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The *longue durée* of an imperial villa estate in southern Lazio

Peter A. J. Attema

ELIZABETH FENTRESS, CAROLINE GOODSON, MARCO MAIURO with M. ANDREWS and J. A. DUFTON (edd.), with S. Bernard, M. Bianchi, D. Booms, R. Cabella, F. Candilio, C. Capelli, S. Carocci, G. Castellano, N. Cavalieri De Pace, B. Cernuta, M. Ciausescu, S. Cox, I. De Luca, A. Di Miceli, C. Fenwick, R. Ferritto, T. Franconi, S. Gatti, G. Gaianigo, G. Giammaria, S. Hay, E. Holt, B. Hoffmann, A. Kuttner, R. Laino, B. Lepri, A. Mariani, M. McNamee, I. Miliareisis, E. Nitsch, M. Piazza, F. Pollari, S. Privitera, G. Rascaglia, R. Ricciardi, C. Rice, D. M. Totten, R. Veal, K. Williams and J. Young, *VILLA MAGNA: AN IMPERIAL ESTATE AND ITS LEGACIES. EXCAVATIONS 2006-10* (Archaeological Monographs of the British School at Rome 23; The British School at Rome, London 2016). Pp. xix + 516, figs. 329, col. pls. 34. ISBN 978-0-904152-74-6. £90 (source data and excavation reports available at <http://archaeologydata.brown.edu/villamagna>)

Recent overviews of Republican and Imperial villas, by A. Marzano (2007) for central Italy and by C. P. Venditti (2011) for *Latium vetus* and *adiectum*, show that the *suburbium* around Rome *sensu lato* was dotted with smaller and larger estates during those periods.¹ Their inventories, however, also show that this thriving countryside was affected by decline during the 2nd and 3rd c. A.D., when the number of active villas decreased dramatically. The valley of the Sacco southeast of Rome, where the present case-study is located, forms no exception to this general picture, but one villa stands out for its long afterlife: Villa Magna, in the sources known from the letters of Marcus Aurelius and in the landscape known as an imposing agricultural estate inhabited to this very day.² The initiative to start an excavation at Villa Magna was taken by E. Fentress, C. Goodson and M. Maiuro who thought this complex worth studying archaeologically not only on account of its interesting Roman past, linked to Imperial power, but also – and perhaps especially so – because of its long afterlife covering late antiquity and the Early Mediaeval period and extending well into the period of *incastellamento* (with that term is meant the change from open settlements in the valleys and plains towards fortified settlements on hilltops in the foothills that line the valleys and coastal plains of mediaeval Italy). The imperial villa was fortified and resettled in late antiquity and then turned into the locus of a monastery in the 10th c., as such featuring a unique sequence of several distinct mediaeval phases. Eventually abandoned in the early 15th c. in a period of crisis, the complex was, after a history of 1300 years of use, resettled in the 19th c. when the residential part of the original villa was overbuilt by a large farmhouse (*casale*) that re-used its Roman foundation (*basis villae*). While this implied that archaeological knowledge of the residential part of the villa would be poor, the productive and other functional spaces surrounding the residential sector, such as the imperial winery, the workers' "barracks" and the bath complex, in contrast, appeared to be highly informative and fundamental for our understanding of the functioning and transformation of an imperial estate.

Villa Magna, a unique archaeological project

Although many villas can be expected to have had long and complex afterlives, few have been archaeologically investigated on the scale and with the detail applied by E. Fentress and her team of international specialists and students at Villa Magna. The project, carried out between 2006 and 2010, comprised excavations, surveys and specialist studies. It has now resulted in a very detailed and well-illustrated excavation report with a supporting open-access database housed at Brown University. This monumental study can be viewed in its own right as the complex and intricate archaeological and documentary biography of a unique site,

1 See A. Marzano, *Roman villas in central Italy, a social and economic history* (Leiden 2017); C. P. Venditti, *Le villae del Latium adiectum. Aspetti residenziali delle proprietà rurali* (Bologna 2011).

2 The letters of Marcus Aurelius and other Roman sources on the villa and its surroundings are discussed by Maiuro on 27-31.

but at the same time as a “guide fossil” for our understanding of the late-antique to mediaeval transformation of the landscapes of Lazio south of Rome. Physical remains dating to the first centuries of the second millennium A.D. are well represented and well studied in the landscape of S Latium as part of work on *incastellamento* and monasteries, but archaeological insights into unfortified mediaeval sites of this period such as Villa Magna are very meagre; in fact, as a rule the early mediaeval phases escape us archaeologically, since many sites were built over. In this sense Villa Magna is of particular interest since it fills this gap. Fentress rightly states that the Villa Magna project has great potential to ask fundamental questions about the *longue durée* of central Italy with respect to the rôle of élite power in the changing political, religious and socio-economic structures of the Imperial and Early Mediaeval periods, and with respect to the conditions of the peasant population. Especially regarding the latter aspect the excavations proved extremely informative. But let us first have a look at the landscape of Villa Magna as described in the book and the landscape survey conducted so that we can frame the site within the local settlement pattern.

Landscape and settlement around Villa Magna

Villa Magna lies in the Sacco valley at c.200 m asl on the slopes of the limestone massif of the Monti Lepini. This is a fertile landscape of mixed soils well adapted to all kinds of cultivation. While the area of Villa Magna had already been archaeologically mapped as part of the *Forma Italiae* series by M. Mazzolani, using a topographical approach, the project team deemed a further intensive artefact survey useful to increase knowledge on the rural settlement pattern of which the villa had formed part.³ The catalogue of known sites, in combination with the survey which could be carried out only in a limited number of fields having good ground visibility, yielded a total of 88 sites in an area of c.5 x 5 km around Villa Magna. The distribution of sites is presented in chronological maps covering the Republican to late-antique periods. The authors note that, by the 2nd c. A.D. when the villa was founded, the rural settlement pattern had changed in the sense that the rather densely inhabited, centuriated rural landscape of the Republican period was being transformed into a landscape “dominated by a small number of elite villas and only a handful of smaller sites” (48). In fact, in late antiquity the immediate surroundings of the villa saw only one new rural foundation and only 5 other sites with datable late-antique material. While in the conclusion to the survey chapter J. A. Dufton and R. Laino accept that the foundation of Villa Magna led to a decrease in sites in its immediate surroundings, they express doubts on the representativeness of the survey data in general, given the large amount of non-datable potsherds. This problem of a possibly still-hidden, non-datable settlement pattern is even greater for the Mediaeval period: while 62 houses are known from textual sources, no traces have been found in either the 1969 *Forma Italiae* survey or the Villa Magna survey itself. This is perhaps not so surprising given the perishable nature of mediaeval rural building and the much scarcer pottery record, as was exemplified in the excavations of mediaeval housing at the site of Villa Magna after it was resettled. This aspect of the Villa Magna excavation, the bringing to light of ephemeral rural structures, adds to the importance of the project.

The extent of the site of Villa Magna in terms of productive landscape is estimated to have been slightly short of 200 ha. The excavations, especially those of the grand wine-processing facility (see below), make clear that Villa Magna specialized in the production of a good-quality wine in a luxurious setting. The scale of wine-making, judging from the storage facilities uncovered, leads to the assumption that a large part of the surrounding land was in use as vineyards. We may envisage the ensemble in Imperial days as not unlike a French château with respect to its grandeur and management of labour. Naturally, there would have been additional support crops with the cultivation of vines, as the environmental evidence indicates. For instance, chestnut and other types of wood grown on the slopes of the Lepini will have been used to fabricate stakes, and fruit and vegetables would have been grown in gardens on the estate itself. Moreover, soils not fit for vines may have been used for grain cultivation. The integration of palaeobotanical studies (by R. Veal) is a strong point when it comes to providing data on the productive potential of the estate.

3 M. Mazzolani, *Anagnina (Forma Italiae, Regio I, VI)* (Rome 1969).

Remote sensing and architectural recording

Research at the site itself consisted of a combination of remote sensing (mainly geophysical prospection by S. Hay, but also air photography) and excavations, with the former aiding in determining the strategy of the latter. Geophysical research (mainly gradiometry) led to the identification of several additional structures in the surroundings of the residence and the monumental “imperial winery” (see below), resulting in new phased plans of the villa complex (mainly of the Hadrianic and Severan eras). It revealed how the imperial residence in the north was connected to the winery by means of a N–S portico several hundred metres in length. Along the portico to the west the outline of several additional large structures were recorded. Immediately southwest of the imperial residence remains were recorded of a probable bath complex, a nymphaeum, and a building that is interpreted as “workers’ barracks”, the last three all dated to the Severan phase. Two large cisterns were identified in the S part of the complex. In 1905, standing remains of the nymphaeum still stood tall when it was known as the “Fontana Romana”. Water supply and drainage, vital for the functioning of the villa, receive specialist attention (I. Miliareis and N. Cavalieri De Pace) resulting in an interesting reconstruction of water management at the site and a proposal for the functional and monumental reconstruction of the nymphaeum. The plans recovered from the remote sensing and architectural recording, reconstructed in various perspective views, help the reader visualize the various spaces in some considerable detail. Finds from the excavations (painted plaster, marble, etc.) are used to reconstruct the decoration of floors, walls and ceilings where possible (illustrated in colour plates).

The excavation of the Roman and late-antique remains

Much attention is given to the excavation data pertaining to the productive spaces that made up the winery of the imperial residence and their architectural reconstruction. The excavation covered the rooms where the grapes were processed as well as the storage area filled with *dolia* dug into the ground. The perspective views, created by D. Booms in an exceptionally clear style, bring out the scenographic and ceremonial architectural setting in which wine-making at Villa Magna took place. This was not a regular productive space but one set apart through its use of monumental architecture and luxurious materials. The cultural and ideological significance of wine-making at Villa Magna is discussed in an insightful manner by Fentress (203–8): wine-making was not only a ‘spectacle’ for the imperial élite and a means of display and self-representation by the emperor and his family, but, as Fentress argues on the basis of the ancient written sources, immersed in imperial ideology and carrying even religious significance.

Of the actual imperial residence not much is known, as this zone (area B) was overbuilt by the mediaeval settlement consisting of a church, monastery and cemetery (discussed in chapter 7). The residence was set on a high podium that stood out in the landscape. There is evidence of a façade in front of it, which would have given it a monumental appearance, while the magnetometry indicates the existence of a vast peristyle. Although several Roman structural remains were identified in the complex stratigraphy, there were too few finds to allow any firm, detailed interpretations of the plan, and only a courtyard paved with large white, rounded stones could be reconstructed. In a later phase, an apsidal brick building was erected in the latter (its plan and foundations would be re-used for the mediaeval church built in *opus vittatum*). The initial brick building was probably subdivided into three aisles lined with columns. While interpretation is difficult due to the lack of finds (possibilities extend from an early church to a reception hall, mausoleum or villa temple), the lack of luxury elements, presence of a *fistula*, and presence of a vat and paving slabs suggest a working area. The excavators propose that the structure represents a new winery that replaced the old one abandoned around A.D. 250. Palladius indeed suggests an apsidal building as befitting a winery. A parallel is found at the site of Passolombardo, where a *calcatorium* was found in an *apsis* (the place where the grapes are trodden). The latter connected to vats holding the juice that was further distributed in channels to *dolia* set in the ground in rows in the outer aisles. The new winery — if this interpretation is right — was twice the size of the old one, and would show that investment in wine-making continued in the 4th and possibly lasted until the 6th c. when the church was built and when yet another location for a winery was chosen, in front of the new church.

The "barracks"

From a sociological point of view, the excavation of an elongated structure, referred to by the team as the "barracks", merits attention. This probably two-storeyed complex, the plan of which could be reconstructed in its entirety, consists of two blocks separated by an alley. In all, it comprises 30 individual but aligned units, arranged in a double row on one side and in a single row on the other side of the alley with attached portico. The complex as a whole borders on a contemporary Roman road that passed through the grounds of the villa. The construction date is thought to be somewhere between the beginning of the 3rd and midway through the 4th c., after which periods of re-use extend well into the 5th c. To the latter period belongs a group of infant burials found beneath the beaten floors of two of the rooms (pp. 132-35). A possible cause of the abandonment may have been an earthquake known to have struck Rome and surroundings in 484 or a more general geological instability that affected the viability of the structure.

The structure, which in plan resembles an army barracks, is unusual for a villa. It could have housed members of the Praetorian Guard drafted to protect the imperial property, but its poor construction and the nature of the finds, which indicate the presence of both sexes, rather point to accommodation for dependent labourers, both families and single persons. Among the finds were more than 50 hairpins of bronze and bone and other personal objects, 176 scattered coins of low value, a fair amount of domestic pottery for storage, transport, cooking, eating and drinking, tools for milling, weighing and textile working, oil lamps, and glass. The heavily-fragmented pottery assemblage indicates intensive use of the "barracks" between the 3rd and 5th c. In the destruction layers a significant amount of Byzantine wares was found. The objects, discussed in detail on 138-70, give insight into the material reality of the daily lives of the labourers housed here. Reflecting on the 3rd- to mid-4th-c. pottery, M. Ciausescu states that the finds "reflect the humble condition of the inhabitants at this time and their limited mobility", a situation that may have changed somewhat thereafter, to judge from the presence of the coins and a range of imported amphoras. She concedes, however, that post-depositional biases and the re-use of pottery must always be kept in mind. The study of the fabrics of the coarse wares shows strong continuity. The latter are thought to have been products of nearby rural industries that supplied Villa Magna. Their shapes vary in their cultural and economic affiliations, for instance towards the area of Rome in the 3rd c., and towards the Bay of Naples in the (late) 4th c. All in all, the pottery study proves important for establishing the position of Villa Magna within regional and extra-regional economic networks from the Imperial period down to late antiquity.

Below the beaten-earth floors of rooms 13 and 23 of the "barracks", six infant burials were found dating to the Late Roman phase, and two dating to the 6th and 7th c. (132-35). The former had been buried while the rooms were still in use. They were simple trench graves lined with and covered by tiles. M. Andrews notes that, although common in abandoned villa contexts of the 4th/5th c., the practice of burying infants in a still-functioning habitation context is rare for the period; on the other hand, there are cases where excavators assume abandonment of habitation structures based on the presence of infant burials, even if this is not stratigraphically attested. This practice may thus have been more common than previously thought. This implies a need to rethink the cultural and ritual significance of infant burials in Late Roman society. From a biological point of view, the infants exhibited identical pathological changes pointing to nutritional stress probably caused by genetic anaemia. The researchers conclude that the burials belonged to families who were living in the rooms above and it is suggested that we may be dealing with an influx of foreign labour. (Apart from the infant burials in the "barracks", the team also excavated a mediaeval cemetery comprising 450 graves next to the church in the mediaeval settlement of Villa Magna; these burials are discussed in detail in chapt. 7.)

The 6th and 7th c.: continuation of the wine-making vocation

What makes Villa Magna even more interesting is its continuity in the 6th and 7th c. The new phase starts in the mid-6th c. with the construction of a three-aisled church in *opus vittatum*. To the northwest, in the area of the former Roman courtyard, wall remains and *dolia* were found. The latter context is interpreted as the *doliarium* of the new *cella vinaria* that followed

on the one that was removed from the former brick structure now turned into a church. After an abandonment of *c.*80 years, the “barracks” were partly re-utilized and parts of the portico rebuilt as habitation spaces, as the pottery finds indicate.

Nearby, two vats found in a large rectangular building point to wine-making also during this period (treading grapes) contemporary with the re-occupation of the “barracks”. The latter were destroyed by fire only a few decades after its re-occupation around 600. Following this phase, there is evidence for the existence of “Grubenhäuser” (sunken-floor buildings with walls of mud around wooden frameworks), possibly dating towards the mid-7th c., while series of postholes point to the presence of timber structures.

The phases of re-use of various structures at Villa Magna during the 6th and 7th c. were identified on the basis of a substantial number of potsherds found in stratigraphic contexts. The introduction of new wares and fabrics (casseroles, bowls, lids, jars and jugs) indicate new methods of food preparation and/or a decline in imported ceramics, both burnished and unburnished. The new pottery repertoire shows connections within Lazio and, above all, with Rome. The evidence leads Fentress to describe the 6th and 7th c. as a time of revival, during which new investments were made in the former Imperial estate. The new 6th-c. situation is rendered in a reconstruction (p. 255) showing the brick building and the *doliarium* that formed the economic heart of the estate. While in theory the owner could have been the church or a private landlord, Fentress argues that Villa Magna probably continued to be fiscal property.

The final occupation and abandonment of the site, with the church and its narthex and the large sunken-floored buildings in front, is rendered in a reconstruction (p. 259) which greatly helps the reader envisage the complex excavation results. The latest pottery finds date the abandonment of the new set-up to before the 8th c. The interpretation of the sunken-floored buildings is that they served as storage, probably for grain, rather than a domestic function, since hearths and domestic débris were lacking. The building technique of the sunken-floored buildings links them with examples from N Italy, although there is no sign of Lombard material culture. Late in the 7th c. the sunken floors were filled in and the buildings must have gone out of use.

The mediaeval settlement

The team did not find any clear traces of habitation for the better part of the 8th c. (except pottery [see p. 270]) and it is only in the late 8th and 9th c. that a new phase of occupation could be detected archaeologically. The latter would last into the 13th c. when the monastery was suppressed and the monastery became an élite residence, with the church and churchyard filled with graves. Within this period, the team discerns three discrete phases (an early, a middle and a late mediaeval one). Now the complex is referred to as Villamagna. First comes re-occupation of the vaulted substructures of the monumental Roman winery and transformation into a semi-fortified élite residence. The excavations revealed a 9th-c. oven here probably used for food preparation (bread?). Later, this space became filled in with rubble and refuse containing pottery of the 12th-13th c. On the still-intact platform of the former winery numerous postholes attest to construction of a large roofed building re-using still-standing Roman wall fragments. The former “imperial staircase” was adapted and used as an entrance that could be closed. The reconstruction of the ground-plan and elevation of the residence and tower (pp. 269 and 271) shows the vaulted substructures still intact and a courtyard building on top with a structure that is interpreted as a tower. Set on the high Roman platform, the residence was in a commanding position and naturally well-defended. Parallels for such rural fortified buildings from this period are few, although the rectangular form of the early mediaeval residence at Villamagna comes close to the early phase of an élite residence at Monte Fiesole near Florence.

The church of the early mediaeval settlement saw redecoration of its interior following a period of neglect and disuse. This shows the aspirations of the estate-owners and their connections with the Roman Church. The many remnants of liturgical fragments found scattered (many were re-used in later tombs) are placed in the context of the redecoration scheme. Pottery abundantly present in rubbish deposits and other accumulations shows connections with pottery from urban contexts at Naples and above all Rome. Typical of the period is the 9th-c.

“Forum Ware” with a thick vitreous glaze; it makes up c.10% of the total. Some forms such as the chafing-dish would point to access to luxury consumption goods, as do globular amphoras. Fabrics were studied in an attempt to relate them to places of production. While there were imports, it is conceivable that pottery was produced on the estate of Villa Magna (as on comparable sites such as Monte Gelato). An important outcome of the study of the large body of cooking-wares and amphoras is the possibility that part of the pottery already falls within the late 8th c. So far, however, there is no pottery that can be securely dated to the 10th c.

The monastery of San Pietro at Villamagna

At the end of the 10th c., a monastery endowed with properties as laid down in a charter was created north of the church. Around the latter new structures were put up. A mediaeval settlement arose over the remains of the former winery. This new phase is thought to have been created by élite landowners on their own lands. C. Goodson writes (284) how

the proliferation of monasteries on private lands in ninth- and tenth-century Italy corresponded to the desire of certain families to mark out territories, consolidate ownership over lands and promote the status of the families.

However, reforms issued from Cluny soon weakened the relationship between monasteries and élite families, making the former more independent and richer. Income was generated in three ways: properties rented to tenant farmers for income in cash or in kind; exploitation of lands owned by the monastery and farmed by labourers in order to sell surplus produce; and offerings and donations given to the monastery in exchange for services (e.g., masses, burials). Documents describing the properties show that many of them were near the monastery, but two fisheries were as far away as Sezze, on the E side of the Monti Lepini close to the Pontine marshes.

The richly decorated church and the presence of the mediaeval village suggest that the estate was run efficiently. Remarkably, and unusually for the period, the ensemble was unfortified. By the early 13th c., the monastery’s independence and wealth seem to be over. This was probably due to disagreements between the abbot and local lords over peasant labour. In 1297, Bonifatius VIII suppressed the monastery of San Pietro di Villamagna, joining all of its properties and vassals into the bishopric of Anagni.

The team excavated and studied various structures that functioned during the 10th and 13th c. To the north of the church, walls were erected in what is called *cantiere povero* masonry, of a technically low standard, as were the floors of beaten earth belonging to the monastic enclosure and some related buildings. A small number of burials identified inside the enclosure probably belong to monks or persons with special status. Later, a free-standing bell-tower (later 11th/early 12th c.), a porch replacing the old narthex, a well-built cloister, a substantial cistern fed by a water filtration system and a well-house were added to the monastic complex. Both the initial and the more monumental 12th-14th c. phases are captured in reconstruction drawings (pp. 290 and 300), the elevations of which are based on analysis of architectural fragments found in destruction deposits. Specialist masons were employed for the cloister. The considerable economic investment in the monastic complex was typical of the period, as was its architectural appearance (a square cloister with covered corridors having biforate windows and giving out on a central court), which shows that the abbots kept up with their peers.

To the south of the monastic complex, over the former winery and south of it, a mediaeval settlement developed. Here the team excavated several habitations dating between the early 10th and the late 13th c. that will have housed labourers working the monastery’s land. A list of the monastery’s properties mentions 60 habitations scattered over the property in what were probably small hamlets, like the one excavated. Living conditions at this small hamlet seems to have been quite harsh over the four centuries of its existence, to judge by the material culture. The habitations (“huts”) from various centuries are reported on in detail. Their size probably did not exceed 13m² and they were rebuilt, it is thought, every two or three generations using Roman building materials that were still lying about. The study of middens provides insight into subsistence in the hamlet. Both the monastery and the hamlet were abandoned at about the same time, underlining how closely related their functions must have been.

G. Rascaglia discusses pottery of the 10th-13th c., of which the major part was found in the hamlet. He notes that finewares almost totally disappear in the 10th c. Sparse glazed wares dating to the 11th c. occur frequently, resembling productions at Rome, but much of it is of second quality. To judge from the uniformity of many of the fabrics and the match with the local geology, both the Sparse Ware Pottery and the common wares were probably produced at Villamagna itself, or at least nearby. Pottery dating to the late 13th or early 14th c. is thought to be related to the re-use of the area of the hamlet for farming.

Glass is discussed by B. Lepri and faunal remains by E. Holt. Although the sample is small, Holt notes how the meat of pigs and sheep/goat became part of the diet in the village and in the monastery, as part of a mixed-farming strategy. The faunal remains suggest that villagers may have reserved hind limbs of pigs to pay their annual rents during the monastic period.

The castrum

After the monastery had been abolished at the end of the 13th c. the site was occupied by "laymen with a social status" who owned horses and weapons but made use of local pottery and thus were without access to the Roman market (335). The village was abandoned, as was the area of the former winery, but the church continued to function for the occasional mass. The monastery buildings were now used as storehouses. The court of the monastic building was filled in. A burial found in one of the filtration layers of the water system of the monastic complex indicates that the water-supply system had gone out of use. In various deposits 14th-c. pottery was found. The *castrum* ceased to be used in the second half of that century, following a period of famine and epidemics in the first half. Burials of the Later Mediaeval period were found in the area of the former narthex. Shortly after the 14th c., the church was surrounded by fortification walls and a newly built tower. The absence of 15th-c. pottery indicates that the fortification was in use only for a brief period and may never have been finished. Its intent was more to protect rural property than to highlight the power of the owner (e.g., the Caetani or Conti family, or the bishop of Anagni).

Abandonment

Villamagna was finally abandoned by the 15th c. Among the deposits near the well-house some relatively intact but collapsed masonry is tentatively interpreted as resulting from the earthquake of 1349. Such an event may have been the final blow for an already deteriorating situation from which at times of economic and demographic crisis Villamagna could not recover. Burials at the site continued, however, and the book contains an extensive report on Villamagna's mediaeval cemetery and the burial rites practiced, as well as a discussion of 14th-c. pottery, coins and metal objects (which include the horse fittings). There was re-use of the ruins for sheds and shelters in the Early Modern period, not for dwelling but in relation to an orchard at Villamagna. Much varied pottery of the 14th c. was abundantly present in the re-used court of the monastic complex. Alongside the continuation of certain common wares, a new tableware now appears on the market, a local glazed ware probably modelled on the Green Glaze Wares of Roman and Campanian production (a few imports of the latter were found). Glazed cooking-wares also now occur. Characteristic of the last phase is the appearance of Archaic Maiolica and tin glaze pottery. Although Rascaglia characterizes the assemblage generally as of low status, he admits (346) that deducing social status from pottery alone in this period is difficult due to the unstable social and economic situation. Discussion of the objects from the *castrum* by T. Franconi (horse fittings, projectile points, dice) shows that the monastery was now used by laymen who included armed persons protecting those who lived on the properties.

The mediaeval funerary record

Finally, one should draw attention to the in-depth analysis of the mediaeval cemeteries. The author, C. Fenwick, claims that this is the largest sample of mediaeval burials in Italy, amounting to 491 individuals from 384 graves. The burials investigated for the most part lie west of the church, with the earliest ones in the former narthex, and late mediaeval graves (of higher status) in the church itself. Three phases (Early, Central, Late) with increasing numbers of burials are distinguished. Burials were assigned to phases on the basis of stratigraphic

information, material culture and radiocarbon dating. The earliest radiocarbon date is 1280-1380 cal. AD. Burial had ceased by the latter part of the 14th c. The cramped distribution of the burials by the Late Mediaeval period is clearly shown in the plans. Despite the complexity of excavating many superimposed burials of particularly the Late period, three-dimensional viewing in ArcScene allows one to discern successive phase plans and the identification of possible family plots. Throughout the period, tomb types are mostly *fosse terragne*, simple earthen graves in which the deceased was laid and then covered with earth. Grave furniture is generally absent, although tiles were used to cover infant burials or the skull. In some tombs local building materials were re-used, both standing walls as well as loose materials. Single and multiple burials occur in both the Central and Late periods, mostly below ground but in the Late Mediaeval period also above ground. The analysis covers disposition of the body (supine with legs extended) and dressing of the corpse (probably clothed, although some may have been wrapped in a shroud). In the near-total absence of preserved textiles and dress items, the team had to deduce this information from the anatomy. Many graves lacked grave-goods, and the few items of dress, jewellery or other grave-goods (coins) that were found are mostly assigned an apotropaic significance.

In separate paragraphs, Fenwick discusses age and gender differences as they emerge from the burial treatment, paying due attention to infant burials (marked by a peripheral location in the Late Mediaeval period). Status is evident foremost from the location of a burial inside or outside the church or monastery; those inside religious structures were more expensive, yielding more income for the clergy, and they have relatively more grave-goods than those outside. The relatively high marine or animal protein isotopic signals of those buried in front of the church also indicate that this location carried status. For the period during which the monastery was active, Fenwick concludes (372) that

the monks controlled the whereabouts of burial and the funerary rites, and in particular which categories of the dead could be buried in consecrated ground.

Following the suppression of the monastery, mortuary practices changed and rules were slackened. This is apparent from the children and infants and the fact that grave-goods (discussed here separately) became more common. These changes reflect wider trends in legal and social funerary practices. The section on the mediaeval cemetery ends with a preliminary report on the osteological and isotopic studies of the human remains. Conditions for bone preservation at Villa Magna were surprisingly good, yielding valuable data on mortality rates, life expectancy, pathologies and diet. While the early sample is too small for any meaningful aggregate analysis, the data show that from the Central period onwards mortality was high and life expectancy low, pointing to harsh living conditions for the villagers. Sub-adults numbered 204 out of 491 individuals. The estimated stature for men and women is shorter than average when compared with data from other mediaeval Italian data-sets. According to the isotopic analyses, the taller men had more access to meat and fish. Figures on stature and robusticity point to stress throughout the Central and Late periods without any strong discontinuities or changes in lifestyle. Skeletal markers point to a heavy workload. For reasons still unknown, males were slightly more represented in all periods, but this is in line with other studies of mediaeval cemeteries in Italy. Migration inwards seems to have been limited.

Contextualization of the mediaeval phase

Finally, S. Carocci contextualizes the mediaeval village at Villa Magna — a site type again in this period known as ‘villa’ — in the context (401) of

a world where fortified villages (*castra*) were multiplying and becoming ever more exclusively the principal organizing structure of power and settlement.

He emphasizes that more attention should be paid to the phenomenon of the mediaeval open village, of which many more must have existed, to judge by the documentary sources. Currently, the study of the castles as a central political element in the mediaeval settlement pattern still dominates; indeed, Villa Magna would eventually develop into a *castrum*. In studying the legal testimonia found in the monastic archive, Carocci portrays the social environment in a good deal of detail, as well as the world of work (including *corvées*) of peasants living at Villa Magna. He also pays attention to their relationships with the monks and the secular lords of

nearby castles. It appears that settlement on the property would have been nucleated but that no *militēs* were present on-site under monastic lordship. Peasants received a fair amount of land to cultivate, and *corvées* (with up to 60 days of labour) seem to have been common. At the end of the 12th c. the situation changed, with political and military control of the countryside increasing. It is in this period that the open villages under monastic control in Lazio disappear, as happened at Villa Magna shortly after the monks had gone and the site was turned into a *castrum*.

C. Goodson concludes the chapter on the Mediaeval period by positioning the archaeological and historical results within the grand narratives and models of mediaeval settlement in Italy. In chronological order she comments on the formation of the Papal State, the rise of monasteries and castles, and the ‘crisis’ of the 14th c. In many ways, according to her, the excavations have permitted us to rethink prior assumptions regarding social status. One is that the social status of the Villamagna management during the Early Mediaeval period was higher than expected: indeed, the material culture excavated even speaks to high-status rural occupation (413). The material record also shows that the villa was part of the Roman urban network.

The monastery that was founded subsequently likewise attests to opulence. Its architecture emulates the large monasteries of Farfa, Monte Cassino and San Vincenzo. Documents show that it even owned houses and chapels in nearby castles. In 1297, the monastery was suppressed following a period of diminishing donations in one of general economic crisis. In the latter part of its existence, the material record of Villa Magna is increasingly orientated towards the centre-south of the country, which indicates how Rome’s grip on the valley of the Sacco had weakened. The book concludes with Fentress paying particular attention to the *longue durée* of the site, with due attention given to its intriguing socio-economic history.

Why is this book important?

While at this point one might have concluded simply by complimenting Fentress, Goodson, Maiuro and their team for having established an important archaeological milestone along the road to understanding the late-antique and early mediaeval landscape and society of central Italy, it is more important to draw attention to three particular strengths of this volume:

First, the book describes a unique site in southern Lazio that has been studied by a highly specialized team from multiple angles. The uniqueness of the site comes from its long archaeological biography from Roman Imperial times well into the period of *incastellamento*. The *raison d’être* of the estate was wine-making; this was a constant, starting under imperial patronage and ending in the 7th c. under quite different socio-economic conditions, though possibly still state-controlled.

The excavation of the “barracks” gave insight in the daily lives of the workers, who must have been dependents of the owners of the estate, and may have been slaves all along, as Fentress suggests. In the Early Mediaeval phase, the site was transformed into an open village around a church. At the end of the 10th c., a monastery was founded which organised the surrounding properties and labour. The combination of archaeology and documentary sources give a remarkably detailed image of this period, even if from the pottery analysis there is uncertainty about continuity. In any event, Villa Magna continued to be a focal point in the landscape as ecclesiastical power was wielded over the surroundings. This aspect of the power of the élite and the dependence of the labour during the Mediaeval period is well brought out by the multidisciplinary approach of dedicated experts in which the analysis of excavation contexts, material culture (architecture, pottery, burials), osteological remains and research in paleo-diet and archival material all work together. This, then, is a second strength of the project and the publication.

A third strength is the contextualization of the excavation data within the broader narrative of late antiquity, the Early Mediaeval period and *incastellamento*. At least for southern Lazio, Villa Magna now functions as a lens through which we can view the socio-economic history of this long period, not only from the perspective of the élite but also, and especially, from that of dependent labour.