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Book Review

Zarmakoupi, Mantha. 2023. *Shaping Roman Landscape: Ecocritical Approaches to Architecture and Wall Painting in Early Imperial Italy*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications; 978-1-60606-848-9 hardback \$65.

Shaping Roman Landscape: Ecocritical Approaches to Architecture and Wall Painting in Early Imperial Italy by Mantha Zarmakoupi is an engaging book that applies modern ecocritical theory to the study of ancient Roman architecture and art. This beautifully produced 208-page monograph includes 78 color illustrations, 8 black and white illustrations, and 24 maps and plans, which give readers a wide-ranging perspective of Roman landscape, especially as expressed in architecture and wall painting.

Chapter 1, ‘Ecocritical Approaches to the Roman Landscape’, serves as the introduction to the book. Noting the historiography of landscape in the ancient Roman world, Zarmakoupi argues that ecocritical approaches allow for a more comprehensive analysis of Roman concepts of landscape in its many forms. As she states on page 9, ‘I explore the architectural design of Roman villas, the cultivated landscapes around them, and the literary and visual representations of landscapes in order to address the ways in which ideas about and the idealization of landscape contributed to the creation of a novel language of architecture and landscape architecture’. To examine how “[l]and” becomes landscape’, Zarmakoupi draws on



the work of French philosopher Alain Roger (1997) who uses the term ‘artialisation’ (p. 19). Zarmakoupi weaves the idea of ‘artialization’ (anglicizing the word) throughout subsequent chapters in considering how human intervention changed the environment and conceptualizations of landscape in early imperial Italy.

In Chapter 2, ‘Changing Landscapes’, Zarmakoupi examines major changes in Roman architecture during the first century BCE through the first century CE. Placing these changes in the historical context of Rome’s expansion in the Mediterranean, Zarmakoupi asserts that ‘...the construction of extensive *porticus*, harbor infrastructures, imperial fora, and porticoed garden enclosures radically transformed urban Rome, while imported architectural designs, plants, and art signified the territorial appropriation of the empire’s growing power in the Mediterranean’ (p. 27). Surveying several examples of architectural innovations in Rome, Zarmakoupi makes the case that the changing cityscape corresponds with the growing authority of Rome’s empire. Next, Zarmakoupi shifts attention to the changing countryside, examining the proliferation of maritime villas along Italy’s coastlines.

‘Environmental Considerations in Luxury Villa Design’ (Chapter 3) thoroughly analyzes the architecture of Roman luxury villas, including Villa A at Oplontis, Villa San Marco and Villa Arianna A at Stabiae, the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum, and the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta. Zarmakoupi brings an important and novel focus to ‘the ways in which climate and environmental factors affected architectural design decisions’ (p. 48). She demonstrates that the Romans designed villas with careful attention to seasonal practices, and that the comfort of rooms would depend on factors such as location, orientation and time of year. Of particular interest is Zarmakoupi’s analysis of the *porticus* and *cryptoporticus* as architectural forms that ‘mediated’ (p. 64) between the inside and outside of villas. Zarmakoupi also argues that dining rooms served as spaces for ‘social performance and political maneuvering’ (p. 54) and shows how *triclinia* were situated throughout villas to showcase views of interior gardens and larger exterior landscapes. She deftly considers how Roman writers such as Vitruvius, Varro and Pliny the Younger discuss the relationship between villa architecture and environment. Zarmakoupi strengthens her analysis with several photographs, plans, and reconstructions that provide helpful insight into how the Romans designed villas for and within their physical environments.

In Chapter 4, ‘Between Conceptual and Perceptual Space: Miniature Landscapes’, Zarmakoupi analyzes framed landscape images (often referred to as *pinakes*) painted on the walls of houses and villas. She shows that many landscape paintings chronicle human interventions. In representing contemporary villa and harbor designs with features such as large colonnades, these paintings suggest a Roman impulse to dominate nature. Approximate measurements of these landscape paintings would have been helpful in discussing the effect of the miniature, as the examples given in this chapter vary in size.

‘Simulacra and Simulation: Garden Paintings’ (Chapter 5) explores garden paintings alongside the contemporary interest in planting real, ornamental gardens to embellish houses and villas. Analyzing, among others, garden paintings from the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta and the House of the Golden Bracelet at Pompeii, Zarmakoupi argues that these ‘...garden simulacra domesticated the once-foreign cultures of the Hellenistic East and the ecosystems in the empire’s reach in the process of artialization’ (p. 123). In this chapter, Zarmakoupi also considers Nilotic landscape paintings and how they communicate a Roman interest in expanding and conquering territory. The author draws an interesting comparison between wall paintings and the constructed water features at luxury villas, which were often called a little ‘Nile’ or ‘Euripus’, referring to well-known natural features in Egypt and Greece, respectively. Paintings of gardens and Nilotic views, along with constructed waterways within villas, thus show how elite Roman villa owners participated in the appropriation of environments of the larger Mediterranean.

Chapter 6, ‘The Remediation and Intermediality of Landscape’, serves as the book’s conclusion. Zarmakoupi continues to analyze the interaction and interrelation between actual and depicted landscapes. Building upon the work of Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999), she argues that ‘[t]he architecture of Roman villas created a series of intermedial relationships between painted and real landscapes...’ (p. 127). Zarmakoupi concludes that such artistic representations and designed views ultimately ‘...artialized the natural world into landscape’ (p. 143). In a coda at the end of this chapter, she emphasizes that it was the labor of enslaved people that shaped and maintained Roman villas and Roman landscape.

Shaping Roman Landscape is innovative and ambitious in its interdisciplinary approach that considers archaeological, art historical and literary sources to understand Roman ideas of landscape. The sections analyzing villa architecture and the painted decoration of villas are especially strong. Greater discussion of mythological landscape paintings would have been a welcome addition to the treatment of Roman conceptions of landscape (briefly mentioned on p. 135–136). Overall, this is an excellent book, and the way Zarmakoupi deploys the lens of ecocriticism to synthesize diverse types of evidence offers a model for future interdisciplinary studies of the ancient world. Scholars of archaeology, architecture, painting and landscape alike will find this book interesting and engaging.

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