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Decorative Features and Social Practices in Spaces for Agricultural Production in Roman Villas

Abstract: This paper examines the use of decorative features in the context of wine and oil processing facilities in the villas of Roman Italy. To this purpose, the investigation analyses the interaction of decoration with the central productive installations, the spaces surrounding them and the villa building as a whole. This relationship between utilitarian facilities, decoration and architecture makes it possible to draw conclusions about the social practices associated with these facilities and the potential motivations of the actors involved in their construction and management. The forms of decoration employed range from wall paintings to the use of representative architectural forms and innovative designs. These various techniques could be utilised to arrange production rooms to facilitate ritual acts, to provide a space for aristocratic leisure, or to emphasise the care taken in the production processes. Other owners took the opposite approach, hiding production areas with representative façades to create the impression of a luxury estate.

Introduction

In the postmodern economic system of the western world, it is increasingly important for individuals, but also for companies, corporations and other businesses, to be visible, to stand out and ‘make the difference’ with their own products and services¹. To this end, the results and goods of work are increasingly designed with the recipient in mind, who needs to be addressed by their novelty and specificity and thus encouraged to consume them². Within this consumer culture and its economic strategies, the aesthetic design of products or services and their affective-sensual experience by the customer gain immense importance³. This process of aestheticisation includes on the one hand the design and perceptual qualities of the products themselves⁴. But on the other, the spaces in which the products or services are offered to the consumers are also aesthetically prepared to promote the desire to buy them⁵. To achieve this, the visual, haptic, acoustic and olfactory stimuli of sales rooms⁶ are designed in order to create an appealing ambience that creates an affective connection between the consumer and the product by subliminally associating it with positive attributes⁷. In this context, the decoration of these spaces has the concrete task of generating an environment appropriate to the targeted group of consumers.

The spaces of production and the less appealing processes associated with them are mostly separated from the spaces of consumption and are withheld from the consumer’s gaze. In contrast to this approach stands the less common strategy of purposefully demonstrating the production processes, for example in the concepts of craft fairs, agrotourism or show kitchens. Here, the consumer gains insight into selected, sensually appealing work activities⁸ from mostly traditional, (handi-)

1 Reckwitz 2018, 184; see also Knox – Pinch 2010, 55.

2 Reckwitz 2018, 188–191.

3 Welsch 1965, 3 f.

4 Lash – Urry 1994, 14 f.

5 Venkatesh – Meamber 2008, 47.

6 Numerous tactics are employed, including the dimensions, colour design, lighting, surface materials and structures of the room and the furniture, the use of background sounds or scents and the control of movement.

7 Knox – Pinch 2010, 55. Theodore Schatzki defined the emotional influence of space on social action with the term ‘teleoaffective structures’; see Schatzki 2002, 80–85.

8 The presentation of aesthetically unpleasing or deterrent production processes, such as the work of butchers or tanners, logically occurs rather rarely or not at all.

craft, agricultural or gastronomic fields of work⁹. Afterwards, s/he can of course purchase the corresponding items. The more or less direct participation in the production process addresses the experiential shopping motives of the customer and thus builds a close emotional bond to the product¹⁰. Furnishings and decoration, although often completely artificial in character, again play a decisive role in creating an atmosphere appropriate to the production process, and thus affectively lending authenticity to it. In this way, the distinction between production space and consumption space is removed. The production process becomes the aesthetic motivator of consumption.

Although reaching an extent and level of systematisation never seen before, the aestheticisation of economic spaces and facilities through decoration is not a purely modern phenomenon, but can already be grasped in ancient contexts. The following study focuses on such situations in the agricultural production spaces of Roman villas. These are certainly not among the first contexts that come to mind when approaching the topic of decorative principles in the Roman built environment. However, decorative elements in the form of wall paintings, precious materials, sophisticated architecture or other non-production-related furnishings in rooms for the processing of agricultural goods are not as rare as one might expect.

The corresponding archaeological remains turn out to be a fruitful background for researching the effects and functionality of *decor*: on the one hand, as we will see, these production spaces each served a clearly defined production task, which had a strong effect on their architectural design. On the other, they were sometimes equipped with elaborate furnishings that had no immediate purpose with respect to these production tasks, or even obstructed them to a certain degree. This connection opens up a field of tension that offers ideal conditions for studying the interrelationship between decorative elements, their architectural context and the social practices taking place within the respective spaces.

At the same time, the decorative features provide insights into some ancient activities that would otherwise have remained archaeologically invisible and thus reveal that economic facilities were not 'only' workspaces, but part of a wider range of human actions. In contrast to the modern situations described at the beginning, these actions are not primarily connected with motives of consumption. Rather, they touch a broad range of practices from the context of everyday Roman 'villa life' and its different social actors. This paper attempts to shed light on the functionality of *decor* in the production contexts, the motifs and practices that led to its use, as well as its initiators and potential addressees. To address these questions, this study will investigate decorative elements in economic facilities that produced wine and olive oil in the villas of Roman Italy. These data are supplemented by single examples from the Iberian Peninsula and the town of Volubilis in North Africa. By analysing the forms and respective qualities of the decorative features applied, as well as their spatial disposition within the rooms, the paper tries to deduce the purpose of the decorations, the motivations behind their placement and finally the practices associated with them.

Spaces of production

The production of wine and olive oil constituted the two central economic sectors of Roman market-oriented agriculture¹¹. Therefore, many villas in Italy were (depending on their location) equipped with facilities for processing one or even both of these two crops¹².

⁹ Cf. Hibbert – Tagg 2001, 348 f.

¹⁰ See Dawson et al. 1990, 409–413.

¹¹ Morel 2007, 506.

¹² See Feige, forthcoming.

The processing and refinement of wine and oil was time consuming¹³ and required a considerable amount of fixed technical equipment. A market-oriented winery, for instance, needed installations for the treading (*calcatio*) of the grapes (*calcatorium*), a press (*torculum*) and a collecting and decantation vat (*lacus*), as well as vessels (*dolia*) and significant space for the storage and fermentation of the wine (*cella*)¹⁴. Olive oil workshops, aside from a press and storage facilities, required an oil mill (*trapetum*) and settling vats¹⁵. As the production of wine and oil promised considerable profits¹⁶, but at the same time was relatively prone to failure without constant supervision to prevent spoiling of the products¹⁷, great care was given to the furnishing and maintenance of the facilities. This is evident not only from the texts of Roman agricultural literature, most notably the works of Cato, Varro and Columella¹⁸, but also from the archaeological evidence.

The facilities for the market-oriented production of wine and olive oil relevant to this study consisted of the press rooms (*torcularia*), for the physical processing of the crops, and storage areas or rooms, where, in the case of wine production, the chemical fermentation processes also took place. Surviving examples of these spaces in Roman villas from all over Italy reveal a spatial structuring of the economic installations that followed a very similar basic scheme, adapted to the practical requirements of production¹⁹. The pressrooms mostly featured a long, rectangular ground plan and a structural separation into two functional areas: typically, a lower zone for the operation of the press mechanism, and a higher one where the actual processing was carried out (here called a ‘pressing floor’) (Fig. 1). The length of the *torcularia* was a consequence of the long lever presses installed here, which were by far the most common kind of presses used throughout Italy²⁰. While the operation area mainly contained the apparatus for the handling of these lever presses²¹, the pressing floor was designed as the focal point for all production fittings: the *calcatorium*, the actual pressing surface (*ara*) and the collection system, as well as the rear anchors of the press (*forum*). In the villas of Roman Italy, these elements appear according to two recurring constructive and organisational configurations.

In configuration one (Fig. 1), every step of wine production took place in a separate installation: a treading vat, an *ara*, a collection channel (*canalis*) and finally the collection vat. This vat did not usually stand in the pressroom itself, but in an adjacent, roofed storage room. Here, the must obtained was transferred from the vat into *dolia* or casks. In configuration two (Fig. 2), known only from facilities around the Bay of Naples, a large basin combined the production steps into a single structure, which served as treading vat, pressing area and collection installation at the same time. The storage areas that were used in combination with these *torcularia* took the form of an open-air courtyard and most often did not possess a direct connection to the pressroom via a pipe or a channel²².

¹³ Thurmond 2006, 126.

¹⁴ See Brun 2004, 21–25.

¹⁵ Concerning the working steps and equipment used for the processing of wine and oil: see White 1970, 225–246; 1975, 225–233; Brun 2004, 5–36; Teichner – Peña Cervantes 2010–2011, 378–384; on the presses specifically, see Baratta 2005.

¹⁶ See White 1970, 241–246.

¹⁷ Thurmond 2006, 108 f. 134–140.

¹⁸ The three writers address the cleanliness and maintenance of agricultural equipment at various points throughout their works, e. g., Cato Agr. 10; Varro Rust. 1, 64; Colum. 1, 6, 9–11; 12, 18, 4; 12, 52, 2 f. A detailed compilation and discussion of the instructions passed on in the written sources concerning the hygiene and maintenance of production equipment can be found in Thurmond 2006, 80–85. 115–118.

¹⁹ Concerning the following considerations, see Feige, forthcoming.

²⁰ Baratta 2005, 139–144.

²¹ The operational apparatus could take the form of a winch (*sucula*) or screw (*coclea*) that was fixed to the floor or to a counterweight; see Brun 2004, 14 f.

²² There are a couple of examples of the piped configuration. The first is the famous Villa della Pisanella at Boscoreale (Pasqui 1897, 483–490). The second example known to the author is the winery of the Villa di C. Olius Ampliatus, located in the southeast district of modern Naples (Cascella – Vecchio 2014, 26–33).

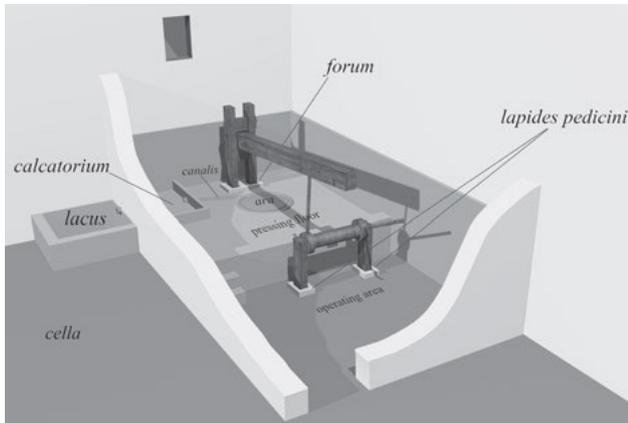


Fig. 1: Reconstruction of a *torcularium* for winemaking, with separate structures for each step of the production (Type 1).

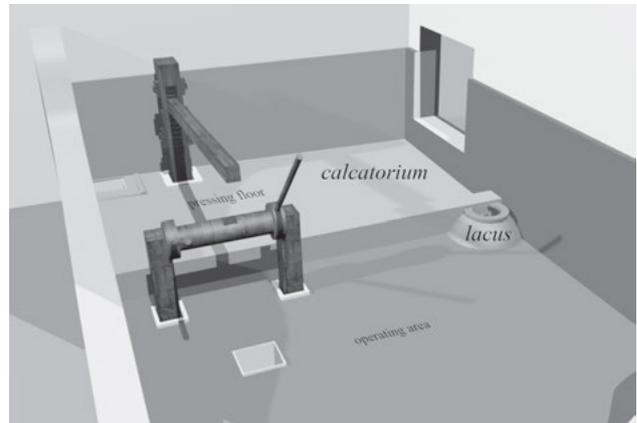


Fig. 2: Reconstruction of a *torcularium* for winemaking, combining the production steps in a single, large basin (Type 2).

In both configurations, the processing areas and the pressroom vats predominantly featured waterproof *cocciopesto* or *opus spicatum* floors. The operation areas for the presses were often equipped with simple beaten earth floors²³, as were the storage spaces, which on rare occasions also show floors made of *cocciopesto* or brick tiles²⁴. Irrespective of the different advantages and disadvantages of the two configurations, the working spaces, consisting of a combination of *torcularium* and *cella*, feature a clear and rational structure in their equipment and layout with a distinct focus on their economic tasks. The decisive attention in the planning of the installations lay in the logistical simplification of the production processes, as well as the appropriate hygienic conditions for the product. However, as a growing number of archaeological discoveries underlines, there were a significant number of production spaces for the processing of wine or oil that deviated from this strictly functional layout. They stand out through decorative elements that *a priori* do not fit into the rational environs of a production site. The spectrum of these elements includes unusual architectural forms for the spaces themselves, additional non-production-related installations, mural paintings and precious building materials.

Spaces of representation and leisure

In 1995, Nicholas Purcell discussed the phenomenon of the display of agricultural production within Roman villas, employing an analysis of written testimonies supported by select archaeological examples²⁵. One key complex that he addressed is the now-lost Villa della Muracciola, excavated in 1925 near the Via Cassia in the northwest part of Rome's *suburbium* (Fig. 3)²⁶. The

²³ In the area around Pompeii, all the pressing floors were made of *cocciopesto*, e. g., in the Villa della Pisanella, Villa Regina and the Villa of N. Popidius Narcissus (see Pasqui 1897, 489–496; De Caro 1994, 42; De’Spagnolis 2002, 48–52). *Opus spicatum* floors were used in the *torcularia* of the Villa dei Volusii and the Villa di Castel di Guido near Rome (De Franceschini 2005, 156–161 no. 54; 274–286 no. 99).

²⁴ In most cases the *dolia* used for the storage of wine and oil were placed into beaten earth floors, as can be seen in many of the villas around Pompeii, e. g., the Villa della Pisanella (Pasqui 1897, 483–490), the villa in loc. Villa Regina (De Caro 1994, 63–69) and Villa of N. Popidius Narcissus (De’Spagnolis 2002, 62–68). A *cocciopesto* floor is preserved in the storage area of the Villa di Santa Maria di Canneto sul Trigno in Molise (Ferrara 1988, 53–67; Di Niro et al. 1995). A floor made of *bipedales* was found in the storage room of the winery in the Villa di Castel Giubileo 1 in Rome: see De Franceschini 2005, 56 f. no. 12; Ammannato – Belelli Marchesini 1987–1988, 466 Fig. 184.

²⁵ Purcell 1995, 157–173.

²⁶ Gatti 1925, 399–403; Baratta 2005, 219 no. 134; De Franceschini 2005, 75–77 no. 21.

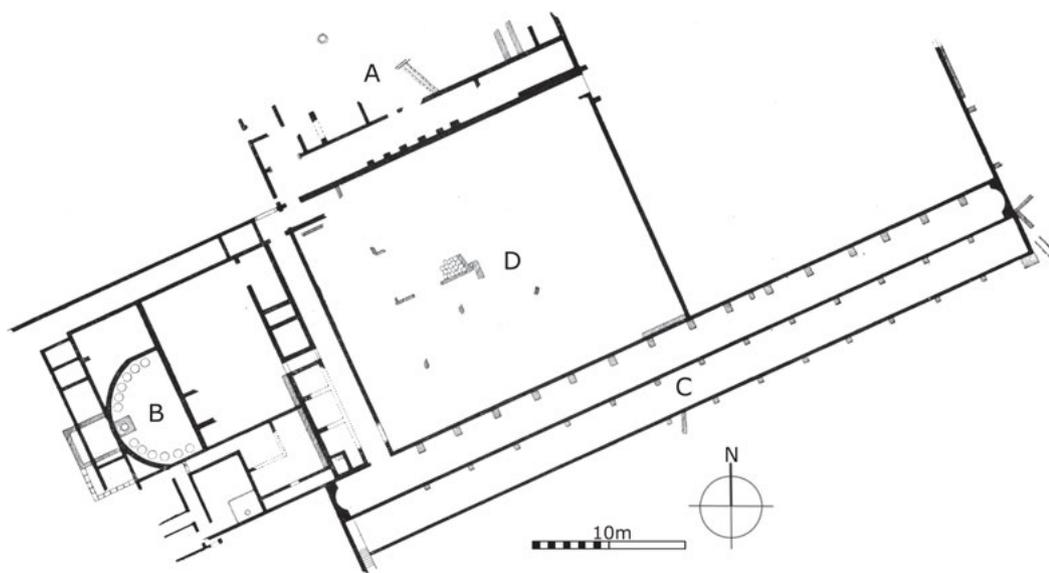


Fig. 3: Villa della Muracciola, Rome, Imperial period. A: rooms with floors in *opus sectile*; B: winery; C: *porticus* or *cryptoporticus*; D: peristyle.

outstanding feature of this villa was its winery, which lay within a semi-circular room of about 9×14 m (Fig. 3, B) and contained 12 *dolia*, arranged along the curved back wall on both sides of a centrally-placed treading basin²⁷. The installations, which were set out in a wide arc and clearly visible in front of the round rear wall, framed a large free area in the eastern part of the room. Due to the unusual shape of the room and its specific layout, the winery's installations appear almost like a theatrical scene. Consequently, the purpose of the ensemble must have been to present the agricultural equipment as well as the production process.

Based on the written records, like the famous passage in Varro's *De re rustica* that describes villa owners dining in their fruit store rooms and enjoying the fruits like paintings²⁸, Purcell sees complexes such as the Villa della Muracciola and others²⁹ as spaces for a demonstration of agro-economic capacities within strategies for the competitive self-presentation of the social élites³⁰.

Since Purcell published his study, new excavations have extended the archaeological record of wine and oil producing villas in Roman Italy. At the same time, a series of extensive material collections made the large corpus of previously known production villas easily accessible for further study³¹. This newly available data makes it possible to gain a broader and more differentiated image of the motives behind the application of decorative features in production contexts, as well as the different practices and social actors associated with them.

Of the utmost importance in this context are the recently published excavations of the Villa Magna's winery near Anagni, excavated between 2006 and 2010³². The facility belongs to an enormous imperial villa complex (occupying an area of c. 11 ha) that dates back to the Late Trajanic

²⁷ Because of the poorly documented and unpublished excavations of the villa in 1925, there is no precise information about the furnishings of the winery or the materials used. The same applies for all chronological questions concerning the facility, so it is impossible to deduce whether the ensemble was planned in this way or if the winery was a secondary installation.

²⁸ Varro Rust. 1, 59, 2.

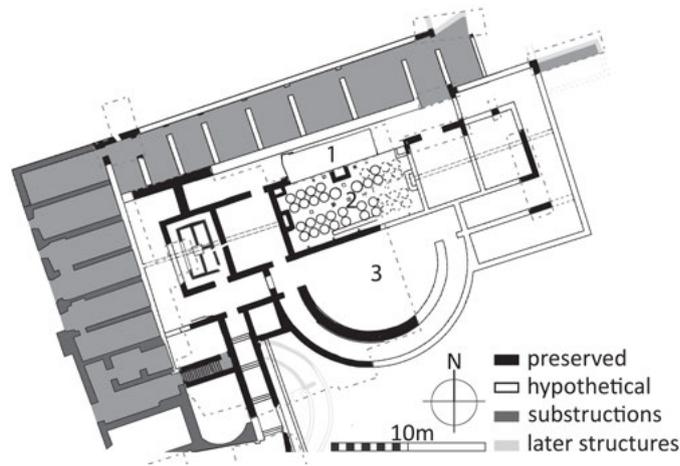
²⁹ Another example discussed by Purcell is the Villa of Cinecittà, loc. Subaugusta, where an apsidal room served as a *calcatorium*. For the villa, see Bellini – Rea 1985, 120 f. no. 5; De Franceschini 2005, 188–190 no. 67.

³⁰ Purcell 1995, 169–171; also Fentress et al. 2016, 203.

³¹ Particularly helpful in this context are De Franceschini 2005; Baratta 2005; Marzano 2007.

³² For the final report on the excavations at the Villa Magna, see Fentress et al. 2016. Preliminary reports can be found in Fentress et al. 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010; Fentress – Maiuro 2011.

Fig. 4: Winery complex of the Villa Magna, San Pietro di Villamagna, Trajanic–Hadrianic period. 1 *calcatorium*; 2 *cella vinaria*; 3 *exedra*



or Hadrianic period³³. The winery is situated at the centre of a building erected on an extensive terrace located at the far south of the site³⁴ (Fig. 4). The facility was located in a 12.4 × 17.7 m space and housed approximately 38 *dolia* arranged in four groups (Fig. 4, 2)³⁵. The *dolia* were placed in a floor of *opus spicatum* made from portasanta marble, and each was bordered by a circle of green serpentine stone. A rectangular platform measuring c. 3.5 m wide ran along the entire north wall of the room – this most likely functioned as a *calcatorium* (Fig. 4, 1). A vat, also lined in portasanta marble, was installed in a central position at the front of the platform and served as *lacus*. Another basin was unearthed along the west wall; the excavators assumed that a matching vat was located on the east side of the room, but a modern building obstructed further investigation. No traces of the press mechanism were found.

South of the winery, the excavators discovered a semi-circular courtyard surrounded by a portico of arches and engaged columns (Fig. 4, 3). The exact form of the party wall between the two spaces is not clear, but as two steps have been preserved along the winery's side, there must have been one or more large openings that permitted visual and physical access from the courtyard³⁶. The floor of the storage area was lower than the courtyard, and thus the *calcatorium*, positioned prominently against the room's back wall, was arranged like a stage. This interpretation of the ensemble can be connected to a letter written by the young Marcus Aurelius to his teacher Fronto, in which the future emperor depicts one of his sojourns at the Villa Magna in the entourage of his father-in-law Antoninus Pius³⁷. Describing his day, he notes that he assisted in a sacrifice performed by the emperor, took part in the wine harvest with him, and then bathed and later dined in a winemaking room, where he was amused by the coarse conversations of the rural workers³⁸. In light of the letter, Elisabeth Fentress, the lead excavator of the complex, convincingly demonstrates that the winery's ensemble probably served as a space for ritualised winemaking and sacrifices in the

³³ The 2nd century A.D. complex overlies at least two older sites (Fentress et al. 2016, 196 f.).

³⁴ For the evidence concerning the overall plan of the villa, see Fentress et al. 2016, 61–69.

³⁵ For detailed discussion of the winery, its findings, layout and furnishing, see Fentress et al. 2016, 89–123.

³⁶ The editors propose a construction similar to the courtyard's portico (Fentress et al. 2016, 94).

³⁷ Fronto Ep. ad M. Caes. 4, 4–6.

³⁸ *Loti igitur in torculari cenavimus (non loti in torculari, sed loti cenavimus) et rusticos cavillantes audivimus libenter*: 'So we had supper after we had bathed in the oil-press room; I do not mean bathed in the oil-press room, but when we had bathed, had supper there, and we enjoyed hearing the yokels chaffing one another...' (Fronto, Ep. ad M. Caes. 4, 6, 2, translation by Haines 1919, 183).

worship of Jupiter or Bacchus Liber – both patrons of the vintage³⁹ – during the *vinalia* or at the beginning of the wine harvest in Latium. The semi-circular court south of the winery most likely functioned as an area for onlookers of the ritual practices⁴⁰ and, as Marcus Aurelius’ notes suggest, also as a dining area, which overlooked the installations of the winery like the *cavea* of a theatre⁴¹.

In the overall proportions and layout of the complex, as well as the choice of materials, foremost emphasis was placed on presenting and visualising the actions performed. A logistically reasonable arrangement of the installations, which would have permitted quick and easy processing of the wine, was of secondary importance. Compared to the production spaces discussed in the previous section, long distances had to be covered when transporting the grapes from the vineyard⁴². Furthermore, the building complex did not incorporate a mechanical press, which generally was an integral component of market-oriented wineries in Roman villas⁴³. Instead, the individual production installations (e. g., the collecting basins) in the Villa Magna were placed along important visual axes. The overall structure was designed in such a way that each processing step could be viewed easily from the courtyard in the south. Thus, the functional elements themselves served as *decor* and became a part of the complex’s decorative ensemble. As in the winery in the Villa della Muracciola, in the centre of this visually-focused arrangement stood the *calcatorium*.

The *calcatio* was not only a central step in the winemaking process – by appealing to multiple senses, it also had good ‘entertainment value’⁴⁴. Therefore, what the audience watched in the Villa Magna’s winery was not the everyday agro-economic reality, but more a ritually organised ‘peasant theatre’ (‘Bauerntheater’)⁴⁵. The audience must have consisted of the emperor’s entourage and guests (i. e., the social elite of the empire) and thus a group of people who had little contact with real agricultural work. In the enjoyment of this bucolic romanticism, enhanced and staged with all available means of architecture, this urban noblesse could feel connected with the oft-invoked traditional life of the simple farmer⁴⁶.

³⁹ On the worship of Jupiter and Bacchus Liber in the context of winemaking, see Cazavone 1988; 1995; Baratta 2005, 120–122.

⁴⁰ A masonry base in front of the western end of the *calcatorium* might either be another basin or an altar for the libation of fresh must: Fentress et al. 2016, 96 f.

⁴¹ For a detailed discussion of the text passage and its meaning within the framework of the structures discovered, see Fentress et al. 2016, 203–208.

⁴² The exact access and transportation route to the winery is not clear from the surviving evidence. But because of the winery’s position on a massive terrace, it is clear that the grapes had to be brought over a considerable distance and up some kind of stairway to reach the *calcatorium*.

⁴³ See Feige, forthcoming. Even if there was a real *torcularium* somewhere else on the estate, as the excavators assume (Fentress et al. 2016, 96), this would mean a considerable additional expenditure during the vintage that would be otherwise unnecessary.

⁴⁴ The treading of the grapes could be accompanied by music, as is testified in the famous agricultural mosaic of Saint-Romain-en-Gal: Lancha 1981, 208–225 no. 368. The picturesque quality of the *calcatio* becomes clear through its frequent representation in various forms of ancient art. Cf. Brun 2003, 49–70, who has collected a range of depictions. Even today treading is a public spectacle in grape harvest festivals throughout Italy.

⁴⁵ On this point see Fentress et al. 2016, 206–208.

⁴⁶ This romanticising of the simple, rural life is recognisable in the letter of the young Marcus Aurelius, who studies Cato’s *De agri cultura* in the morning, then later helps a little with the grape harvest and amuses himself by watching the farm workers in *torcularium*.

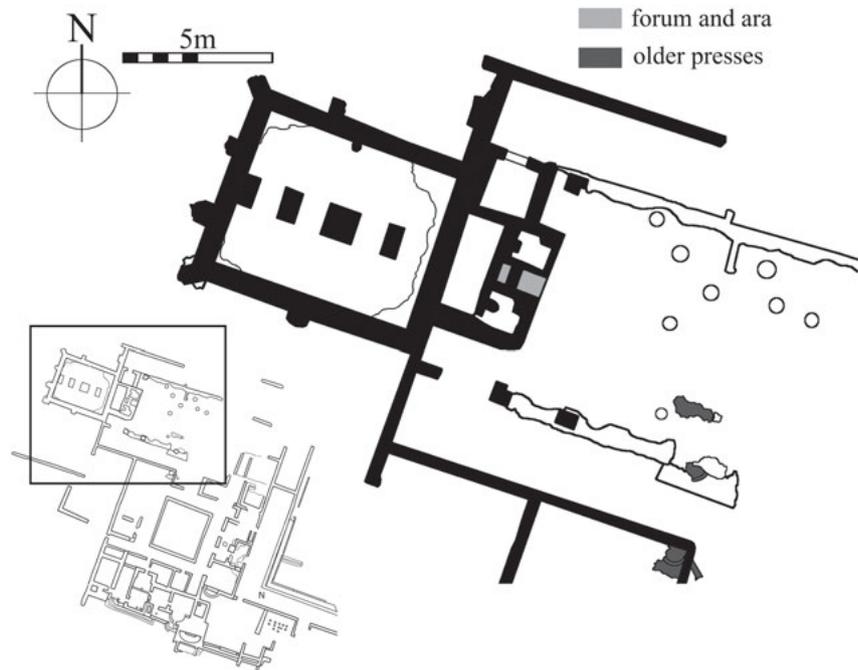


Fig. 5: Production area of the Villa of Val Melaina, Rome, 1st century A.D. (Phase 2).

Advertising spaces

The situation at the Villa Magna, however, does not mean that the implementation of decorative arrangements and features within productive spaces always resulted in profound interference with (or negative consequences for) the functioning of the facilities. The winery of a villa excavated between 1980 and 1987 in loc. Val Melaina near the Via Nomentana⁴⁷ shows close similarities in its spatial layout with the two sites discussed above. The facility was situated in the northern part of the villa and had the form of a rectangular courtyard measuring about 10 × 13 m, originally flanked by pillar porticos along its northern and southern sides (Fig. 5). The southeast corner of the ensemble, which dates from the 1st century A.D.⁴⁸, is lost. The winery consisted of a storage area that occupied most of the open space, as is attested by the widely scattered remains of eight *dolia*. A press installation mounted on the courtyard's longitudinal axis constituted the northwest limit of the area. It consisted of a lever press in the centre flanked by two lateral collection basins, placed symmetrically⁴⁹. As in the two other villas, a single large space incorporated the processing facilities and a storage area, featuring an axially symmetrical layout of the main productive installations. The entrance to the ensemble is lost, but it must have been located somewhere in the southeast part of the yard. Seen from this vantage, in its basic visual composition and layout the facility functioned similarly to the winery of the Villa Magna. The lateral porticos created a frame and directed the view towards the press installation, situated in a prominent position at the centre of the courtyard's rear wall⁵⁰. Again, the structural components were arranged in such a way that an observer could easily view all of the agricultural activities taking place here. The existence of a *torcularium* with a mechanical press, however, suggests that, despite its strong visual appeal, the ensemble was

⁴⁷ Cutuli et al. 1981, 161–163; a concentrated summary can be found in De Franceschini 2005, 81–83 no. 25.

⁴⁸ The winery was built over an older *torcularium* dating to the Republican period, documented by the remains of three *arae*.

⁴⁹ As there is no detailed description or photography of the installation in the excavation reports, its form can be deduced only from the published plans. From these, one can assume the presence of an anchor stone for the rear post of a lever press (*forum*) with an *ara*-block (later robbed) positioned in front of it.

⁵⁰ The excavation report gives no details about the fittings in the winery.

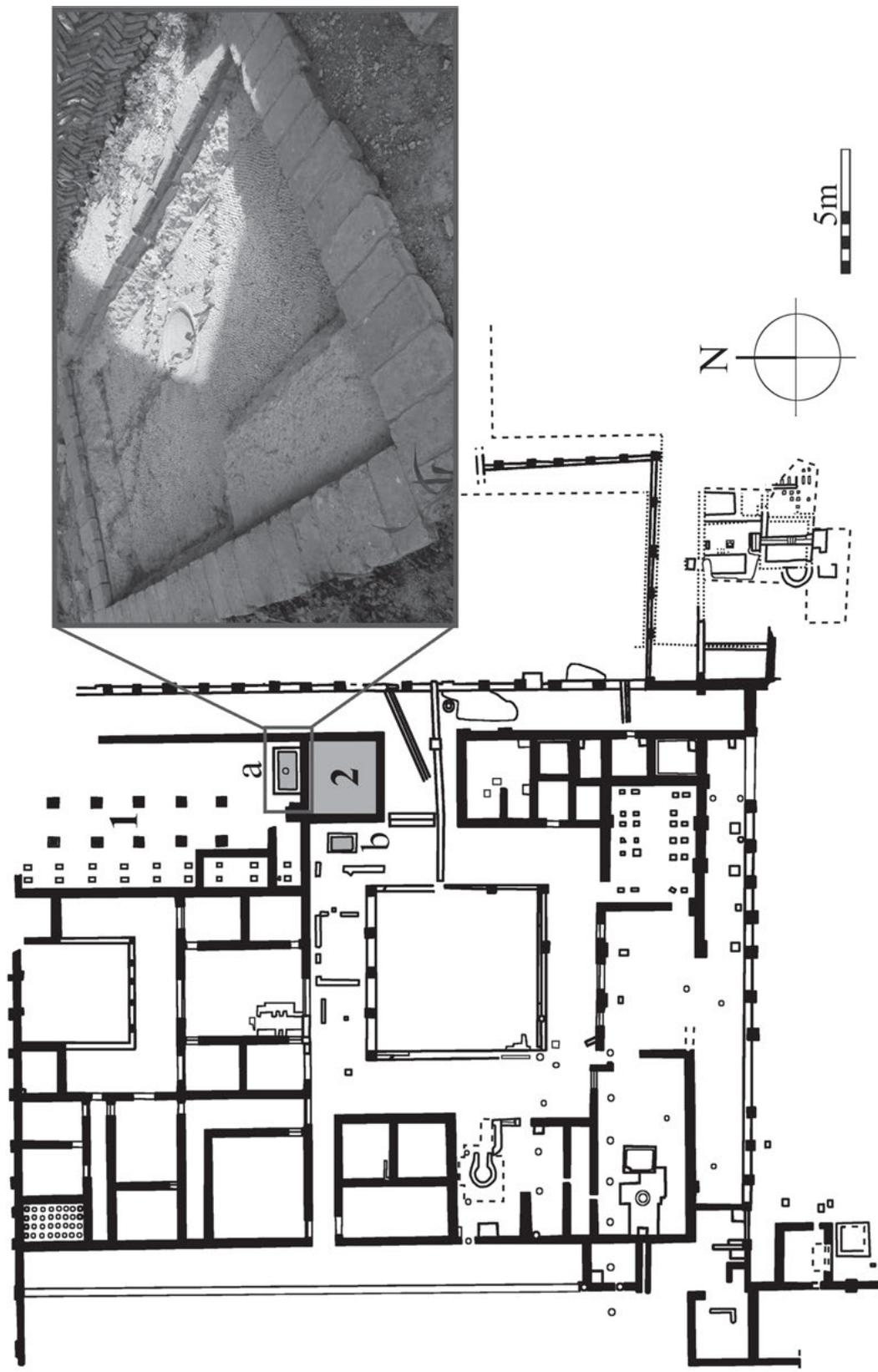


Fig. 6: Villa of Russi, Ravenna, late 1st/early 2nd century A.D. (Phase 2). 1: *cella*; 2: *torcularium*; a: *lacus* decorated with marble *tesserae*; b: recess for the counterweight of the press.



Fig. 7: Reconstructed oil production workshop in *insula* 16 at Volubilis, Morocco.

functional and dedicated to the tasks of a market-oriented agricultural business. Thus, the complex fits much better into Purcell's image of a proud owner and entrepreneur who wants to demonstrate his economic performance.

Finds from the Villa of Russi near Ravenna (Fig. 6), dated by the excavators to the late 1st or 2nd century A.D., lead to a very similar interpretation⁵¹. A winery, consisting of a large storage room with three naves (1) and adjacent pressing installation (2), was located in the northeast corner of the complex. The only remnant of the lever press that once stood in room (2) is the rectangular pit used for the counterweight (b). The winery stands out owing to the use of unusual materials: the pressing floor in room (2) and the *lacus* (a) in storage room (1) were paved with marble *tesserae*⁵² (Fig. 5). However, in contrast to the Villa Magna, this enhanced materiality was not paired with an architectural layout for a purposefully staged presentation of the productive processes⁵³. Rather, with a large *cella*, an adjacent but separate *torcularium* and easy access from outside the villa, the equipment and the layout of this facility meet the necessities of a normal market-oriented winery. Therefore, the use of decorative elements here had a different objective.

This is indicated also by the selective use of the precious materials, which is explicitly limited to areas that had direct contact with the grapes and the must obtained from them. Obviously, it was not just a matter of presenting agricultural capacity⁵⁴, but of showing the care and effort involved in processing the products – i. e., quality. As mentioned above, the agricultural writers gave great importance to the cleanliness of the production facilities. With that thought in mind, a pavement made of brightly shining marble provided an inventive way to visually underline and exaggerate the impression of a carefully cleaned surface; it thus attested to the good maintenance of the winery. Consequently, the *decor* here perhaps functioned as a means of advertisement.

One possible occasion on which this might have occurred was a demonstration of the production facilities in the context of trade negotiations with potential buyers. Depictions in wall paintings

⁵¹ The first systematic excavations began in 1953; see Mansuelli 1962; Bermond Montanari et al. 1975; Bermond Montanari 1981; Maioli 2001.

⁵² Maioli 2001, 311f.

⁵³ Due to the press's location (in a corner of the large peristyle), the *torcularium* was visible from other parts of the villa, especially along the peristyle's north portico. However, the establishment of the *torcularium* in the annex of a *porticus* in a central courtyard was not unusual and can also be observed in other villas, e. g., the Villa of Carmiano A, or the villa in contrada Giuliana, fondo Zurlo (Sogliano 1897; Camardo – Ferrara 1989, 69–82). As such, it should not be evaluated as a specific visual display.

⁵⁴ Without question, this task was already fulfilled by the enormous size of the storage room (1), which measured approximately 560 m².

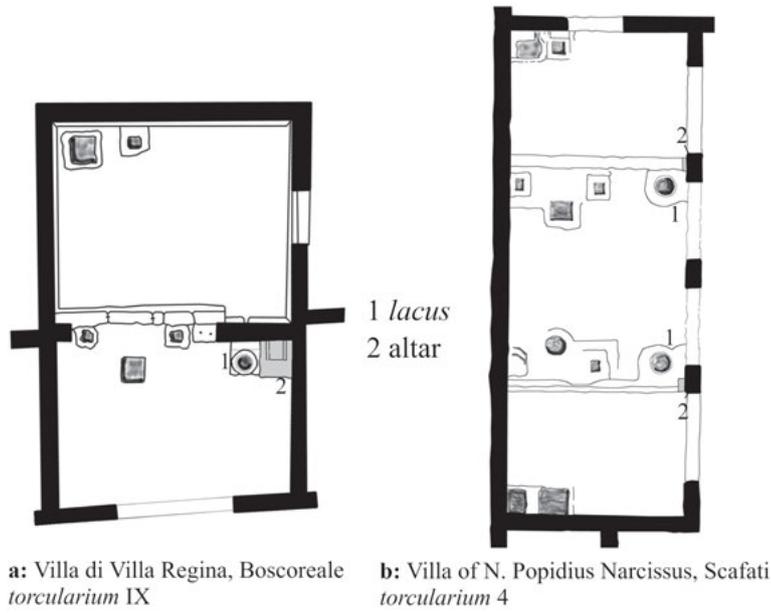


Fig. 8: *Torcularia* discovered in the villa in loc. Villa Regina, Boscoreale (a) and the so-called Villa of N. Popidius Narcissus, Scafati (b).

and reliefs, such as the famous Cupid frieze from the Casa dei Vettii in Pompeii (VI 15,1)⁵⁵ and a funerary relief now in Ince Blundell Hall⁵⁶, indicate that a buyer's personal visit to the villa, including a tasting, was not only usual, but also logically one of the central moments of wine production and trade⁵⁷. The owner of the Villa of Russi, through the application of cost-intensive material *decor*, probably tried to demonstrate to the buyers his extraordinarily high degree of attention to the care of his equipment and goods. The geographical location of the villa, far away from the highest centres of power, in combination with its considerable size, indicates that this proprietor was a member of the local economic and social elite, showing off his capabilities whilst also focusing on economic necessities.

A similar entrepreneurial pride becomes apparent, albeit in a different and somewhat reduced way, in some urban oil-making workshops discovered at Roman Volubilis. In workshops in the House of Orpheus⁵⁸ and *insula* 16⁵⁹ (immediately east of the Baths of Gallienus), the walls mediating the 1 m difference between the level of the pressing floor and the level of the presses' operating area were decorated at their upper end with simple *cymata recta* mouldings (Fig. 7)⁶⁰. Although this relatively simple moulding does not permit any definitive conclusions, it suggests that the two *torcularia* were perhaps open to a select audience on certain occasions, for the sale of oil or for other festivities.

Characterised by a more frugal and concentrated application of decorative principles that did not interfere with the functional interaction of the productive installations, the three examples from northern Italy and North Africa show a synergy between the decoration and the architectural challenges of systematic, market-oriented production. Thus, the facilities offer a glimpse of other social actors, different from those visible in the high-end complexes of the Villa Magna and Villa

⁵⁵ Cerulli Irelli 1990, Pl. 60. On the frieze as a whole, see de Angelis 2011.

⁵⁶ Angelicoussis 2009, 99 with Figs. 1 and 4. The relief's iconography clearly suggests that the tasting happened directly in the *cella* of the winery.

⁵⁷ Another (less well-preserved) depiction of such sales negotiations survives in the wall paintings of the Villa di Casal Morena: Rossi 1979, 108 f. Fig. 161.

⁵⁸ Panetier 2002, 94–97.

⁵⁹ Riße 2001, 103 f. Figs. 153 f.

⁶⁰ Further ornamentation of the moulding by means of painting cannot be ruled out. However, no traces remain visible on site.

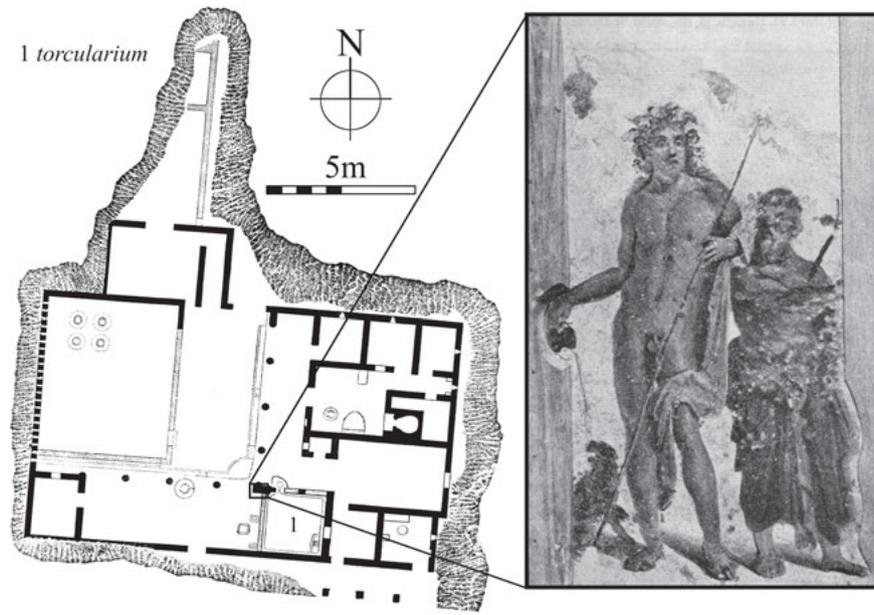


Fig. 9: Wall painting of Bacchus, Silenus and a panther from the *torcularium* in the villa in contrada Giuliana, Boscoreale,

Muracciola. These are successful entrepreneurs, integrated into the specific regional and interregional economic networks and most likely important members of their local communities, showing off the capacity and quality of their enterprises.

Spaces of worship

However, the decoration of production spaces does not only shed light onto the desires and activities of the facilities' owners; it also opens a window onto the everyday lives of the workers and inhabitants. In this respect, the material evidence for domestic cult practices in the context of wine-making, best preserved in the villas destroyed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79, is particularly revealing.

The most comprehensive example for such cult activity is located in the *torcularium* of the villa in loc. Villa Regina at Boscoreale, excavated from 1978 to 1983. Directly east of the *dolium* that served as the *lacus* of the winery, a small, unadorned altar was set up (Fig. 8a). Mural paintings that show a temple façade with opened doors are preserved on the partition wall behind the two installations. The temple originally contained a figure of Bacchus⁶¹. The mural paintings were arranged so that the temple and Bacchus appeared directly above the *dolium-lacus*.

Two further altars existed in the *torcularium* of the so-called Villa of N. Popidius Narcissus Maior in Scafati, unearthed in 1993 and 1994. The symmetrically designed room was equipped with two antithetically placed presses. Each of the mechanisms had its own *calcatorium*, pressing floor and *lacus*, and each was equipped with an altar, placed directly above the *dolium* that served as a *lacus*⁶² (Fig. 8b). Like the winery at the Villa Magna, the two ensembles were probably used during ritual acts for the god of wine, Bacchus-Liber or Liber Pater⁶³. Liber, identified with Dionysus, was linked specifically to the winemaking process, where he was supposed to ensure the cleanliness

⁶¹ De Caro 1994, 41 Pl. 3.

⁶² De' Spagnolis 2002, 42–48.

⁶³ Baratta 2005, 120–122. For Liber, see DNP VII (1999) 136 f. s. v. Liber, Liberalia (F. Prescendi).

of the installations as well as the purity of the fresh must⁶⁴, thus securing the economic success of the vintage⁶⁵. In order to gain his support, Liber was offered sacrifices from the first must. As the example from the Villa of N. Popidius Narcissus suggests, this sacrifice was not only necessary for the overall vintage, but apparently also for the single, individual pressing processes.

However, the situation in other wineries throughout the region shows that a fixed altar was not obligatory for worshipping the god. Indeed, the marking of the facilities as a sacred place could also be achieved by attaching an isolated wall painting of Bacchus-Liber without additional fittings. Such a painting of the god was discovered in the *torcularium* of a villa in contrada Giuliana, excavated in 1897⁶⁶ (Fig. 9). Here, Bacchus, who wears only a wreath of vines on his head and a loose-fitting mantle, holds a *thyrsus* in his left hand while performing a libation using a small *kantharos* with his right. A small panther, his sacred animal, sits on the god's right side and drinks the sacrificial liquid – certainly wine. To the left of Bacchus, Silenus appears playing the lyre, wearing a cloth around his hips and a wreath of vines on his head. A similar depiction of the god came to light in the pressroom of the villa in fondo Agricoltura during excavations conducted in 1906⁶⁷. The religious implications of this form of pictorial representation are evident. In both cases, the paintings were located on the wall directly above the winery's collection basin, which corresponds to the similar arrangement of the altars. The cult of Liber could also be situated alongside other domestic cults, as indicated by the frequent location of *lararia* and other niches in the vicinity of *torcularia*, e. g., in the villas of Carmiano A⁶⁸, Via Motta Carità⁶⁹ and Pisanella⁷⁰. In the Villa 'Las Musas' near Arellano in modern Spain, a *lararium* was even placed directly within the *cella vinaria*⁷¹.

This extraordinarily close spatial interaction between the decoration, productive and cult practices and the *torcularium* indicates that Liber's presence during winemaking was considered in a concrete spatial sense. The purpose of the decoration was to mark and fix the position of the god within the real space of the villa. In light of the fundamental importance of wine production for these estates, this close connection between religion and economy is hardly surprising. Especially in the small and highly specialised farms and villas of the Sarno valley, the success of the year's vintage was of the utmost importance not only for the owner of the property, but also for the individuals living and working there. After all, it represented one of the central sources of income and thus secured their subsistence.

Therefore, it is clear that these decorative features were not intended to create a separate, sacred space: the cult practices connected to them also took place in *torcularia* lacking the types of archaeological markers that make these activities visible to us. Rather, the application of *decor* was intended to highlight ritual acts through visual media and thereby accentuate their significance. So, the main addressee(s) of the decorative effort, aside from the villa's *familia*, was seemingly the deity himself, with the expectation that he would grant economic success to the facility.

⁶⁴ Liber was responsible for the production of profane wine for human consumption, while Jupiter was worshipped as part of the production of sacrificial wine; see Cazavone 1988.

⁶⁵ In the Villa of N. Popidius Florus, Liber is one of the gods to whom the owner consecrated a stele in the enclosure wall of his *cella vinaria*, recording the dedication with the following inscription: *N · Popidius · Florus · Ven · Lib · Herc* (Della Corte 1921, 444).

⁶⁶ Sogliano 1897, 400. The panel was cut out and today is in the British Museum, London (inv. 1899, 0215.1).

⁶⁷ Also called the 'villa in fondo di Palma' (Della Corte 1921, 461–467 no. VI; Stefani 2000). Another painting of the god was unearthed during the Bourbon excavations in the *torcularium* of the Villa di Sassole near Stabiae; see Ruggiero 1881, 346; Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, inv. 9274.

⁶⁸ Camardo – Ferrara 1989, 69. 75 Figs. 75 f.

⁶⁹ On the Villa of Via Motta Carità: see Miniero 1988, 239 f. no. 15; Oettel 1996, 163–165.

⁷⁰ Pasqui 1897, 464 Fig. 51.

⁷¹ Teichner – Peña Cervantes 2010–2011, 426–430 Figs. 37 f.

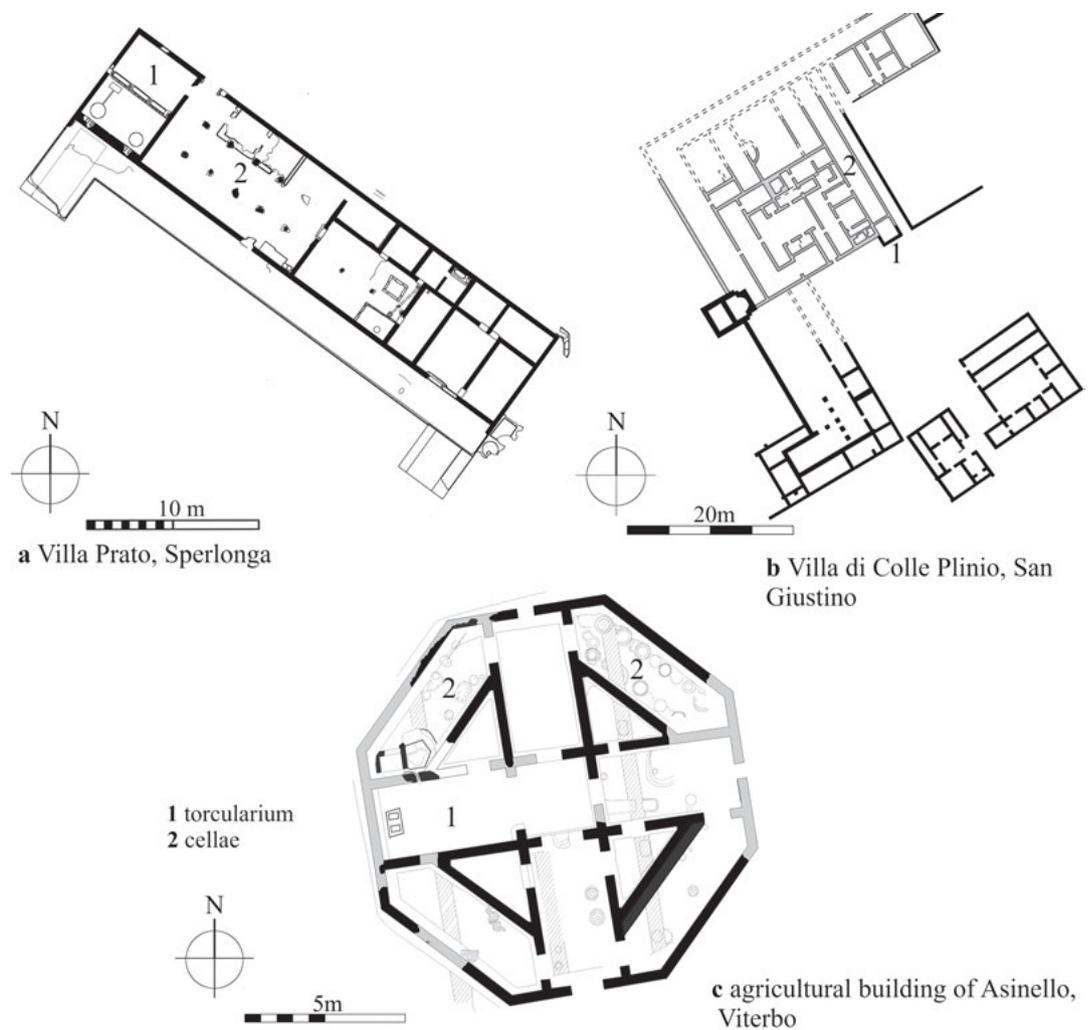


Fig. 10: a) Villa Prato, Sperlonga, 2nd century B.C. b) Villa di Colle Plinio, San Giustino, late 1st/early 2nd century A.D. (Phase 3) c) Octagonal building of Asinello, Viterbo, Augustan period.

Invisible spaces

All the phenomena discussed thus far concern the interior of production spaces. However, decorative features were also utilised to influence the external perception of the economic facilities, as well as the villa as a whole. On some larger productive estates, façade porticos were erected along exterior sections of the villa. Prominent examples include the famous Villa of Settefinestre near Ansedonia⁷², the Villa of Grottarossa in Rome⁷³ and the Villa of Russi (cf. Fig. 5) mentioned above. This façade design is a well-known and prominent element in the architecture of luxury villas⁷⁴, with the *porticus* serving as light-flooded porches for the outward-facing rooms located behind them. At the same time, however, these features created a uniform and rhythmic external appearance, and in this way united different parts of the building behind a visually indistinguishable curtain of columns.

This design is illustrated impressively by the Villa Prato near Sperlonga, which dates to the second half of the 2nd century B.C.⁷⁵. The villa building, investigated from 1979 to 1984, lies on a high terrace, and was built on a ground plan that resembles a *stoa* framed by a pair of lateral risalits

⁷² Concerning the villa's main building: Carandini 1985, 149–156.

⁷³ For the Villa of Grottarossa, see Stefani 1944–1945; Cozza 1947; Becker 2006.

⁷⁴ E. g., in the Villa dei Papiri or the Villa of Oplontis A on the Bay of Naples: cf. Zarmakoupi 2014, 28–53. 75–102.

⁷⁵ The excavations are published in Broise – Lafon 2001.

(avant-corps) (Fig. 10a). The building was equipped with a large *torcularium* and a storage room that composed a significant part of the structure. On the outside, however, the villa was adorned with a stepped terrace façade that terminated in the *porticus* above. In the Imperial period, a comparable approach was taken at the Villa di Colle Plinio near San Giustino. During the second phase of the complex, which dates to the late 1st or early 2nd century A.D., the owner built a portico featuring symmetrical risalits at its corners with a small temple feature occupying a central position between the projecting elements⁷⁶ (Fig. 10b). This impressive façade, which mimicked the design of a sanctuary, hid a large part of the villa from the valley in which the property was located.

Thus, a number of well-to-do villa owners upgraded estates of a productive and agricultural character with elements of sophisticated luxury architecture. By enhancing the façade(s) of the building with porticos, they indulged themselves in the amenities of a sumptuous estate for their personal leisure, and also unambiguously made clear their assets and status from a distance. In doing so, the impressive façades visually marginalised or even hid the productive and agricultural aspects of the villa – either intentionally or as a side-effect.

The agricultural building of Asinello, which was built during the Augustan period, represents an exceptional example of this phenomenon (Fig. 10c). Built on a ridge above the ancient Via Cassia⁷⁷, the building belonged to a nearby villa complex and stands out because of its octagonal form (and considerable size, as each side measured c. 10 m). Surprisingly, this monumental building contained a functional facility for the production of olive oil⁷⁸. A rectangular room in the western part of the building was set up as a *torcularium* and contained a lever press (1), of which only the rear anchor survived *in situ*. A pair of unusually shaped rooms (2) along the outer perimeter served as storage spaces, as indicated by the presence of numerous *dolia* in each. In the *cella* immediately to the north of the *torcularium*, two decantation basins were found; these were connected to the press by a conduit. Through the creation of the octagonal layout – which at the time was quite rare – the production area was transformed into an appealing landmark on the villa's estate⁷⁹. Annalisa Marzano sees the building as a monumental statement by the owner, showing off 'the worthiness of that type of production and the magnitude of the investment'⁸⁰. However, in its visual function as a representative landmark, it was not recognisable as an agricultural building from the outside. Indeed, the size and unusual form of the structure no doubt fooled travellers along the Via Cassia (located c. 500 m to the east), who would have struggled to identify the building's true function⁸¹.

The building of Asinello marked its owner's personal status and capabilities in the landscape rather than his role as an entrepreneur. Indeed, the position and design of the monument emphasised two qualities of the owner in particular: (1) he was able to occupy a country estate at this prominent location; (2) he had the financial means and social contacts, as well as the education and cultural knowledge, to erect such a progressive building on his property. Therefore, he did not market himself simply as a successful businessman, but made every effort to distinguish himself clearly from other members of the local elite.

⁷⁶ In the first construction phase, which dates to the middle of the 1st century B.C., the villa already had a façade *porticus* that surrounded it on two sides. This portico was now massively enlarged on the front side of the complex. Based on this background and a group of stamps on lead pipes, the excavators deem the complex to be a part of Pliny the Younger's villa 'in Tuscis', at which he himself mentions the construction of such a temple: Plin. Ep. 9, 39. See also Braconi – Uroz Sáez 1999, esp. 102–104; Braconi 2007, esp. 97–100; Braconi – Uroz Sáez 2007.

⁷⁷ For the building of Asinello, see Broise – Jolivet 1986; 1995, 114; 2000; Baratta 2005, 163 f. no. 22; Marzano 2007, 645 L375; Broise – Jolivet 2008.

⁷⁸ It is not clear if the facility belongs the initial phase of the building: see Marzano 2007, 118 no. 65.

⁷⁹ Broise – Jolivet 2000, 376.

⁸⁰ Marzano 2007, 119.

⁸¹ Marzano herself points out that the building's outer form is reminiscent of a mausoleum (Marzano 2007, 118 f.).

Conclusion

The brief examination presented here highlights the versatile use of decorative elements within the production facilities of Roman villas. As is often the case today, spaces of production were generally hidden from the public eye. However, despite the study's focus on a small and specific group of installations, we have considered a substantial number of archaeological contexts in which elaborate forms of decoration appear. Thus, the (at least partial) aestheticisation of production spaces, while not representing a mass phenomenon in Roman antiquity, was by no means a marginal issue.

As in the case of many other aspects of the ancient world, economic matters were closely intertwined with other spheres of life. Accordingly, the spectrum of social practices, actors and motives that can be associated with the use of *decor* in this context is equally broad. An important observation in this regard is that the decorative upgrading of production spaces was not undertaken only by social elites. Rather, it was connected to the activities of a wide range of actors from diverse parts of Roman society, among them entrepreneurs of local importance and their customers, as well as simple farm workers. Each of these social groups engaged in the aestheticisation of production spaces through different practices, and experienced various emotions and motivations in their interaction with the ensembles. In addition to cult activities (which are archaeologically visible in the wineries, for example), the bucolic staging of productive processes for aristocratic leisure is discernible. In other cases, however, the visual concealment of such activities can also be seen. Of particular interest are the isolated instances in which the marketing of performance and quality are evident; these entrepreneurial strategies anticipate similar techniques that can be observed in the modern consumer-oriented aestheticisation of economic areas.

The decorative elements were employed with fine nuances in their form, materiality and positioning depending on the practices associated with them, as well as the socioeconomic status, aims and intended audience of the proprietors. Yet these decorative arrangements created no new spaces of action. Rather, they marked or accentuated select installations or activity areas, drawing visual attention towards them. The choice of *decor* thus reflected the meaning that the production facilities held for the owners and residents of the villas. The various techniques employed to present (or, in some cases, hide) the production rooms shed light on the subtle differences in the social perception of productive activities and the role of the villa owner as an agricultural entrepreneur. On the one hand, agriculture was stylised into a spectacle or was proudly presented to potential customers; on the other, owners tried to emphasise the luxurious character of a rural residence by visually concealing economic activities. The Villa of Russi, for example, shows that these strategies of presentation and concealment were employed simultaneously in the same building. Both the individual elements and the overall decorative programme of these complexes were thus designed to fit different situations, perspectives and addressees. As material indicators of these situation-related design strategies, the preserved examples of decorative elements are a reminder that *torcularia*, *cellae* and other agricultural facilities in villas and urban houses were far more than 'just' production spaces, and were in many ways closely integrated into the daily life of their inhabitants.

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Fig. 1–2. 8: M. Feige.

Fig. 3: J. Rütten, after Gatti 1925, Fig. 14.

Fig. 4: M. Feige, after Fentress et al. 2016, Pl. 5, 5.

Fig. 5: J. Rütten and M. Feige, after Cutuli et al. 1981, Fig. 5.

Fig. 6: J. Rütten and M. Feige, after Maioli 1990, Fig. 1.

Fig. 7: M. Feige, after De Caro 1994, Pl. B (7a); after De’Spagnolis 2002, Fig. 23 (7b).

Fig. 9: M. Feige, after Sogliano 1897, Fig. 1; Fig. 10.

Fig. 10: J. Rütten and M. Feige, after Broise – Lafon 2001, Fig. 1 (10a); J. Rütten and M. Feige, after Braconi 1998, 158 and Braconi – Uroz Sáez 2008, Fig. 14 (10b); after Broise – Jolivet 1995, Fig. 5 (10c).

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