CHAPTER SIX

VILLA TOPOGRAPHY:
INFRASTRUCTURE AND IMPERIAL VILLAS

The geographical distribution of villas in Italy was determined by several important factors, among them the convenience of various locations, the fertility of the land, and proximity to other kinds of commercially exploited natural resources. For example, in the Ager Veientanus (Monte Aguzzo) and Ager Faliscus (Monte Maggiore), the local basalt quarries (used for the paving of roads) were surrounded by the well appointed villas of those who exploited them commercially. But there were also other major factors determining villa-distribution, such as the presence of a good transportation infrastructure. A major road running into or through a given area not only made it easy to reach one’s property, thus allowing the construction or purchase of a mansion that could be visited regularly, but also constituted the fundamental condition for the shipment and distribution of whatever commercial goods were produced on the estate. This relationship could work both ways; the presence of villas in an area could lead to the construction and regular maintenance of roads.

A navigable river could also serve as a major communication route, particularly one provided with harbor installations and bridges along its course, like the Tiber. As we have seen in Chapter 4, villa sites in Umbria are mostly concentrated along the Tiber and its tributaries. The river, as is also attested by Pliny’s letters and other literary sources, was used for both the transportation of passengers and the shipment of goods produced on rural estates to Rome. Minor rivers also seem to have had a role in the diffusion of villas, clearly because of their role in the transport of goods. One such a case is the river Garigliano, on whose banks several villas were built, up stream from Minturnae, and where a kiln was also discovered. Similarly, the wooden structures belonging to fluvial docks located at more than 20 km from the mouth

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1 Potter 1987: 114.
2 Lafon 2000: 145–146: the kiln was located on the river, 12 km from the sea. The senator L. Cornelius Lentulus Crus produced and shipped wine from here to Gaul
of the river Amaseno, between Circeii and Terracina, were very likely used for shipment of goods by rural villas in the area.

We have seen that a recurrent feature of maritime villas was the presence of a small harbor, in addition to any road that might already pass nearby (as in the cases of villas along the Via Severiana to Tar racina, or the coastal villas in the area of modern Sperlonga, which took advantage of the Via Flacca), and this points to the importance of water transport, both for people and for goods.

Another important element determining the choice of where to build a well appointed villa was the availability of a reliable water supply. In addition to collecting rain water in cisterns, other forms of water supply were also needed for a villa, especially when the fashion of having baths and *nymphaea* became popular. Water could be provided by private aqueducts, by tapping nearby natural springs or aquifers by means of underground channels, or by wells if the water table was not too deep. If a major public aqueduct ran close by, the villa could be connected to it directly. It was therefore highly desirable to own a property next to an aqueduct, since it could supply running water for all the villa’s needs.

The presence of Imperial residences in a given territory also determined the diffusion of elite villas there. During the Empire, it was desirable to be close to an Imperial seat in order to maintain and foster crucial political and social connections. In addition, the presence of an Imperial residence in an area very often translated, in practical terms, into a better infrastructure, providing further incentive to own or upgrade a villa in the same area as the emperor’s.

These are general observations on factors that appear to have influenced the distribution of villas in a given area; obviously, each individual case needs a closer examination. For instance, the area around Tusculum shows a high concentration of villas, not always in the most favorable or convenient position, probably as a result of the high demand of villas in that area. In the *suburbium* of Rome, another sought after area,