

An aerial photograph of a Roman villa. The central feature is a large circular mosaic floor with a central floral or tree-like design and the name 'PORCIANUS' inscribed around the perimeter. To the left of the circle is a rectangular building with a grid-like floor plan. A road with a decorative border runs along the bottom right. The top of the image shows a modern street with a crosswalk.

# The musealization of the Roman villas

STUDIES ON THE  
RURAL WORLD IN  
THE ROMAN PERIOD

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# The musealization of Roman villas in Catalonia

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## RESUM

Actualment a Catalunya hi ha un conjunt notable de vil·les romanes visitables. En aquest article analitzarem les característiques principals de les seves formes de presentació. En general es pot considerar que, malgrat les diferències entre elles, hi ha una orientació general en tractar aquestes vil·les com a ruïnes arqueològiques i en posar l'accent de la comunicació en els aspectes arquitectònics en detriment dels socials.

**MOTS CLAU:** vil·les romanes, museïtzació, Catalunya

## ABSTRACT

Catalonia currently has a considerable number of Roman villas open to visits. In this article we will analyse the main characteristics of the ways they are presented to the public. Despite the differences between them, there is a general tendency to treat these villas as archaeological ruins and to emphasise their architectonic aspects to the neglect of their social ones.

**KEYWORDS:** roman villas, musealization, Catalonia.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, there has been intense activity in Catalonia to adapt archaeological remains. All kinds of sites (caves, settlements and villas, among others) covering a wide range of different periods (from the most distant prehistory to the modern age) have been the target of major actions that have transformed their appearance and the way in which they are presented, and made them visible to the general public.

The study is based on the above statement and drawn from direct experience as well as theoretical knowledge. The aim was to analyse the various ways in which sites have been adapted. To this end, we selected a series of parameters that we considered of use in determining the level of adaptation. We started from the premise that some actions hardly change the way in which archaeological remains are visualized after excavation, whilst the image of other sites is very different from that found initially<sup>2</sup>. The parameters were (Burch / Figueras 2003): 1) integration into the environment, 2) the treatment of the archaeological structures found during excavation, 3) the appearance of the surface area of the archaeological remains, 4) the routes and meeting places, 5) signposting around the site, and 6) the existence of related information centres or museums.

In line with the subject of the collection, the focus of this study was Roman villas. We covered the whole of Catalonia, as this is the overall, unitary area to which Catalan legislation on the protection and conservation of cultural heritage in general, and archaeological heritage in particular, is applied.

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This paper presents the state of the question of the musealization of Roman villas in Catalonia, excluding the wine cellar in Teià, which is dealt with separately in this volume. Other cases are also excluded from this paper: these sites could have been visited, but their physical development is such that we cannot consider that they have been turned into museums or that they are open to the public, even partially.

<sup>2</sup> Note that the data in this paper are from the time that it was written, and there are continuous changes in this field.

<sup>3</sup> Excluding issues related to the relocation of remains.

## Integration into the environment

Although the Roman villas were rural settlements, many of them have lost this characteristic as they have been absorbed by the urban fabric of the cities, towns and villages in the areas in which they are situated. Thus, if visitors translate the current location into the past in their spatial imagination, they may mistakenly consider that villas such as Ametllers in Tossa de Mar (fig. 1), Pla de Palol in Platja d'Aro (fig. 2), Llafranc in Palafrugell (fig. 3), Llosa in Cambrils (fig. 4), Barenys in Salou (fig. 5), Roman Baths in Sant Boi de Llobregat, Clota in Creixell<sup>3</sup> (fig. 6) and Rocafonda and Torre Llauder (fig. 7) in Mataró were town houses. The most singular example in this group is Torre Llauder, which is raised on a concrete structure and is therefore situated above the road level in the surrounding area. From the outside, this gives it the appearance of a stadium.

Other sites have kept a certain rural character, but due to their location, they are not totally separate from the urban environment. These include: Font del Vilar in Avinyonet de Puigventós (fig. 8), Centcelles in Constantí (fig. 9), Can Terrés in La Garriga (fig. 10) and Els Munts in Altafulla (fig. 11). This conflicting duality can be detected easily by the visitor. For example, next to the Roman villa of Can Terrés there are crops in one area, and an urban development in another. Similarly, Font del Vilar is delimited by an urban development and is ending up within it. However, the site maintains its rural character as it is also demarcated by a piece of open land and forms part of a fairly small town that is surrounded by crops and wooded areas. The cases of Centcelles and Els Munts are different. Like the sites mentioned above, these spaces are delimited by built-up areas. This is particularly true of Els Munts, where the houses in the adjacent urban development almost touch the archaeological site. However, this site's extensive green area, and particularly the trees that envelop the archaeological remains, lessen the sensation of being part of an urban area and heighten one that is closer to the rural world of the Roman villas. Finally, in a third group of villas, the rural nature of the sites perfectly





Figure 1. Els Ametllers, Tossa de Mar.

matches their territorial contexts, which are also rural. This group includes the villas of Romeral in Albesa (fig. 12) (Marí / Revilla 2006), Rajadell and Vilauba in Camós (fig. 13) (Castanyer / Tremoleda 2007, 48). Nevertheless, there are even certain differences in the environments of these three villas. Rajadell and Vilauba have roads running through them, whilst the last stretch of the access road to Romeral is a track that crosses numerous fields of crops.

In relation to spatial integration into the environment, we also differentiated between sites that are open and accessible at all times and those that are enclosed by a fence or building that limits access and restricts it to certain days and times. Villas that are open at all times include Pla de Palol, Llafranc, Font del Vilar, Can Terrés and Rocafonda.

Those that are only open at certain times include Romeral, Llosa, Clota, Barenys, Els Munts, Centcelles, Vilauba, Roman Baths of Sant Boi de Llobregat and Torre Llauder. The preserved building of Clota is quite small, so its rooms can even be seen from outside the fence. Llosa and Romeral are in an intermediate position in this second group, as the archaeological remains can be observed from outside the archaeological site, but can only be interpreted in depth from inside the enclosure. In the remaining cases, it is difficult or impossible for visitors to see the remains unless they enter the archaeological park.

As the villa of Pla de Palol is situated in an urban area and is always open, it has become more than just an archaeological park. From an urban development perspective, it is now a square for public use, with the special characteristic that it contains archaeological remains. These remains differentiate it from all of the other public spaces in the city. An analysis of other villas does not lead to the same conclusion.

The villas of Llosa and Barenys are similar. They are both situated in urban areas, inside green spaces that take up an entire block of houses and

envelop the archaeological site, which is separated from the rest of the area by a fence to limit access. Thus, the impression given is of a landscaped area that contains archaeological remains. However, unlike Pla de Palol, the space for use by the public, and by the local population in particular, is not the remains in themselves but the green area that surrounds them. Thus, these two villas fall in between the first level, in which the archaeological site could be identified as a space for public use on a daily basis, should the occasion arise, and a second level in which the remains could be identified as an archaeological park. The most paradigmatic examples of this second level are Els Munts and Centcelles. These sites maintain the characteristic of public spaces, but cannot be included in the concept of a public square.



Figure 2. Pla de Palol,  
Platja d'Aro.

### **Treatment of the archaeological structures**

A few structures in some of the villas under study have not been strengthened or restored. However, this is not the norm. In fact, all of the villas that we studied have been influenced in some way by the various actions carried out on them. On this point, we found few differences between the sites. In the level of least intervention, we include actions to strengthen the archaeological remains and stop them from deteriorating further. In the level of most intervention, we include actions that involve a certain degree of rebuilding to make a structure more visible. We even found that it is not unusual for these two criteria to be applied to the same site, with no clear predominance of one over the other. Perhaps the clearest example of structures being restored to better define a space is that of Centcelles, where some parts of the villa's baths and areas that make up the mausoleum have been restituted. However, in all cases the final result is an archaeological site that we could still consider a ruin. This has helped to maintain the visitor's perception of authenticity. The value of



authenticity has taken priority over other issues, such as an understanding of the spaces, which has had to be transmitted by other means (information boards and the surface treatment of the remains, among other factors).

Various sites coincide in their use of modern materials to reconstitute columns and pilasters. These are clearly visible, due to the play of colours and textures that differ from the site's original materials. This is the case of villas such as Vilauba, Romeral, Torre LLauder, Barenys and Els Munts. The restorations are normally associated with delimiting open spaces such as courtyards or peristyles. As the original is not reconstructed in these sites, the technique employed is not exactly *anastylosis*, which is frequently used in colonnades. However, like *anastylosis*, the aim is to recreate the volume of the spaces. Similar attempts to increase the volume can be found in other places, such as the villa of Echternach in Luxembourg (Minucciani /Lerma 2007). However, the Catalan villas differ from many of these places, as the aim is to show clearly which parts have been restored in relation to the original architecture, and thus maintain the perception of an archaeological ruin. For this reason, the restored structures are not normally higher than the visitor's line of sight from the viewpoint to the rest of the archaeological elements.



Figure 3. Llafranc, Palafrugell.

In some cases the columns have been restored, whilst in others the hypocausts of the hot baths have been reconstituted. It is not unusual to see how the *pilae* have been reconstructed from the original remains or simply built again. In general, the objective is to explain how these spaces worked, given the singularity of their operation, which makes them difficult for the general public to understand.

Another issue related to archaeological remains is that of roofing (Laurenti 2006). This is a problem that is closely associated with the Roman world and Roman villas in particular. In northern Europe, many Roman villas have been covered entirely or partially, using a wide range of architectural solutions (Ruggieri Tricoli 2007). In Catalonia, we can consider that this problem has also been dealt with using relatively standard criteria. Most of the Catalan villas that have been made into museums do not have any

roofs and the structures remain in the open air, apart from a few isolated cases, such as Roman Bath in Sant Boi de Llobregat, fully covered (Barreda / Gutiérrez / Marquès 2003, 293). In Centcelles, there is a new roof on one of the rooms of the mausoleum. It follows the original shapes, but can be differentiated from the original structure by the materials and colours that have been used. In addition, the hot baths at Centcelles are covered by a roof identical to that used in part of Els Munts. In both cases, the function of the roofs is clearly to protect the structure. The aim was not to restore the original shapes, materials or colours. In addition to these two villas, the circular marquee that was recently assembled at Torre Llauder stands out, as do the various metal structures in the shape of an inverted “C” that have been assembled over parts of the Roman villa of Barenys.

Consequently, we can consider that the treatment of the Catalan remains differs widely from complete reconstructions, as are found relatively frequently in Germany, and from sites that are totally covered over, which are particularly common in England (Ruggieri Tricoli, 2007). In contrast, the musealization of Roman villas in Catalonia clearly involves maintaining the impression of an archaeological ruin that is associated with the authenticity (whether real or partially falsified) of the elements that visitors can see.



Figure 4. La Llosa, Cambrils.

#### **Treatment of the land's surface**

The appearance of the surface of an archaeological site is largely responsible for its image. In the treatment of structures, we considered that the main criterion was to leave the visitor with an impression of a ruin. The general criteria for treatment of the land's surface are focused on achieving the same aim. Thus, to make the remains comprehensible, the spaces inside the rooms are usually just levelled out with earth, which is sometimes compacted. This is the main image in sites such as Llosa, Clota, Els Munts or Centcelles.

Beyond this, a second stage could include villas in which there is a combination of two types of floor surface. Some parts of these villas have earth floors as in the above group, whilst others are covered with gravel or crushed stones. This group could include Can Terres, Romeral and



Vilauba. In Can Terrés, maroon-coloured gravel is used in the areas of the hot baths, and in Vilauba the open spaces are covered in small grey crushed stones. The materials used in the rooms and spaces that make up Romeral are also grey, with a colour scheme that is strangely the inverse of that used in Vilauba.

In a third stage, we can find villas whose surfaces are completely or almost completely resurfaced using gravel and stones. This group includes the villas of Font del Vilar, Barenys, Pla de Palol and Ametllers. In these sites, the resurfacing of the land combines the use of a wide range of colours and textures: gravels of different colours (normally maroon, but also black), small grey and whitish stones, brownish-red clays, and fragments of pottery to simulate *opus signinum* surfaces. Therefore, the colours and the textures serve to reinforce the architectural unity of the spaces, by contrasting them with the other areas. The criterion for using a type of material or colour varies according to the site. Thus, in some cases the aim is to reproduce the original paving, whilst in others it is to emphasize the different functions of the rooms. The site at which this can best be appreciated could be considered that of Pla de Palol, where a multicoloured carpet covers the site, prolonging the rainbow that can also be seen in the surrounding urban developments. This case is very similar to the paradigmatic musealization of the villa of Löffelbach in Austria (Zito 2007, 228).

The surface treatment of the remains at Ametllers also stands out. Here, blue resins simulate the water that would have filled the pool in the villa's courtyard and in some of the rooms of the baths. In this villa, we also find one of the few presentations in the Catalan region of the line out technique. In this case, a simulated line can clearly be seen that separates the various rooms from a channel. In this case, the line was made from sheets of glass that were whitish in places and blue in others.

Figure 5. Barenys, Salou.





In Barenys, the use of colours is strongly marked by an impressive green carpet that extends around the site, in enormous contrast to the architectural spaces, in which brownish colours predominate. In other words, the green serves to frame the architectural areas as if they were paintings. In turn, the architectural areas are enveloped by newly built, brown structures and elements. At the same time, the green of the site is integrated into the green areas that extend around the site in the form of a landscaped area for public use, which is separated from the archaeological site by a fence. This use of green as a frame is also employed in Pla de Palol and in Torre Llauder. However, in Pla de Palol and Torre Llauder, the grass frames the site in general, whilst in Barenys it isolates the areas that make up the archaeological park.



Figure 6. La Clota,  
Creixell.



Figure 7. Torre Llauder,  
Mataró.

In the field of surface treatments, we should also highlight cases in which mosaics exist, for example, in the villas of Ametllers, Els Munts, Roman baths of Sant Boi de Llobregat and Torre Llauder. In the first case, the mosaics are totally uncovered, whilst in the second each one has a protective cover. In the case of Ametllers, the well-known mosaic of Vitalis, which is conserved in the rooms of the Municipal Museum of Tossa de Mar, was reproduced using computer graphics techniques.



Figure 8. Font del Vilar, Avinyonet de Puigventós.

### Routes and meeting places

In some cases, the villas are so small that the idea of routes around them does not really apply. This is true of Clota, Rocafonda or Font del Vilar. There is no defined route at Vilauba or Barenys, despite their larger size. In these cases, the site can be visited without following paths that are marked out to varying degrees. In the other cases, the site can be visited by following an established route that is more or less clear. However, there are many different ways of marking the routes. One of the simplest methods is to demarcate the path for visitors using low railings comprised of posts stuck into the ground at more or less regular intervals joined together by wire, rope or chains. This method is used in some of the sites under study: Romeral, Llosa, Torre Llauder and Els Munts. In this case, the railings simply act as an element to demarcate the area, as they are not high enough to stop people from accessing the archaeological remains.

Another element that is used to demarcate the spaces are low signs made from stones (in Els Munts) or wooden posts laid down horizontally (in Can Terrès), which separate the visitors' paths from the rest of the site.

Routes are also delineated by the use of a different type of paving to the rest of the site. This method has been used in many of the cases. In some, it simply involves covering the routes in small stones, as in Els Munts or Llosa. In other cases, the paths are made from wooden posts (part of Els Munts), manufactured flagstones or stepping stones (Pla de Palol, Llafranc and Ametllers), which represents a higher stage of intervention. In addition,





Figure 9. Centcelles,  
Constantí.



Figure 10. Can Terrés,  
La Garriga.

in the path to enter Pla de Palol, some metal elements serve as the frame of a fictitious door and indicate the path that the visitor should take.

Some of the routes are circular (meaning that they enable visitors to leave the site without retracing their steps on the same path). Sites that have circular routes include Ametllers, Pla de Palol, Llafranc, Romeral, Can Terrès, Torre Llauder and Centcelles. Another characteristic that distinguishes most of the routes is that they normally enter inside the



spaces of the villa. This is true of Ametllers, Pla de Palol, Can Terrès, Els Munts and Llosa.

In some cases viewpoints have been built to provide a better view of parts of the site. On some occasions, a certain high point in the land is used to improve observation, without having to build raised constructions as in the Aguntum Archäologischer Park in Dölsach (Austria). On other occasions, for example in Llosa, the fact that the site is at a lower altitude than the surrounding land makes it easier to create a viewpoint. In some places, such as Llosa, benches are placed at the viewpoints to reinforce them. This solution of making use of the contours of the land as a viewpoint is also found at Vilauba, where the highest point over the site has a large information board to explain the remains, and in Pla de Palol and Ametllers, where one of the viewpoints is situated over archaeological remains that were much higher than the rest of the site.

Some of these viewpoints can also be considered meeting places. The clearest example of this is at Pla de Palol. At this site, a space with no buildings on it that was one of the villa's courtyards has been used to build a large circular platform. This acts as a meeting place for groups that are visiting the site or for various activities. There are not many examples of such spaces, but we can also find them in the Roman villa of Ametllers, where the meeting place is paved with slats of wood rather than concrete.



### Signposting around the sites

Most of the sites under study have boards that use various methods to explain the villa in question. These are not the same at all sites, although there is a clear tendency to use lectern-style boards, such as those found in Ametllers, Pla de Palol, Romeral, Rajadell, Can Terrès, Barenys, Els Munts or Vilauba. In some cases, lecterns are used in combination with other kinds of boards. The materials from which the boards are made also vary,

Figure 11. Els Munts, Altafulla.



although there is an increasing tendency to use corten steel and a drop in the use of glass or methacrylate, which are now found in only a few places, such as Pla de Palol. In addition, in many places, boards are used that are made from sheets of different materials that have been painted or covered in vinyl.

The aim of most of the signs is to explain what can be seen. Signs are positioned in particular at singular places in the site, such as the baths and the ovens. In some villas, there are also signs that indicate the direction, as found in Els Munts or Can Terrès.

The amount of information that is provided varies substantially from one site to another. At the Centcelles villa, the sign in front of the baths only shows a map with each of the spaces numbered and a colour scheme to indicate the chronology. At the Els Munts villa, the information provided on the boards consists only in a concise definition of the room, a map of its location and a reference number. This number is linked to a leaflet that is given to visitors when they enter the site and which provides more information. However, in most cases, there are many boards that contain a title to indicate the contents, a text that provides information on the functions and chronology of the space and a wide range of graphic information that varies depending on the place: maps, reconstructions (normally drawn by hand rather than using software) and photographs of objects found during the excavation.



Figure 12. El Romeral,  
Albesa.

#### **Additional buildings**

Unlike other places in Europe where the roofs over villas are used to create museum spaces, whether they are museums in the strictest sense or what we call information centres, such spaces are not common in Catalonia. In fact, they are highly unusual (Roman baths in Sant Boi). Buildings





Figure 13. Vilauba, Camós.



that provide or could provide some kind of information complementary to that which can be obtained from looking at a site and consulting the accompanying signs include those found at Els Munts, Llosa, Torre Llauder and Centcelles. In any case, these are very simple kinds of museum spaces, which are far from the more comprehensive examples that can be found in other places, housed in architectural structures of considerable importance.<sup>4</sup>

### Conclusions

In general, we can consider that the various actions carried out on Catalan Roman villas reflect some common patterns. They reveal a difference in the way sites are adapted in Catalonia and in Northern European countries, where the tendency is to recreate Roman villas in Germany and to construct museum facilities that enclose or are adjacent to archaeological remains in England. However, this pattern of actions is not exclusive to Catalonia, as the models can be observed in other countries such as Austria or Luxembourg, to cite two of the places mentioned in the text. The pattern is characterized by maintaining the appearance of an archaeological ruin, which is achieved by little intervention to the archaeological structures and to the treatment of surface areas. Most of the actions merely strengthen and raise the height of structures with a few rows of bricks, following the same criteria as those used in the original parts of the structures in terms of the materials and construction techniques. To avoid imitation, various procedures are used so that the visitor can identify the reconstructed part of the site. The use of modern materials (concrete, tiles, corten steel, etc.) to evoke the volumes of the villa's original spaces, as in one of the galleries of Els Munts, is a method that is rarely used in the presentation of rural Roman villas in Catalonia. Nevertheless, the tendency to intervene in a rather discreet way has been complemented or combined with other actions (particularly those that were started in the first decade of the twentieth century) that are more decisive: a variety of textures and colours are used to present the surface areas of the villas; and ways are sought to help visitors to understand the archaeological remains and to make visits safe and easy.

However, this is not the most notable characteristic that has emerged in this field. One of the peculiarities that we have stressed is that these Roman villas are now found in urban areas. Thus, this type of settlement is often the only archaeological ruins that are possible in an urban context. This in itself has become a paradoxical question. Due to the location of the settlements, prehistoric or Iberian remains are not likely to have become part of a city's fabric. Remains of ancient and medieval cities may have a monumental appearance that makes them closer to architectural buildings than archaeological remains. Alternatively, they may have been diluted or destroyed by the continuous settlement in these spaces. Therefore, Roman villas have emerged from the subsoil to be incorporated into a new reality in which they are embraced for their role both as an item of heritage and as an open space; a landscaped area for public use.

In villas that have become real information centres on the ways in which land was occupied and used in the Roman era, the structural and architectural aspects of the site tend to be emphasized, rather than aspects that are more closely linked to the agricultural and livestock activities that were carried out there. Thus, the method of recreating crops or species that is commonly found in information centres on earlier eras or medieval times is often overlooked in sites from the Roman era. This method can be used to explain work in the fields, daily life, farm production, crop techniques, landscape, etc. Such aspects are equally essential to understand the social and economic basis of Roman society.

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<sup>4</sup> This volume also contains the villas of Olmeda and Loupian.

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