

The Roman Countryside by Stephen L. Dyson, London: Duckworth, 2003, pp. 128, 4 maps. ISBN 0-7156-3225-6 (Pb).

Villa to Village: The Transformation of the Roman Countryside in Italy, c. 400-1000 by Riccardo Francovich and Richard Hodges, London: Duckworth, 2003, pp. 127, 19 figures. ISBN 0-7156-3192-6 (Pb).

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These volumes are published in the series “Duckworth Debates in Archaeology” edited by Richard Hodges. Each is designed to introduce students and scholars “to a theme which is the subject of contemporary debate in archaeology” (thus the back cover blurb). The books are short in compass but are provided with thorough bibliographies and indices (this latter much to the credit of series editor and publisher alike). The two volumes considered here are very different in scope and character. In what follows, I will devote most space to Stephen L. Dyson’s *The Roman Countryside*, because it is likely to be of more interest to readers of this journal.

Dyson attempts two tasks: he surveys the tradition of scholarship on the rural world of the Roman Empire and suggests new ways in which the topic might be approached. For many of us the Roman countryside is synonymous with the Roman villa, and it is with this subject that Dyson begins (ch. 1). He notes that early interest in villas grew out of classical literary studies, particularly from the descriptions of their rural retreats offered by Cicero, Horace, and Pliny the Younger. This had an impact on later archaeological investigations that tended to prioritise analysis of the *pars urbana* (a villa’s lavishly appointed residential

quarters). By contrast, those parts of a villa connected with economic production were regarded as somehow sordid, an interpretation that shows how Roman elite attitudes to manual labour and trade influenced modern gentleman scholars. More recent efforts to study villas as centres of production, Dyson contends, have been equally vulnerable to interpretations guided by scholars' ideological preconceptions: thus the presentation of the villa at Settefinestre (near Cosa in Italy) as the epitome of a slave-based economy owed much to the Marxist predispositions of its excavators. Dyson also stresses the difficulties in trying to extrapolate a broader economic picture from individual sites and argues that villas need to be seen in a broader rural context.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine efforts to provide just such a holistic picture of the Roman countryside through the use of new techniques such as archaeological field survey and aerial photography. Again Dyson notes that scholars' ideological backgrounds can prompt distorted interpretations. For example, archaeologists raised in colonial cultures (such as early-twentieth century Britain and France) often emphasised Roman innovations in the landscape at the expense of native continuities. Today, Dyson contends, the picture is less bleak. Landscape archaeology is opening up new vistas for students of the Roman world. For example, where cultural diversity in the Roman Empire was once studied through architectural forms and inscriptions, now we can bring to bear evidence of faunal remains that imply a predilection for pork in Italy and southern Gaul, beef in northern Gaul (so much, perhaps, for Asterix and Obelix's taste for wild boar?), and lamb and goat in Libya.

Such considerations prompt Dyson to offer new analyses, based on evidence for the ancient countryside, of the interrelationships between native and Roman cultures (ch. 4) and the end of the Roman Empire (ch. 5). In the former, he endeavours to move away from a model that gives priority to Romanisation to one that lays equal stress on Roman and local

cultures intersecting in a dynamic of continuity and change. In the latter, he argues for a picture of late-antique transformation that emphasises diversity not only between provinces but also within them. Along the way fascinating vignettes are offered, for instance that Sardinian *nuraghi* (prehistoric stone towers) remained a focus for rural settlement through the Roman period, and that analysis of pollen samples suggests that areas of the Netherlands once used for arable cultivation were being recolonised by woodland already in the fourth century.

In *Villa to Village*, Riccardo Francovich and Richard Hodges take up where Dyson leaves off. This, however, is a very different book, quite apart from its narrower geographical focus. While Dyson presents a wide-ranging portrait of the study of the Roman countryside with suggestions for new styles of scholarly investigation, Francovich and Hodges adopt from the outset a more polemical tone. Furthermore, their volume is concerned with the contribution of new archaeological evidence to one debate: put succinctly, this is that “the historical distinction separating the transformation of rural society in late antiquity from the age of *incastellamento* [i.e. the emergence of fortified villages] in the later tenth century is no longer tenable” (p. 29). This is not to say that the authors accept simplistic notions of continuity – notions that have perhaps rendered too anodyne the idea that late antiquity was an age of gradual transformation rather than one of catastrophic decline and fall. On the contrary, they maintain that there were indeed periods of upheaval and that the Roman villa system did disappear (ch. 2). But they see the processes that produced such changes as more drawn out than, say, the Italian wars between the Goths and Byzantines in the mid-sixth century. For example, the different ecological zones into which Italy was divided (“narrow coastal strips ... deep valleys and rolling hills ... [and] a high mountain massif”: p. 26) had been integrated under the Romans, but were pulled apart again as imperial power ebbed

away. Hence subsistence farming as opposed to an integrated market economy came to dominate much of the peninsula. Meanwhile political power became more militarised, giving rise to new social dynamics. Moreover, the processes of transformation began earlier than the crises of the mid-sixth century: a decline in the villa system can be seen already in the third and fourth centuries. Such trends gave rise to new habitation patterns, with a move towards hill-top settlements. New ceramic evidence (such as that from the Crypta Balbi excavations in Rome) allows for these changes to be dated earlier than the tenth century. Francovich and Hodges suggest that they began in the sixth and seventh centuries (ch. 3). Thus the emergence of stone-built fortified villages in the tenth century was less a rupture in Italian settlement patterns (as scholars have tended to argue) than the culmination of a trend, albeit one provoked by the emergence at that time of powerful local lords (ch. 4).

Both volumes fulfil the needs of the series very well, although it seems to me that Dyson's – with its broader scope and more suggestive tone – is perhaps better suited as an introductory text for students. Neither, I think, is quite perfect. There are occasional errors and misprints (my favourite being Dyson's "Pliny the Young": p. 13). Both books could have benefited from the provision of a glossary: Francovich and Hodges deluge the reader with technical terms; Dyson, for example, introduces the term *longue durée* on p. 63 but only defines it at p. 103. It is a matter for regret that Dyson's volume is not as well illustrated as that of Francovich and Hodges. Moreover, Dyson's map of north Africa does not show the Libyan sites he discusses. I was also disappointed that Dyson excludes the eastern provinces from his analysis: as Susan Alcock's excellent *Graecia Capta* (Cambridge, 1993) showed, there is plenty of eastern material that is relevant to Dyson's argument.