

BOOK REVIEW

Designing for Luxury on the Bay of Naples: Villas and Landscapes (c. 100 BCE–79 CE).
By MANTHA ZARMAKOUPI. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xx + 315.
Hardcover, \$160.00. ISBN 9780199678389.

Mantha Zarmakoupi's volume on villas and landscapes around the Bay of Naples is an essential examination of the architecture and decoration of some of the best-known Roman elite villas, appraised through a thoughtful social-historical lens. She focuses on five residences from the region with a sensible chronological window of ca. 100 BCE–79 CE and an aim toward explaining "the ways in which architecture accommodated the lifestyle of educated leisure,...an appreciation of landscape" and how the luxury villa phenomenon became "a crucial element in the construction of Roman cultural identity" (vii). This study is a much-needed appraisal of current thinking on the villas around the Bay of Naples, not because they have been ignored by the scholarly community in recent years, but because this material requires an architect's eye and an updating of theoretical models first introduced by Wallace-Hadrill and Clarke,¹ now over twenty years ago. Zarmakoupi sensibly integrates the examination of specific architectural features with ancient notions of luxury and leisure as expressed through the wall-painting and other decorative features which are so frequently discussed bereft of their built contexts.

Chapter One introduces the framework of the overall text, yet also provides important historiography on the study of luxury villas as well as a helpful overview of some primary literary sources regarding this genre of architecture and its reception in antiquity (e.g. Cato and Varro on the transition from *villa rustica* to *villa urbana*). The analysis of textual evidence for villas continues into Chapter Two, where Zarmakoupi introduces her primary archaeological case studies. These brief overviews of excavation history and building phases of the Villa of the Papyri,

¹ Clarke, John R. 1991. *The Houses of Roman Italy, 100 BC-AD 250: Ritual, Space, and Decoration*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Wallace-Hadrill, Andrew. 1994. *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Villa A at Oplontis, and the Stabian Villas Arriana A & B and San Marco are useful in their concision and for their bibliography.

The following four chapters address specific architectural components of luxury villas: porticoes and cryptoporticoes, porticoed gardens, water features, and dining facilities. Zarmakoupi, in her discussion of porticoes in these aristocratic estates, underscores one of the main themes of her book, that villa culture—and villa architectural language in particular—was a major vehicle for the assertion of elite social status through “a notional lifestyle of luxury *à la grecque*” (14). Zarmakoupi emphasizes the unique nature of some Roman reinterpretations of Greek architectural prototypes (like the portico), noting “there is no precedent either in Italy or in the Hellenistic East” for the cultural phenomenon of elite villa culture (3).

And so it seems that what is peculiarly Roman about villa culture was the way it could take the features of Greek public architecture and repackage them for the domestic realm, especially extrurban residences. The appropriation of features like porticoes is therefore twofold: translating public to private, urban to pastoral. With the elite conceptualization of their luxury estates as ones which drifted along axes of *otium* and *negotium*, learned leisure² and agricultural production, it is logical that the architectural language of villas should be the result of a complex and thoughtful borrowing from Greek prototypes, rearranged in such a way to fulfil specifically Roman cultural practices. In this way, Zarmakoupi engages with the current practice in art history to credit the Romans with inventive interpretation of preexisting visual culture as opposed to the less generous (and accurate) designation as shameless copyists.

A different sort of architectural compromise is discussed in Chapter Four: peristyle gardens in villas can simultaneously allude to triumphal displays like Pompey’s Portico, Greek intellectual centers like the Akademia, or, at even greater chronological and geographic distance, Persian *paradeisoi* (106–113). Here Zarmakoupi further refines her thesis on Roman appropriation of Greek architectural models in her analysis of domestic peristyle gardens: the adaptation of these Greek precursors is also emblematic of Roman imperialism, much as the taming of natural elements in these gardens asserted a Roman mastery over the earth in its material forms.

² On which see Myers, K. S. 2005. “*Docta Otia*: Garden Ownership and Configurations of Leisure in Statius and Pliny the Younger.” *Arethusa* 38: 103–129 (not included in Zarmakoupi’s bibliography).

This concept of power over the natural environment is especially significant for Zarmakoupi's discussion of water features in Chapter Five. Fountains, pools, and the like in villas as well as public spaces were manifestations of Roman technical ingenuity while also making "a wide range of mythological, symbolic, and sensual associations" (141). The ornamental use of water is too infrequently treated as a luxury "material" in studies of domestic architecture and deserves its place alongside imported colored marbles and sumptuous statuary; indeed both trained water and quarried stone are evidence for Roman conquering of nature. Zarmakoupi cleverly notes that villa *nymphaea* like that at the Villa San Marco changed "the status of water from natural to tamed" through the use of grotto-like apses combined with basins or pools (154–55). With the addition of horticultural elements, garden water features brought exterior landscape to a semi-indoor space.

In each chapter, Zarmakoupi discusses more than simply the built environments of her five case-study villas; remarks on other types of Roman luxuries are peppered throughout the volume, reminding us that these residences were considered sumptuous for more than just size and location. Elite villas were the loci of consumption and Zarmakoupi rightly points out throughout the volume that luxury came in many forms, including exotic materials, breeding pools for fish, extravagant meals, and, as noted above, water. Villa architecture was an "architecture of the senses" (229–235) and the most impressive ones took advantage of sound (fountains, perhaps even wind through trees) as well as sight and touch.

While Roman art history and archaeology has in the past couple of decades emphasized the voices and points of view of underrepresented groups (e.g. women, *libertini*, lower classes), Zarmakoupi takes on a lesser-studied aspect of elite culture. The volume is thoughtful in its combination of architectural description with the literary, material, and cultural contextualization of life in luxury villas.

The volume boasts a large number of illustrations, including photographs, plans, and computer reconstructions. All images are black and white and complement the text effectively; some photographs could have used some tuning up to increase contrast and make them more legible e.g. Fig. 4.12, a fresco from Villa A at Oplontis). Zarmakoupi's digital model of the Villa of the Papyri is reproduced in a handful of images; on page 45 she notes the model "provides a template and 'playground' for the study of the villa's sculptural programme." Indeed such a tool would be tremendously useful for her readers and it is a shame there is no means

of accessing the model, provided in some way by the book's publisher. Could Oxford host Zarmakoupi's model online somewhere, available with a password provided in the book itself in order to maintain some level of control on copyright issues? This would be another means by which color or high-quality images from the book could be disseminated to readers. This reviewer is aware that she is not the first to raise such an issue and this particular solution,³ yet it is puzzling that prestigious presses have not sorted this out.

FRANCESCA C. TRONCHIN

Rhodes College (trinchinf@rhodes.edu)

³ See, for example, John R. Clarke's review of Allison and Sear 2002 in *BMCR* 2005.02.17 <http://bmc.brynmawr.edu/2005/2005-02-17.html>.