

11— The fate of villae: the example of Horta da Torre (Fronteira)

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ABSTRACT

The excavations carried out at the Roman *villa* of Horta da Torre since 2012 have documented an interesting process of post-abandonment reoccupation and systematic destruction of the built space. Though archaeological evidence can sometimes be tenuous, it records a concrete case of occasional reoccupations, while parallel circumstances have also been detected at various archaeological sites in *Lusitania* and other areas of *Hispania*. Evidence has been found to suggest that Horta da Torre was a location at which yet another phenomenon occurred, during which monumental structures and ways of living in the countryside in the imperial era were disrupted, thus allowing for questions about subsistence strategies in the post-classical period to be posed.

KEYWORDS

Transformation; *Villa*; Archaeological record; Settlement patterns.

1. Introduction: the Horta da Torre *villa* within the framework of the Alto Alentejo landscape during Late Antiquity

The Roman rural landscape in Alto Alentejo is characterised by several monumental structures interpreted as *villae*. Few of these have been the subject of archaeological excavations, and even fewer have had rigorous methodologies applied to their research. However, due to the abundance of large masses of built remains and the presence of architectural and decorative ornaments, these sites can be characterised as monumental structures of vast apparatus built under the aegis of *Domini* with high purchasing power (Carneiro 2014).

One of these sites is in the parish of Cabeço de Vide (**Figure 1**), in the municipality of Fronteira, which has been subject to annual archaeological excavations since 2012. Although the excavated area is still small in relation to the estimated size of the site — about 1000 m² in an estimated total area measuring around 30,000 m² — evidence of various presences on the site and phenomena related to different uses of the space at different times have been identified. This situation is of particular interest because it provides another angle from which to analyse the process generically called ‘the end of the *villae*’ (Chavarría Arnau 2007). The evidence uncovered allows the process of abandonment to be perceived as well as the disruption of the way in which the structure was inhabited and the surrounding territory used. The data collected has been published sequentially on several occasions: an overview of the architecture of the site and its decoration (Carneiro 2019), the results of the excavation (Carneiro, *in press*) and changes in subsistence patterns at the site (Carneiro 2020), not forgetting an analysis of the intra-site evidence

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Figure 1: Horta da Torre in the Iberian Peninsula map.

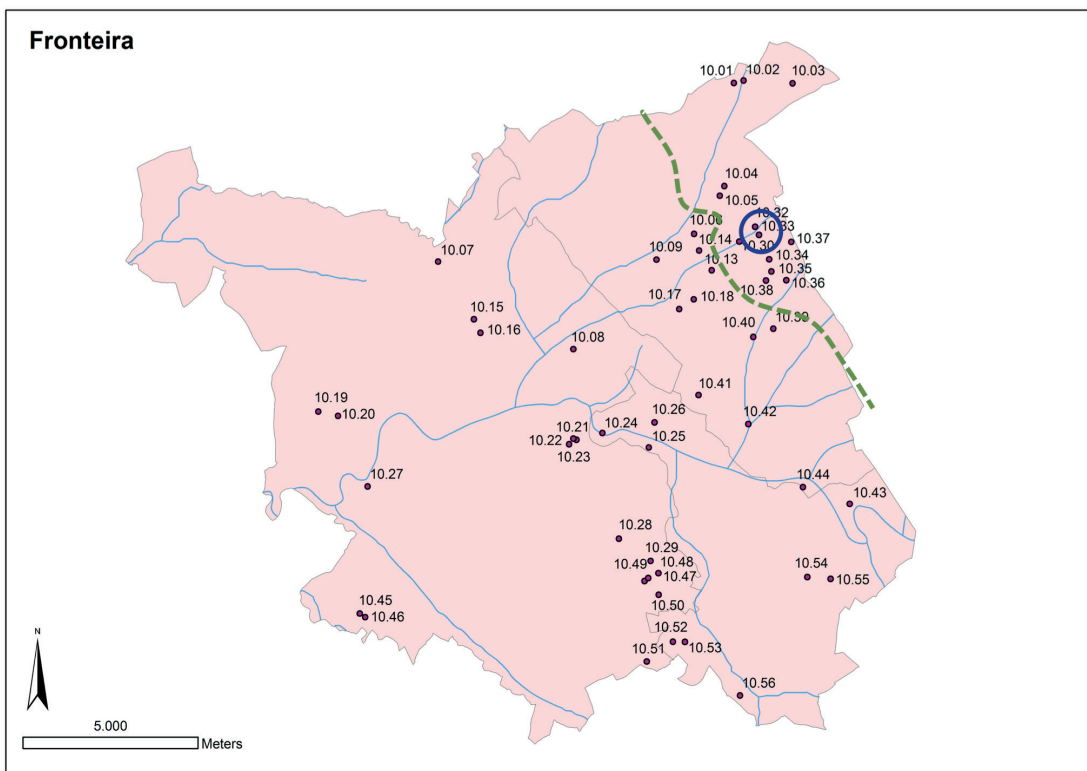


Figure 2: Roman Settlement in the Fronteira territory: map from Carneiro 2014.

using super-intensive surveys and remote sensing methods (Carneiro *et al.* 2019). Since this text is part of a collective volume that seeks to understand patterns of change in rural areas in the High Middle Ages, a conscious effort will be made to avoid repeating content presented elsewhere. As such, this paper shall be used as a means through which to seek to understand the circumstances that took place in Horta da Torre, based on a broader picture of changes in the economic and subsistence models of the communities that inhabited the Lusitanian countryside from the 5th century onwards.

2. The Horta da Torre villa: changing patterns

The municipality of Fronteira has a total of 56 Roman sites identified within a total area of 248 km² (Carneiro 2005). A total of seven of these sites are characterised as *villae* (1/35 km²), having presented a specific set of surface findings, four of which are located in the northeast corner of the municipality, in the parish of Cabeço de Vide (Carneiro 2014 II: 249–82). This concentration can be explained by the proximity of one of the most essential *itinera*, what was probably Via XIV, along which there is a string of large *villae*, of which Horta da Torre is one (Figure 2).

To avoid repeating content published in other texts, it is worth briefly stating that the excavation area at Horta da Torre was initiated around a structure that was already visible on the surface. Due to its semi-circular shape, this structure had been named the Tower (*Torre*) by the local population. The work subsequently conducted led to the space being documented as having a double apse that crowned a monumental room with a *stibadium*. Behind this device is a gate that allows for the controlled entry of water, on the wall that forms the internal apse. This points to the reason why the floor of the room is entirely covered with *opus signinum*. The floor was joined to the wall using a frieze made of marble slabs, and the upper section of the elevation would once have been decorated with multi-coloured mosaic panels with figures of aquatic plants. The theme of water and the implementation of *nymphaeum*-type spaces are common traits among the other *villae* in this area of Portugal (Carneiro 2019: 9–12), worked into the designs as a means through which to create a fusion between natural landscapes and built environments.

The room opens onto a large peristyle (not yet excavated in its entirety), which has columns and a set of ducts and structures in *exedra* used to allow water to circulate around what would have been a pleasant *viridarium*, an internal garden. A wall separates this room from a small peristyle to the south, in which *cubiculae* were built around an *impluvium* filled by a fountain (Figure 3).

When the excavation of the *stibadium* room began, it was carried out under the assumption that this would make up the central area of the *pars urbana* of the *villa*. It was assumed that it had since been severely devastated due to intentional destruction and agricultural practices. However, georadar surveys were carried out throughout the property in 2018, within the scope of the *Fronteira Landscape Project*, in collaboration with Leiden University (Netherlands). The results were surprising (Carneiro *et al.* 2019), as the structures below ground spread out over two hectares; the *stibadium* room located in a decentralised, peripheral position before an extensive patio that was preceded by a smaller one. The *villa*'s built space also extends into the neighbouring properties, as there is an isolated apse about 200 metres from the excavation area. A necropolis is located between this apse and the *iter*.

Sometime in the mid-5th century, this vast construction, which was decorated with elements of exquisite opulence, would face a meticulous process of abandonment. It was carefully planned, because at no time did the excavation make it possible to identify any situations in which there would have been a fire, destruction or loss from sources other than fortuitous circumstances. Likewise, levels of abandonment that have been preserved contain a scarcity of materials from the imperial occupation, which demonstrates an organised process of withdrawal. The excavations conducted have allowed

for materials left under specific circumstances to be collected, though these do not compare to the diversity of finds collected outside the architectural space. There were two locations in which waste had been deposited, one on either side of the apse of the *stibadium* room. However, this applied even more to the material collected from surveys outside the built space, where various material records were found, including early findings not documented in the excavation (Carneiro and Sepúlveda 2011).

The *villa* was not, however, abandoned permanently. All the areas that have been studied to date show signs of human presence through reoccupation processes that took place when the *villa* was abandoned and starting to fall into ruin. However, there could have been further intermediary occupations that are more difficult to determine.

Evidence for this/these occupation/s includes:

- a. In the **stibadium room**, the *opus signinum* floors were drilled into in order to build a shelter out of perishable materials similar to others witnessed in *Hispania* (Tejerizo 2017: 130–32) and with parallels in the archetypes identified for sites in Italy (Fronza 2011: 121–28). There is a high probability that the occupants of this shelter never saw the room's marble baseboards, which would have been torn out previously, circumstances that can be inferred from evidence found in *villae* in other regions (Munro 2012: 365). The entirety of the surface of the double apse room, which measures approximately 100 m², was covered by a thick layer of rubble [UE22], sealing in a residual layer containing sparse finds [UE33]. Among those found, however, some were relevant osteological elements. In particular, horse bones (Valente and Carneiro 2015) were recovered, indicating that people and animals shared the occupation of this space.
- b. In the **large peristyle**, the *opus signinum* paving surface exposed in the archaeological excavations carried out is scarce, though other perforations were already found in the East corridor. The most relevant element, however, was found in the inner area of the *impluvium*, where there would have been a garden. The sediment [UE108] found in this section contained several sections of bone, including jaws that presented marks made from cutting and consumption. This set of findings is under analysis but corresponds to layers of rubble and waste.
- c. As for the **small peristyle**, its roof had collapsed, the ceramics used for its construction thrown into the *impluvium*, covering it almost entirely [UE72]. In the northern aisle, and particularly in the north-western corner, a thick layer [UE16] composed of dark sediment was filled with coarse ceramic cooking vessels, remains of *dolium* used to store food and various remains of bones, including jaws, demonstrating how this area was used to deposit waste (**Figure 4**). A fragment of granite millstone was found, thus allowing for this type of activity to be documented for the first time within the framework of materials salvaged throughout the *villa*.

Thus, in the area studied hitherto — which, it is worth reiterating, is only a fraction of the entire area covered by the *villa* — the following situations have been documented:

- Construction of new structures *within* previously inhabited spaces;
- Removal and displacement of building elements;
- Deposition of sediment —rubble and waste— inside the built structure, though not within the inhabited areas (that is, it was deposited on the floor in the small peristyle already abandoned and in the garden).



Figure 3: Excavation area after the 2019 campaign (drone photo by João Marques, Geodrone.pt).



Figure 4: Jaw found in the UE16 during the 2015 campaign.

Two situations in which spaces faced a complete change with regard to how they were previously used have also been determined:

- a. Technological change in the recorded finds, from *Mediterranean connectivity* to a situation in which materials were scarce and manufactured using rudimentary techniques. Ceramics are the predominant material found, used for both making and storing food and bearing marks proving their systematic and prolonged use.
- b. Zooarchaeological records (Valente and Carneiro 2015; Carneiro 2020) also provide evidence of a profound change, with luxury consumption (molluscs, wine and oil imported in amphorae, big game and hunting, large cattle) becoming limited to a local scale. In terms of fauna, a predominance of sheep and goats was detected, though their consumption would have been reinforced with flour, which would possibly have been stored in the medium-sized containers found in the small peristyle. The existence of unsophisticated agro-pastoral activities can thus be detected, in which highly resistant animals were sought after, simultaneously allowing for the extraction of their by-products.

Such is the material data that could be recovered thanks to the excavation of the Horta da Torre *villa*. The following section contains an analysis of other components that could offer other possible perspectives.

3. The fate of Horta da Torre: attempting to establish the timeframe

Traditionally, the *end of the villae* has been understood as an abrupt turn of events resulting from the invasions of ‘hordes of barbarians’ that dismantled sites, bringing an end to the former imperial landscape. This conventional paradigm was later altered to a theoretical framework based on continuity, in which it was believed that *villae* became ‘villages’. This development was thought to have come about as a result of operations undertaken by an active church. As it evangelised the rural areas, these agents would become the axis that stabilised the processes of change, with churches taking root as a reference point around which rural communities would form. In recent years, wide-ranging studies have sought to define the standards according to which these ongoing transformations took place, also creating intermediate steps within which it was perceived that the process of the *end of the villae* was made up of several, sometimes contracting, phases of change (Chavarría Arnau 2007).

However, what the growing corpus of information seems to highlight is the difficulty in establishing patterns that can allow us to understand the entire process. Indeed, stratigraphic records (vertical sequences in excavations) and planimetric on-site readings (horizontal readings taken in open area operations, so very far away from the current recording and rescue archaeological paradigm that only allows small windows) are far from abundant. Even so, it seems to have become increasingly clear that the *end of the villae* was a particularly variable process with significant differentiation, even within regions (Carneiro 2017).

To take Horta da Torre as an example, sometime during the 5th century (though presumably at the beginning) the site was abandoned, and its ruins reoccupied. However, a little further south, the ceramics found in surface field surveys in the *villa* at Monte de S. Francisco include imports from as late as the mid-6th century, including an abundant presence of African red slip ware D (Hayes 76, 84, 93B and 97). An emergency intervention made it possible to document the existence of at least three burials, in addition to at least a dozen more found via georadar imaging (Carneiro *et al.* 2019: 52–53). In other words, it has been acknowledged that the human presence at Monte de S. Francisco changed at a certain point, with the ‘necropolisation’ of an area outside the building. However, this population’s purchasing power and the circuits of the Mediterranean world-economy seem to have remained active

for a long time, nonetheless. Likewise, the well-known *villa* of Torre de Palma, which stands to the south-east of Horta da Torre, seems to register a visible 5th-century *floruit* in several ways: in the expansion of the wine cellar and storage of wine and/or oil, but also with the progressive development and monumentalisation of the spaces related to Christian worship —the basilica and baptistry (Lancha and André 2000)— evidence that (at least, in the present moment) are totally absent in Horta da Torre and Monte de S. Francisco. This allows us to perceive how complex the panorama is, as though these locations are only a few kilometres apart geographically, each displays distinct phenomena of evolution.

However, the process of conducting an intra-*villa* analysis itself has also become more complex as a more accurate and rigorous reading of the circumstances has become possible. Beth Munro's innovative works are an example of this (especially 2012 with bibliography), allowing new intermediary steps to be established in the process of decommissioning the *villae*, both in terms of the time phases and of the planimetric reading of the sites. In this way, the structure of any *villa* can be established within itself. Considered purely pragmatically, each *villa* is, in fact, a stock of resources that attracts different agents at different times. As such, rigorous excavation and interpretations carried out in each site can lead to surprising results, as proved in the paradigmatic case of Faragola (Turchiano and Volpe 2018: 143–49), at which several reoccupations and plundering phases could be detected within the *villa*'s structural areas.

For Horta da Torre, the filters used to detect timeframes have not been fine-tuned sufficiently to allow for a rigorous sequencing of processes to be defined. However, human use of the site can be proposed as follows:

- i. Early/mid-5th century: the *villa* was abandoned in an orderly and, it seems, systematic way. The ultra-intensive surface surveys conducted at the site did not detect relevant supplies originating from Northern Africa., with later Hayes forms 50, 61, 58, 59, 61 and 67 having been recorded (compare with the Monte de S. Francisco record mentioned above). Likewise, none of these were found on ground level during excavations, constituting a sign of a planned abandonment.
- ii. Mid/late 5th century: marble slabs were removed from the *stibadium* room. This process could have taken place within one of two timeframes: removal by the *villa*'s last owner, who could have removed the marble upon leaving the location (due to its intrinsic value?), or immediately after it was abandoned, due to a change in ownership of the property (so that the marble could be recycled?). It is also clear that the process of removing the slabs was systematic, though manual, because no machinery was used. Proof of this was found in the damage done by pointed tools hitting the marble and the mortar of the walls. Either way, the removal process would have needed to be organised. The work was laborious. It must, therefore, be assumed that this work was carried out by a team, an operation that differs significantly from the type of operations carried out in the 'pastoral' phase.
- iii. A short cycle of human presence in which wooden structures were erected in the *stibadium* room, around the early/mid 6th century. This proposal is based on evidence found that seems to point to a record of material culture and the presence of fauna different from that found in the small peristyle (Carneiro 2020). In this case, building a shelter in this room would have required a reasonable amount of investment and organisation, as it would have been necessary to drill the solid *opus signinum* floor. The hut constructed is also proof that the conceptual planning of the space differed in its entirety from the organisational model applied in the imperial phase. It is also proof that the population inhabiting the hut remained in the location for some time. It was possibly at this stage that the debris registered in the peristyle areas was deposited there.
- iv. Leading on from the previous phase or at a later date (6th century? Early 7th century?), a 'pastoral reoccupation' took place. Abundant proof of this phase was found in the excavations carried out

thanks to evidence of cattle being kept and waste deposited in various locations within the built space (Figure 5). It is difficult to split this period apart from the previous one. However, the patterns of material culture in the peristyles are precarious, seeming to correspond to occupants with greater mobility and a more fluid connection to the land than the events that took place in the *stibadium* room. Also, while the structure of the latter was still in good condition, the roof of the small peristyle had already started collapsing, as mentioned previously.

For now, determining additional intermediate timeframes is a particularly complex task, and even how these phases are characterised needs to be refined further — with more excavations and with systematic study of the material culture. Furthermore, problems arise from post-depositional processes at this archaeological site: intense farming of the land has led to deep displacement and the soil being stirred up many times, producing structural effects over vast areas and a complete disruption of archaeological layers. In addition to these phenomena, the normal erosion processes that occur in an area with gentle slopes must also be taken into consideration. Although the best-preserved section of the inner north wall of the double apse room is 1.30 m tall, the profiles of 80 % of the excavation area are, on average, less than 30 cm tall. Another factor that must also be taken into consideration is that the excavated area is still relatively small. A result of this is that the passages and channels of communication between the spaces do not allow for a clear perception to be gained of the focal point of this population's presence and spatial interrelations. The same difficulty is faced when identifying the possible areas in which products were recycled. This contrasts with archaeological research conducted in other regions, where recycling locations were found, sometimes outside the abandoned buildings (Munro 2012: 355). Even with the aid provided by extensive georadar prospecting undertaken in 2018, which made a rigorous mapping of the area possible, it is necessary to bear in mind that many processing structures were spatially located or constructed precariously, thus requiring an extensive area to be excavated under strict informational monitoring.

For all these reasons, it is crucial that the periodisation proposed above, which is still very much preliminary, be seen as a mere working hypothesis. It may certainly become clearer over the course of this investigation. In other words, it is becoming increasingly evident that the end of the villa did not take place abruptly. Instead, it took place through a phased set of operations that, on the one hand, used the architectural structure and its materials as a resource, picking the components that could be recycled, and on the other used the remainder (the architectural space, a skeleton devoid of decorative ornaments) as a shelter for other activities.

In this way, Horta da Torre proves that these monumental structures continued to be a reference point in the landscape, the hotspot around which operations were conducted, even when their original purpose had been long lost. The challenges now to be faced are defining the stages of this process of decommissioning the *villa* more rigorously, as well as how long the site remained in use. In order to do so, rigorous excavations must be conducted, and the information gathered carefully monitored. The protagonists of each phase must, of course, also be defined, thus bringing us to our next point.

4. The fate of Horta da Torre: searching for agents

Recent archaeological investigations have, with progressive rigour, managed to pinpoint a set of actors in the rural landscape who, paradoxically, are very little known in the Imperial landscape: the peasantry (Quirós Castillo 2016; Tejerizo 2017). However, it also remains a complex task to track the owners of the properties and managers of the agrarian economy, as there is a void, both in the material register and in the codes of representation, that stops us from detecting members of the elite —the *domini*— during the Late Antique period. This disappearance of the elites or *elite void* gave rise to one of the most stimulating works conducted in relation to the end of the imperial landscape (Lewit 2005), in which this invisibility



Figure 5: Waste disposal [UE68] under the wall collapse [UE16] in the north-eastern corner of the small peristyle during the 2015 campaign.

became particularly apparent. In truth, this absence — which was, at most, partially filled by the agents of the Church — is inversely proportional to the circumstances presented in the previous timeframe, when only *domini* and *potentiores* seemed to reside in the *villae*. Within the imperial landscape, all the other agents seemed to be relegated to a *penumbra*, only emerging from the periphery in the funerary record, given the sprawling undifferentiated rural necropolises in this region (Rolo 2019). We are therefore faced with a contrast in the social panorama between the imperial and post-Classical eras, which, essentially, represents many other difficulties that must be overcome (in the imbalances found in written records, improving prospecting and excavation projects, etc.).

Now, returning to the landscape found in Late Antiquity, this ‘cultural revolution of the 5th–6th centuries’ (Lewit 2003: 270) created a differing scenario in the Alto Alentejo, in which some sites saw continuity of occupation, while others were abandoned. Similarly to circumstances faced in cities, this situation certainly created a mosaic of realities, with some *villae* becoming devoid of inhabitants but containing areas of intense activity — pillaging, recycling and/or sheltering — before their final abandonment. In contrast, others evolved, seeking to strengthen productive agricultural activities, or becoming buildings inhabited differently. That is, as time went on, an increasingly multifaceted landscape emerged, in which levels of functional coexistence contrast with each other, and within which the population was able to develop adaptive mechanisms to deal with the new situations they faced.

While they may have lacked the operations that characterised their existence in the previous period, these *villae* remained points of attraction for the populations in their surroundings. However, while (according to the traditional perspective) archaeologists are programmed to identify the ‘extraordinary’ events that characterised the imperial landscape, at this stage it has become necessary to look for tenuous evidence that is usually constituted by layers of sediment, the removal or displacement of

elements, or the remains of certain operations — fireplaces and structures within which combustion was conducted, materials abandoned, etc. These discarded finds present a clear potential for providing information. However, it is necessary to understand how they reflect the adaptive strategies of those who used them and left them behind.

In general, it can always be assumed that the earliest sites to be abandoned were those located in less privileged areas or in marginal, peripheral locations that were not easily accessible. In the case of Horta da Torre, one of the most contrasting elements for analysis lies in the clear visibility of its structures and the ease of access to the *villa*. These circumstances arise from two of the *villa*'s features: the building itself, which would undoubtedly be imposing, but also the fact that this was the closest *villa* to an *iter* in the region. In other words, the *villa* would be clearly visible to anyone travelling along the road, making it necessary to consider that this would have been an appealing factor, serving to encourage settlers to shelter in the locale or use it to source resources they could pillage. It was a hotspot of operations, drawing in agents travelling around the area and even the locals.

Along these lines, two types of human presence can also be assumed to have existed in the *villa* in the post-abandonment stage. One relates to *itinerancy*, in which possible occupants were in transit in this territory, knew it well, and perceived the structure as a resource at a certain point, though only for one-off operations. Others were agents who were unfamiliar with the location, and who had other concerns, but who approached the *villa* for shelter and/or pillaging. Yet another record of occupation also exists, however, in terms of the remaining residents of the surrounding area. This population was familiar with the landscape and saw the *villa* as a salient ruin in their mental maps of the area. This same population may also have felt some form of fascination concerning the *dwelling*, whether in terms of occupying the space, or due to an interest in removing any materials they may have wanted or needed. In other words, even if the *villa* had been incorporated into a neighbouring *fundus* and had somehow continued to benefit from any form of organised surveillance or presence, it seems obvious to assume that a structure of this dimension would continue to mark the landscape, drawing agents from across the land — whether they were travellers or locals — to move there. These people perceived the ruin as a magnet, to a certain extent, something that caught their attention and functioned as an irresistible locale they must seek out. It is the traces of these presences — whether they were longer-lasting or short-lived — that an excavation would seek to find. A project of this dimension would require increasingly rigorous analytical frameworks.

In brief, I would like to draw attention to the fact that, as in previous texts, no focus was intended on any markers of identity, whether ethnic or cultural. So far, no evidence has been found to suggest the presence of any populations foreign to the territories — the barbarians that traditional research always seems to look for — or of testimonies related to Christian worship. In fact, out of all the *villae* in the region, this is the only one that (for the time being) has not revealed any markers of a Christian presence. The only scenario that these archaeological campaigns allow us to consider was that, for some time, several people continued to visit Horta da Torre — seeking shelter, removing materials, keeping cattle, cooking meals, dumping waste and leaving remnants behind as markers of their presence. These people occupied the ruins in a radically different way from its previous residents, bringing new meanings to areas through uses that were entirely different from those for which they were initially constructed. These agents demonstrated resilience and adaptive strategies, keeping the site alive up until it was finally permanently abandoned. While other locations have shown evidence of having become the focal points of specific operations, this *villa* became marginal, while still maintaining enough power and appeal to continue to be visited. It is the marks of these presences in the *villa* that will open up a window onto the lives of these people, those who remained in this land and sought to adapt and develop their livelihood strategies — as they've always done.

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