

Roman Failure: Privilege and Precarity at Early Imperial Podere Marzuolo, Tuscany*

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ABSTRACT

The case of the early imperial small rural settlement of Marzuolo, in south-central Etruria, paints a micro-history of arrested developments: a couple of decades into the site's existence, an abandoned wine-production facility was converted into a blacksmithing workshop, which in turn burnt down and was abandoned soon after. But were both these endings failures? This article uses the concept of failure as an epistemic lens to examine inequality: who could fail in the Roman world, and for whom was failure not an option? It argues that failure was tied up with particular notions of the future, which were not equally distributed. Yet in contrast to modern paradigms, in the Roman world even the privileged seem not to have embraced failure as a stepping-stone towards growth.

Keywords: failure; inequality; wine production; blacksmithing; rural archaeology; Roman Italy

I WHY FAILURE MATTERS

Risk and disaster set the stage for the Roman world: risk as a structural vulnerability of pre-industrial economies grafted on a Mediterranean constituted by thickly but loosely connected micro-ecologies;¹ disasters such as earthquakes, droughts and pandemics as the causal movers that tipped the fragile balance of stability.² Gambling, magic and other strategies offered tools for wide cross-sections of Roman society to turn intransigent uncertainty into malleable risk, and even the most privileged were often bound to embrace a windfall rather than project systematic gains.³ This emphasis on the

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¹ Horden and Purcell 2000; Halstead 2014.

² Woolf 2020: 398–403, on Mediterranean megalopolis as disproportionately vulnerable.

³ Purcell 1995; Grey 2020. For the Greek world, see Eidinow 2007. See also Adam and Groves 2007, chs 2 and 3. Whereas Appadurai 2013: 293–9 links anticipation to risk, I see all futural orientations in the Roman world as starting from risk. Where they differ is in their capacity to navigate it.

Roman world as a high-risk environment, in which windfall and disaster were but two sides of the same coin, might seem to suggest that failure was endemic. But whereas everyone in the Roman world was subject to pandemics, droughts and war, Judith Butler makes the important distinction between such universal pre-industrial precariousness on the one hand and precarity as a product of structural inequalities on the other.⁴

The difference between universal precariousness and disadvantaged precarity can be expected to show in the response to failure: who could bounce back, and who could even embrace failure as an opportunity for further growth, as per the Silicon Valley mantra of ‘fail fast and fail forward’? Yet the narrative that positions failure as a stepping-stone towards growth cannot simply be assumed to have been at play in the Roman world, and sees ample critique even today.⁵ Queer and critical race studies, for instance, argue for embracing failure *qua* failure and not as a hurdle to be overcome on a ladder of inevitable progress and growth.⁶ For queer theorist Judith Halberstam, failure ‘can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon “trying and trying again”’.⁷ Lingering over failure can help us ‘untrain ourselves so that we can read the struggles and debates back into questions that seem settled and resolved’.⁸ Anthropologist Anna Tsing similarly wonders what alternatives open up if we shed the assumption that progress and growth are foundational to the human condition. She weaves stories of ruination in modern capitalist economies and contemplates a world of precarity as ‘that here and now in which pasts may not lead to futures’.⁹

Aside from probing the response to failure, this article dives deeper into the preconditions of failure. Tsing’s quote already hints at a triangulation between failure, precarity and futurity. Failure is here defined in etic terms as instances when risk catches up with plans. It therefore presumes a particular emic orientation towards the future, one that allows for plans to be made. By teasing apart futural orientations, this article asks who could fail in the Roman world; put differently, who could envisage future plans that opened up the possibility of failure?¹⁰ While risk was present for everyone in the Roman world, farmers and emperors alike, an inquiry into failure’s preconditions and consequences thus provides an epistemic lens for examining its practical and affective reverberations and their profoundly unequal distribution.

This article presents new empirical data on arrested agricultural and artisanal undertakings from the imperial Roman rural site of Podere Marzuolo in Tuscany. The high-resolution archaeological data from this context tell different stories of success and failure, and of their preconditions, as seen from the perspective of people occupying different socio-economic positions at the site. The narrative that ensues uses failure as a lens through which to diffract the slippery concept of inequality in the imperial Roman world.

II A VINTNER AND A BLACKSMITH AT MARZUOLO

The early imperial Roman site of Podere Marzuolo was situated in inland south-central Tuscany, about 30 km removed from the nearest town of Roselle on the Tyrrhenian

⁴ Butler 2004.

⁵ Myers 2019.

⁶ e.g. Wilderson 2021.

⁷ Halberstam 2011: 3.

⁸ Halberstam 2011: 11. See also Ahmed 2019: 206 on such ‘lingering over’ things as a queer move.

⁹ Tsing 2015: 61.

¹⁰ This question has rarely been considered in scholarship in Roman studies. See e.g. Shaw 2019b on the failure of grape harvests and similar ‘future’ expectations.



FIG. 1. Marzuolo in its regional context. Red: *terra sigillata* production sites; orange: towns; black: villas. (Map by author)

coast (Fig. 1). Marzuolo epitomises the transitional nature of this historical locale. Politically, it sat at the very edge between the territories of Roselle, to which it probably belonged administratively, and Chiusi. In terms of connectivity, Marzuolo was equidistant from the two main north–south roads, the Via Aurelia along the coast and the Via Cassia inland. While the River Orcia, which skirted the site to its north before flowing into the Ombrone, was not navigable, its valley would have facilitated travel. Ecologically, Marzuolo bridges the flat coastal landscape characterised by villa economies and the hilly interior, cleaved by seasonal streams and home to a mixed economy of small farmers.¹¹

The site of Marzuolo was first recorded during a field survey in 2006–7, and was subsequently subject to two short excavation seasons under the auspices of the Roman Peasant Project (RPP) in 2012–13.¹² Since 2016, the Marzuolo Archaeological Project has carried out intensive excavations and studies, which give a rare high-resolution glimpse of the complexity of such ‘minor’ rural sites and their histories. The lack of later building activity in the north-western area of the site facilitated the detailed reconstruction of a rapid sequence of events, all within the span of around half a century. Around the turn of the millennium, a large building was constructed in *opus reticulatum* masonry, quite likely as an agricultural processing installation, as evidenced by two cylindrical tanks added shortly after, one of which contained residues of tartaric acid indicative of wine production (Fig. 2, phase 1).¹³ At most a few decades after construction, the tanks went out of use and were partially filled in with dumped materials. Room C and part of Room D in the *opus reticulatum* building became home to a blacksmithing workshop (Fig. 2, phase 2).¹⁴ In the middle of the first century A.D., much of the building’s northern wing was destroyed in a fire, and the blacksmithing workshop was covered by collapse material and abandoned (Fig. 3). Reoccupation, still in the first century A.D., does not seem to have touched any rooms west of Room D.

This ten-by-ten-metre area of a small, rural Roman settlement in inland Tuscany thus packs a dense and eventful history of endings, including a wine business that was abandoned soon after its initiation and a blacksmithing workshop left behind after a disastrous fire. But were both of these events instances of ‘failure’? At what cost? And

¹¹ Cambi 1996; Campana 2013; Bowes 2021a.

¹² Ghisleni 2010; Bowes 2021a.

¹³ Vennarucci *et al.* forthcoming.

¹⁴ Van Oyen *et al.* 2021.

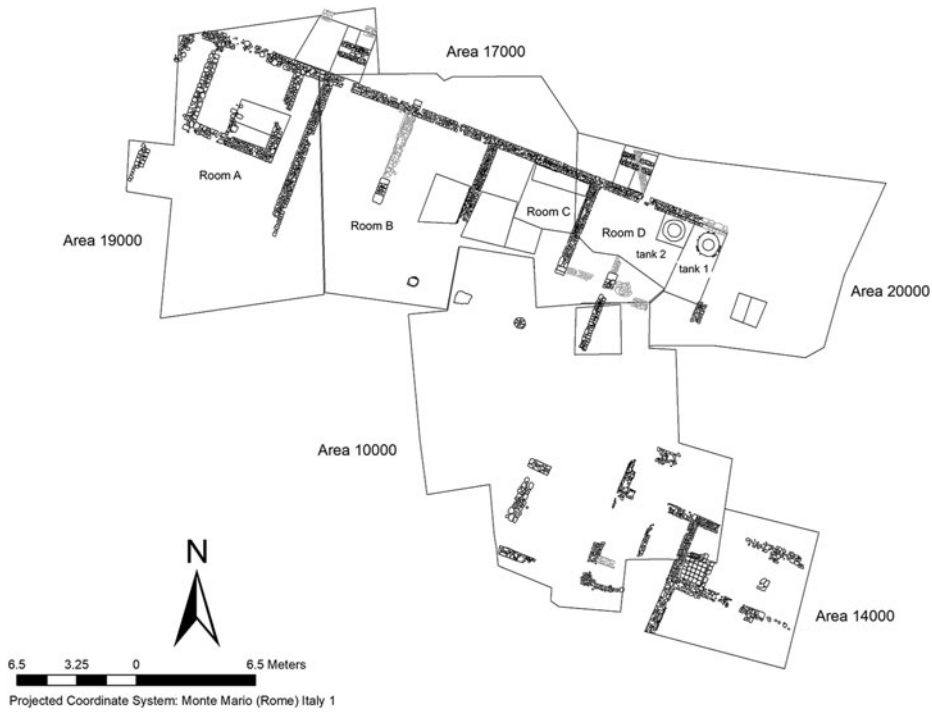


FIG. 2. Marzuolo, plan of *opus reticulatum* building. Black: phase 1 (Augustan); grey: phase 2 (first half of first century A.D.). (Marzuolo Archaeological Project)

for whom? The following two sections will unpack the stories of the vintner and the blacksmith, using the prism of failure to reflect on issues of inequality in imperial Roman (rural) society.

III THE PRIVILEGE OF EXPECTATION

Design and planning

The *opus reticulatum* building at Marzuolo was constructed in the later first century B.C. or the very early first century A.D. It was probably inserted into what was at the time a nascent small-scale rural settlement with a row of rectangular, wide-entry strip buildings possibly oriented around a road or trackway. The strip buildings had a socle consisting of a few courses of unmodified river stones bounded with earth and placed either directly on the walking surface or in a very shallow foundation trench (Fig. 4).¹⁵ These stone bases carried an earthen elevation — possibly pisé — and shielded it from any moisture rising from the ground. The technique was common in the area, both on earlier nearby sites

¹⁵ No traces of foundation trenches have been found for these stone socles. Only one foundation trench, in Area 14000, was attested, with a heterogeneous infill, and supporting only one side of a wall. In this case, the extra support suggests the space in question needed to withstand high pressure, possibly due to pressing activity (an unidentified mortared feature was found inside the room). See Van Oyen *et al.* 2021: 244–5.

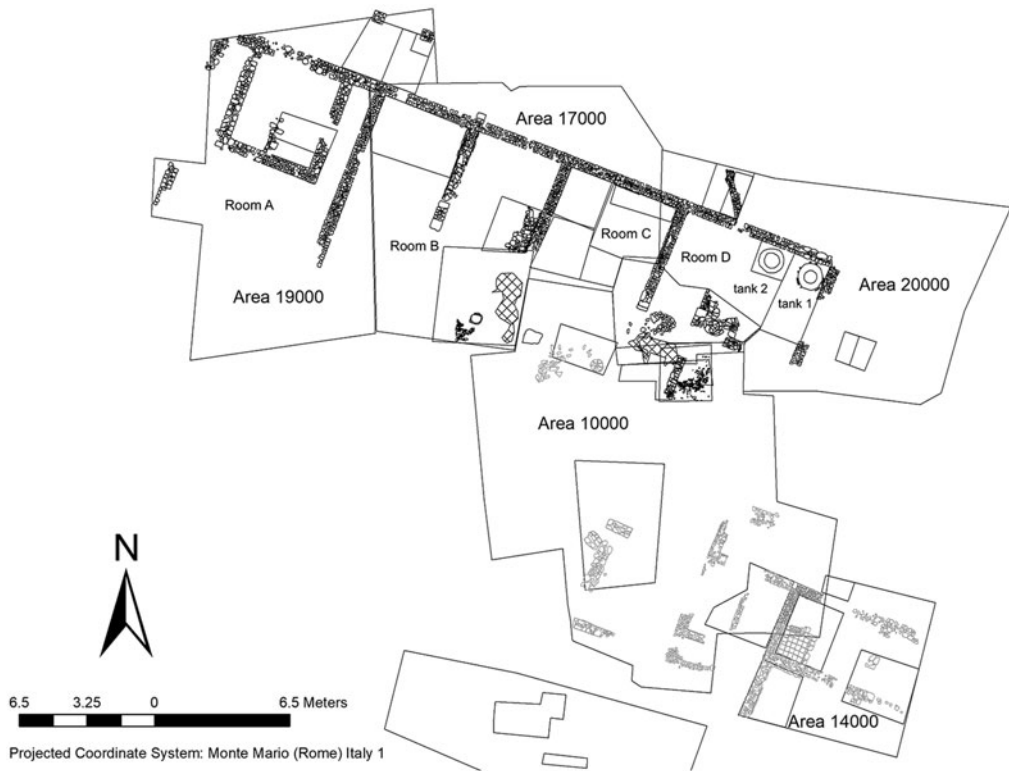


FIG. 3. Marzuolo, plan of *opus reticulatum* building after fire (mid-first century A.D.).
(Marzuolo Archaeological Project)



FIG. 4. Marzuolo, wall base of river stones and tiles bounded with earth (first century A.D.).
(Marzuolo Archaeological Project)

such as Podere Cannicci¹⁶ and on contemporary sites excavated by the RPP, from dwellings to temporary stables.¹⁷ This combination of stone base and earthen elevation made the most of the locally available materials in a region that was poor in stone but rich in clay.

¹⁶ Sebastiani *et al.* 2018: 11. Also e.g. at the sanctuary of Diana Umbronensis at the mouth of the River Ombrone: see Sebastiani *et al.* 2015, e.g. 45 (early imperial).

¹⁷ Bowes 2021a: 568–75.



FIG. 5. Marzuolo, *opus reticulatum* wall with start of foundation and elevation in irregular diamond-shaped stones or *cubilia*. (Marzuolo Archaeological Project)

Whoever designed, built and financed the *opus reticulatum* building at Marzuolo wanted to do things differently, though. Its size exceeds that of other buildings at the site by many orders of magnitude (Fig. 2). Its northern wing was at least thirty metres long (and continues beyond the excavation limits). What really set the building apart, however, was its construction technique. Deep foundation trenches were cut in the clay-rich substrate, meticulously measured out to wrap tightly around the foundations. At 80–100 cm deep, these foundations were carefully assembled using roughly cut river stones bonded and layered with white mortar. Near the base of the walls, the foundations transitioned into more regularly cut rectangular stones secured with the same white mortar. The actual walls were built in concrete with a rubble core and a facing of river stones cut into a rough diamond shape, once more with white mortar as a bonding agent.¹⁸

Each of the *cubilia* — the individual diamond-shaped stones that make up the double facing of the walls — was carved individually, a difficult and time-intensive feat given the hardness of the calcareous river stones. The stones were probably fetched from the River Orcia, which flows immediately downslope from the site of Marzuolo. This contrasts with the softer tuff with which *opus reticulatum* construction is usually associated, used in Rome and its volcanic environs and highly amenable to carving and shaping.¹⁹ The result of the harder material used at Marzuolo was stones with a frontal face that only ever approximated the regular diamond shape of true *opus reticulatum*

¹⁸ Around four courses of *cubilia* are preserved. The construction technique of the remainder of the wall elevation remains unclear, and probably changed between occupation phases.

¹⁹ Mogetta 2021: 21.

(Fig. 5). Therefore, whether it is appropriate to call the Marzuolo masonry *opus reticulatum* or *opus quasi-reticulatum* is a moot point, that might erroneously ascribe chronological weight to what was in reality the product of available materials.²⁰ More interesting is how the imperfectly diamond-shaped stones made the task of assembling the walls into a tall order, thereby confounding any explanation that sees *opus reticulatum* masonry as a strategy of efficiency.²¹ Whereas cutting soft volcanic tuff stones to create a ready-made building kit to be assembled by unskilled labour speaks to rationalisation, carving recalcitrant rounded calcareous river stones to generate a giant puzzle defies any means–ends logic. Something other than efficiency and labour management seems to have been at stake here.

Marzuolo's *opus reticulatum* speaks above all about the desire to execute a design. In doing so, the performance was at least as important as the result. Its construction paraded a true spectacle of labour — labour for cutting the stones, and labour for assembling them — that was local, extended in time, and both highly visible and audible. It is impossible to pin down the nature of that labour, which could involve slaves, but is likely also to have drawn on the local farming and crafting population of Marzuolo and its environs, whether through forms of payment, social obligation, or economic dependency.²² Whatever the source of labour, construction of this building was conspicuously wasteful of it.

This spectacle of labour staked a claim to the future: building in *opus reticulatum* was building for the future. This future envisaged a particular function for (at least part of) the building. Room D in the northern wing, entirely paved in *opus signinum* (whitish mortar containing orange-to-pink ceramic inclusions), contained two cylindrical tanks at its back, installed shortly after a first use-level consisting of a beaten earth floor. The tanks were sunken below floor level and carefully finished with an *opus signinum* waterproofing, with partially preserved tile rims providing a lip for a possible lid or cover. Residue analysis of the mortar lining of the easternmost Tank 1 yielded tartaric acid indicative of wine production; samples from Tank 2 were not conclusive.²³ The two tanks amounted to a total liquid capacity of 1500–1750 l for wine fermentation, or a modest 0.3–0.4 hectares of vines.²⁴ No press was present in the excavated areas, and it is possible that the floor of Room D served as a manual treading floor. The *opus reticulatum* building was set up with the intention of engaging in wine production, even if perhaps not at a scale warranting investment in a press.

Other features that were part of the building's original design similarly speak to an intended function. A channel ran parallel behind the entire length of the northern wing's back wall. It consisted of two low walls with foundations, c. 60 cm apart, employing the same fine white mortar as used in the *opus reticulatum* walls, and probably collected rainwater runoff. A sturdy pavement with large stones, filled in with ceramic and tile fragments, was in place in front of the northern wing, suggesting a preparation for heavy-duty work and the reception of heavy loads, possibly including the grapes that would have been carted into Room D for pressing and fermentation and the wine that would have exited.

In sum, the future conjured by the *opus reticulatum* building was programmatic and geared towards a specific function and goal. Yet, at the same time, this futural orientation exceeded functionalism in that the entire structure was over-engineered for its purpose.

²⁰ Medri 2001: 15–16; Mogetta 2021: 19.

²¹ Coarelli 1977; Torelli 1980.

²² e.g. Garnsey 1980; de Neeve 1984; Foxhall 1990; Kehoe 1997.

²³ Residue analysis by A. Pecci and S. Mileto at the Universitat de Barcelona: see Vennarucci *et al.* forthcoming.

²⁴ Estimates based on the ratios given in Dodd 2020: 64. See Vennarucci *et al.* forthcoming.

Between promise and potentiality

Investment, integrated project design and the spectacle of labour all conspired to create, colonise and tame the future as an abstract space of promise and possibility, a time-space rife with expectation.²⁵ Rebecca Bryant and Daniel Knight coin ‘expectation’ as a horizon defining the *futurity* of the future. In other words, when we are able to expect, we can almost ‘see’ the future spread out in front of us.²⁶ Expectation — and especially the expectation of expectation — allows one to experience the full thickness of the present: actions in the present bring a sense of future promise. The promise of expectation inhabits an emptied, decontextualised future: ‘the future is simply there, an empty space waiting to be filled with our desire ..., holding out the promise that it can be what we want it to be’.²⁷

Yet the initial plan as materialised by the *opus reticulatum* building at Marzuolo was ultimately unsuccessful. Its first use-phase was very short-lived indeed, perhaps of the order of a decade or even less (Fig. 2, phase 2). The cylindrical tanks went out of use and were partially filled in.²⁸ It is impossible to tell whether this repurposing entailed a shift in ownership: in other words, whether the building changed hands between its use as agricultural processing site and as craft centre. Perhaps the original owner died, and the estate was inherited or put up for sale.²⁹ As will be discussed below, there is circumstantial evidence that hints at some form of leasing for the second use-phase, which would have meant the (old or new) owner opted to switch to a more risk-averse mode of exploitation.³⁰ Whatever the exact scenario, abandonment of wine production — and possibly also of the associated vineyards, a large-scale, long-term investment — and repurposing of the structure meant failure for the original owner/investor.

It is precisely because the project of the *opus reticulatum* building and its wine production had been so carefully designed and so meticulously executed that its lack of success can be labelled ‘failure’. Failure presupposes the presence of and confidence in the future as a ‘structurally occupied space’, *sensu* Brent Shaw in these pages,³¹ or what Bryant and Knight call a ‘horizon of expectation’.³² Failure happens when something falls short of someone’s expectations. The futural quality of expectation resides just as much in the fact that its substance *can* indeed be expected to happen as in the possibility, always present, that it may *not* materialise. Bryant and Knight describe this as the tension between promise and potentiality, which are both qualities or flavours of expectation.³³ This tension is where the possibility of failure resides. In other words, expectation — the orientation that sees the future as a horizon, empty and

²⁵ Abram and Weszkalnsy 2011: 8–11, on planning as a form of performative promise.

²⁶ Bryant and Knight 2019: 50, 55 and *passim*. The phrase ‘horizon of expectation’ is borrowed from Koselleck 1985: 271–6. But while for Koselleck this ‘horizon’ denotes a particular temporal mode of existence, smeared out over the future (Koselleck 1985: 272, in contrast to the ‘space of experience’, which condenses different layers of pastness into an atemporal singularity), this article uses Bryant and Knight’s more neutral glossing of the term as a future that can be expected but that is not here yet, and Pickering’s addition of the horizon as ‘open and unlimited’ and ‘the supreme locus of promise and possibility’ (Pickering 2004: 272).

²⁷ Adam and Groves 2007: 11; on promise, see also 45–6.

²⁸ Van Oyen *et al.* 2019.

²⁹ Mauné 2010: 127–8 advances a similar hypothesis for a sudden shift in the nature and range of ceramic output at the villa of Aspiran (Béziers, France), which he links to the disappearance or death of the original owner-investor Quintus Iulius Priscus. I thank Ben Luley for this reference.

³⁰ cf. Kehoe 1997; Poblome 2016.

³¹ Shaw 2019a: 6.

³² Koselleck 1985: 271–6; Bryant and Knight 2019: 52–3.

³³ Bryant and Knight 2019: 63. Note that potentiality does not denote *any* possible scenario but only *likely* alternatives. In a similar vein, Koselleck 1985: 274–5 sees the untranslatability of experience to expectation as constitutive of future-making. He identifies *Neuzeit* when expectations ‘have distanced themselves evermore from all previous experience’ (Koselleck 1985: 276). On Koselleck and modernity, see Pickering 2004. Sassaman 2012 argues for the value of Koselleck’s ideas beyond modernity.

decontextualised — is a prerequisite of failure. The possibility of failure, then, is a privilege that comes with the ability to imagine *the* future and its promise.

Whether the wine-making business at Marzuolo lasted a few years, a decade, or two decades, its demise was swift. No attempt was made at maintaining it, improving processes in some way, or changing the product or its marketing. Instead, activities inside the building moved away from wine-making altogether. The associated infrastructure was completely abandoned, without regard for the care, energy and labour that had gone into its establishment. Whether the building itself, and perhaps any land or resources that came with it, were sold, inherited, or repurposed, change was sweeping.

IV THE BURDEN OF ANTICIPATION

Modifications and dwelling

As the wine production in Room D came to a sudden halt, Room C and the portico area were converted into a blacksmithing workshop. A domestic assemblage including cooking wares and faunal remains indicates that a blacksmith took up residence inside Room C, possibly accompanied by a family or dependents. But most exceptional was the find of a complete assemblage of tools for blacksmithing and associated woodworking, objects in the process of repair or working, and recyclables.

The toolset encompasses a blacksmith's essential instruments.³⁴ This includes at least two hammers, a large striking hammer with a flat surface, and a much smaller typical smithing hammer. The large hammer is so heavy as to require both hands for holding it, especially when in active use, which implies a team of at least two people: a master-artisan holding the object to be worked and indicating the place to be hit with a smaller smithing hammer, and an assistant or aid striking the blows. Several sizes and types of tongs, used to hold objects while forging or hammering, were also found inside the workshop, indexing a broad and versatile task- and skill-set. Objects worked or repaired range from small (e.g. nails) to large (e.g. a ploughshare). An offcut from an iron bar points to the import of fresh iron, but there is also evidence suggestive of recycling. A woodworking toolset — including saws of various types and a drawing knife or billhook — indicates that complementary woodworking took place in the same workshop, to fit handles to tools, shares to ploughs, etc. While the scale of output is difficult to estimate without representative waste deposits, the overall picture is of a workshop comprising *c.* two to four people, including at least one permanent, specialist blacksmith, and servicing the local rural economy and its need for new products as well as repairs.

The blacksmith modified the space (Fig. 2, phase 2). They used a drain on top of the pavement of large-scale stones that was left in its original position in the portico in front of Room C. Inside Room C, the blacksmith cut pits, one in the back of the room filled with a deposit including large ceramic fragments and a stone, and another, wider one in the west of the room, filled with an assemblage of ceramics, animal bones, glass and slag, possibly the remnants of an interim cleaning up of the workshop floor.

Several workstations combined hearths and anvils or hammering supports (Fig. 6). The archaeological footprint of the latter was traced by mapping the concentrations of hammerscale, the small, ferromagnetic lamellar particles that escape during the hammering of hot iron. Smithing hearths can be quite rudimentary, consisting of no more than a flat area, sometimes raised or slightly sunken, with clay walls or another low barrier to shield the blacksmith from the heat. At Marzuolo, the footprints of five hearths

³⁴ Van Oyen *et al.* 2022 for a preliminary publication and analysis of the blacksmithing workshop, its spatial layout, its *chaîne opératoire* and its assemblage of iron tools and objects.

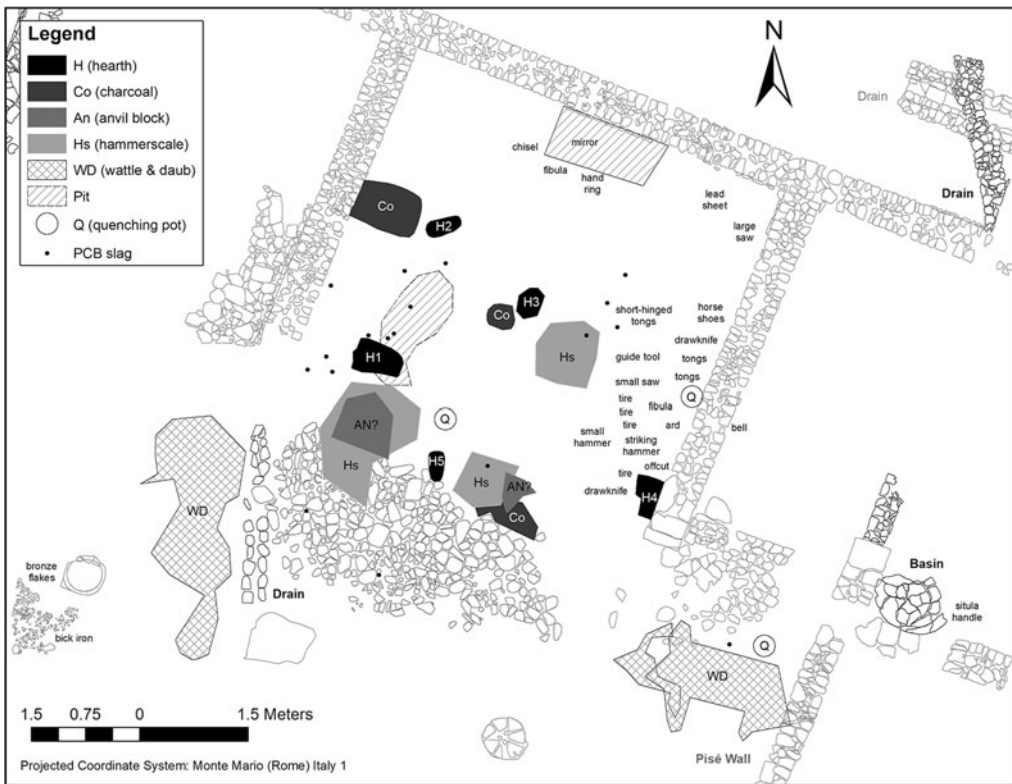


FIG. 6. Marzuolo, plan of blacksmithing workshop inside *opus reticulatum* building, Room C (middle of first century A.D.). (Marzuolo Archaeological Project)

were found inside the workshop, three of which were associated with hammerscale concentrations. Judging from *in situ* plano-convex slag that collects at the bottom of a smithing hearth, and a lining of tile and stones, two hearths had been in operation recently. The various hearths could represent multiple smiths working simultaneously, different workstations for different objects and/or the repeated abandonment and setting up of workstations. Several quenching basins consisting of broken amphorae are likely to have contained water for cooling off or hardening tools and objects.

The portico area was divided and shielded by the erection of two wattle-and-daub screens, which collapsed sideways (Fig. 3).³⁵ The imprints on the remaining earth chunks show segments of a supporting wooden framework of flat beams and of the tapestry of twigs that filled in the framework and on which the earthen mix was applied (Fig. 7). Traces of white plaster survive on some of the fragments. The walls were installed at either end of the portico in front of Room C and seem to have functioned to shield activities elsewhere in the complex from the smoke and other nuisances stemming from blacksmithing, while possibly also adjusting the airflow in proximity to the smithing hearths. In addition, the screens could have served to claim space by dividing up the portico area and reshaping circulation patterns.³⁶

³⁵ Similar wattle-and-daub screens (or perhaps bins) subdividing a portico building were recorded at Vagnari: Carroll 2022: 52–5.

³⁶ Vennarucci *et al.* 2018.



FIG. 7. Marzuolo, fragments of daub with impressions of supporting wattle framework.
(Marzuolo Archaeological Project)

The blacksmith made the space their own and looked forward, creating a thriving workshop servicing the local community. But while the conversion relied on skill, it did not require radical structural interventions or large investment of labour or resources. Where building in *opus reticulatum* aspired to be building for eternity, the features employed by the Marzuolo blacksmith embodied a different futural orientation. Vitruvius writes that wattle-and-daub walls are prone to cracks in their plaster cover,³⁷ and excavations in London and Verulamium in Roman Britain have shown that timber and wattle-and-daub walls were frequently rebuilt, as often as every two years, and generally lasted between two and ten years.³⁸ Preservation and duration of wattle-and-daub walls is highly context dependent, varying with (among other variables) humidity, moisture, technique and use; but while they could, in some cases, last for a lengthy period, they could just as well need repeated maintenance. Several drains in the north-western area of the site attest that humidity in particular was a recurring concern at Marzuolo, probably compromising the longevity of wattle-and-daub. Masonry or concrete structures could transform into heritable assets because their material properties lasted for the long term, thereby opening a multi-generational horizon of expectation.³⁹ Wattle-and-daub walls, by contrast, harboured their own cyclicity, as did clay hearths and movable workstations. Through such shorter-term (or open-term) features, the blacksmith was not only looking forward to the success of the workshop, but also attending to the uncertainties of the near future. They were, in other words, anticipating.

While expectation looks ahead to a distant horizon and the abstract space of possibilities and promise it describes, anticipation is already creating, intervening in and grappling with that future, which can be here any minute now.⁴⁰ Anticipation is a self-conscious preparation for, or reaction to, a future that is not yet actualised but already experienced as real. Anticipating happens when the future cannot be kept at bay: '[t]he future is always possible now, at this moment, viscerally present in the act of anticipation'.⁴¹ Where the

³⁷ Vitr. 2.8.20; Magni 2000: 442, citing Plaut., *Mostell.* 108–117 and the moralising discourse of Sen., *Ep.* 115.9.5.

³⁸ Perring 2002: 91–2.

³⁹ Perring 2002: 81.

⁴⁰ On the philosophical and psychological underpinnings of anticipation, see Poli 2019. Anticipation operates in what Jane Guyer calls 'the immediate' (Guyer 2007; 2019).

⁴¹ Bryant and Knight 2019: 35. While anticipating prepares for a future that is already at the doorstep, it can also be seen as an attempt to delay that future — to keep it on the doorstep just a little longer.

expected future is at once abstract and distant, creating space for exploration and planning, the anticipated future presses down on the present, demanding specific responses.

Pre-empting failure

The anticipating to which clay hearths, wattle-and-daub walls and temporary workstations compelled its users at Marzuolo finds its clearest illustration in the workshop's end. Indeed, the very reason why the wattle-and-daub screens at Marzuolo were preserved is because they were accidentally baked in a fire in the mid-first century A.D. that destroyed the entire blacksmithing workshop and much of the portico area (Fig. 3). What should give us pause is not that the fire happened (after all, blacksmithing was a pyrotechnic craft) or that the wattle-and-daub screens were unable to withstand it (Vitruvius's mockery of this material as a fire hazard has some basis),⁴² but the response to the fire and its destruction. Instead of rebuilding, repurposing, or at least salvaging, this particular area of the site remained untouched, despite continued activity in other zones.

This lack of salvaging attempts is all the more unusual since the destruction levels buried the assemblage of blacksmithing and woodworking tools described above. Indeed, it is most exceptional to find a complete set of blacksmithing tools *in situ*, in their workshop context.⁴³ Most archaeological finds of Roman-period tools occur instead in deliberate deposits or in secondary contexts. A dump in an abandoned silo at the site of Ruscino (France) contained a varied set of agricultural implements.⁴⁴ An assemblage of ceramic pots and iron tools stored in a cave or cellar at the rural site of Côté de Contrexéville (France) was sealed by fire debris.⁴⁵ Among a large number of smithing tools retrieved at the vicus of Lousonna (Switzerland), none appeared in workshop contexts, and some might have been deliberately stowed away.⁴⁶ Ironworking tools also frequently show up in hoards, whether their purpose was functional or ritual.⁴⁷

One possible explanation for why the tools were not retrieved and why the deposits in Room C were left untouched⁴⁸ could be found in the symbolic connotations of blacksmithing. A rich ethnography of blacksmithing and blacksmiths has detailed how the making and working of iron conjures a recurrent imaginary of transformation and regeneration.⁴⁹ The state transformations of worked iron — between fluidity and solidity — the skilled management of the fire and the embodied and closely guarded knowledge of reading immaterial and intangible signs such as the colour of heated iron add up to making the blacksmith at once a venerated figure of authority and a marginalised, feared character. This ambivalence extends to the ironworker's tools: their placement in graves, hoards and structured deposits might indicate — at least in part — a process of purification, neutralisation, or curation of these objects' potent associations.⁵⁰ If the Marzuolo blacksmith accidentally set the workshop on fire, then

⁴² Vitruvius 2.8.20.

⁴³ For a few exceptions in Pompeii (but older excavations), see Graf 1988. Tools in the Casa del Fabbro might be part of a temporary store of tools or iron (Allison 2006: 341–2, 348–9), or an active toolset (Ling 1997: 162; Monteix 2011). Most tools in Roman London were retrieved in the Walbrook Valley, in a secondary waste-dump context; no tools were found at the extensive Roman metalworking site of Southwark: Hammer 2003; Humphreys 2021: 100–1. For a toolset in Roman Austria, see Pollak 2006.

⁴⁴ Marichal 2000.

⁴⁵ Huitorel *et al.* 2018.

⁴⁶ Duvauchelle 2005: 305, 311. Cf. a woodworking toolset in secondary context, possibly safeguarded for destruction, in Augst: Mutz 1980: 117.

⁴⁷ e.g. at Kilverstone: Garrow *et al.* 2006: 125–9; see also Manning 1972. For iron tools in several hoard contexts in Pfalz, south-west Germany, see Hanemann 2014.

⁴⁸ Bowes 2021a: 273–4.

⁴⁹ Herbert 1993; Childs 1999; Blakely 2006.

⁵⁰ For the British Iron Age, see Giles 2007; Hingley 1997; 2006.

both the context and its assemblage — including, and perhaps especially, the toolset — might have been considered tainted and to be left alone.

That blacksmithing at Marzuolo might have occupied a similarly ambivalent social role, as is attested in other times and places, is plausible, albeit not testable. But to ascribe the lack of retrieval of the Marzuolo toolset to symbolic or ritual preoccupations is to pair such other-than-rational behaviour with the subaltern. As an explanatory strategy, it locates the subaltern — in this case the Marzuolo blacksmith — in an ahistorical timespace, bereft of the historicity and futurity that make them human.⁵¹ What could an alternative framework look like?

The tools left behind at Marzuolo were valuable for their iron content — the large hammer alone contained 4 kg of iron that could have been reformed.⁵² Cato recommends selling off ‘old tools’ (*ferramenta vetera*) when taking over a farm, indicating that tools were part of the inventory and would be acquired and sold as the owner saw fit.⁵³ But for a craftsperson, tools also materialise a form of embodied knowledge. Craftspeople often make their own tools, or customise them to their body, hands, movements, as well as to the task at hand.⁵⁴ More than extensions of body and skill, tools come to stand in a metonymic relation with their craftsperson: tool and craftsperson become indistinguishable in terms of both identity and disposition.⁵⁵

Participatory ethnography of blacksmithing in the United States of the twentieth century by Charles M. Keller paid close attention to the importance of the workshop setting and layout, including the arrangement of tools.⁵⁶ Of note is how tools are, once more, more than a simple extension of one’s skill; instead, they *constitute* this skill. Tools carry knowledge by activating a rich imagery:

One knows about one’s tools, where they are kept, how they are shaped, the past productions in which they have been utilized to effective or ineffective ends, from whom they were purchased or how they were made. This imagery is rich and detailed, its comprehensive quality often seemingly excessive, yet the information represented allows the smith to search his stock of knowledge with respect to the task at hand.⁵⁷

Being presented with a task, especially a new or challenging one, the blacksmith will glance over their toolset to map out possibilities and forge new connections. The tools set in motion problem-solving networks at the interface between the mental and the somatic. It is thus easy to understand how loss of one’s trusted tools equals loss of skill, insofar as the craftsperson’s body knows and remembers through its seeing and handling of the tool, and how the singularity of both the setting and the toolset are of crucial importance.

The Marzuolo toolset thus represented a significant capital investment, but was also a core constituent of someone’s human capital. Why, then, was the toolset left behind after a fire destroyed the workshop, even when other areas of the site continued to be occupied?⁵⁸ Examples at Autun and Blessey — both in Roman Gaul — show that even when blacksmithing workshops were destroyed by fire, craftspeople tended to return to retrieve their tools.⁵⁹ At least in these cases, any concerns with the symbolic domain of reproduction and transformation did not prevent people from re-opening the contexts and recuperating its assemblages. Why, then, did not one of the presumably two to

⁵¹ e.g. Tsing 2015; Ellis 2018.

⁵² On the relative value of iron based on a price from Vindolanda Tablet 183, see Bray 2010.

⁵³ Cato, *Agr.* 2.7.

⁵⁴ Ingold 2011: 56–8; Høgseth 2013; Kuijpers 2018: 59 n. 21.

⁵⁵ Rose [1937] 2001: 49–50, as quoted in Marchand 2012: 261.

⁵⁶ Keller and Keller 1996.

⁵⁷ Keller and Keller 1996: 140.

⁵⁸ Lewis 1969: 124 observed that craftspeople in poor households in Mexico City held on to their tools for a long time, in sharp contrast to the rapidity with which other items of material culture changed hands.

⁵⁹ Chardon-Picault and Pernot 1999: 154; Mangin *et al.* 2000: 224.

eight people (blacksmith, apprentices or aids, and family) associated with the Marzuolo workshop dig through the collapse deposits? Why did none of the inhabitants of Marzuolo aware of the existence of the workshop attempt to salvage or claim the tools?

The explanation I propose is that the exceptional *in situ* presence of a complete toolset in the Marzuolo blacksmithing workshop hints at a misalignment between the ownership of capital (in this case the workshop and the tools) and human capital (the embodied skills of the blacksmith or blacksmiths). Perhaps the master-blacksmith succumbed in the fire, a scenario that is impossible to rule out, although no human bone material was found in relation to the otherwise well-preserved workshop space. But even then, anyone involved in the blacksmithing at Marzuolo would have interacted intimately with the tools — tweaking, adjusting and slowly aligning mind, body and tool — and would have understood the importance of retrieving them. And any of the other inhabitants of Marzuolo without the buffer of an ample asset portfolio, aware of the presence of the now-buried workshop, would have salvaged at least the bigger iron objects for their recycling and resale value. That instead the collapse layers and the tools they shielded remained untouched suggests that whoever owned them denied access, for whatever reason. It therefore seems unlikely that the blacksmith was the owner either of the workshop or of the toolset that was left behind, given how their skill development would have taken a significant step backwards without it.

The possibility that the owner of the tools and building installed a blacksmithing workshop operated by slave labour seems unlikely on similar grounds. Indeed, in the case of a slave-artisan, capital and human capital coalesce in the skills of the slave, and optimal use of this investment would once again have relied on the tools.⁶⁰ If a slave-owner decided to cease activity at Marzuolo and reinstall a blacksmithing workshop elsewhere, the tools would have been worth retrieving. If they relinquished blacksmithing altogether, the slave(s)-blacksmith(s) would have fetched a higher resale price as skilled specialists *with* tools.

The most likely scenario, although ultimately impossible to prove, sees a blacksmith (free or freed) lease the workshop space and associated tools from the building's owner, who may or may not have been the same person who designed and funded the construction of the *opus reticulatum* building in the first instance, and who may or may not have died in the fire.⁶¹ After the disastrous fire this owner (or their heir) was, perhaps once again, privileged enough to swallow another failure and simply abandon the investment altogether. The blacksmith and their probable aide(s) instead — if still alive — had no choice but to search for other opportunities, albeit without their tools and thus with a significant dent in their skillset.

The schism between capital and human capital would have curbed innovation and constrained the possibility of Schumpeterian growth, at least in the Roman rural economy. The blacksmith was forced to have recourse to versatility: they might have moved in an attempt to find employment as a blacksmith elsewhere, or they might have ventured into other activities, relying on complementary skills, wage labour, or family ties. One can assume that the skillset of a blacksmith — even, or perhaps especially, one of the 'generalists' who produced such things as nails and made various *ad hoc* repairs, as did the Marzuolo blacksmith — was sought after in various contexts: rural estates, minor centres, or even cities such as Roselle or Chiusi. The blacksmith could thus have found a new leasing contract or some other arrangement allowing them to continue practising their craft and earning a living. Even this possibility, however, would have

⁶⁰ Saller 2012: 78. The epigraphic record lists skilled slaves mostly as domestic servants, whereas most craftspeople commemorated through their occupational title were freed: Joshel 1992.

⁶¹ On leasing of craft facilities, see Cockle 1981; Strobel 1992; Poblome 2016. On leasing of farms, see Foxhall 1990. On the possible identification of the building's (original) owner as C. Decumius, see Van Oyen 2020.

come at significant cost: establishing new supply networks, new customer relations, new needs, a new workshop space and, indeed, a new toolset. Perhaps the largest cost, however, was the human toll of forced change, possibly including displacement, uprooting one's life, friendships, families, landscapes. In this scenario, resilience was not a choice for the blacksmith.⁶²

The Marzuolo blacksmith, however, had anticipated this outcome. However detrimental and costly its impact on their life, the destruction of the workshop by fire did not represent failure for them, precisely because they never really entertained the promise of expectation. Put differently, for the Marzuolo blacksmith failure was not futural; instead, it was always already 'there' and, therefore, anticipated. They did not project plans into an abstract futurity, but were constantly responding to, and preparing for, specific concerns and demands. We cannot tell what the duration of a leasing-contract for the blacksmithing workshop might have been: the Roman jurists tend to accept as standard a short contract of the order of five years.⁶³ Regardless of any length of time stipulated by a *locatio-conductio* contract, the future as a horizon of expectation, a distant, abstract space of possibility, would not have existed for the Marzuolo blacksmith in this scenario. Their futural orientation was one based on imminence, one that was always already in responsive mode, even before a response was needed. Where expectation can lead to failure, and indeed lends its futural quality to the potential of failure, anticipation inverts the temporal and causal arrow: it pre-emptively failure in order to deny its potential. Here the wattle-and-daub screens, the clay hearths and the other mutable features come in again, as both product and tool of anticipation. The short term of Roman leasing-contracts parallels the lifecycle of wattle-and-daub walls as reconstructed in excavations in Roman Britain, of the order of two to ten years.⁶⁴

For the Marzuolo blacksmith, building in wattle-and-daub meant building in anticipatory mode. It meant preparing for a future that would entail change, uncertainty, a future that was right at the doorstep, right around the corner. A small apotropaic stone phallus affixed to the workshop's front materialises this anticipatory impulse: warding off evil before it manifests itself (here and now, not in the future). With the future already on the doorstep, it becomes impossible to make the leap 'from more proximate needs to more distant aspirational worlds'; instead, one remains caught up in the pressing demands of proximate needs.⁶⁵ Much like the other modifications and the smithing hearths themselves, the wattle-and-daub screens were relatively low cost and easily reversible. They minimised the loss of labour and capital tied to a facility that would have had to be left behind at some point — when the lease ran out, at the owner's whim — while maximising the return in the form of a functional space, skilfully laid out and adapted to its new role as a forge.

In laying the groundwork for the future, anticipation draws on past experience.⁶⁶ Such experience offers a repertoire of actions and modalities with which to respond to the perceived future-at-the-doorstep. This should not be seen solely as a conscious and strategic process, nor as an automatic recycling of tradition. Much anticipatory action takes place subconsciously, in a choreography of calibration between experience and need. As an anticipatory tool, wattle-and-daub was deeply anchored in local and regional practices at Marzuolo. Its constituent materials were widely available and

⁶² Diprose 2014.

⁶³ On short-term lease contracts as the norm for Roman jurists, see Kehoe 1997: 155–6; 165; 201–7. Cf. Columella, *Rust.* 1.7.1–2. See also Foxhall 1990: 99 and 101. On long-term lease contracts and bargaining power of tenants, see Kehoe 1997: 183–209.

⁶⁴ Perring 2002: 81; Perring and Roskams 1991: 81.

⁶⁵ Appadurai 2013: 213.

⁶⁶ Bryant and Knight 2019: 28, 69.

intimately known: earth as a bonding agent; cuttings or twigs probably from local shrubs which could have doubled as kindling for craft and domestic firing processes; wooden beams — cut locally or on the slopes of Monte Amiata — also used in construction of roofs and even for complementary woodworking inside the blacksmithing workshop.⁶⁷ Moreover, building in wattle-and-daub had a long history in the wider area of Marzuolo. This local history was selectively activated at Marzuolo, for the specific anticipatory action of a blacksmith (re)furbishing a workshop space that could not be expected to remain theirs into the future.

V FAILURE AND ITS LIMITS

The Roman world was unequal: Roman elites extracted comparably more of the available wealth than their classical Athenian counterparts.⁶⁸ What this meant for the lives of people on various rungs of the steep Roman socio-economic ladder is less clear, however, despite some pioneering quantitative modelling.⁶⁹ Several recent studies describe the gap that separates GDP, Gini coefficients and other numerical abstracts from lived experience:⁷⁰ botanical remains from a Herculaneum sewer demonstrate that non-elites at Herculaneum consumed a varied diet, including fish and even pepper;⁷¹ the size and layout of Pompeian houses refuse to be divided neatly into rich and poor;⁷² and Pompeian graffiti documenting expenditures on foodstuffs record the highly individual consumption choices of various (presumably non-elite) people and households.⁷³

It is impossible to quantify the absolute level of material wealth of the Marzuolo blacksmith and to gauge the number of mouths fed by the workshop activities. The domestic assemblage of cooking implements and dinner wares does not stand out as either particularly rich or deprived. Compared to some of the farmers, labourers and traders that would have circulated in and through the site of Marzuolo, the blacksmith had the advantage of possessing a specialised skillset. The owner-investor of the *opus reticulatum* building, in contrast, clearly occupied a very different socio-economic register, able to finance a large capital investment. An examination of the half-century of start-stop development in Marzuolo's north-western corner can texture this stark socio-economic inequality. Paradoxically, the privilege of the owner-investor was constituted by failure: the ability to fail was dependent on the ability to conjure a future horizon of expectation in which things were possible, and therefore could also fail. Conversely, what marked the blacksmith as disadvantaged and their position as precarious was already to anticipate and in some way experience loss as real even if it was not (yet) actual. The subjectivity of precarity was thus shaped by a pre-emptive 'tyranny of tomorrow'⁷⁴ which ruled out failure, or rather, displaced failure from the future to the now.

Shaw's conclusion that the Romans had no sense of an abstract future as a 'structurally occupied space'⁷⁵ hides profound inequalities: some privileged people could indeed

⁶⁷ Wattle in Roman Britain often used '[h]azel and birch from short rotation coppicing': Perring 2002: 83. The most dominant tree cover in Marzuolo's vicinity was mixed oak wood; part of the landscape would have been open with shrubs and pasture: Rattighieri *et al.* 2013.

⁶⁸ Bagnall 1992; Scheidel 2016; Taylor 2017: 89.

⁶⁹ Scheidel and Friesen 2009.

⁷⁰ Stiglitz *et al.* 2010.

⁷¹ Rowan 2016.

⁷² Flohr 2016.

⁷³ Bowes 2021b.

⁷⁴ After Jérôme Bindé's concept of the 'tyranny of emergency' of the last decades: Bindé 2000, as cited in Appadurai 2013: 161. The tyranny of emergency leaves no space for anticipation and pre-emptive response; its future is not on the doorstep but already past.

⁷⁵ Shaw 2019a: 6.

embrace expectation, and thus the possibility of failure, while (presumably many) others were trapped in anticipatory mode. These different futurities had affective resonances.⁷⁶ Confidence is needed to expect, to let the future arrive and unfold: it considers, and parks, the potential that things might not turn out as planned. Failure happens when the potentiality of expectation overtakes its promise. Conversely, the inability to expect, and therefore the inability to fail, causes stress. A sense of control emerges as a key variable of stress from sociological research on relative poverty,⁷⁷ and indeed this is one way in which tenancy agreements and similar forms of dependency in the Roman world served to lock in part of the population. This stress is not acute — it is different from any stress which Marzuolo's *opus reticulatum* investor might have felt when their investment in wine production failed to pay off as expected, and it is different from the sudden rupture of crisis.⁷⁸ The stress of precarity, instead, is chronic: it is the constant background hum of anticipation.⁷⁹

The owner-investor at Marzuolo could probably swallow failure. Yet even they did not abide by the narratives of growth-through-failure that have become normative today. When the wine business failed, no attempt was made to learn from mistakes, to re-invest, tweak or otherwise improve. Instead, the undertaking was abandoned altogether. Whether or not the property changed ownership at that stage, a more risk-averse strategy was adopted, if the above reconstruction of leased workshop spaces inside the *opus reticulatum* building is correct. Even for the owner-investor of the *opus reticulatum* building, then, the privilege of failure had real limits: the horizon of expectation crafted after the wine business's failure was radically reoriented, and decidedly more cautious and restricted in nature.

Endings and abandonments abound in the archaeological record, much of which stems from pre-industrial worlds coloured by risk and uncertainty. By texturing experiences of privilege and precarity, the story of the vintner and the blacksmith at Marzuolo opens new methodological and interpretive avenues for the archaeological study of such pauses, ruptures and fissures. These phenomena have long been read mechanically, through the lens of post-depositional processes at the micro-scale⁸⁰ or of grand causal movers at the macro-scale.⁸¹ More recent studies emphasise the work of place-making, between phenomenology, mnemonics and politics.⁸² But the unit of analysis tends to be either an undifferentiated human agent or an equally undifferentiated group. This article shows the value of interrogating the very nature of such endings and not just their causes or consequences. Both the arrested wine production and the abandoned blacksmithing tools represent endings, but while one can be labelled a failure, the other was an anticipated reorientation, where the human and economic cost lay as much in the stress of constantly preparing for the inevitable as in its consequences.

Finally, the case of the vintner and the blacksmith at Marzuolo highlights the need to write micro-histories of Roman social and economic dynamics. At a coarser scale of analysis, the data presented here might have appeared as a typical pattern of mixed agricultural and craft activities, characterised by gradual developments and slow changes

⁷⁶ For thoughts on Roman futurities and affect, I am grateful to Duncan Macrae's paper at the 2021 SCS/AIA joint session on Roman Anticipations. See also Popkin and Ng 2022. On anticipation, affect and Black ontology, see Fleming 2022.

⁷⁷ Wilkinson 2005: 75. On poverty and stress through a micro-economic lens, see also Banerjee and Duflo 2011, ch. 6; Claro *et al.* 2016 on 'fixed' versus 'growth' mindsets in education.

⁷⁸ On how narratives of crisis operate, and at what cost, see Roitman 2014; on 'quotidian experiences of trauma' and their affective consequences for Black lives, see Ibrahim and Ahad 2022: 2.

⁷⁹ Banerjee and Duflo 2011, ch. 8 on stress and the difference that a little bit of hope can make, as shown through studies of saving choices.

⁸⁰ Schiffer 1987.

⁸¹ Compare Haldon 2016 and Harper 2017.

⁸² e.g. Lamoureux-St-Hilaire and Macrae 2020.

of orientation. Instead, on closer examination, the smooth curves of macro-economic models and the artificial continuity of survey evidence hide a story of repeated boom and bust.⁸³ Sustained excavation and high-resolution analyses at small-scale sites such as Marzuolo are needed to texture the social and economic ramifications of such processes of boom and bust. Repeated endings, some of them failures, may well have been at the very core of the fabric of the Roman world, rather than merely constituting the sequel of its fall.

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⁸³ Cf. Bowes 2021a for the region more broadly.

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