

From the Light and into the Dark: The Transformation to the Early Middle Ages

Arrush Choudhary

College of Arts and Science, Vanderbilt University

From a historic perspective, the period of Roman rule and the following Middle Ages are polar opposites. For most, the city of Rome and the Western Roman Empire represent a time of advancement for the Mediterranean world while the Middle Ages are viewed as a regression of sorts for Europe. The reasons explaining the underlying cause of this transition from the Western Roman Empire to the Middle Ages are numerous but this paper will specifically focus on the practices started by the Romans themselves and how they contributed to the rise of the Early Middle Ages on the Italian Peninsula. More specifically, economic turmoil and urbanization following the 3rd century crisis in the city of Rome laid the groundwork for social, legislative, and political changes that thread the path to the fundamental characteristics of the Middle Ages. Changing views of the city and the countryside, the construction of latifundia and villas, and the passing of legislation that restricted the rights of laborers, in addition to other transformations in late Rome, all contributed to the decentralized governance, rural life, and serfdom that are characteristic of the Middle Ages. Ultimately, the goal of this paper is to illustrate that despite the major differences that exist between the Roman period and the Middle Ages, the practices of the late Western Roman Empire were often directly carried over into the Middle Ages and, as a result, for one to truly understand the origins of the Middle Ages, it is essential to comprehend the traditions started by the late Romans.

The fall of the Western Roman Empire in the late fifth century CE and the subsequent shift to the Middle Ages in Western Europe is one of the most dramatic and seemingly unexpected transitions in European history. This paper will examine how the changes to the landscape of the Italian countryside, which was heavily influenced by the economic and political situation in the city of Rome, account for, at least in part, this transition to the Middle Ages. For one, urbanization in the wake of the expansion of latifundia played a key role in shifting the city/country duality in such a way that the countryside was viewed more positively than the city. Secondly, villas and latifundia constructed under Roman rule on the Italian Peninsula served as possible precedents and models for medieval manors. Third, the conditions under which the Romans treated *coloni* during late antiquity played a role in the transition to Middle Age serfdom. Ultimately, I hope that this paper will make clear that the transition from the Roman Empire to the Middle Ages, though dramatic, was not unpredictable, due to the fact that many of the practices started by the late Romans in the city of Rome paved the way to the realities of the Middle Ages on the Italian Peninsula.

LATIFUNDIA AND URBANIZATION

It is important to introduce and highlight villas and latifundia here as major causes of urbanization and thus the urban problems that arose in the city of Rome during late antiquity. Villas in Roman times were essentially luxurious country houses consisting of farmland and residential buildings surrounding a central courtyard. The definition of latifundium, in contrast, was often something along the lines of “a large, centrally managed agricultural enterprise, measuring 1,000 or more iugera (= to 250 ha), using mostly slave labor.” The major distinction between a villa and a latifundium is size; in general, latifundia are much larger than villas. Before the first century CE, the rural landscape of the Italian Peninsula was dominated by villas but latifundia became more prevalent at the turn of the century. In fact, the exponential growth of latifundia and their subsequent displacement of smaller villas was such a concern for the senators of the city of Rome that many eyewitnesses of the time spoke about the possible negative repercussions related to the expansion of latifundia. For instance, Seneca the Younger, a philosopher, adviser to Nero, and one of the richest statesmen in the city of Rome during the first century, warned others about

their unnecessarily expansive tracts of land, asking “How far will you extend the bounds of your possessions? A large tract of land, sufficient heretofore for a whole nation, is scarce wide enough for a single lord.” Likewise, Cicero, another influential Roman who lived almost a century before Seneca, noted that the whole Italian Peninsula had no more than two thousand landowners. The fact that ancient sources were aware of the problems associated with the rise of latifundia reveals that latifundia caused immense, and possibly negative, changes in the Roman way of life.

On top of these primary sources, modern analysis supports the expansion and significance of latifundia. For instance, modern archeological studies reveal that property was consolidated in Italy during the first and second century CE. According to Alexandra Arnau, based on the exhaustive documentary analysis done by Domenico Vera on the villas of the Italian countryside, “there is... a general consensus that from the second century CE onwards there existed a tendency towards a concentration of rural property ownership.”⁵ This concentration of land in the hands of a few individuals directly supports the rise of latifundia. Furthermore, like ancient sources, modern authors agree that latifundia played a critical role in altering the city of Rome as well as the Italian countryside. For example, Simkhovitch and Bourne strongly attest to the consequences associated with the rise of latifundia playing a crucial role in the fall of the Western Roman Empire. These specific consequences will be discussed shortly. In essence, however, looking at ancient sources as well as modern archeological findings and views reveals that the expansion of latifundia caused substantial disruptions in the Roman way of life and played an important part in the city of Rome’s decline.

The rise of large latifundia in first and second century CE Italy is important in two ways. One, as a consequence of the growing size of latifundia, many ancient literary sources attest to the fact that small and medium sized villas were taken over by large latifundia and, as a result, farmers were often forced off their lands. This dispersal of farmers, who were traditionally considered the backbone of Roman society, astonished many ancient authors, some of whom lamented the changing of Roman values. For example, Horace, a Roman poet, stated that the great deeds of the Romans stemmed from the farmer class and since the farmers no longer existed, Roman society would fundamentally change in a negative way.⁷ Moreover, because these farmers no longer had reason to remain in the countryside, they moved to the city, especially Rome, where there were no new jobs and

already high unemployment. According to Frank Bourne’s estimates, thousands of farmers left the countryside and migrated to the city. The second consequence of latifundia was a decrease in the Western Roman Empire’s economic performance. Latifundia, during the first and second century CE, were able to produce huge amounts of agricultural produce but, starting in the early third century, extensive farming, which was a staple of latifundia, exhausted the soil of the Italian countryside. As a result, by the late third century, the economy of the Italian countryside and, in turn, the city of Rome began to deteriorate. These two phenomena play a key role in shifting the country/city duality in the late Western Roman Empire.

SHIFTING CITY/COUNTRY DUALITY DUE TO URBANIZATION AND ECONOMIC DECLINE

Before I begin this discussion of the landscape in the city and countryside and how it changed, it is important to define what landscape is exactly. For the purposes of this paper, I will define landscape rather simply as the geographical and manmade factors that characterize a given location. During the first and second century, as a result of latifundia displacing smaller farms, the landscape of the countryside began to change. Later, as displaced farmers moved to the city, the landscape of the city shifted as well. Ultimately, the changing landscape of both the city and the countryside resulted in fundamental paradigm shifts of the average citizen’s view of the countryside, the city, and their relationship. More specifically, as a result of latifundia in the countryside and urbanization in the city, the city/country duality changed such that the countryside was favored over the city - a key characteristic of the Middle Ages.

The first important aspect to notice about the city/country duality in the city of Rome is the fact that it existed prior to late antiquity. As James Ackerman so effectively articulates, the countryside was viewed in a positive light by the most Romans; it was:

Defined as an antithesis to urban life, its essential elements were the simplicity and the informality of country living, the healthfulness of the air and the opportunity for exercise, the scope for undisturbed intellectual and creative activities, leisurely conversations with friends, and the delights of contemplating the natural and cultivated landscape in different seasons and conditions.

Drawing from several ancient sources of the first century,

like Horace, Pliny the Younger, and Maecenas, a political advisor to Augustus, Ackerman makes it quite clear that even prior to the severe urban problems that arose in the city of Rome during late antiquity, there seems to have been consensus, at least among the Roman elite, that the countryside had its advantages over the city. Consequently, the city/country duality is not a new concept that arises by late antiquity but rather a relationship that becomes more pronounced.

Although the city/country duality changed for both the wealthy and the average citizens of Rome in the same way during late antiquity, the reasons differ. As a result, the following discussion is tailored to each of these groups individually.

THE WEALTHY

As discussed previously, the rise of latifundia during the first and second centuries led to a migration of individuals to the city from the countryside. At first, urbanization was not a major problem because the economy of the Roman Empire was doing well and thus longstanding relationships between the rich and the poor remained intact. More specifically, the common practice of the rich in the city of Rome providing the poor with food, housing, and other basic necessities as sign of their wealth and as a currency of exchange for political allegiance persisted during initial urbanization. As a result, prior to the third century, the urban problems in the city of Rome were not too severe and, to some extent, kept under control.

At the onset of the crisis of the third century, however, this patron system began to change. As military threats from Germanic tribes increased, taxation was imposed on the Italian Peninsula due to the desperate needs of the Roman government, the regional and imperial economy slowed down, and plague threatened the city of Rome, the wealthy began to lose a lot of their monetary sources. In other words, the third-century crisis caused decreasing profits, increased taxation, and a growing number of poor individuals dependent on the wealthy. To make matters worse, political interest in the city of Rome began to decline as “political bribery was no longer tolerated under Augustus.” Though this policy was instated during the turn of the millennium, it was only enforced by the Romans after the economic crisis in an attempt to avoid losing tax money. As a consequence of this policy, the economic incentive of holding political office decreased and as a result political offices in the city of Rome were no longer valued as highly as they once were. Thus, for the wealthy, “urban living, display and office-holding

began to lose their appeal.” In other words, the combined effect of the economic downturn and decreased political interest among the elite shifted the city/country duality in such a way that the popularity of the city declined. Consequently, the third and fourth centuries marked a period of time in which the urban elite fled the city and settled in the surrounding countryside. There, wealthy Romans were able to enjoy the advantages of country living that their ancestors once did and also avoid their expected civic responsibilities to the state and to the poor.

As a result of urban pressures in late Roman times, the city/country duality shifted in such a way that the countryside gained ground over the city as the ideal place to live and, as a result, the wealthy, who were in a position to act on their desires, migrated from the city to the country. This migration of the wealthy to the countryside is supported by archeological findings around the city of Rome from the third and fourth centuries. According to Sarah Scott’s survey of the these late Roman villa, once the city began to lose its appeal to the Roman elite, they settled in the countryside where they built large lavish villas that “formed foci for display and entertainment for fellow aristocrats and even emperors’ entourages.” In essence, modern archeological findings of extravagant villas from the third and fourth centuries suggest that wealthy Romans must have moved out of the city and to the country. Moreover, these villas were often situated in such a way that they “were designed to impress visitors not just internally but also externally... in their wider landscape setting.” The fact that these villas were constructed to incorporate the natural landscape around them reveals that urban elites did not flee the city just to avoid its negative aspects but to also embrace nature and the serenity of the countryside.

THE MIDDLE CLASS AND THE POOR

Once the wealthy in the city of Rome left for the countryside, the situation in the city began to deteriorate. First, the patron system that supported a large majority of the city of Rome’s unemployed and poor ceased to exist since the wealthy no longer lived in the city. This resulted in even worse living situations and overall urban squalor. As detailed by Bourne, the average citizen in fourth-century Rome, as for most of the city’s history, did not live a life of comfort in a clean, safe, and spacious environment. Instead, their living arrangements were often nothing less than chaotic; the majority of the city’s citizens lived in tenements where disease, filth, fire, sewage problems, and traffic were ubiquitous. This situation was made even

worse by the flight of the wealthy and the concurrent lack of jobs.

Moreover, as the rich fled the city, the problems associated with urban poverty became those of the government. The government, however, due in part to the other problems of third- and fourth-century Rome, was not able to deal with the poor effectively. This inability of the government to take care of the poor makes even more sense given the fact that about 60% of Rome's population can be characterized as non-producers, individuals who contribute next to nothing to the economy. Thus, as a consequence of limited aid and economic turmoil, the urban squalor in the city of Rome grew and as a result even the middle class and the somewhat well-to-do tried to flee to the countryside to avoid these problems. The main "take-away" here is that even for the more typical citizens of the city of Rome, who did not necessarily view the countryside as a place for relaxation and beauty, the country/city duality nonetheless changed in such a way that the countryside was viewed more positively than the city.

The ultimate result of this changing city/country duality during late antiquity can be best seen in Figure 1, a graph depicting the steady decline in population of the city of Rome after the mid-second century. Looking at this figure, it is clear that due to urban problems and the shifting country/city duality, people moved out of the city and into the countryside. This migration of citizens out of the city also plays an important role in the view of the Romans toward government. As stated by Bourne, by the end of the fourth century and into the fifth century, "both the poor... and the rich... began to lose their enthusiasm for shouldering civic government." Decreasing political interest in state affairs is a trend that, I believe, plays an important role in the shift to the Middle Ages since citizens of the city of Rome, by the end of late antiquity, had negative views towards the city and centralized government. Thus, as a consequence of this altered city/country duality, at the onset of the Middle Ages, Roman citizens viewed the countryside and minimalistic government, at least at first, as welcome changes to what they remembered about late Roman cities and governance.

LATIFUNDIA AND VILLAS

Starting in the early fourth century and stretching to the sack of the city of Rome in 476 CE, the rural landscape of the late Western Roman Empire was changing substantially as large numbers of individuals were leaving the city and moving to the countryside. Consequently, the number of living quarters outside the city of Rome, vary-

ing from large latifundia, to villas, to smaller dwellings, substantially increased during late antiquity. Although the consensus among most scholars about the state and use of these rural structures after the fall of the Western Roman Empire is unclear, using what is left from the few Roman country residences that are still well preserved today, it is known that some villas were converted into churches, others were robbed, but others still "may have shifted into... a more functional agricultural role."

Despite the fact that not much work has been done looking solely at the transformation of specific villas and latifundia in Italy from late antiquity to the Middle Ages, there is some agreement by scholars that villas shifted from more luxurious to more practical as the Western Roman Empire began to decline. For instance, according to Arnau's extensive study on specific villas in Spain such as Vilauba, Torre Llauder, and La Torrecilla, among others, villas were changed so that "characteristic elements of the aristocratic Roman way of life, such as mosaics or baths, were destroyed and replaced by the installation of agricultural or industrial structures." Importantly, this transition in the structure of villas to more productive hubs was "a pattern documented elsewhere in the Western Roman Empire. Likewise, Marzano's systematic survey looking at the villas of the central Italian countryside reveals that, during late antiquity, "many sites [villas] show signs of decline in the quality of their architectural décor, which implies that they were no longer used as elite residences." Although it is important not to be hasty when looking at these findings, since they are largely limited to a few well preserved villas, there seems to be a recurring theme nonetheless that villas and latifundia were converted into more agriculturally productive estates after the fall of the city of Rome. One can thus argue that Roman villas and latifundia were conceivable precursors to Middle Age manors and villages. However, a more direct relationship between the practices of Rome and the rise of the Middle Ages comes in the form of the labor used to work these latifundia, villas, and farms – namely slaves and *coloni*.

SLAVES AND COLONI

Slaves, as most would expect, had almost no rights during Roman times and as a result were the most profitable and preferred form of labor for wealthy latifundium owners. Moreover, since latifundia replaced small and medium sized farms in the Italian countryside during the early first century, slaves became the predominate form of agricultural labor in Rome. In fact, as in the definition

provided on page 2, definitions of latifundium usually incorporate its slave element. This fact that the definition of latifundia includes slave labor clearly illustrates just how central slavery was to the Italian countryside and agricultural production. Given the popularity of slaves, it is almost surprising that *coloni*, or legally free tenants, became the major source of labor for the Roman Empire in the second century.

First, before an analysis of this shift to *coloni* can occur, it is important to expand on the definition of *coloni* and their origin. *Coloni*, according to Simkhovitch, arose as a consequence of legislation. More specifically, as latifundia displaced small and medium farm owners in the first and second centuries, farmers migrated by the masses to the already largely unemployed city. This caused an even greater increase in unemployment in the city as well as more urban problems. Consequently, in order to combat these issues, legislators in the city of Rome decided to enact a law tying farmers to their land. Under this law, legislators hoped that large latifundium owners would be forced to hire the farmers whose land they acquired and, thus, farmers would keep their jobs and not migrate to the city. This concept of farmers being tied to their land is the underlying concept of *coloni*. More formally, according to Giardina, *coloni*, as defined in such pieces of legislation as the Codex Theodosianus and the Codex Justinianus, are “small tenants of low social standing who cultivated the land directly, formally free but lacking one of the fundamental requisites of the condition of full freedom: the ability to abandon their workplace and to move elsewhere.” As a point of nuance, however, looking at ancient texts, no single law defining *coloni* and their status exists. Thus, a majority of current knowledge on *coloni* is based on “a haphazard number of references, mostly in the law codes... which simply take for granted... that everyone knew what a colonus was.”

With the establishment of *coloni* in the late second century, a shift began in the Roman countryside from slave based labor to *coloni* based labor. Although historians provide many reasons why *coloni* may have come to be preferred over slaves as a source of labor, Whittaker provides the best synopsis. One reason is legislation. At first, laws created the concept of *coloni* as tenants tied to their land but later government policies of the fourth century started to limit the rights of *coloni* in such a way that “the conditions of free *coloni* deteriorated to that of quisilaves.” In other words, legislation made the difference between slaves and *coloni* minute and thus employing *coloni* instead of slaves was not as disadvantageous to

latifundia owners since they had complete control of these laborers. A second reason for the shift to *coloni* is that, as a consequence of the third-century economic crisis, Italian landlords were no longer able to afford or maintain a large number of slaves and, as a result, *coloni*, who were less expensive and required less resources to transport to Italy, became more popular. The last major reason for this shift is due to the potential social implications of having a large concentration of foreign slaves in the Italian countryside. According to Whittaker, people in Rome were afraid of the potential rebellion and social complications of having a slave based society and as a result *coloni* were viewed as a less risky form of equivalent labor. All of these factors, Whittaker claims, contributed to the increased popularity of *coloni* over slaves as the preferred form of labor in the late Roman Empire. The fact that *coloni* took over agricultural production is important since *coloni* effectively served as predecessors to Middle Age serfs.

COLONI AND SERFS

Coloni, in addition to having legislation that tied them to their land, had other rights stripped away during Roman rule. More specifically, as the Roman Empire got closer and closer to its ultimate demise, the rights of *coloni* began to dwindle through legislation. For instance, starting in the late fourth century CE, *coloni* lost their right to sue their landlords, marry freely, or sell their possessions. These restrictions placed on *coloni*, which seem hardly necessary for effective labor to take place, nonetheless existed and are important in that they reveal just how much control the Roman government had over these otherwise “free” laborers. In fact, by 339 AD, *coloni* status became hereditary, and as a result, *coloni* had essentially no chance at social mobility, another key characteristic of later serfdom. In fact, Whittaker goes so far as to claim that “the similarity between slaves on rural plots and free tenants on the land has led some to believe that the two categories have become virtually indistinguishable.” Thus, by the late fourth century, *coloni* and slaves were equivalent in the eyes of the law. This point is critical because, in reality, *coloni* were not slaves, yet Roman practices viewed them as such. As a result, Roman legislation created a precedent of free laborers being considered equivalent to slaves. Furthermore, by the fourth and fifth centuries, *coloni* became even more similar to slaves in the sense that they were viewed not only as laborers with minimal rights but as property. According to Grey, landlords in the late Western Roman Empire were required to list *coloni* in their tax records as assets. Regardless of the

underlying rationale behind this policy, it ultimately reveals the common belief among most legislators that free laborers had no status in the Roman world.

In my eyes, this concept of legislation treating *coloni* as if they had no rights and were simply property sets an important model for the later lords and aristocrats of the Middle Ages to further reduce the rights of their serfs and view them, as the Romans did, as merely slaves. In fact, many scholars agree with this sentiment, claiming that patterns surrounding the rural servitude of *coloni* could have easily led to the serfdom of the Middle Ages. For instance, Whittaker states that “the Later Roman Empire... had developed a kind of general, rural ‘servitude’ which was easily transformed into the serfdom that we always associate with the Middle Ages.” Further, Simkhovitch refers to the growing problem of the colonate as “not merely... a detail in Roman history but... a tableau that introduces us into the Middle Ages.” Clearly, quite a bit of evidence exists supporting the fact that the serfdom was not an innovation of the Middle Ages but rather a concept started in the late Western Roman Empire that spilled over into this next epoch.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

My analysis of practices started by the Western Roman Empire in late antiquity, with an eye to understanding how some of these practices continued into the Middle Ages, has important consequences. For one, it reveals that conventional views and assumptions of the immense differences between the Roman Empire and the subsequent Middle Ages are, at least to some extent, unfounded. Yes, the Roman period was more progressive and innovative than the Middle Ages but, hopefully, this paper has effectively demonstrated that some of the practices of the “advanced” Romans played a huge role in the rise of the more “primitive” traditions of the Middle Ages. In essence, Roman agrarian history heavily impacted how the Middle Ages unfolded. Historical studies and analysis, firsthand documents written by ancient authors and legislators, and archeological studies looking at the change of the countryside all reveal that certain realities of the late Western Roman Empire influenced major characteristics of the Middle Ages like decentralized government, serfdom, a penchant for rural life, manors as a basic social structure, and feudalism.

Importantly, although this paper has largely focused on the Italian Peninsula and the city of Rome, similar conclusions regarding the practices of late antiquity contributing to the characteristics of the Middle Age can

be made elsewhere. For example, though Spain effectively avoided the Middle Ages due to the conquest of the Iberian Peninsula by the Muslims, some commonalities still persist in how villas changed after the fall of Rome in both Italy and in Spain. Additionally, much of the discussion of Italian villas, urbanization, changes in the city/country duality, and *coloni* can be translated to the Gaul and other modern-day locations in France as well as Greece. Thus, it is important to note that although the specifics might not carry over exactly to all of the Roman Empire, the concept of practices originating in late antiquity playing a key role in the shift to the Middle Ages is applicable to most of Western Europe.

Despite the seemingly bold claims made by this paper, it is important to remember that, although these continuities between Rome and the Middle Ages may seem surprising, they are indeed quite logical. In other words, when looking at history chronologically and without modern bias, it only makes sense that there was some sort of bridge between the vastly different eras of Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The major characteristics of each of these time periods did not magically appear but were rather products of historical forces and realities. Thus, a perhaps more general “takeaway” from this paper is the fact that no transitions in history occur without warning. Reasons for underlying historical changes always exist and making sense of any seemingly unexpected transition simply requires a bit of research.

REFERENCES

- Ackerman, J. (1990). *The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses* (pp. 35-61). Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Arnau, Alexandra. (2004). “Interpreting the Transformation of Late Roman Villas: The Case of Hispania,” in N. Christie, ed. *Landscapes of Change: Rural Evolutions in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (pp. 68-102). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Bourne, Frank. “Reflections on Rome’s Urban Problems.” *The Classical World* 62, no. 6 (1969): 205-209. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4346809>. (accessed October 17, 2014).
- Garnsey, P. (1997). Rural Life in the Later Roman Empire. In *The Cambridge Ancient History: The Late Empire, AD 337–425* (Vol. 13, pp. 277-311). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Grey, C. (2007). Contextualizing Colonatus: The Origo of the Late Roman Empire. *Journal of Roman Stud*

ies, 97, 155-175. Retrieved November 8, 2014, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20430575>.

Giardina, A. (2007). The Transition to Late Antiquity. In *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (pp. 743-768). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Kehoe, D. (2007). *Law and the rural economy in the Roman Empire*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Marzano, A. (2007). *Roman Villas in Central Italy: a Social and Economic History*. Leiden: Brill.

Munro, Dana Carleton. *The Middle Ages, 395-1272*. New York: The Century Company, 1921.

Scott, S. (2004). "Elites, Exhibitionism, and the Society of the Late Roman Villa," in N. Christie, ed. *Landscapes of Change: Rural Evolutions in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*. (pp. 39-65). Aldershot: Ashgate.

Simkhovitch, Vladimir. "Rome's Fall Reconsidered." *The Academy of Political Science* 31, no. 2 (1916): 201-243. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2141560>. (accessed October 17, 2014).

Twine, Kevin. "The City in Decline: Rome in Late Antiquity." *Middle States Geographer* 25 (1992).

Whittaker, C. (1987). Circe's Pigs: From Slavery to Serfdom in the Later Roman World. *Classical Slavery* (pp. 88-122). London, England: F. Cass.

IMAGES

Figure 1. Population of the City of Rome, from Twine, 1992.

