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## BOTANICAL IMPERIALISM AND METAMORPHIC BIODIVERSITY: LIVIA AND OVID

Since the garden and gardening practices define humanity's relation to the natural environment, it is of utmost importance to retrace and re-examine the garden's symbolism, history, and life-sustaining potency

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At the Empress Livia's suburban Roman estate at Prima Porta, there was a venerated laurel tree. According to the ancient sources, in 39/38 BCE, a white hen, which had in its beak a laurel branch, was dropped by an eagle into Livia's lap when she was at her suburban property. From this sprig was planted a laurel grove from which the Julio-Claudians took their victory crowns<sup>2</sup> and the property took its name from the white chickens: *Ad Gallinas Albas*. The story instantly and consciously legitimated both Augustus' marriage to Livia and his extraordinary rise to power through the creation of a 'mythological landscape' in the real Italian countryside.<sup>3</sup> Augustus liked to appropriate trees. Two laurel trees were planted by his doors on the Palatine (depicted frequently on coins) and he claimed a palm tree sprang up in the pavement in front of his house and he had it transplanted to Apollo's Temple next-door.<sup>4</sup> The vegetal imagery on public monuments such as the Altar of Peace proclaimed a new 'Golden Age' of prosperity and fecundity under Augustus' protection. A common iconographic representation of Livia was as the

grain goddess Ceres. In Rome, Livia dedicated the *Porticus Liviae*, a public portico and garden; the *Villa ad Gallinas Albas*, however, was evidently private.<sup>5</sup>

Livia had probably inherited the estate from her father. Recent excavations<sup>6</sup> have revealed that there were once four gardens at the villa, one of which occupied a huge terrace with a double-aisled portico (ca 68 m long and 74 m wide) that would have contained some 100-150 columns.<sup>7</sup> Livia's most famous garden, however, is the painted one now recreated at the Palazzo Massimo. This painted room was originally in a subterranean chamber some four meters below ground, accessible by a steep staircase. Recent analysis of the paintings reveals 24 species of plants, flowers and fruits all blooming simultaneously, some out of season, all young plants.<sup>8</sup> The laurel appears throughout the background, but is not framed in the niches. Scholars hotly debate the symbolism in the choice of plant species, and see connections with the shared vegetal imagery of the Altar of Peace.<sup>9</sup> The exceptional plant variegation, unparalleled

in its detail, of Livia's commission in this new Second Style of painting (ca 40-30 BCE), visually celebrates garden and plant knowledge and seems to confirm her participation in contemporary elite (male) competition for fame in plant breeding and collecting.<sup>10</sup> The late first century BCE saw a flowering of interest in horticulture and botany. Exotic trees (such as ebony and balsam) were displayed as booty or prisoners in triumphal processions, and agricultural and botanical treatises seized during Carthaginian and Mithridatic wars were brought to Rome and translated. Some two hundred types of plants have been identified in Roman iconography (list 202 taxa, 78 families, 159 genera and 168 species<sup>11</sup>). The trees and plants depicted in the Garden Room are both domestic and foreign, included are the northern pine and the palm, perhaps expressions of botanical imperialism. Perhaps similar plantings were to be found outside at the villa in the real gardens. The search for a religious, mythological, political, or philosophical key to the interpretation of the paintings will no doubt continue, but perhaps in the original private space the point was merely to imbibe the paradoxical pleasure of a cool underground garden when it was too hot to be outside.

The poet Ovid, born in 43 BCE, was witness to the rise of Augustus and his appropriation of Roman myth, architecture and iconography, religion, and even time, in the service of the dissemination of his new values and the legitimization of his power. Through his poetry Ovid probed and challenged these authoritative and authoritarian maneuvers in subtle and often provocative ways. When Augustus was claiming Venus as his ancestress, putting a Cupid at the foot of the Prima Porta statue, Ovid in his poetry insistently depicted Venus and Cupid as promoters of erotic affairs, heterosexual, homosexual, incestuous, adulterous. At the very time Augustus was passing Rome's first moral legislation against adultery, Ovid's *Art of Love* professed to teach adultery. He reminds the reader that the prominent pairing of Venus and Mars in Augustus' Mars Ultor Temple in Rome could evoke their famous

adulterous affair. Ovid frees the iconography and narratives of poetry, art, and nature from the interpretive grip of imperial power.

In the *Metamorphoses*, the origin of the Augustan laurel is told in the story of the transformation of Daphne (the Greek name for laurel). Daphne begged to be transformed because Apollo was attempting to rape her; even as a tree she shuddered at his touch. Apollo's arboreal appropriation mirrors Augustus'. Biodiversity in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti* is created from human suffering; trees and flowers represent the sufferings of humans, male and female, caused by the powerful gods. In the *Fasti*, Ovid tells the origin story of the Roman flower-goddess Flora and the first flower garden, given to her after she was raped by the wind-god Zephyr. Her garden is filled with metamorphosed boys, all of whom became flowers after tragedy ("through me beauty springs from their wounds"<sup>12</sup>). In a remarkable act of originality, Ovid says that Mars, god of war and father of Romulus, sprang from a unique flower in Flora's garden. Juno had wanted to conceive without a male and Flora touched her with a magic flower. Are we to recall that Livia was never able to conceive a child with Augustus? In Ovid's version, Rome thus originates in a flower produced by Flora, the goddess at whose festival, the Floralia, prostitutes famously danced naked. Ovid never finished his calendar poem (*Fasti*) - it ends before he gets to the moths named after Caesar and Augustus. He was banished by Augustus in 8 CE because of a poem and an 'error,' as he tells us. From the cold shores of the Black Sea at the edge of the Empire (modern Romania) where he died, Ovid never stopped asking Augustus, Livia, and later Tiberius, for a pardon and return. He never received one. In a late poetic letter *Ex Ponto*,<sup>13</sup> he recalls his own Italian garden on the same Via Flaminia as Livia's gardens and dreams about weeding and watering his plants.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Annette Giesecke (editor) and Naomi Jacobs (editor), *Earth Perfect?: Nature, Utopia and the Garden* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2012), 14.
- <sup>2</sup> *Pliny the Elder, Historia Naturalis* 15.136–137; Suetonius, *Galba* 1.1; Dio Cassius 48.52.3–4
- <sup>3</sup> Allan Klynne, “The Laurel Grove of the Caesars: Looking in and Looking Out,” in Barbro Santillo Frizell and Allan Klynne, eds. *Roman Villas Around the Urbs: Interaction with Landscape and Environment. Proceedings of a Conference at the Swedish Institute in Rome, September 17–18, 2004. Projects and Seminars 2* (Rome: Swedish Institute in Rome, 2005), 167–175.
- <sup>4</sup> Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 92.1–2.
- <sup>5</sup> This is disputed by Allan Klynne, “The Laurel Grove of the Caesars: Looking in and Looking Out,” who suggests the Villa would have invited visitors. The famous statue of Augustus Prima Porta, which was discovered at the villa in 1863, might support this.
- <sup>6</sup> Allan Klynne and Peter Liljenstolpe, “Investigating the Gardens of the Villa of Livia,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 13 (2000): 220–233; Peter Liljenstolpe and Allan Klynne, “The Imperial Gardens of the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta: A Preliminary Report on the 1997 Campaign,” *Opuscula Romana* 22–23 (1997–1998): 127–148.
- <sup>7</sup> Klynne, “The Laurel Grove of the Caesars: Looking in and Looking Out.”
- <sup>8</sup> Caneva, Giulia and Lorenza Bohuny. “Botanical Analysis on the Livia’s Villa Painted Flora (Prima Porta, Rome).” *Science and Technology in Cultural Heritage* 4 (2003): 149–155.
- <sup>9</sup> Barbara A. Kellum, “The Construction of Landscape in Augustan Rome: The Garden Room at the Villa ad Gallinas,” *The Art Bulletin* 76 (2) (June 1994): 211–224; Reinhard Förtsch, “Ein Aurea-Aetas-Schema.” *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung* 96 (1989): 333–345; Bernard Andreae, *Am Birnbaum: Gärten und Parks im antiken Rom, in den Vesuvstädten und in Ostia* (Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 1996).
- <sup>10</sup> *Pliny the Elder, Historia Naturalis* 15.70, figs named for Livia and Pompey the Great; Ann Kuttner, “Looking Outside Inside: Ancient Roman Garden Rooms,” *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes* 19 (1) (1999): 7–35. Published online: May 31, 2012.
- <sup>11</sup> Alma Kumbaric and Giulia Caneva, “Updated Outline of Floristic Richness in Roman Iconography,” *Rendiconti Lincei* 25 (2) (2014): 181–193. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12210-013-0279-4>.
- <sup>12</sup> Ovid, *Fasti* 5.228.
- <sup>13</sup> Ovid, *Ex Ponto* 1.8.

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