CHAPTER FIVE

THE “VILLA SCHIAVISTICA” MODEL

When historians talk about the “villa system” as a mode of production, they are referring to the type of *villa rustica* that initially appeared in the Italian countryside in the time of Cato and then developed into the villa theorized by Varro and Columella—that is, a villa with both a *pars urbana*, for residential purposes, and a *pars rustica*, which exploited slave labor for the concentrated cultivation of cash crops, such as vines and olive trees. It is generally accepted that the “Roman villa” was the manifestation of a specific socioeconomic system, which, in the aftermath of the Hannibalic war, had both new capital and a considerable number of slaves at its disposal.¹

Whether the “villa-system” in Italy was adopted from Greece via the colonies of Magna Graecia, or from the Punic (Carthaginian) world, via Sicily, as the discoveries on the island of Jerba suggests, or even whether it evolved in Central Italy from Etruscan palace-structures is still an open debate.² Whatever its “origins”, this type of villa is said to have developed in Tyrrhenian Central Italy, specifically in the regions of Latium, northern Campania and southern Tuscany (Etruria).³

The scholarly definition of the villa system, and the construction of the economic models it implies, rests heavily not only on literary sources like the works of the Latin agronomists, but also on the results of various archaeological investigations. The work directed by Andrea Carandini in the *Ager Cosanus* and at the site of Settefinestre has, for example, been very influential in this sense.

At Settefinestre, Carandini and his team⁴ excavated a large country villa, with at least three major phases: original construction in the

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² Lafon 2001; Carandini 1989b: 113 and Fentress 2001; Terrenato 2001a. Carthage had certainly an important role in the development of agricultural “enterprises”: one needs not to forget that the agricultural treatise of the Carthaginian Mago was the only literary work translated into Latin in the aftermath of Carthage’s destruction in 146 B.C., and constituted the basis for the works of the Latin agronomists.
⁴ Carandini 1980; 1985a; 1989b; Catalogue: T3.
mid-first century B.C.; additions and changes to the floor-plan in the first century A.D.; and decline leading to abandonment in the late second century A.D. The villa has been associated with the Sestii, in particular to the senator L. Sestius, since the site is located in the immediate hinterland of Cosa, from where the shipment of wine to Gaul in amphorae stamped “SES” took place. The reason why the published study of this villa became so influential on works relating to Roman agriculture and the economy of Roman Italy is that, in its second phase, the site seemed to exemplify Varro’s villa perfecta: an elegant pars urbana, a pars rustica equipped for the production of wine and oil, and a pars fructuaria for storage, comprising also a granary. The villa had two courtyards surrounded by rooms belonging to the first and second phases, which the excavators determined to be slave quarters (alloggi servili). This evidence, in combination with the results of the field survey of the region around Cosa and the villa of Settefienestre, has shown that a radical change in the mode of land ownership took place around Cosa in the first century B.C., namely a shift from small farms belonging to coloni to villas at the center of large estates. The progressive concentration of the land in the hands of fewer and fewer landowners, along with the creation of the slave-staffed villa perfecta, would have caused a serious crisis for small farms and free labor, causing the disappearance of small- and medium-sized settlements.

The archaeological data recorded at Settefienestre provided the evidence for a situation already attested by literary sources in Etruria and elsewhere for the second century B.C.6 In order to explain the diffusion, by the first century A.D., of large latifundia—not only in Italy, but also in the provinces—historians applied these considerations on

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5 Intensive survey was carried out in the Valle d’Oro, Valle dell’Albegna, Valle del Chiarone and Valle del Tafone: Celuzza and Regoli 1982; Carandini and Cambi 2002 (long-overdue presentation of the survey results and smaller in scope than the original two volumes planned, the book presents interpretative work up to the 1990s). For a review of this volume see Wilson 2004.

6 According to Plutarch (Ti. Gracch. 8), when Tiberius Gracchus traveled through coastal Etruria in 137 B.C., he found it deserted and farmed by imported slaves. See also App., BGciv 1.1.7–9 on the exploitation of public land by the rich by means of slave labor and on Tiberius’ speech on these topics on the occasion of the vote on the Lex Agraria. On the impoverished conditions of coloni in Etruria in the first century see Sall., Cat. 28.4.

7 The famous passage in Pliny, NH 18.35 is often quoted in this context as evidence of the diffusion of large estates in the first century A.D.: latifundia perdidero Italicum, iam vero et provincias sex domini semissem Africam possidebant, cum interfecit eos Nero princeps.