kind of alternative to an individual's present state – a promise of a sort of afterlife in the near or distant future, along with participation in a cult collective, independent of class distinctions.

If, however, the *taurobolium* at Las Musas worked to the benefit of the cult's sub-elite participants as much as it did to the elite persons who were responsible for the existence of this sacred complex, what should be made of the temple-mausolea at Sádaba and Liédena, which do not obviously allow for discussions of mystery cult, membership, and any semblance of an adherent's metaphysical reward? Indeed, if the cult structures at Liédena and La Sinagoga were family mausolea first and foremost, sub-elite inhabitants of the estate may have been compelled to frequent them and carry out necessary rituals. Previous scholarship on domestic cult, especially the cult of the *lares*, has argued that lesser members of the *familia* – especially the enslaved – were responsible for maintaining the cult and the family's concomitant social standing.⁵⁰ By this line of reasoning, the mausolea at Sádaba and Liédena might be understood as a physical means of ensuring the loyalty of persons employed by the estate, whose duties included paying respects at these sites.

⁴⁸ Turcan, 1972: 128-131.

⁴⁹ See Mezquíriz Irujo, 2003: 164-166. For general discussion of Cybele's cult and other mysteries: Alvar, 2008. For discussion of enslaved persons as initiates in Dionysiac cult, compare Beckmann, 2023.

⁵⁰ E.g. Foss, 1997. Bodel, 1997. For La Sinagoga in particular and a nearby necropolis, presumably for populations involved in agricultural exploitation of the surrounding land, see Andreu Pintado, 2015a, 138-140.

Yet it is also possible that these temple-mausolea were dedicated to one or various deities, together with the family or families that patronized the construction and/or maintenance of each cult building. Indeed, La Sinagoga preserves niches for statuary display, and the temple-*in-antis* form of the cult building at Liédena participates in a long tradition of sacred architecture.⁵¹ Accepting that both are flexible sacred structures, we may infer that some ritual participants frequented these structures for reasons ulterior to veneration of the owner's family cult.

Perhaps the most lucid account of the workings of estate temples is found in a much earlier letter of Pliny the Younger, who writes about his plan to renovate a temple on his Tuscan estate. His motivation for doing so involves the surrounding community. He writes: "I need to restore the temple of Ceres on my estate; it needs enlarging and improving, for it is certainly very old and too small considering how crowded it is on the day -- for on the Ides of September, great numbers of people from the surrounding country assemble there; many affairs are transacted, and many vows are made and fulfilled."⁵² The shape and nature of these affairs and vows Pliny does not divulge – perhaps because he is either uninterested in or uninformed about their content by virtue of his station. In any case, the agency and intentions of rural worshippers at a sacred complex and the desires of the *dominus* – at a temple-mausoleum as much as a complex devoted to Cybele or Ceres – need not be mutually exclusive.

RURAL INTERDEPENDENCIES IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Having reviewed the reciprocal benefits of free-standing villa cult sites to both their patrons and rural audiences broadly, let me contextualize the impetus underlying the provision of such structures in the 4th century broadly. For, although villa cult is common in earlier periods of Roman history, the archaeological evidence for physical vestiges of such sites becomes increasingly widespread in late antiquity and in the Iberian Peninsula in particular.⁵³ Beyond the aforementioned sites, for example, are several well-known cult sites in coastal *Tarraconensis*, including the *mithraeum* at the villa of Els Munts and the possible mausoleum and Christian cult site at Centcelles.⁵⁴ Further afield, there are several *umgangstempel* type structures dating to the late antique period in the Roman Algarve, most notably the temple-*nymphaeum* at the villa of Milreu.⁵⁵ K. Bowes' work has also drawn attention to the fragmentary evidence for Christian cult in the Peninsula which, in the 4th and early 5th centuries, is better documented in the *rus* than in the *urbs*.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Temples with *antae* are commonly found in Greece and Asia Minor, but examples in Rome and the Latin west do exist, see Vitr., *De arch.*, III, 2, 2, and Temple 1 at Sant'Omobono (Hopkins, 2016: 53-61).

⁵² Plin., *Ep.*, IX, 39, 1-2. Translation after Radice, 1969.

⁵³ For examples see Bowes, 2006, and Chavarria Arnau, 2007.

⁵⁴ For further bibliography see Chavarria Arnau, 2007: nos. 16, 17.

⁵⁵ Hauschild, 1993, and Bowes, 2006: 77-80. For the *umgangstempel* type see also Derks, 1998.

⁵⁶ Bowes, 2008.

With this evidence for cult buildings of all kinds on *villae* across Iberia, and indeed throughout the wider western empire, I close with a series of questions. Is there more at stake in the *rus* than in previous periods, meaning that *villae* must clearly materialize their commitment to the surrounding populace, perhaps through the construction of mutually beneficial structures like cult buildings? Is what we see in the archaeological record simply a continuation of earlier traditions, or has something definitively changed in late antiquity, such that there is greater need to court rural groups, and more correspondent value to maintaining a rural clientele? Did rural non-elite persons have more power in late antiquity than in previous periods? Was ensuring the loyalty of the peasantry worth greater time and effort from landowners?

As regards the interests of *domini* and possible reasons to court the attention of rural sub-elite classes, we can consider the burgeoning of the senatorial class over the course of the 4th century – its growth from about 600 persons at the start of this century to 4000 at its end.⁵⁷ There were simply more elite individuals for other elite persons to compete with, even in the countryside. In this particular socio-historical context, I argue, physical instantiations of patronage – e.g. rural cult buildings – were a means of attracting and sustaining the interest, attention, and fidelity of different rural groups. A larger entourage of rural clients permitted landowners to distinguish themselves from other elite *domini* both socially – with clients as symbols of a *dominus*' wealth and powers – and economically. For the bulk of a landlord's rural clients assuredly belonged to the laboring class; they worked the landowner's territories, and/or provided other necessary services.⁵⁸

With the economic utility of rural clients in mind, the greater agency of such persons in late antiquity is also worth considering, based on the aforementioned cult sites and several contemporary points raised by Libanius in his 47th oration *On Patronage*, written near the end of the 4th century. Scholarship often remarks that Libanius' comments provide insight into the late antique character of patronal networks.⁵⁹ For our purposes, some of this eastern rhetorician's primary frustrations are especially revealing. In particular, Libanius is bothered by strong competition for the position of [rural] patron from persons of decidedly non-aristocratic backgrounds: military men; clerics; the "nouveau riche". Libanius' complaints in this vein, which are frequent in this speech, underscore the social upheaval caused by bureaucratic promotion in the 4th century, that is to say, the competition that ensued between different types of elite persons.

As far as the collective power of rural inhabitants in the countryside is concerned, Libanius' lamentations over a world in which clients (as opposed to patrons)

⁵⁷ Heather, 1998.

⁵⁸ For patronage in late antiquity see Kelly, 2004: 145-185; see also Beckmann, 2022, for material culture as pawns in these same negotiations, especially in villas of the western provinces.

⁵⁹ See for example Garnsey and Woolf, 1989: 162-163, Kelly, 2004: 165-181, and Grey, 2006.

enjoy a buyer's market are equally telling. Libanius speaks for his own interests in this speech as an elite landowner, and especially his investment in maintaining the *status quo* of the patron-client hierarchy. He asks rhetorically:

“Well,” it may be said, “what happens if the landlord is incapable of doing the job, and some more powerful personage is needed?” Then let the peasant tell the master, and he tell this other. You, my man, make your request to him [the original patron], and let him pass it on. You would get help in this way, and *he would suffer no harm, since the order of precedence in such matters remains firmly fixed*.⁶⁰

Libanius reveals that he himself has “suffered” this very harm earlier in the speech. Several of his tenants, members of a Jewish family that had been working for him for generations, appealed to alternative patrons for assistance in a court case. Their ultimate victory over Libanius in these judicial proceedings not only humiliated him; it dissolved the patronal-client bond that had connected them for years.⁶¹ This anecdote reveals Libanius obvious disdain for the flexibility that mere peasants – his own included – enjoy. For a traditional member of the local aristocracy like Libanius, this revised model of patron-clientage, in which clients choose or abandon patrons who serve or fail to fulfill their own needs, is a blatant violation of the Imperial-era system and ancestral traditions of patron-clientage.⁶² From this, moreover, we may conclude that the sub-elite have a stronger voice in rural dialogues than is generally assumed, especially in the late antique period. Courting, capturing, and keeping the attention of such persons, I argue, appears to be in the best interests of landowning patrons, and rural cult structures emerge as one way to materialize that objective.

EPILOGUE

With this investigation, I have sought to bring greater nuance to the long-standing conceit of *villae* as dynamic nodes organizing the surrounding countryside. Contrary to Salvian's reports, I argue that any power that villa estates and their landowners enjoyed was dependent on their ability to ensure the respect and fidelity of the surrounding rural community, many of whom worked for the villa owner directly, or in lands adjacent to the *dominus'* estate. This paper has focused on the provision of cult structures for such audiences, but such buildings are just a fraction of the much larger material assemblage that comprises the late Roman villa, which can and should be used to give contour to the nature of the reciprocal relations between landowners and non-elite rural inhabitants.

⁶⁰ Lib., *Ora.*, XLVII, 22. Trans. Norman, 1977 (stress italics are my own).

⁶¹ Lib., *Ora.*, XLVII, 13-16.

⁶² See especially Garnsey and Woolf, 1989, for patronage in the Imperial period versus the late antique period.

The dependence of landowners on the attention and fidelity of non-elite groups further encourages us to rethink fundamentally our approach to late Roman villas as “elite” sites. If, as I argue, *villae* catered to rural populations as much as to the whims of their elite *domini*, we must treat these sites as windows onto the full spectrum of Roman society, from senators to slaves. Owners have received plenty of press in previous scholarship; the lives of sub-elite persons who worked, frequented, inhabited, and even patronized various structures on these estates now merit our attention.

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