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Republican Villas Around Rome: a Quantitative and Topographical Approach

Between 1996 and 1999, the City of Rome conducted field surveys, excavations and other investigations in the area of the old airport of Centocelle, in the southeast suburbs of Rome, where a large natural park is about to be completed. This research work made possible an extensive historical reconstruction of the settlement phases dating from the sixth century B.C. through the sixth century A.D. The archaeological report will comprise three books, the first of which, published in 2004 ("Centocelle I"), concerns the roman republican phases of the area. Among the discoveries in this area, the most impressive and substantial remains were those of three long-lived villas. Together the villas and their associated agricultural fundus covered an area of more than 30 hectares and both their construction and development is notable. All of these villas have a built size of more than an hectare in the imperial period, but they also had substantial mid- and late republican phases. The agricultural production in the surrounding estate was centered above all on wine, as attested by the unusual finding of the ditches in the bedrock cut when the vineyard was planted. Cereals, vegetables, cut flowers were also produced at the villas, which were clearly catering to the large urban markets and increasing Roman population, rather than simply producing for their own subsistence.

The works presented to a recent congress held at the French School in Rome ("Suburbium II. Il Suburbio di Roma dalla fine dell'età monarchica alla nascita del sistema delle ville (V-II sec. A.C.)") as well as new studies and publications, now allow a better understanding of these findings in the wider context of the city's suburban area. Based on this body of evidence, the present paper attempts a general collection of all the known Republican villas in the hinterland of Rome. A particular emphasis is given to quantitative approaches, which assess the patterns of chronological development, production, building techniques and topographical distribution of villa sites. In conclusion, there is now a sufficient number of these sites to support not only an architectural analysis, but also an overall reconstruction of the landscape in the Middle Republic, which so far has remained very unclear and in great need of further studies.