Rethinking the later Roman landscape
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Introduction: the terms of the debate

T. Lewit’s article in JRA 16 on the continuity of élite rural settlement in the Late Roman West is a welcome evaluation of the current state of the field.1 Many of the arguments it advances are undoubtedly correct and will force us to reconsider a host of sites and their interpretative ‘baggage’. This response does not contest Lewit’s basic premise that members of the social élite continued to occupy rural sites; instead, it challenges some of her assumptions and methodologies and offers an alternative approach to thinking about the Late Roman rural landscape.

Lewit argued that the well-documented changes in post-Roman villas — the conversion of luxurious living spaces to subdivided poorer-quality housing, industrial/agricultural functions or mortuary space, and the gradual replacement of mortared structures with dry-stone or timber buildings — indicate not the replacement of élites by poor ‘squatters’ but simply reflect the élite’s new material face.2 She points to similar material changes in urban space. Insisting that élites must have existed and therefore must have lived somewhere, she suggests that neither urban nor rural contexts experienced decline but simply underwent a transformation of élite “fashion”.3 The monumental pars urbana of the 2nd-4th c. had become, as Lewit describes it, “socially irrelevant”, and its post-built, subdivided, grave-riddled successor was the new garb of the same Roman landowning élites who, in step with changing times, had simply changed their monumental clothing.

As Lewit herself describes, her interpretation is part of a broader debate over the fate of the Roman countryside in the 5th-6th c., one which, like its sister debate on the nature of late-antique urbanism, has been cast in terms of ‘catastrophe’ versus ‘continuity’.4 The catastrophist position points to the many instances of total abandonment of rural sites during the 5th and 6th c., positing significant population decline and topographical discontinuities in rural settlement patterns.5 It interprets the material changes discussed by Lewit as the (enforced) adoption of generally lower standards of living for those who remained, and identifies these people not as transformed élites but as ‘the poor’, whose simpler material footprint defines a late-antique culture that has ‘declined’ in quality from that of the High Empire. The catastrophist paradigm objects to this narrative as ‘Gibbonist decline-and-fall’, rife with valuations that hold Roman

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2 Lewit 260-63.
3 Lewit 263-67.
classicism as a societal apogée and any departure from it as social decline. It de-emphasizes rupture, and instead stresses the continuity of those settlements that do survive, interpreting their material changes as simply new ways of living, neither better nor worse than any other. Lewit has extended this line of reasoning to claim not only a general continuity of landscape settlement, but also a specific continuity of the people themselves: by assigning post-Roman, post-built structures to the poor, she claims, we are making value-laden assumptions about the relationship between material culture and status. Instead, these material transformations represent nothing more than the changed lifestyle of the same landowning élites.

The preoccupation with change and continuity

As Lewit’s article demonstrates, we have reached the stage where the catastrophe versus continuity debate itself, rather than the evidence, occupies center-stage. In this environment, discussions of 5th-6th c. rural sites are frequently framed around the question of continuity or decline, while detailed analysis of the occupation itself, its spatial topography, sociology, and economic hierarchies, receives short shrift: a site becomes merely a salvo in the ongoing polemic. This phenomenon is not limited to villas: field surveys and regional landscape analyses are conducted and interpreted through this same theoretical lens. The tail of the debate is beginning to wag the dog.

For both sides, any evidence that fits the terms of the debate itself is given priority over that which does not: the specific individual voice of the material is drowned out by forcing it to join one or other general and polemical chorus. Thus, a model such as Lewit’s, which stresses continued élite rural occupation, tends to side-step the equally important problem of actual abandonment. The disappearance of the physical markers that distinguished rural élites from non-élites, whose simpler material culture they now largely share, is also glossed over. Finally, the thesis relies heavily on parallels drawn between rural occupation and apparently comparable evidence from urban centres during the same period. Such an approach presupposes that the meaning of subdividing a space, or of interring the dead within the sphere of the living, remains in principle the same, in whatever context it occurs. Yet the distinction between rural and urban life was fundamental to the Roman world; to map urban interpretative models onto the country is to lose this distinction altogether, and so misses an opportunity to explore the fundamental changes in the meaning of ‘city’ and ‘country’ in the post-Roman world. Such an attitude to the evidence is equally apparent in the catastrophist models that Lewit herself rightly critiques: their failure to distinguish between apocalyptic levels of population decline and the simplification of material culture leaves unexplained the very sites that Lewit analyses, which all display clear and unambiguous evidence of settlement continuity. Similar models that demand the blanket application of ‘romantias checklists’ to the post-Roman world, in order to gauge the extent of material discontinuity, are equally problematic because

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8 Her argument is, in this respect, very similar to that made by Halsall (supra n.7) 248-53 in his study of villas around Metz.
9 See also Ripoll and Arce (supra n.4); Chavarría (supra n.7); and on the West, J. Banaji, Agrarian change in late antiquity (Oxford 2001):20.
10 See G. P. Brogiolo and B. Ward-Perkins (edd.), The idea and ideal of the town between late antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (Leiden 1999).
11 For instance, R. Hodges, “Il declino e la caduta: San Vincenzo al Volturno,” in Storia di Roma vol. 3.2. Il luoghi e le culture (Turin 1993) 255-78; Potter (supra n.5).
they fail to grasp that cultural identities such as ‘Roman-ness’ can shift in both meaning and articulation over time. What is being lost in both these polemical positions is the individuality of the evidence, which is becoming merely a token in an increasingly schematic debate.

The problem of periodization

Change and continuity are present at all historical moments or epochs, in varying degrees; thus, the concepts are not antonymous, and neither ever exists to the exclusion of the other. Historians and archaeologists of all periods grapple with their implications when they write narratives of the past, and the scholarly pendulum variously privileges one over the other. Why, then, has change versus continuity become so prevalent in late antiquity, to the extent that it dominates much of the scholarly output? Much of the problem resides in issues of periodization, and the relationship between the planes of time that are being studied: the Roman ‘past’, the late antique ‘present’, and the mediaeval ‘future’. The abstraction of periodization distorts our interpretations of the past. The place of late antiquity inside the greater periodized schemata of Western European history has forced us to this point: those who study late antiquity are forced to wring greater significance from change and continuity because they must ‘explain’ more in historiographic terms. The changes and continuities of A.D. 400 are being made to work so much harder, and appear so much more significant, than the changes of, say, A.D. 200, because in our periodized scheme the former date appears to be superficially more significant, either as a marker of change or of continuity. Similarly problematic is what we might term ‘soft historicism’, which has come to mean the unspoken assumption that, in this instance, the defining characteristic of the 5th c. is its relationship with events of the 4th, and that this relationship, however we choose to describe it, must be at the fulcrum of our narratives. The by-now well-established predilection against conferring special significance on dates such as 378, 395, or 476 has only masked a deeper conviction that somehow the period of late antiquity must in itself ‘explain’ a host of historical circumstances, such as the Fall of Rome, the birth of the feudal economy, or the emergence of Christian kingdoms. We remain entangled in the implicit assumption that the period cannot be evaluated on grounds that are solely its own. The way forward, surely, is to accept that things are always in flux and are subject to both change and continuity, and to remove the historiographic obsession with finding the edges of things (both origins and ends), focussing instead on producing coherent analyses evaluated on their own terms.

The problem of ‘élites’

Lewit’s search for ‘élites’ in the late Roman countryside would seem to have achieved precisely this goal: late-antique élites, she insists, cannot be archaeologically evaluated in the same way as élites of the High Empire: their archaeological footprint must be considered on its own, late-antique terms. This is the strongest part of her argument, but its real possibilities are ultimately sapped by the essentialist terms of the continuist versus catastrophe debate, and specifically by her failure to define adequately the meaning of ‘élite’. The valueless, non-judgmental category of ‘élite’ is used as a sieve though which to pass the richly heterogeneous evidence for rural (and urban) occupation in the 5th-7th c. Yet the term ‘élite’ is barely defined, and then only by the adjective ‘landowning’. Indeed, for Lewit, it is only in this undefined state that the category can be useful. Élites can be seen as a value-less, heuristic category precisely because of their apparent historical ubiquity; thus they are transformed into ahistorical abstractions. She argues that a post-Roman ‘élite’ has to exist, because the land

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must be owned, the population must be taxed and controlled, and the wealth we find in burials must come from someone. By assuming that every society in every period has élites, Lewit already knows what she is looking for and so she always finds it. The fact that 5th-6th c. élites' look very different archaeologically from their 3rd-4th c. counterparts she takes as due to changes in fashion and taste, rather than to any deep-rooted social change that might threaten the existence of the abstract, panchronic category. Indeed, the fact that the material footprint of élites has now become indistinguishable from that of non-élites is irrelevant precisely because they are assumed to be an a priori category, and any material transformation is dismissed simply as a change of 'fashion'. In this way, the differences between a Roman senator, a Merovingian king, and a 13th-c. nobleman are likewise ones of form, rather than substance. The ‘cultural revolution’ Lewit identifies in the 5th-6th c. is thereby blotted of anything but the most superficial of historical significance, akin to a change of clothes, while an unchanging essence remains undisturbed. While Lewit starts from the entirely laudable desire to rid scholarly discourse of prejudicial categorization, her alternative merely replaces one set of essentialist categories with another; the potentially rich issue of élite identity is assumed, rather than probed.

Lewit’s use of an assumptive, poorly-defined élite' parallels (though, happily, does not fully embrace) a significant strand in late-antique rural studies that uses textual evidence for late-antique élites to make sense of archaeological remains (thereby obviating the need to explore the category or the archaeology). Rural élites make prominent appearances in surviving texts of the 5th-6th c., and the lives and habits of men such as Sidonius and his epistolary friends, or the Leontius and Nicetas made famous by Venantius Fortunatus, have been comprehensively investigated. Indeed, these literary characters exhibit many of the signs of being the inheritors of Romanitas: in the late 5th c. they still quote Virgil and Pliny, they still use architectural ekphrasis to express their status and, while Christian hermeneutics may have percolated into their flowery descriptions of nature, it is still a rhetoric born of the Roman ideal of otium. According to this strand of scholarship, these texts provide evidence of an élite that “... continued, despite the times, to live according to the rhythms of the past”. If archaeology has not detected these people and their lavish Roman habitus, it is not because they are not there; they are there, and they remain (like the conceptual category of élite’ itself) largely unchanged. Yet such logic gives priority to texts over archaeology as a reliable guide to both élite identity and presence. In this approach, the possibility that texts and archaeology might tell radically different stories about what constitutes the élite' is rarely contemplated.

Symptomatic of the problem is the debate circling around the mid-5th c. Gallic poet-bishop, Sidonius Apollinaris. Catastrophists have labelled his luxuriant descriptions of monumental villas, penned during the 460s, as the literary fantasies of a world long-since past. Sidonius is thus, for some archaeologists, simply a liar. Recently, however, new work on Late Roman villas in Aquitaine and parts of Spain have found important phases of building construction and mosaic creation datable to the early 5th c. Sidonius’ descriptions, other scholars now triumph...
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Phantily boast, were true all along. Yet both interpretations miss what is perhaps the crux of the matter: Sidonius, as much excellent work on his literary craftsmanship has shown, neither lied nor reported. The ekphrasis of a villa landscape, or the comradely epistle rehearsing familiar topoi of life as a gentleman landowner, were tools to create and manage social identity in late-5th c. Gaul. Only a generation earlier, élites such as Salvian and Orientius had described the same landscape as ruined in an effort to carve out new Christian identities. The disparity between the descriptions of the 440s and the 470s should warn us against using these texts as unambiguous evidence of 5th-c. life. Many different strategies might be employed to construct élite identity in specific social contexts; material culture is another such means and, just as Salvian's and Sidonius' tactics varied, so too should we allow that material culture might craft social hierarchies and identities in ways that may not neatly coincide with textual exempla. Our goals should be attention to the specificities of the material evidence and an acknowledgement that it might shape its own definitions of élite identity.

Settlement and agglomeration

Thus, while Lewit's insistence on a changed élite archaeology is most welcome, shifts in methodological approach and greater sensitivity to the heterogeneous nature of the evidence are necessary if the late-antique countryside is to tell its own stories. Lewit and others have rightly drawn attention to the subdivision of space and to the insertion of agro-industrial facilities and graves in the heart of the former residential quarters of villas. In lumping all such changes into the single category of new-style élite residence, Lewit omits one, oft-repeated, feature that describes a new sociology of settlement: this sociology, which is marked by agglomerations of élites and non-élites living together in multi-family groups, points towards a new definition of élite identity centred on control of the communal aggregate.

Two examples from among those cited by Lewit can stand for those emerging from careful recent excavations and can represent the broad chronological and geographic spread of the phenomenon. The villa of Monte Gelato, excavated by the British School at Rome in the 1980s, was one of the many High-Empire villas dotting the Ager Faliscus, c.30 km north of Rome. Like so many of these villas, its occupation appears to have ceased or diminished in the late-2nd or 3rd c., only to be re-invigorated in a wholly different form during the mid-4th to 5th c. A large room near the villa entrance was subdivided, with the N half marked by wide entrance doors, rough wooden partitions and troughs, while the S half contained a hearth surrounded by post-holes. Multiple hearths and post-hole structures were inserted in the villa portico. The villa baths were transformed into a combination of metal-working area and stable. A small church was constructed south of these spaces; additional habitation with coarsely-built mortar walls and a hearth were found east of the main settlement.

The villa of Séviac (Gascony) exhibits many of the same characteristics. This large peristyle villa with an expansive bath-house was maintained and even enlarged as late as the mid-5th c. At some point, seemingly in the 6th c., the rooms on the S and E sides of the peristyle were subdivided by coarse mortared walls; early excavations detected hearths in many of the

19 See Balmelle (supra n.17) 144-46 and 327.
20 See, e.g., M. Roberts, The jeweled style: poetry and poetics in Late Antiquity (Ithaca 1989).
22 Survey articles and catalogues containing numerous other examples include, for Spain, Chavarria (supra n.7); for Italy, various articles in Brogiolo (supra n.4); G. P. Brogiolo and A. Chavarría, "Chiuse e insediamenti tra V e VI secolo: Italia settentrionale, Gallia meridionale e Hispania," in G. P. Brogiolo (ed.), Chiuse e insediamenti nelle campagne tra V e VI secolo (Mantua 2003) 9-37; R. Francovich and R. Hodges, From villa to village (London 2003); for France, Van Ossel (supra n.4); Ouzoulas et al. (supra n.17).
23 T. W. Potter and A. C. King, Excavations at the Moia di Monte Gelato (Rome 1997).
new spaces, as well as storage pits.24 The baths, maintained through the middle years of the 5th c., were then either abandoned or converted to use as a stable.25 A building which may be a small church was inserted in the villa’s SE corner, either in the 6th c. or somewhat later.26 The ceramics from this phase are generally simple coarse wares, with some local sigillata; the graves from the nearby necropolis are largely unfurnished.27

As Lewit rightly notes, the subdivision of rooms may simply reflect the changed priorities of a seigneurial family, and the use of timber construction simply the reversion to less labour-intensive construction. However, the presence of multiple hearths accompanied by subdivision into individual room or hut units points to a new sociology of occupation, namely the presence of multiple family groups.28 Multiple, small hearths of basic construction, scattered throughout the transformed villa, seem to be the cooking or domestic-industry fires of several family units.29 While it remains possible that they represent the cumulative hearths built by a single family over time, at sites like Monte Gelato and Séviac, where the multiple hearths produced similar ceramics and seem to have existed co-terminously, their presence is best explained as evidence of multi-family groupings. The accompanying subdivision of both villa peristyles and rooms into multiple autonomous spaces tended to transform the villa’s interpenetrating spaces into a series of isolated units. Again, while at least one archaeologist has interpreted this phenomenon as simply evidence for changing notions of familial ‘privacy’,30 when taken in conjunction with multiple hearths it is more likely to suggest more than one family group, each utilizing its own space. Only careful excavation, combined with attention to the whole range of later occupation in villas, can describe this process in the necessary detail and thereby test the probability of agglomeration versus other forms of habitation.

The shift from villa-based to agglomerated kinds of settlements may also be reflected in terminology. Beginning in the later 4th c., the term ‘villa’ begins to suffer something of an identity crisis as its meaning shifted from ‘landed estate’ or ‘estate building’ to something more ambiguous.31 By the later 6th c., Gregory of Tours uses the term ‘villa’ almost exclusively to describe a settlement and land held by several owners — what we would term a ‘village’.32 The


29 For more on multiple hearths as a characteristic feature of late-antique ‘villa’ settlement, but without an explanation of the phenomenon, see P. Ouzoulas and P. Van Ossel, “Dynamiques du peuplement et forms de l’habitat tardif: le cas de l’Ile-de-France,” in Ouzoulas et al. (supra n.17) 147-72.


word ‘villa’ seems to have suffered the same transformation as the above-mentioned sites, from the private, single-family estate, to the nucleated, multi-family village.

*Status and new definitions of ‘élite’*

While the phenomenon of agglomeration points to a new sociology of settlement, it leaves unanswered the question of status. Who made up the multi-family groups that occupied these sites? Were they high-status individuals or agrarian laborers? From what little we know about the material culture of the Late Roman peasantry, this use of relatively less-complex building and ceramic technologies alongside the inter-penetration of residential and industrial space might all be considered consistent with an agricultural population living at, or slightly above, subsistence levels. Yet Lewit is certain that this material footprint is equally likely to have been left by those of much higher status, and her claim that élite material culture had significantly changed is demonstrably true. Yet the élite’s material culture had so changed that it became largely indistinguishable from that of non-élites. Once we accept this, we must ask: How was élite status being-manifested?

A more rigorous methodology is required for identifying the material culture of status-identity in the later 5th and 6th c. For instance, as trade networks became increasingly specialized and as long-distance trade was largely restricted to the coasts, the interiors of Hispania, Gaul and much of Italy found themselves largely bereft of imported goods. Yet a handful of ‘transformed’ villa sites in these areas, such as Monte da Cegonha (Portugal), Séviac (Gascony) and San Vincenzo (Molise), have produced small quantities of imported amphoras, fine wares, glass, and other goods. In the appearance of these hard-to-obtain commodities in areas generally cut off from long-distance trade may be glimpsed the manipulating hand of an ‘élite’. The ability to manipulate human populations by pulling families into agglomerated units may be another mark of élite status. Finally, rare epigraphic evidence, frequently from rural churches associated with rural settlements, sometimes includes status descriptives, such as *honesti, inlustres* or *clarissimi*; these are the clearest signs of élite presence and perhaps élite occupations. In general, if élites are to be found in the landscape of the post-5th c., they must be sought through hierarchies manifest in the evidence itself, not simply assumed to be quietly wearing a fashionable disguise.

When this more rigorous standard is adopted for identifying status in the archaeological record, élites can often be found living shoulder-to-shoulder with non-élites. The best example may be the 6th-c. phase of the villa of Séviac. As we have suggested, the late 5th and 6th c. community at Séviac may have been composed of multi-family units. The most recent excavations have produced a very small amount of imported, luxury goods: Gaza and Tunisian amphoras of late 5th-6th c. date; a handful of similarly-dated imported glassware; and an important group of 5th-early 6th c. sigillata from the Bordeaux region.33 Their presence here in rural Gascony far from major routes calls for some comment: it would seem to signal some organizing power able to command hard-to-find goods from the coast. If these materials are contemporary with the subdivision and multiple hearths, they may indicate two different levels of material status at 6th-c. Séviac; an ‘élite’, of higher material status, co-existing with others living on simpler material means.

Much recent scholarship on the construction of social identity has come to accept that material culture may be an active agent in shaping identity, rather than passively reflecting it. That is to say, we are becoming increasingly comfortable with the idea that (for example) fine-ware pottery, Byzantine-style belt buckles, or imported reliquaries were not simply used or worn as manifestations of status, but themselves worked to define status. The disappearance of

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the monumental élite house and its replacement by subdivided spaces where the living and the dead, those of high status and low status, animals and agriculture, all co-existed under the same roof does not simply mark the same élite in different clothes; rather, such a radical change in material culture — indeed, the near-elimination of the material markers of status-identity — must represent a transformation in the very notion of what it meant to be an ‘élite’ and, more importantly, the nature of those communities around which status itself was defined.

Agglomeration and meaning: the rôle of Christianity

Upon careful examination, therefore, many of Lewit’s ‘élite’ residences emerge as clustered ‘group-homes’, and this clustering appears to be a broader social feature of late-antique landscapes in the West. While Lewit’s interpretation supposes that superficial changes in material culture mask a continued sociology of settlement, a more nuanced consideration of the same evidence can see changed material culture as pointing to significant sociological change. People in the 5th and 6th c. did not just live in different material surroundings; the spatial and social relationships by which they defined their world had changed too.

What is the meaning of these changes? First, it is important to note that agglomerative impulses were not unique to late antiquity; agglomerative settlements, such as *vici* and *papi*, were present in the earlier Roman countryside. While they have received less attention than their flashier villa cousins, new research has shown them to be an important component of earlier Roman rural economies and settlement patterns. The more pertinent questions must be: What did agglomeration mean during late antiquity? How did agglomerative settlements fit into new perceptions of rural hierarchies? The appearance of a new participant in the rural landscape at precisely the time that concerns us may be suggestive, a participant with considerable economic and rhetorical muscle, and one that undoubtedly helped shape new definitions of community, settlement, and status: the Christian church. Throughout the 4th and first half of the 5th c., the Church remained largely an urban phenomenon in the West. However, by the later 5th and particularly the 6th c., ecclesiastical organization of the countryside began to gain momentum: it was around this time that the first documentation for nascent parish systems appears in N Italy, central and S Gaul, and, slightly later, in Hispania, alongside the first significant numbers of rural churches.

This period of rural church expansion coincided with the most important period of agglomerative activity in the countryside. Indeed, many of the examples cited above as evidence for new agglomerative social systems include the contemporary construction of a church. The small, multi-family communities residing on former villa sites at Monte Gelato and Séviac clustered around a church set beside the transformed settlement. At the former villa sites with possible evidence for both élites and multi-family occupation, churches are also prominent. Dozens, if not hundreds, of other examples suggest that it was churches that played an important rôle in the creation of agglomerative settlements; in some cases, churches seem actually to have initiated such settlements; in others, they appeared as a significant organizing force for pre-existing patterns of occupation.


36 For examples in Italy, see G. P. Broglio (ed.), *Chiese e insediamenti nelle campagne tra V e VI secolo* (Mantua 2003); *L’edificio battesimalle in Italia. Aspetti e problemi* (Bordighera 2001); for France (particularly the south), Fixot and Zadora Rio (supra n.4); for Hispania, Broglio and Chavarria (supra n.22).
It is impossible to know who was responsible for the construction of these churches. In some cases, where the construction of the church is roughly contemporary with high-status domestic construction or occupation, they may have been built by landowners as private estate-churches.\textsuperscript{37} Other cases are more nebulous; ecclesiastical authorities, pious landowners, or the collective efforts of the inhabitants are all possible candidates. Whoever was responsible, it seems clear that churches — and Christianity in a more general sense (both public and private) — are key in understanding the appearance of new sociologies of settlement in the Late Roman landscape.

We should not, however, assume that individual churches, or even the institutional Church, ‘caused’ agglomerative settlement in this period: rather, the phenomena of agglomeration and the rise of rural Christianity attest to the centrality of the ‘collective’ or the ‘aggregate’ in a new discourse of power and status. Defined by its concomitant community of the Christian faithful, the institutional Church, with urban bishop and parochial satellites, was organized along fundamentally different social lines than an aristocratic \textit{familia}. Its definitions of community, hierarchy, and status operated in very different ways. Indeed, for the Church, ‘community’ itself — the aggregate body of persons living and worshipping together — lay at the heart of social hierarchy, and the ability to control or manipulate this aggregate served as the basis for episcopal status.

When carefully examined, the archaeological evidence may also describe élite identity as the control of the human, communal aggregate. The phenomenon of agglomeration itself, with élites and non-élites living shoulder to shoulder, points in this direction. So too does the construction of estate churches. No longer is the family villa, with its baths and reception-rooms, the means by which élite identity is crafted and made manifest in the rural landscape; instead, the means has become the church, defined by its physical structure and by its liturgically-bound community. Indeed, from the later 5th c. onward, virtually the only rural buildings built of mortared construction were churches. Mortar becomes a status object in its own right, and its exclusive appearance in churches documents a new language of status that focussed on buildings of collective, rather than purely familial, use.

**Conclusions**

The later Roman countryside of the 5th-6th c. was not simply inhabited by Roman élites wearing new clothes, nor were those élites aiming to fulfil unchanged social rôles through an altered material culture. Rather, the landscape embodied a new sociology of human communities and new definitions of power and status. In the midst of this, much remained unchanged, with a significant continuity of agglomerative settlement as a method of rural organization. Viewed in this light, late-antique agglomerations are merely the latest manifestation of an ever-present and ever-changing agglomerative impetus. The place of agglomerative settlement in a new lexicon of power and status may comprise the most significant kind of change. It may be that agglomerative settlement comes to stand for the ability to organize and control people. It may also be that the church (whether private or parish) is now serving as the monumental expression of communally-derived status. Lewit was correct to state that hierarchies of status still existed in the late-antique countryside; but they are neither the same hierarchies nor are they composed of the same élites. The ‘transformed’ villas of the 5th-6th c. may represent a new currency of power, but that currency is not material, it is human.

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\textsuperscript{37} The archaeology of estate churches has been the object of several recent studies: K. Bowes, "\textit{Nec sedere in villam}. Villa-churches, rural piety and the Priscillianist controversy," in T. Burns and J. Eadie (edd.), \textit{Urban centers and rural contexts in late antiquity} (East Lansing, MI 2001) 323-48; Brogiolo and Chavarria (supra n.22); Percival (supra n.18).