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BIODIVERSITY IN THE ANCIENT ROMAN WORLD, THE VILLA OF LIVIA

The ancient Romans certainly had a concept of biodiversity, though it may not have been recognized or called by the same name. To the Romans, nature and its cultivation were tied to life and prosperity from the earliest of times. Later Romans often looked back to the early Republic, for example, as a time when hard-working and honorable men – Rome's richest and best, in fact – lived an honest and simple life tilling their own fields and harvesting their own crops. This sweet situation placed nature at the core of man's existence, and man was fully invested in the process of cultivating it.

Authors such as Cato the Elder, Varro, Columella and Vergil, wrote treatises and verse about farming, flora, and the natural world. Cato the Elder's treatise on agriculture, *De Agri Cultura* (ca. 160 BC), is in fact our oldest surviving work of Latin prose. A relatively informal manual of farming and animal husbandry, it was written from Cato's own experience. This work was so impressively full of essential and objectively true information, however, that it would be cited afterwards by authors on the same topic even centuries later.

Both Varro (ca. 37 BC) and Columella (mid-first century AD) for example refer to Cato's work in their own treatises of the same name, *De Re Rustica*. Varro's work is an incredibly precise guide, discussing every aspect of farming from land choice to necessary equipment. But the concept of biodiversity is vividly alive within the text, for much of it is dedicated to flowers and gardens, trees, and hedges, as Varro discusses in detail when, where, how, and for what reason to grow every species:

> Certain trees, such as the fir and the pine, flourish best and are sturdiest in the mountains on account of the cold climate, while the poplar and the willow thrive here where the climate is warmer; the arbute and the oak do better in the upland, the almond and the Mariscan fig in the lowlands.
>
> (*De Re Rustica*, I.6.4)

Indeed, the Romans well understood the precious concept that though man may change, the land stays the same. Therefore, it was vital – indeed it became a form of art – to know one's land, what it would best produce, and to subsequently plant and care

for it in the most efficient way so that it would yield the best results. In fact, the Augustan poet Vergil so advises in his *Georgics* (I.51-53):

> Be it our care to learn betimes the winds and moods of heaven, To learn the tillage of our sires and nature of the place,
> What fruits each district does produce and what it does refuse.

Land cultivation was thus a traditional and respected science whose detail was studied and passed down for centuries.

As Rome expanded, it appropriated customs of the elite from the nations that it conquered, and it also amassed an incredible new wealth. By the second century BC, notions of what the rich should be doing with their time and money changed to reflect Rome's new status as wealthy world capital. At this time, the elite began to build *horti*, or expansive villa estates, where they could escape city life and the work associated with it, and retire to a place where they could enjoy their own leisure time and activities. *Horti* were filled with the beauty of gardens, art and the natural world.

It is these villa estates that we hear so much about from writers such as Pliny the Younger (late first century AD), who, in his letters to friends, took great pride in describing his villas in astounding detail. This was particularly true of his gardens, as he methodically described the shape of their shrubs, the design of their walkways, and the species of flora that filled the areas. These passages were provocative tours for the imagination.

One favorite instance is Pliny's description of his Tuscan villa in a letter to Domitius Apollinaris (*Ep*. 5.6). Pliny begins by describing the area's healthful aspects, as evidenced by the (unusual) fact that area residents survive to very old age. It is here, for example, that we witness Pliny's quite accomplished knowledge of plant species, though painted in broad strokes to outline the natural characteristics of the area as well as the benefits of biodiversity for the health of man:

> The air in winter is sharp and frosty, so that myrtles, olives, and trees of that kind which delight in constant warmth, will not flourish here: but the laurel thrives, and is remarkably beautiful, though now and then the cold kills it.... The summers are extraordinarily mild, and there is always a refreshing breeze, seldom high winds. This accounts for the number of old men we have about, you would see grandfathers and great-grandfathers of those now grown up to be young men, hear old stories and the dialect of our ancestors, and fancy yourself born in some former age were you to come here. The character of the country is exceedingly beautiful. Picture yourself in an immense amphitheater, such as only nature could create.

But it is the following passages in particular that demonstrate the care with which domestic gardens were laid out and planted, within these estates. Here, Pliny recounts walkways and areas framed by greenery, or alternatively green areas planted as focal points; all of it very carefully curated. He furthermore reveals the purposeful selection of particular species for specific areas of the residence, each chosen for its individual virtues and the particular benefits it provides:

> [The hippodrome] is set round with plane-trees covered with ivy, so that, while their tops flourish with their own green, towards the roots their verdure is borrowed from the ivy that twines 'round the trunk and branches, spreads from tree to tree, and connects them together. Between each plane tree are planted box-trees, and behind these stands a grove of laurels which blend their shade with that of the planes. This straight boundary to the hippodrome alters its shape at the farther end, bending into a semicircle, which is planted round, shut in with cypresses, and casts a deeper and gloomier shade, while the many inner

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> circular walks, enjoying an open exposure, are filled with plenty of roses, and correct, by a very pleasant contrast, the coolness of the shade with the warmth of the sun. Having passed through these several winding alleys, you enter a straight walk, which breaks out into a variety of others, partitioned off by box-row hedges. In one place you have a little meadow, in another the box is cut in a thousand different forms, sometimes into letters, expressing the master's name, ... while here and there rise little obelisks with fruit-trees alternately intermixed, and then on a sudden, in the midst of this elegant regularity, you are surprised with an imitation of the negligent beauties of rural nature. In the center of this lies a spot adorned with a knot of dwarf plane trees. Beyond these stands an acacia, smooth and bending in places, then again various other shapes and names.

Letters like these, written by learned men who were not strictly farmers, show how much a deep knowledge of plants and the natural world was still valued by the elite, even when the farming villas of old had been replaced by new luxury villas. As we learn from Pliny, an understanding of the unique gifts provided by different plant species and types was vital for creating for oneself the best and most coveted living situation, what he describes as the most "profound and undisturbed retirement;" a place where "all is calm and composed."

Villas such as Pliny's have been discovered and excavated in modern times, with astounding results that corroborate ancient testimony as to these types of carefully planned garden areas. In the cluster of luxury estates perched on the cliffs of ancient Stabiae, for example, every villa was found to have a large external garden area. The recently excavated Great Peristyle Garden at the Villa Arianna (ca. 118 x 30 meters) in fact revealed to excavators the most marvelous and carefully fashioned area, laid out with man's physical and visual enjoyment in mind, and thrilling with an encyclopedic list of plants. Here, excavators found that the rectangular garden space was planted on each side with two long flower beds or bushes that ran the entire length of the garden, which framed three long central rows of small trees. In between the rows of trees, there were grassy paths for strolling; thus the carefully planned layout encouraged a specific movement through the area. Quite interestingly, the rows of trees did not just feature one species type, as we see perhaps in the porticoes in Rome, such as that located at the back of the Theater of Pompey complex. There, Pompey dotted the interior space with the newly imported plane or sycamore tree, chosen for its aspect of providing shade. Instead, at the Villa Arianna, numerous different species of tree were found, which together must have created a visual symphony.

It is precisely this type of luxury estate – precisely this type of garden – that we see represented in the garden wall painting from the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta, now housed in the Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo. It is evident in this wall painting that biodiversity is at work, for on the major expanse of every wall in the room, indeed in the rich background of this wondrous depiction, the natural world is shown growing wild and unsuppressed, representing nature unbounded, as far as the eye can see.

But there is much more to the wall painting, which provides a precious glimpse into the Roman world of the Augustan era. For the painting is not generic. It is precise. Scholars have identified over 23 species of plant and 69 species of bird within the room[1]. Many of these were specifically and powerfully symbolic in carrying Augustan ideology, highlighting the idea that the garden was carefully cultivated in this painting. More than just a scene of nature, then, the painting is therefore a study of species, and a testament to Roman knowledge of the natural world – particularly because the species shown do not usually appear together in the same season.

Indeed, the entire garden painting is cultivated, if we may use that word – and not just

in the farming sense, but in the curatorial sense. For if we look closely, the painting contains areas that represent different levels of cultivation and care. The area closest to the viewer is a carefully manicured lawn located between two man-made structures (fences) and highlighting particular species of trees that are delineated as focal points by the winding form of the white wall behind. There are even domesticated fowl walking on the lawn, and a bird cage rests on a fence on the far wall, its occupant inside. This is the curated zone, a zone touched by man. The area beyond the white wall, instead, shows little of man's touch, as again, the effect is one of unbounded nature continuing far into the distance. The painting thus represented a voyage for the viewer from the domestic sphere from which he peered, to the structured, orderly and curated nature of the first area, to the wilderness beyond.

The garden painting from the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta was not the only example of its type, as paintings within the contemporary Auditorium of Maecenas, for example, share many of its aspects, including a blue sky, birds flying or sitting on fountains – even the wickerwork wooden fence. Pliny the Younger also describes such a painted space in this same Tuscan villa (*Ep*. 5.6):

> There is, besides, another room, which, being situated close to the nearest plane-tree, enjoys a constant shade and green. Its sides are encrusted with carved marble up to the ceiling, while above the marble a foliage is painted with birds among the branches, which has an effect altogether as agreeable as that of the carving, at the foot of which a little fountain, playing through several small pipes into a vase it encloses, produces a most pleasing murmur.

The same types of paintings have been found in villa structures further afield, in situations that make it clear that these cultivated garden images consistently appeared on the interior walls of domestic structures located within manicured garden spaces, purposely placed within truly planted areas. Scholars have thus understood that these painted examples of curated nature, then, actually served to physically and seamlessly blend the interior domestic spaces with what lay immediately beyond the walls, namely sophisticated spaces that included manmade gardens with short walls, fountains, shrubbery, and fruit trees, that would in turn attract beautiful birds and even insects.

Garden paintings such as that from the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta therefore linked the Roman elite to their true, curated gardens, which, in some way, linked them back to what lay directly beyond: wild nature, growing without bounds, and highlighting life and biodiversity and all of their intertwining beauty. The paintings and their curated gardens thus also linked the Romans back to their traditional and respectable early beginnings as farmers, nurturers and benefactors of nature.

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Notes

[1] See the article by Giulia Caneva, in this volume.

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