

Villae maritimae del Mediterraneo occidentale: Nascita, diffusione e trasformazione di un modello architettonico

Edited by Giulia Ciucci, Barbara Davidde Petriaggi, and Corinne Rouse (Collection de l'École française de Rome 614). Rome: École française de Rome 2024. Pp. 354. ISBN 978-2-7283-1613-7 (hardcover) €62; ISBN 978-2-7283-1614-4 (ebook) open access.

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The study of *villae maritimae*—luxurious coastal residences that served both as retreats and centers of economic activity—has long been a fundamental topic in Roman archaeology. This volume represents a significant contribution to the field by synthesizing new archaeological data, offering comparative perspectives, and critically reassessing traditional typological models. Published as part of the Collection de l'École française de Rome, it assembles work by leading scholars whose interdisciplinary approaches enhance our understanding of the architectural, economic, and cultural significance of these elite residences in the western Mediterranean.

By bringing together case studies spanning from Italy to North Africa, the book transcends the conventional Italo-centric focus that has often dominated studies of Roman coastal villas. Instead, it presents a more nuanced and regionally diverse narrative, integrating evidence from recent excavations with technological advancements such as GIS analyses and digital reconstructions. The volume is thus an essential resource for archaeologists, architectural historians, and scholars of Roman economic history interested in the intersection of elite domesticity, maritime infrastructure, and cultural connectivity.

The book is divided into five sections, each addressing a critical aspect of *villae maritimae* within their historical, architectural, and economic contexts. Each section builds upon recent discoveries and interpretations that have broadened our understanding of these structures.

The opening section, on origins and development, examines the genesis of Roman *villae maritimae*, tracing their roots in Hellenistic and Greek domestic traditions and their transformation under Roman influence. Contributions by Ciucci and Rouse emphasize how early Roman elites strategically adapted existing coastal

models to establish architectural typologies that suited the Mediterranean maritime environment. Special attention is given to the Bay of Naples area, where well-documented examples such as the villas at Stabiae and Posillipo set the precedent for later developments (see A. Marzano, *Roman Villas in Central Italy: A Social and Economic History*, Brill 2007). The discussion also extends to the role of Hellenistic influences in shaping the coastal villas of the Roman Republican and Early Imperial periods.

One of the volume's key contributions lies in its comparative analysis of regional variations. The section on regional expressions and adaptations explores how *villae maritimae* evolved differently across the western Mediterranean, responding to local climatic, economic, and cultural conditions. Davidde Petriaggi's discussion of North African examples, including those in Carthage and Leptis Magna, illustrates how these residences integrated indigenous architectural features, while Rouse provides an insightful assessment of the coastal villas in Gaul and Hispania, demonstrating their role in regional trade networks. Additionally, the inclusion of case studies from Sardinia and the Balearic Islands fills an important gap in previous literature, although some areas, such as Corsica, remain underrepresented.

A particularly valuable aspect of the volume is its section presenting detailed analysis of the architectural and decorative programs of these villas. The essays examine key components such as peristyles, panoramic terraces, private harbors, and fishponds (*piscinae*). The integration of hydraulic engineering in these residences, discussed extensively in a chapter by Francesco D'Andria, highlights the technical sophistication that enabled elite owners to manipulate and control their maritime surroundings. Moreover, the discussion of mosaic pavements and frescoes underscores the symbolic

significance of *villae maritimae* as spaces for elite self-representation. The volume successfully places these findings within broader discussions on luxury and elite identity in the Roman world (e.g., A. Wilson and A. Bowman, eds., *Trade, Commerce, and the State in the Roman World*, Oxford University Press 2017).

While *villae maritimae* are often studied as leisure retreats, the next section, on economic functions and maritime infrastructure, shifts the focus to their role in economic production and trade. Several contributions analyze how these coastal estates engaged in fishing, salt production, and commercial shipping. A particularly compelling case study is presented by Pierre Gros, who examines the *villae maritimae* of southern Gaul and their integration into Mediterranean trade routes. The inclusion of recent underwater archaeological findings, notably from the Villa con porto at Ventimiglia, adds a new dimension to the discussion of villa-based maritime logistics. The discussion of maritime trade and its impact on the sustainability of these elite structures aligns with recent studies on Roman economic history, highlighting the complexities of supply chains and resource management.

The final section, on transformation and decline of *villae maritimae*, considers their changing fortunes in late antiquity. As Roman economic structures evolved, many of these estates were repurposed or abandoned. Essays by Sophie Hay and Nicolas Monteix analyze the archaeological evidence for adaptive reuse, noting instances where villas transitioned into monastic complexes or were incorporated into medieval coastal settlements. The discussion extends to contemporary challenges in preserving these sites, particularly in light of modern coastal erosion and climate change, emphasizing the need for integrated heritage management strategies.

Villae maritimae del mediterraneo occidentale is an invaluable resource for scholars interested in the intersections of design, technology, and cultural studies. It provides a rich documentation of ongoing debates and historical case studies that illustrate the complexities of artistic and technological hybridization across global contexts, allowing scholars to bridge past and present discussions and gain a deeper understanding of the roots of contemporary architectural discourse. Whether one is exploring bioclimatic architecture, digital design methodologies, or the evolving identity of built heritage, this volume serves as an essential touchstone for cross-cultural analysis and technological innovation in the built environment.

Moreover, the book stands as a critical reference for those seeking clarification of the role of artistic and

technological contaminations beyond superficial appropriations. The discussions presented in the various sections contribute to a growing body of literature that challenges traditional narratives of artistic influence, instead proposing a more dynamic and reciprocal view of cultural interactions. The volume's interdisciplinary nature enhances its accessibility to readers from diverse fields, including architecture, urbanism, anthropology, and design.

In addition, the book provides a critical reassessment of *villae maritimae* not just as physical structures but as dynamic centers of cultural exchange. The integration of maritime infrastructures, decorative programs, and elite socioeconomic strategies underscores the multifunctionality of these spaces, inviting further research into their impact on regional economic networks. This work enriches existing discussions on Roman architecture by positioning these villas within the broader spectrum of Mediterranean trade, elite display, and landscape transformation.

Another crucial aspect of the volume is its methodological approach, which incorporates traditional archaeological methods with modern digital tools such as GIS-based analysis, photogrammetry, and 3D reconstructions. These innovations allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the spatial organization and architectural evolution of *villae maritimae*. The inclusion of underwater archaeology, particularly in the study of submerged structures and maritime installations, further enhances the depth of the volume's contributions. Such interdisciplinary engagement opens pathways for future research, particularly in the realm of computational archaeology and environmental reconstruction. However, some chapters adopt diverse methodological approaches—ranging from empirically grounded archaeological analyses to more descriptive or interpretive contributions—and do not always fit within a consistent comparative framework. This variability may occasionally reduce the overall cohesion among the case studies presented.

While the book's methodological inconsistencies pose challenges, its thematic richness outweighs these limitations. Future research in this domain could build upon the insights presented, exploring new frameworks for digital-humanist approaches to architecture and deepening the understanding of how technological advancements continue to shape cultural exchanges. The interplay between historical context and contemporary technological applications remains a fertile ground for scholarly inquiry, and this volume offers a solid foundation for further exploration.

The potential for continued engagement with the themes explored extends beyond academia into the realm of cultural heritage conservation and site management. As coastal archaeological sites face increasing threats from urban expansion and climate change, the knowledge and methodologies advanced in this book can inform preservation strategies. Future studies could further expand on conservation technologies that integrate sustainable tourism, adaptive reuse, and digital documentation as methods for safeguarding these invaluable cultural landscapes.

Ultimately, *Villae Maritimae del Mediterraneo Occidentale* succeeds in advancing the scholarly discourse on Roman coastal villas by offering new perspectives,

integrating diverse methodological approaches, and broadening the scope of discussion beyond traditional architectural typologies. It is a valuable contribution to the study of Roman architecture and will undoubtedly serve as a reference work for scholars and students engaged in the fields of archaeology, architectural history, and Mediterranean studies for years to come.

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