Creating Community in the Villa Architecture of the Roman Northwest

This paper examines the development of the villa form in Roman Britain and Northern Gaul as evidence of a cross-Channel architectural network in the first and early second centuries CE. The archaeological record shows that this period witnessed a marked reconfiguration of rural residential architecture on both sides of the English Channel, characterized by the appearance of large, permanent housing complexes built at least in part of masonry and often decorated with mosaics, wall paintings, and colorful stones. These residences have been likened to Italian villas, and scholars have explored their formal and decorative connections to their Mediterranean counterparts at length (Cunliffe 1998). Recently, however, a number of villas in the Roman northwest have been reassessed as products of interactions not just between Rome and the provinces, but also between various individuals—landholders, builders, and artisans— living and working in provincial communities (Haselgrove 1995; Taylor 2011). By considering these villas as a group, this paper explores the connections between Roman architecture, imperialism, and community beyond the Mediterranean basin.

This paper first addresses the palatial villa at Fishbourne near Chichester on England's south coast, and then contextualizes it among similar large rural masonry residences built around the same time in Rome's British, Gallic, and Germanic provinces. To do so, it compares the villas' formal characteristics, spatial syntax, decorative programs, and construction materials, and tracks changes to these features over time and space as a way to characterize the architectural choices and practices of builders and residents. Based on this analysis, the paper argues that the villas reveal the presence of a regional Atlantic social and economic network characterized by patterns of living and building that were related to, but distinct from, those associated with Mediterranean villas. Indeed, viewing the villas of the Roman Northwest

as anomalies, one-offs, or imperfect imitations of Italian villas does not do them justice as a hybrid structural type that developed to serve the needs of an Atlantic rather than a Mediterranean community.

Bibliography

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