JESPER CARLSEN

SUBVILICUS: SUBAGENT OR ASSISTANT BAILIFF?


© Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH, Bonn
**Subvilicus: Subagent or Assistant Bailiff?**

The nomenclature, hierarchy and duties of Roman managerial slaves and freedmen have been analyzed in several studies in the last decade. These recent analyses of business and estate managers, such as *vilici, actores, dispensatores* and private *procuratores*, demonstrate the importance of slaves and freedmen employed as agents in most sectors of the Roman economy.¹ But the studies also provide nuances as to the general view of the duties covered by various Latin job titles. Unanswered questions, however, remain and the functions of the so-called *subvilicus or subvillicus* are still a puzzle to be solved. The entry to the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* translates the word as “an assistant steward or keeper” with references to two inscriptions: one from Rome and the other from Castel Gandolfo in the Alban Hills southeast of Rome:

*CIL VI 9991 = ILS 7374* (Rome):

D M/
Hermeroti/
vicario suo/
Lupercus/
Subvilicus/
hortorum Anto/
nianorum/
bene merenti/
fecit

*EE VII 1248* (Castel Gandolfo):

D M/
Iuliae Fortu/
natae Aciva/
Caes n servo/
subvil coniu/
cariss fec/
cum q vixit/
an XVII m v

We have, in fact, one further inscription mentioning *subvilici*. A list of slaves and freedmen, who were members of one *collegium* attached to the imperial villa at Antium, contains several job specifications, including at least two *subvilici*:

*CIL X 6638*:

an. 41 . . . *Primus subvil*

an. 51 . . . *Nymphius Del/i an subvil*

---


* I wish to thank Robin Lorsch Wildfang, who revised my English.
The title appears in no ancient author or legal writer, and thus the three inscriptions constitute all the fragmentary and elusive evidence for the existence of *subvilici*. There is therefore no basis for the assertion that “se nei privati è molto raro, il *subvillicus* torna spesso nelle organizzazioni imperiali”.

The inscriptions mentioning *subvilici* do not indicate the nature of their work, but some scholars have suggested as a working hypothesis that these slaves perhaps should be identified as subagents. In his thorough study of business managers in the Roman economy in the period from 200 BC until the middle of the third century AD, Jean-Jacques Aubert wrote: “subagents are sometimes attested in the inscriptions as *subvilici*”. Roman jurists admit the appointment of subagents in several cases, but a re-evaluation of all the material will shed new light upon the duties of the *subvilici*. First, the subagents in Roman law and production must be examined. Second, the contexts in which the *subvilici* appear demand a closer scrutiny in order to clarify the functions of the slaves. In the end, the evidence will indicate that the attested *subvilici* were most probably not subagents, but simply assistant bailiffs on imperial gardens and estates without proper agricultural production.

Subagency

A shipmaster, *magister navis*, was allowed to appoint a subagent with his master’s knowledge and consent, so too could *institores* delegate their tasks to subagents with their master’s acceptance. Aubert has suggested that this might often have been the case in the production of clay artefacts, as long as this production was of minor importance in comparison with the agricultural sector. Aubert, however, stresses that the title *vilicus* does not appear on other stamps than *fistulae*, unlike other managers (*institores*). This is perhaps due to the uncertainties of transmission, since *actores* occasionally appear on brick stamps, and since, in his publication of tiles from the fifth century AD in Museo Civico di Cuneo, Giovanni Mennella has suggested that the abbreviations *SB AC* and *C* should be read *s(u)b ac(tore)* and *c(onductore)*. The conjecture has no equal, but if even if Mennella’s suggestion is correct, it is also clear that *actor* and *vilicus* comprised different managerial functions in the Late Antiquity. We may therefore conclude that these tiles do not indicate the existence of *subvilici* in brick production, and that one should look at other types of *instrumentum domesticum* to find traces of presumed subagents.

Whether the paired slave names found on several amphorae stamps are an indication of appointments of subagents is unclear. They could also be joint *institores* or a slave *officinator* and his *vicarius*, as rightly pointed out by Daniele Manacorda and Jean-Jacques Aubert. Yet, one of the first to identify the slave names on amphorae stamps with *vilici* was M. H. Callender in his *Roman Amphorae with...*
Index of Stamps (1965). His comments on the amphorae stamps from the figlinae of the Laecanii Bassi in Istria deserve full quotation, as it has formed the basis for all further studies of this senatorial family and its economic interests: “Although it was forbidden for members of the Senatorial Order to take part in commerce, nevertheless they often did so indirectly; obviously the opportunities afforded by commerce for great increases in wealth were not altogether ignored. Thus it was obligatory for members of that order to invest money in land, and naturally any surplus of that land would be sold; the normal method appears to have been the appointment of a vilicus, usually a trusted freedmen, in whose name the commercial transactions were undertaken. C. Laecanius Bassus, however, openly flaunted his name of these trading vessels; it must be assumed that, in the case of such powerful men, there was not too strict an observance of obligations.”

The influence of Plutarch’s description of Cato the Elder’s financial interests in seaborne commerce is distinct in Callender’s erroneous explanation. The senators were only forbidden by the Lex Claudia of 218 BC to own ships carrying more than 300 amphorae, and more recent studies have made our understanding of the organisation of trade in the Late Republic and Early Empire more sophisticated. Callender’s terminology is inadequate too; the traders were in many cases vilici, but these managers were usually slaves and only in very few cases freedmen. The reason why Callender identifies the officinatores with the vilicus in charge of the estate where the amphorae were produced is not clear and is at best speculative. Yet, his inaccurate terminology recurs in later studies of the Laecanius workshop. In the most recent publication of the more than 400 stamps from Dressel 6B Laecanian amphorae with more than 40 different slave names, Tamás Bezeczky specifies that he called the managers vilici and that they were responsible for the production of olive oil. The author then continues: “Between the Tiberian and the Claudian periods, which is roughly 30–35 years, at least 20–22 vilici were employed on the Laecanius estate. Between the early Claudian and the Flavian periods, which is also about 30–35 years, there were 18–20 vilici. It seems very unlikely that the vilici spent only one or two years at the estate. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that there was more than one vilicus (or subvilicus) on the property at the same time … When we compare the number of vilici mentioned by the stamps with the number of known amphorae, we will find that the number of the amphorae they stamped is very different. This may be due to the years they were employed.” The modern usage of the Latin job titles only confuses the issue and as Aubert has rightly observed: “whether some of the names appearing in stamps are those of vilici is a matter of speculation”. One could add subvilici too.

Ulpianus, quoting Iulianus, refers to the appointment of subagents in various ways: Magistrum autem accipimus non solum, quem exercitor praeposuit, sed et eum, quem magister: et hoc consultus Iulianus in ignorante exercitore respondit: ceterum si scit et passus est eum in nave magisterio fungi, ipse eum imposuisse videtur … Quid tamen si sic magistrum praeposuit, ne alium ei liceret praeponere? From this passage it clearly appears that no exact Latin term for subappointment or for subagents existed. Thus, terminology can not settle the matter of subinstitores.

We do have job designations, which bear a faint resemblance to subvilicus. This may be demonstrated first and foremost by the subprocurator domus augustiane (CIL VI 8640 = ILS 1630), but a handful of other titles bear the prefix sub too: subcornicularius (CIL VI 3596), subpaedagogus (CIL VI
8976 = ILS 1833), subpraefectus classis Alexandiae (CIL VI 1643), subpraefectus vigilibus (CIL VI 1628 = ILS 1456), subpraefectus annonae (CIL V 8659 = ILS 1412), subprocurator ludi magni (CIL II 1085 = ILS 1406), subcustos and subpromus (both in Plaut. Mil.). We find the titles in public administration, the army and private households, and, just as the so-called adiutores, they denote assistants or deputies of the holders of the nominal positions.\textsuperscript{14} They were not subagents; however a brief glance at the villas and the gardens to which the four known subvilici were attached may serve to clarify their functions.

The estates

Our knowledge of the horti Antoniani in Rome is very scanty, and it has so far not been possible to locate their precise site. We know only that the gardens were near to those of Caesar on the right bank of the Tiber. After the death of Marcus Antonius the horti Antoniani seem to have become part of the imperial property, but only very few traces of the staff attached to the gardens remain. In this case, the horti Antoniani were not differentiated from other horti Romani, and like some of the other gardens they too may have been pleasure park or a garden villa without a proper agricultural production.\textsuperscript{15}

We are much better informed on the two imperial properties for which the three other subvilici are attested. Caligula and Nero were both born in Antium, and all of the Julio-Claudian emperors lived there for shorter or longer periods. This villa was also popular with later emperors such as Domitian, Hadrian and Septimius Severus. Two lengthy lists of members of collegia give us a glimpse of the villa’s staff in the middle of first century AD. The lists contain more than 60 names, including about 20 different job titles. There is a remarkably large number of craftsmen, gardeners and administrators, illustrating the strong degree of specialisation in the imperial households. The absence of titles of slaves in menial jobs is no surprise as these slaves are always under-represented in the epigraphical material, but it may anyhow give as to hint of the size of the production sector of the imperial villa in Antium.\textsuperscript{16} The land set aside for cultivation at the luxury seaside villa with gardens, baths, nymphaea and terraces seems to have been limited and presumably did not produce more fruit, vegetables, eggs and other fresh provisions than were needed by the household.

There are also still substantial remains of Domitian’s huge and luxurious villa at Castel Gandolfo in the Alban Hills. It extended from the Alban Lake to the Via Appia with a range of 5,200–5,400 iugera or 13–14 km². A small part of the cemetery for the staff attached to the villa was excavated at the end of the 19th century, and Rodolfo Lanciani published seven early second century cippi from this burial place in the Notizie degli Scavi.\textsuperscript{17} The job titles among these members of familia Caesaris include one vilicus and one subvilicus, but they were certainly only a small proportion of the slaves and freedmen engaged on the improvement and maintenance of the large villa which had several buildings and nymphaea in its extensive park. The epitaphs also commemorate several women and the adornment of one stele indicates the job of a gardener.


The *fundus Albanus* or *Albanum Caesarum* incorporated several Republican villas, which the imperial family had acquired through purchase, confiscation, gifts or inheritance. Inscriptions near several of these properties include imperial estate managers and administrators such as three *dispensatores*, one *vilicus* and one *tabularius*. The slaves may have been employed on the different villas, which apparently continued as independent managerial units of agricultural production after the construction of *Albanum Domitiani*. This fact may indicate that the villa at Castel Gandolfo seems to have been a proper *villa suburbana* with pleasure gardens and with either no or only a little production section.

One consequence of this analysis of the three imperial properties is that one may wonder why the *vilici* attached to them should appoint subagents. To my knowledge, no traces of the production of clay artefacts have been detected at the gardens or the two *villae*. A *vilicus* supervised all kinds of buildings and was at the head of a group of slaves, whose work he controlled. The above-mentioned estates were among the most impressive imperial villas, and the *vilici* in charge may therefore very well have needed assistants or *subvilici*.

Conclusions

Subagents certainly existed, but the preserved epigraphical evidence does not demonstrate the terminology of their titles, and I wonder if they should be identified as *subvilici*. The analysis of the terminology and the type of villas and gardens, to which the attested *subvilici* were attached, indicate that these were assistant bailiffs. The position of a *subvilicus* could perhaps also be understood as some kind of a training post, one in which after a few years the *subvilicus* was promoted to the position of a *vilicus*. If this theory proves right, the few occurrences of the job title *subvilicus* are no surprise. The former *subvilici* ended in more prestigious positions and, like most other slaves and freedmen, they omitted their previous positions in epitaphs and votive altars. Only when the *subvilici* commemorate a *vicarius*, a wife or are members of a *collegium*, do we catch a glimpse of this category of subordinate managerial slaves.

Odense University

Jesper Carlsen

---

18 *CIL* XIV 2259; *CIL* XIV 2261; *CIL* XIV 2426; *CIL* XIV 2431 = *ILS* 1586; M. G. Granino Cecere, Villa Mamurrana, *RAL* s. 9 v. 6 (1995), 361–386. J. Carlsen, Landowners, Tenants and Estate Managers in Roman Italy, in: *Landwirtschaft im Imperium Romanum*, (eds. P. Herz & G. Waldherr), St. Katharinen (forthcoming); more cautiously Ch. Bruun, Imperial *procuratores* and *dispensatores*: New discoveries, *Chiron* 29, 1999, 29–42.

19 Carlsen (n. 1) 54–55.