CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CHRONOLOGY OF VILLAS
AND THE SECOND-CENTURY “CRISIS”

In publications on villa-sites in Italy it is not uncommon to read that, starting in the second century A.D., and continuing into the third, villas were progressively being abandoned; their function as elite residences and production units for cash crops ceased, while squatters dwelled in precarious living conditions in the abandoned structures. Archaeologists reached these conclusions on the basis of evidence for the subdivision of large rooms into smaller living quarters, of poor, crude repairs, and the reutilization of elegant residential parts for utilitarian purposes, such as workshops, storerooms, and so on.

These data—combined with the fact that, by the mid-Empire, Italy was no longer exporting agricultural goods, such as wine, but was importing them from the provinces—generated the widespread view that most villas ceased to be units of agricultural production, and that the crisis of Italian agriculture also caused a crisis in the “villa system.”

The idea that imports of wine and oil from Spain and Gaul put Italian slave-labor estates in difficulties, forcing a move towards tenancy and extensive cereal agriculture goes back to Rostovtzeff.1 Alternative theories have also been put forward by historians, for instance Staerman’s idea that the slave mode of production experienced an internal crisis due to the contradictions of its form of economic organization, which led to escalating costs of supervising production, fuelled by the owners’ desire to increase their profits.2 Regardless of the initial cause, both theories agreed on the final result: the decline in the profitability of Italian agriculture and the collapse of the villa system, which led to a crisis in the economy and society as a whole. Even though some of the elements produced in support of the idea of the commercial competition of the provinces, such as the famous edict by Domitian in 92 A.D., ordering the destruction of half the vineyards in the provinces

2 Ibidem.
and prohibiting the establishment of new ones in Italy\(^3\) (which was interpreted as a protectionist measure in support of Italian agriculture), have been re-evaluated in the context of a shortage of cereals, and of possible over-planting of vines after the eruption of Vesuvius,\(^4\) signs of demise at villa sites have generally been framed in the context of a “second century crisis”.\(^5\)

Although most of the villa-sites considered in this study present only partial archaeological data, it is worth trying to determine any significant chronological pattern that may emerge in regard to the attested phases of occupation, while remembering that these data should be treated with the awareness that they reflect only what was discovered and published about each villa.\(^6\)

The available data on villa chronological phases does indeed show that in all three regions a decrease in the number of occupied-villas

\(^{3}\) Suet., *Domit.* 7.2.


\(^{5}\) For a discussion of the scholarly position on this “crisis” and re-evaluation of the evidence as being an inversion of the commercial trends between Italy and the provinces see Chapter 4 and Lo Cascio, “Introduzione”, in Lo Cascio and Storchi Marino 2001: 8–9; Andreau 1994.

\(^{6}\) In regard to the use of pottery forms as datable elements, it should be remembered that many late Imperial vessel types were produced and used for a long time, from the third/fourth to the late fifth/sixth centuries.