6

Probing the Golden Age *Field*

The Sacral-Idyllic Landscape in Roman Wall Paintings

Introduction

IN THE FOLLOWING, I will slightly shift the focus from the earlier framework of a bird's-eye perspective and zoom in on an area of pre-modernity's pictorial culture that is relatively limited in terms of time and place: the sacral-idyllic landscape in Roman wall painting. I think it appropriate to examine this close-up at this point because the sacral-idyll provides an illustrative case for some of the observations that have been presented in the previous chapters, spatial and sociological alike.

The sacral-idyllic landscape obviously has its great period in the well-represented type of wall painting that survived the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD: a year which, as chance would have it, seems to be a turning point in the art of antiquity. Thus, it is remarkable how quickly Roman painting begins its medieval 'deconstruction' after this terminus, and conversely the extent to which the pre-Vesuvian painting represents the final Golden Age of the classical epoch. In this forum, the two contradictory forces of Rieglian normal sight – closure (clear-cut plasticity) and openness (quasi-perspectival illusionism) – would seem to come together in a last balanced synthesis.

We could perhaps initially attribute this impression to bedazzlement by concentration on the pictorial relics, which were by chance encapsulated in the volcano's sludge. For, geographically, the Campanian evidence is only supplemented to a small extent by relics from other areas, especially Rome. And apart from a few early major works, such as the hunting frieze from the Vergina tombs (4th century BC; FIG. 1.20) and the Nile mosaic from the Temple of Fortuna in Palestrina (if dating it to the 2nd century BC is at all reliable; FIG. 6.1), evidence of Hellenistic-Roman painting does not begin until the last century BC – a period that is indeed covered comprehensively in Pompeii and neighbouring cities.

That this evidence would seem, nonetheless, to be relatively representative of the situation for pictorial art in later classical antiquity is due to the following reasons.

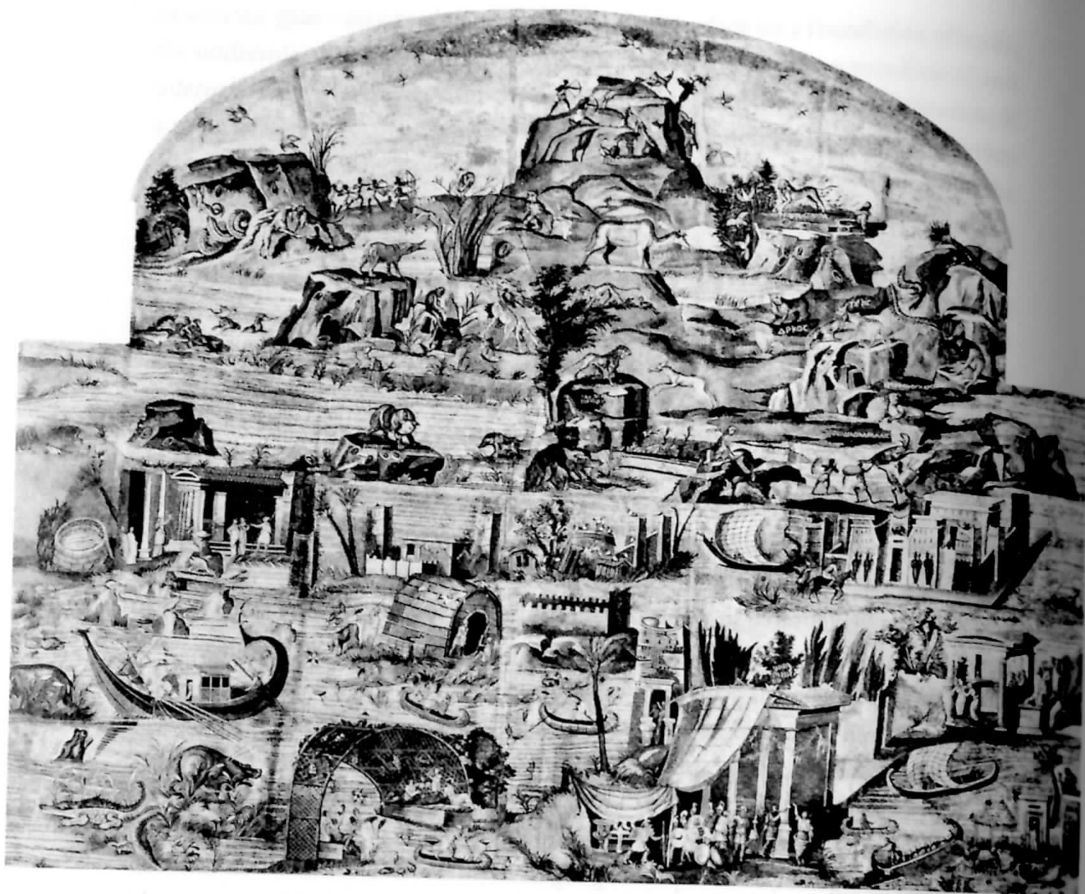


Fig. 6.1. *Nile Landscape* (late 2nd century BC?), mosaic from the Temple of Fortuna in Palestrina. Palestrina, Palazzo Barberini.

Firstly, it should be noted that, almost irrespective of where pre-*c.* 80 AD fragments of paintings are excavated in the Roman Empire, they maintain the stylistic and iconographic homogeneity which had already characterised Hellenistic art. Secondly, the fresco – the dominant pictorial medium of Pompeii – really does seem to have been the most widespread type of two-dimensional pictorial art at the time, especially in private homes. Painting on wood might indeed have been the most prestigious in the Greco-Hellenistic period, but the situation alters at the beginning of the 1st century BC, when the customary aristocratic interior decoration changes from imitation of stone in polychrome stucco (known as the First Pompeian Style) to purely

two-dimensional and more sumptuous architectural illusion (Second Pompeian Style). As this new illusion provides the framework for spatial images, the earlier independent panel paintings are gradually 'absorbed' by the flat walls decorated with frescoes.[1] It would not be excessive to claim that the Romans of this period are struck by a decoration craze that has few, if any, equals in Western history. In Pompeii and Herculaneum even the most modest house contains some kind of painted decoration.

This decoration included the landscape. In complete accordance with my thesis that depiction of landscape in general is a response to the isolation of urban culture from the surrounding environment, the Roman private sphere – the climax of segregation in antiquity – is adorned with the most autonomous landscape images of the period. Landscapes are not just used as background for large mythological figures or seen faintly behind the illusionist architectural scenery on the walls; they become an independent genre worthy of framing: in vistas with genre figures and rural shrines (the actual sacral-idylls), in panoramas with diminutive mythological scenes, in garden thickets filling the entire space.

As used by its inventor, Michael Rostovtzeff, in 1911,[2] the term *sacral-idyllic* referred chiefly to a sub-category of Roman landscape painting, but as the categories, as we will see, are rather unstable, in accordance with a later and somewhat looser use of the word I shall permit myself to extend it to include the Roman landscape image as such. The word precisely predicates the Roman landscape images as being characterised by two main features: they are set in the uncultivated, pastoral nature (idyll), and this nature shows signs of cultic activity (the sacral). How to supply these features with more specific interpretive structures, including a revealing of the junctions of iconography, is, however, an ongoing open question. Presumably as a consequence of the diminishing part antiquity plays in the 20th- and early 21st-century art history syllabus, in this respect scholars have restricted themselves, even more than vis-à-vis post-medieval landscape images, to a mismatched cocktail of stylistic observations, archaeological evidence and more or less random cultural-historical fragments of knowledge; the result being that many aspects of the iconography and iconology of landscape images is to be found in a decidedly undigested, if not untouched, state.[3]

My intention now, therefore, is to present an interpretative outline rather than a compilation of thoroughly examined sectors. By way of introduction I shall detail and extend my analysis of the antique pictorial space from chapter 1, whereas the subsequent section will focus on the ground in both its vertical and horizontal space of significance. An analysis of the cult practice of sacral-idyllic landscapes will thus build upon some of my observations concerning the chthonic wilderness and image of Paradise from chapters 2 and 5, while a sociological analysis will build upon chapter 4's presentation of the modus operandi of the Golden Age paradigm and Golden Age *field*.

6.1 Pictorial space, *numen* and human presence

From limited to distant vistas

The extremely loose and sketchy brushstrokes – known as *ars compendiaria* – with which everything object-like is transcribed in Roman wall painting could give an immediate impression of landscape space in a modern sense. The objects depicted drift evocatively in a mirage-like interplay of light and shade, and the saturation of the colours weakens speedily when moving into the depth of the image. Despite this visual approximation of the impact of light and air on objects, the atmosphere lacks, as shown in chapter 3, a conceptual foundation. Beyond the free play of colour, it never condenses to palpable matter that can enter into an alliance with time and its extension in weather, as happens in European painting after the breakthrough of the modern landscape image in 1420.

An equivalent limitation is evident when examining the 'autonomy' of the Roman landscape images: the extent to which they comprise their own theme. Even though the Roman landscape images might dispense with narrative legitimacy, they never – unlike their modern successors – lack either *numen* or *human presence*. *Numen* is, as described in chapter 1, the original, self-generating power in nature – the divine force in matter itself – which precedes and is, as it were, the element of spirit, which can thereby be seen as a form of distilled *numen*. This entity thrives best in spatially limited images, in which the depiction comes closest to sculpture and thereby to the object it represents. So in an illusionist and quasi-perspectival pictorial space such as the Roman, this means contexts where the depth of field is not shown actually, but only potentially. *Numen* signifies that humans and natural objects are on an equal footing in the cosmos: that there is no wider distinction between here and there. *Numen* ensures that the natural object is at the centre of the field of vision rather than in its depth of field: that it is *ergon*.

But as the surroundings retreat to a distance, displaced to the periphery of the field of vision, become *parergon,* they are drained of *numen*. As compensation for this incipient chasm between creature and surroundings, human presence is required. In spatially limited contexts, where depth of field is only potential, traces of human activity – architecture – will suffice. In wide panoramas, where depth of field is actualised, the human figure is necessary. The greater the distance, the more depth of field and the more autonomy in the depiction of nature, the more nature's *numen* vanishes in favour of the individual's required presence.

Typically, the most spatially limited images of nature in Roman art are best able to dispense with human presence, as *numen* is here most pronounced. In works such as Livia's garden fresco or the satyric cave decoration from Boscoreale, the

panoramic gaze is abruptly curtailed: in the first case by an impenetrable thicket, in the latter by the rock wall around the caves (PLATES 5 and 14). Even though both have architectonic elements – fences in front of the thicket; fountain basin in the cave; and pergola on the rock – and are therefore not devoid of traces of human presence, their only actual performers are small birds. Real human presence does not appear in the image, but is shifted to a communal space between the image and the beholder. For, as we will see, these big landscape images devoid of humans are derived – like the architectonic wall decorations – from theatre scenery, i.e. from backgrounds inextricably connected with the events played out in front of them. Even though theatre scenery gradually took on the role of being viewed by beholders beyond the stage, its origins are again those of the cult ritual, i.e. an environment for participants rather than audience. This function meant that scenery could be transferred from theatre to private home, where it enclosed the comings and goings of occupants and visitors. This context would explain its lack of depth because, as performer in a complete entity of which the image is a part-aspect, the observer is cut off from the sensation of distance that is necessary to create a radical spatial depth.[4]

The limitation is particularly true of the illusionist architectural decorations in which, even though they comprise the closest and most precise medium antiquity gets to mathematical perspective, the really distant panoramic gazes are absent. The colonnades are always dimmed in good time, before their vertical dive gets lost in the punctiformed distance (FIG. 1.23) – that distance which can only be generated, in Lucretius, via literature's more indirect representation (cf. chapter 1). And when stage scenery supplies a view towards an illusion of specific background landscapes, the gaze never reaches further than shrines in the foreground and middle distance (FIGS. 6.2-6.3). The depth experienced in the communal space between an actual human *here* and a simulated surrounding *there* has limited range in antiquity.

If the more distant pictorial depth is to be generated – actualisation of depth of field – the communal space between observer and simulation has to be breached. As the typical frame of simple single-coloured bands suggests, the more radically far-sighted images with landscape space are independent panels inserted *into* the architecture rather than vistas *through* it (FIG. 6.4). Within their own frames too, however, these landscape images have no close foreground and are viewed from a more or less raised vantage point, so the vista covers at most the graduation from middle distance to background. It is in return for this wider panoramic gaze and resulting loss of *numen* that the requirement for presence is intensified. For narrower landscape space, the participation of animals – *numen* manifested through transformation of the earth's paradisiacal power of nourishment (cf. chapter 5) – will suffice. If the animals are larger than the garden frescoes' birds in relation to the

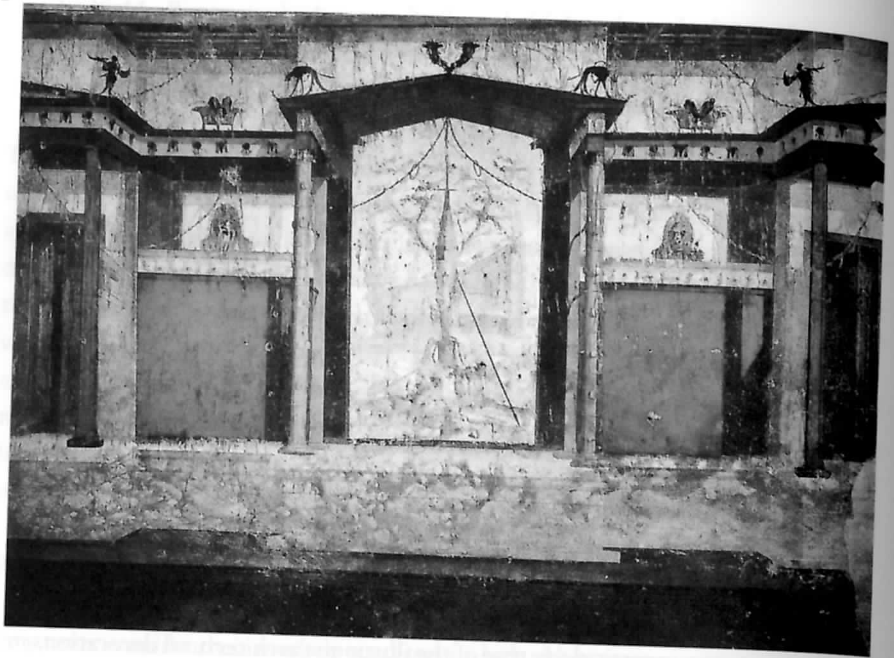


Fig. 6.2. *Architectural façade* (shortly after 30 BC), fresco. Rome, Palatine Hill, House of Augustus, Room of the Masks, east wall.

Fig. 6.3. *Rustic Shrine with Columns* (shortly after 30 BC), fresco (section). Rome, Palatine Hill, House of Augustus, Room of the Masks, south wall.

Fig. 6.4. Architectonic decoration (*c.* 50-62 AD), frescoes. Pompeii VI, 16, 15 (House of the Ara Maxima), Room F, west wall.

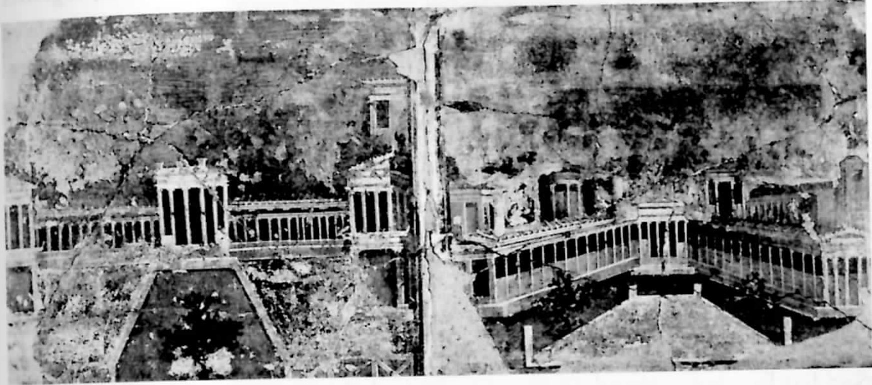


Fig. 6.5. Villa landscapes (*c.* 25-50 AD), fresco from Pompeii. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

edges of the image – e.g. in the mosaics of wild beasts fighting in the wilderness or maritime fauna in front of their element (FIGS. 2.89, 2.94 and PLATE 20) – a more extensive surrounding space is allowed. Correspondingly, several landscape vignettes show luxurious villa architecture – traces of human activity – with neither animals nor humans (FIG. 6.5).

For the landscape to swell to its utmost dimensions, however, human presence is a prerequisite – as if the growing space absorbs the observer who previously could simply be in front of the landscape stage scenery. The *Odyssey Landscapes* from the Esquiline Hill possibly go furthest in this direction as the only presence on the wild rocky coast is that of insignificant human figures (FIGS. 4 and 3.3). In antiquity, nature thus loses its meaning if it is seen both naked and in full spatial extent. This combined view first becomes possible in modernity. And yet it seems that the merely human does not supply sufficient filling in the *Odyssey Landscapes*, but

that nature, under this utmost pressure, has to demonstrate its numinousity one last time. As Greek inscriptions make clear, divine personifications of the natural formations trickle forth: *nomai*, meadow nymphs, and *aktai*, the three nymphs of the promontories by the coast where Odysseus sailed in.[5]

And however far this widest landscape image of antiquity might gaze, it still does not look towards the celestial distance. The landscape is observed from above and downwards and is thereby filled with two-thirds earth and one-third sky. Atmospheric sky, both voluminous and taking up a large part of the image space, can only be displayed as a wrap around other nature personifications, these being the gods of the heavens. In a scene such as *Jupiter in the Clouds* from Herculaneum, the sky actually appears in what could look like its full might over earth, even traversed by a huge white, reddish-brown and green rainbow.[6] For the supreme god to retain his dignity and not fade away in the distance, however, he has to swell, together with his eagle and a cupid, to celestial gigantic proportions, and then the scale of dimensions and the distance in reality implode to a more manageable perspective. In the sky we thus find the elasticity that prevents the pictorial space from opening towards infinity.

The same elasticity is at play in another celestial scene: the aforementioned *Sacrifice of Iphigenia*, in which Diana appears in the clouds (FIG. 13); here the entire celestial section has shrunk and accommodated the earthly scale of dimensions. This scene anticipates the medieval pictorial space, which indeed has to keep to this scale in order to be permanently able to manifest a divine and now infinite heaven without personifications. We have to wait until 17th-century Netherlands before God has become so detached from his original abode that the sky in its independent – and de-sacralized – majesty comes to dominate the pictorial plane (FIG. 5).

If I have here examined the issue of how far the landscape space can expand before the receding *numen* has to be supplemented with human presence or break out in divine personifications, then I can also turn it around and ask: how much landscape expansion in an image can a deity tolerate before the dignity of that deity is threatened? Deities are, after all, in themselves personifications of the components of nature and therefore cannot be inserted in an unlimited landscape space, the premise of which is precisely the termination of all deities. As long as the landscape background is restricted in relation to the pictorial frame, all sorts of gods can be shown without any problems. This is not just true of a lower deity such as Pan, but also of Mars and Venus (FIG. 6.6), and the higher gods Jupiter and Juno, all of whom are to be found depicted in limited environments of rocks and trees.[7] For the highest ranking gods, however, the spatial tolerance is narrow. There are no sacral-idyllic paintings of the type 'Landscape with the Wedding of Jupiter and Juno' in which the higher gods are depicted, miniature-like, in a wide panorama. If the

Fig. 6.6. *Mars Caressing Venus* (*c.* 0-79 AD), fresco from Pompeii. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

wider space is brought into the picture, it is precisely in the form of the heavens: a heavens that has, however, become a – spatially more limited – element for the god. Examples of this fusion were the two aforementioned *Jupiter in the Clouds* and *Sacrifice of Iphigenia*. And so from this angle too, the heavens are the limit to which the pictorial space can approach, but not expand uninhibitedly.

For lower deities such as nymphs and satyrs, the spatial tolerance has already been increased. In the panoramic sacral-idyllic landscapes such deities often seem small in relation to the frame. On the other hand, they also seem bound to their earthly wilderness, as Jupiter is to the heavens. We have already seen how they were tied to land formations in the *Odyssey Landscapes*. Even without this bond, however, it would seem inconceivable that goat-legged deities could appear in an urban panorama on

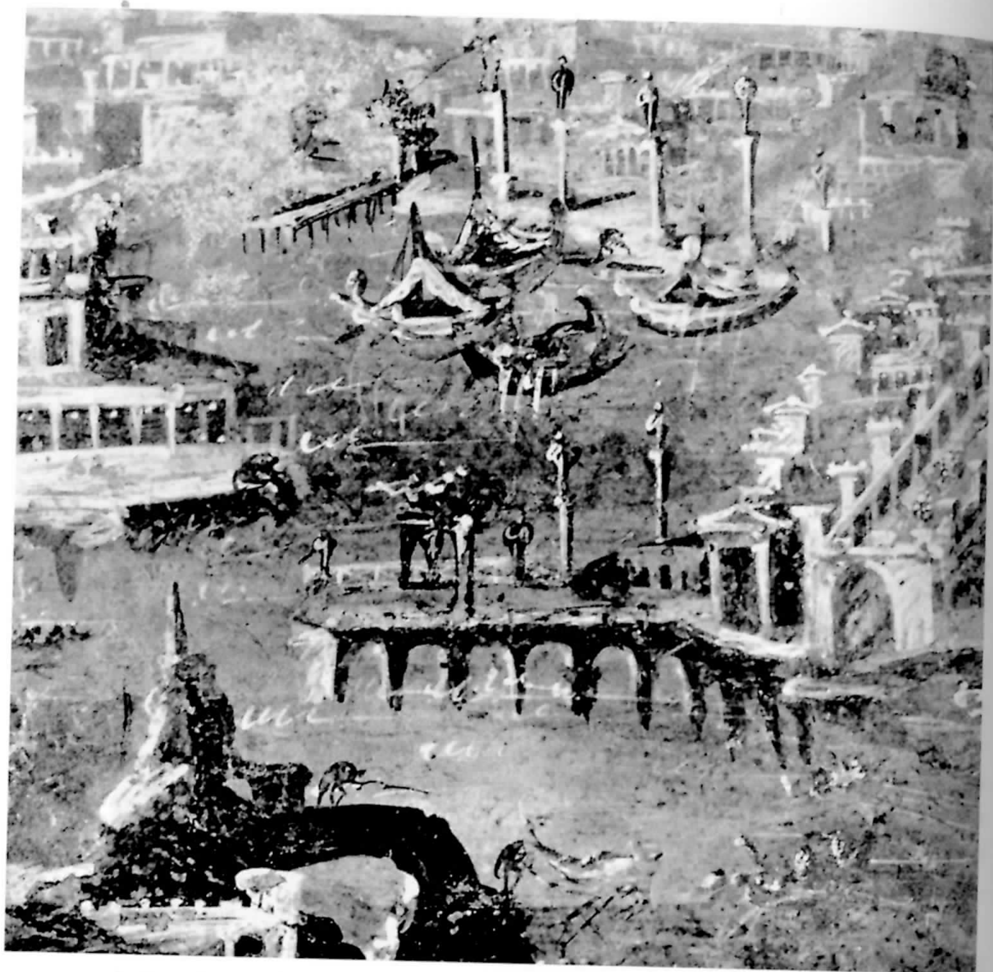


Fig. 6.7. *Harbour Landscape* (*c.* 0-50 AD), fresco from Stabiae. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

as minuscule a scale as the usual genre figures (cf. FIG. 6.7). This kind of bird's-eye perspectival freedom of movement from wilderness to civilisation is only granted to humankind: the creatures between animals and gods. These considerations alone would seem to indicate that landscape space is stretched in parallel with a notion of the human being as an independent individual exempt from chthonic and celestial projections alike. It is only with humans as secularised – or completely absent – participants that the landscape space is able to expand to its utmost extent.

Literary parallels: Statius and Pliny the Younger

It will now be interesting to compare these pictorially conditioned observations with literary descriptions of villas such as those written by Statius (*c.* 45-96 AD) in *Silvae* and Pliny the Younger in his letter to Domitius Apollinaris (*c.* 100 AD), both of which include descriptions of vistas across the landscape. Writing about Pollius Felix's villa in Sorrento, Statius asks:

> Why should I rehearse the thousand rooftops and the changing views [*visendi*]? Every room has its own delight, each its peculiar sea; and beyond the expanse of Nereus each separate window commands its own earth [*terra*]. One looks on Inarime, from another rugged Prochyta appears, this way great Hector's armour-bearer spreads, that way seagirt Nesis breathes her unwholesome air; yonder is Euploea of happy omen for wandering keels and Megalia outthrust to strike the curving waves, and your own Limon is vexed that his lord rests opposite, as from afar he views your Surrentine palace.[8]

Similar window views are found in Pliny's villa at the foot of the Apennines in Tuscany:

> Not far from the baths is a stair-case which leads to a gallery, and to three apartments on the way; one of these looks upon the little court with the four plane-trees round it; another has a sight of the meadows; the third abuts upon the vineyard, and commands a prospect of opposite quarters of the heavens.[9]

In both descriptions it should be noted that the window views appear as independent panoramas: so independent that Statius even has to allot each of them a separate plot of earth. In this discontinuous respect they are suggestive of the more extensive fresco panoramas, which indeed seem more like panels inserted *into* the stage scenery than panoramic gazes *through* them.[10] At the beginning of his letter to Domitius Apollinaris, Pliny also notes:

> You would be most agreeably entertained by taking a view [*prospexeris*] of the face of this country [*hunc regionis situm*] from the mountains: you would imagine that not land plots [*terras*], but some picture [*formam aliquam*] lay before you, drawn with the most exquisite beauty and exactness; such a variation [*varietate*], such an harmonious arrangement [*descriptione*] charms the eye which way soever it throws itself. My villa, though situated at the foot of the mountain, commands as wide a prospect [*prospicit*] as the summit affords [...].[11]

This passage almost describes the genesis of the landscape painting: what had previously simply been land plots becomes, upon viewing, a wonderful picture, marked by variation and harmonious arrangement. As in Plato's description of skiagraphy, this picture assembles the things that would appear different and disconnected to the nearsighted view. However, it also says something about the less cohesive and less specific nature of literature (cf. Interlude) that neither this verbal description nor the window views need an explicit reference to – a presence of – figures or architecture to aid comprehensibility. Similarly, literature can, at least in principle, combine windows with distant panoramas. The image as a medium, however, is too concerned with specifics and totality for these operations to be translated directly. Even though the wall painting testifies to the same love of varying vistas as we find in literature, the paintings can only bring together the very close (architecture) with the very remote (the background landscape) if the landscape is cut free of the architecture and is framed in independent images with their own local space and legitimising presence of animals, architecture or humans. In the wall paintings' landscape images and their relationship to the foreground architecture, it is thus possible to follow the precision mechanics of the thesis in chapter 1: that antiquity has inflated the pictorial space's balloon to the utmost, but lacks the power to implement the explosion that will cause the bodies to dissolve in an infinite homogenised void.

6.2 The character of the landscape

Since Rostovtzeff's study of 1911, the Roman landscape painting has often been divided into categories: besides Rostovtzeff's mythological, sacral-idyllic and Egyptianising landscapes, also harbour and villa landscapes, landscapes with pygmies or wild beasts, garden landscapes. Even though these genres can be very useful orientation tools, they should not be thought of as bubbles that seal hermetically around the individual images, but rather as notions which blend more or less spontaneously in an all-embracing landscape.[12] It is indeed possible to find vistas exclusively showing villas, or scenes which only include rustic shrines with shepherds and fishermen, but at the same time there is nothing reprehensible in landscapes with villas and shrines, landscapes with architecture and harbours (**FIG. 6.8**), or mythological scenes taking place in what could otherwise be categorised as sacral-idyllic landscapes. In the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Polyphemus and Galatea* (shortly after 11 BC), for example, the Cyclops and his goats have placed themselves in a sacral-idyllic rocky landscape with a temple, a vase-crowned column and a column with a Priapus statuette (**PLATE 19**).

Fig. 6.8. *Landscape with Bridge, Villa and Shrine* (1st century AD), fresco from villa beneath Villa Farnesina, corridor F. Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, no. 1233.

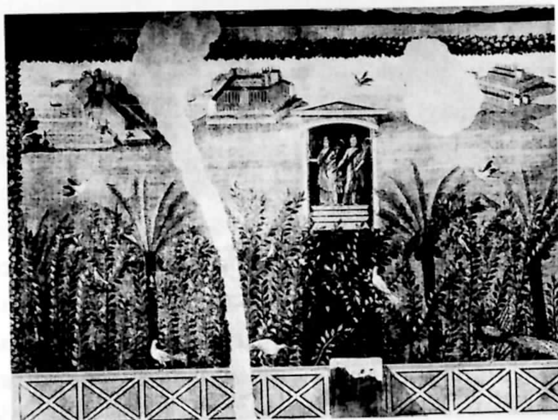


Fig. 6.9. *Garden with Egyptian Deities* (*c.* 50-75 AD), fresco. Pompeii VI 2, 14 (House of the Amazons), east wall.

Only the following features would seem to demarcate the individual pictorial groupings: Egyptianising landscapes avoid villa architecture (perhaps because it would disturb their exotic aura) and garden frescoes live their own independent and spatially-limited life. This is, at least, the case until *c.* 50-75 AD when - at the same time as the space shows its first signs of late antique 'deconstruction' - new synthesising montages between the close and the distant emerge. For example, *Garden with Egyptian Deities* from the Amazon House in Pompeii is compiled of: at the bottom, and seen from the side, a traditional - but now even more two-dimensional - thicket with a shrine; at the top, in bird's-eye perspective, a sea view with three villas (FIG. 6.9).

Rocks and water

But if the Roman landscape categories are so flexible, what is it then that constitutes their common denominators? According to the general rule in the post-Egyptian pre-modern period, I have to conclude that we are in a mountainous and rocky environment in which the meadow floor can only be cursory and local. Any fertility in this landscape is due to a curious and continuous occurrence of water: water swimming around, dreamlike, in the landscape's countersunk floor, as if the rocks had just emerged from a flood that had crushed civilisation. The rural population of the sacral-idyllic landscapes might thus bear traces of Plato's mountain shepherds, the survivors of the Flood, who were "unfamiliar with the crafts at large and, above all, with the tricks of town dwellers for overreaching and outdistancing one another and the rest of their devices for mutual infliction of mischief."[13] Moreover, water in the landscape images merges imperceptibly with a general deepening effect, the identity of which is often ambiguous; for example, looking at the watercourse in the large sacral-idyll from the villa of Agrippa Postumus at Boscotrecase (*c.* 10-0 BC; FIG. 6.10),[14] it is hard to know where exactly the water begins and where it ends: is the mossy-green area in the foreground, for example, to be understood as water, wet meadow or rock? If overground items - trees, people, shrines, architecture - are to gain a foothold in this landscape, it will not happen in the sunken hollows, but only on the rocky outcrops and the raised ground above them.

This spatial disposition alone explains why agriculture and roads were not an option in these terrains: as soon as the rock flattens out, the groove emerges and with it the danger of flooding, a threat to civilisation. The only rudimentary roads that can subsist here are the many natural stone bridges linking the rock plinths. The isolation of the rocky foundations in the watery wilderness thus forms a synthesis with the pre-modern pictorial space, which, as we have seen, is made up of just such an aggregate of spatial islands: *topoi*. The route to the homogenised pictorial space is also the route that levels off rocks and chasms, with the emerging expanses being well-suited to the layout of fields and traffic networks. The aqueous physiognomy of the landscape is equally part of the explanation as to why the Roman pictorial genres are so un-demarcated. As there is so often water flowing around the rocks in the 'ordinary' sacral-idyllic landscapes - the domain of the paradigm - these landscapes can easily be condensed to various iconographic water genres: harbour landscapes, Nile landscapes or mythological scenes that take place by water; for example, the *Landscape with Perseus and Andromeda* (FIG. 6.11), or the travels of Odysseus (FIGS. 4 and 3.3). It actually rarely makes sense to declare that a scene has been specifically moved out to the waterside, or to investigate whether this water is sea

Fig. 6.10. *Sacral-Idyllic Landscape* (*c.* 10-0 BC), fresco from the villa of Agrippa Postumus at Boscotrecase, north wall of the Red Room (cubiculum 16). Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

or just a river or a lake, because water is omnipresent. So, once again: the motif cannot be studied independently of the paradigm.

A literary depiction of this bringing together of rocks and water – the paradigm reflected in the condensation of a theme – is found in, for example, the abovementioned *Silvae* by Statius:

> Why now should I tell of rural wealth, ploughlands cast upon the sea, cliffs awash in Bacchus' nectar? Often in autumn, when Lyaeus is burgeoning, a Naiad has climbed the rocks and in night's secret shade wiped her dripping eyes with a ripened vine shoot and snatched sweet grapes from the hills. Often the vintage is sprayed by the adjoining flood. Satyrs fell into the shallows and the mountain Pans lusted to catch Doris naked in the waves.[15]

This description gives the impression, as in the sacral-idyllic paintings, that water is everywhere a neighbour to the land.

Fig. 6.11. *Landscape with Perseus and Andromeda* (*c.* 0-25 AD), fresco from the Imperial Villa at Boscotrecase, the 'Mythological Room'. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. All rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Trees

In painting, the dominance of rocks over that which rises above the water is not only due to the absence of meadow cover, but also to the absence of extensive groups of trees. As soon as we leave the garden frescoes' agoraphobically dense thickets, the trees retreat in a conspicuous fashion. In large panels where the mythological scene is the main subject and therefore does not leave any room for wide panoramas, trees are often allowed to group closely and freely, albeit always in a semi-close background where they no longer reveal anything about their internal depth relations. Looking at the more autonomous landscape images characterised by vistas,

Fig. 6.12. *Hercules in the Garden of the Hesperides* (*c.* 0-79 AD), fresco. Oplontis, Villa di Poppea.

however, the trees would seem to be largely restricted to two functions: either they appear alone, usually in rural shrines, or they cluster together behind or near buildings. The latter often occurs in mixed, garden-like enclaves, which resemble distant versions of the *close-up* we see in the garden frescoes.

It is therefore extremely seldom that we have the impression of being near by, let alone surrounded by, a typical forest – a forest in which the trees are no closer together than that the gaps between the trunks allow for a view of more distant places. In the most forest-like landscape image I have come across – the fresco in Villa di Poppea, Oplontis, of *Hercules in the Garden of the Hesperides* (FIG. 6.12) – the price for the gaps between trunks is thus that they are seen slightly *di sotto in sù*; they hereby only allow for a view towards the plain blue of the sky, rather than an actual spatial retreat in the rural environment. A mere sequence of trees, like those discreetly penetrating the range of vision in so many 15th-century Italian landscape images (FIGS. 11.6 and 11.33), is inconceivable in antiquity. The situation seems analogous to the vista afforded towards the distance through the openings in illusionistic architecture; simply to look *through* something towards something else – *perspicere* – first

seems possible in the painting of modernity. Antique images either dazzle by the totality of the forest, or we leap quantum-like to its component parts. Similarly, it is inconceivable that birds in the garden frescoes should be able to leave their thickets and move out into the open airspace. Flocks of birds circling distant castle turrets or roofs, as in the work of Albrecht Dürer (cf. **FIG. II.27**), cannot be painted in antiquity.

To make a generalisation about the relationship of plant life to space in Roman landscape painting, it could be said that plants are not really able to leave the *place*: the place regarded as a paradisiacal *locus amoenus*, which is wrapped around itself like a space-shunning node. It is the two complementary aspects of this place that we meet in the frescoes discussed earlier: Livia's garden fresco and the satyric cave decoration from the Boscoreale cubiculum (**PLATES 5** and 14).

6.3 The cult

Pictorial evidence

Even though the sacral-idyllic landscapes portray the rural cult in an idealised way, in principle it refers to an omnipresent pre-modern phenomenon: keeping as sacred the natural places such as mountains, rocks, stones, chasms, caves, streams, rivers, groves and trees.[16] As suggested earlier, these places were border areas in nature, gateways in which the deity, especially the earth's *numen*, was revealed. At these shrines, people sought fertility, cure, inspiration or oracular statements. As Socrates declares in Plato's *Phaedrus*:

> Oh, but the authorities of the temple of Zeus at Dodona, my friend, said that the first prophetic utterances came from an oak tree. In fact the people of those days, lacking the wisdom of you young people, were content in their simplicity to listen to trees or rocks, provided these told the truth.

Actually, there is still so much left of nature's unmediated speech that even the dialogue on love conducted by Socrates and Phaedrus is not attributed to them, but to the rural nymph shrine by which they are resting: a *locus amoenus* complete with spring, plane tree, shade, meadow, breeze, cicada song, images and statuettes.[17]

The laying out of a shrine in antiquity was, therefore, not a question of choice, but of being in touch with *genius loci*. The landmark constituted a signal that was to be interpreted, and is therefore often called *signum* in the augur texts. The augurs, the chief priests who selected the sacred place, made use of *geomancy*, an archaic tradition of knowledge fitting places into the cosmic whole. This included,

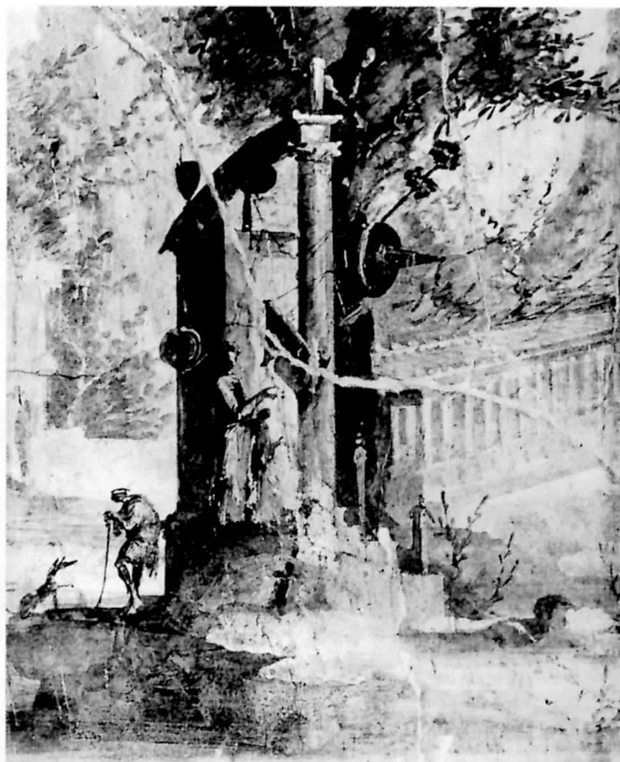


Fig. 6.13. *Sacral-Idyllic Landscape* (*c.* 10-0 BC), fresco (section) from the villa of Agrippa Postumus at Boscotrecase, east wall of the Red Room (cubiculum 16). Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

inter alia, animals, exorcising place names, broad views from elevated points and lines drawn in the earth.[18] The establishment of a shrine involved a repetition of the cosmogony – the creation of the world – and thereby reintroduced locally the lost cosmic whole. Even though the place already had vigorous powers, these were intensified at the inauguration, which could be understood as an ordering of the chaotic power of the earth. The tree, pillar or stone was half nourished by and half pierced the chthonic dragon. As a sign of this controlled earth energy, the omphalos stone, a widespread symbol of the local or universal centre, is therefore often coated with network-like patterns.[19] The power of a place was also increased by burial, be it of newly-sacrificed animals or relics from heroes or demi-gods.[20]

However implied or idealised, this entire cult practice would seem to be reflected in the Roman sacral-idyllic paintings. As a signal of the reinforcement of *genius loci*, the man-made traces usually occur in intimate association with the sacred natural places: hewn columns and statues always rise up on rocky knolls (FIG. 6.3); columns or double-columned portals (known as *sacella*),[21] indicating sacred trees, are almost woven together with the trunks and branches of these trees (FIGS. 6.13-6.14); altars

Fig. 6.14. *Punishment of Dirce* (*c.* 0-79 AD), fresco. Pompeii, Casa di Giulio Polibio.

extend the rock projections or are crudely shaped from them as monoliths or piles of flat stones (FIG. 6.3 and 6.10).[22]

The sacral-idylls also provide evidence of the continuously ceremonial element that was necessary to maintain the power of the shrine. A number of images show people on the land sacrificing, or preparing for sacrifice, mainly goats or oxen (FIG. 6.15). And, quite generally, the shrines have absorbed votive offerings with almost magnetic power: bands and garlands of foliage are bound around the columns, altars and branches (FIG. 6.12); shields and bowls are hung on columns or in trees (FIGS. 6.3 and 6.13); tablets, pictures, burning torches or a shepherd's crook lean against the foundations (FIGS. 6.10 and 6.14).

The boundaries marked out by the shrines could be understood quite literally as fault lines in the terrain. A Greek epigram encouraging sacrifice of grapes or wild pears, begins with the words: "O ye who pass along this road, whether ye are going from town to the fields or returning to the city from the country, we two gods here are the guardians of the boundary. I, as you see me, am Hermes, and this other fellow is Heracles." And in the second of Horace's *Epodes* we read:

> [...] when in the countryside Autumn raises his head arrayed with ripe fruit, how he enjoys picking the pears he grafted and the clusters that rival the dyer's purple, to reward you, Priapus, and you, Father Silvanus, for watching over his land![23]

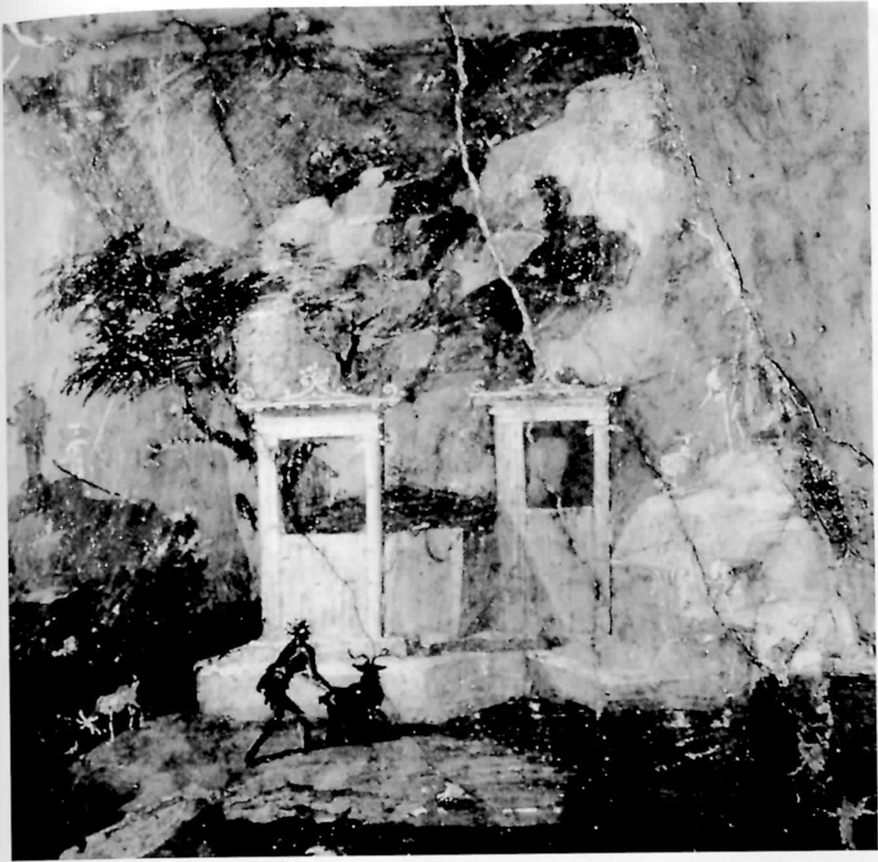


Fig. 6.15. *Sacrifice of a Goat at a Tree Shrine* (*c.* 0-79 AD), fresco from Pompeii. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, no. 9418.

Literary evidence such as these extracts suggest a rural cult in which various deities and their statues – Hermes, Heracles, Priapus, Silvanus – take on the role of border guards and are venerated as such through offerings in the form of, for example, the autumn fruit harvest.

The interaction between these border protectors created a sacred geography dividing the terrain into irregular units. The boundaries between these units were reactivated by festivals such as *Terminalia* and *Ambarvalia*, when the local residents would walk around – perambulate – the lines marked out by altars, stones and sacred groves. In *Terminalia*, the phallic posts or stones of one of the border protectors, Terminus, were wound around with garlands of the cultivators of the adjacent land.

Similar perambulations have often survived right up to modern times, for instance in the British ceremony, *beating the parish bounds*, in which the limits of the parish are reactivated by beating with wooden sticks, digging cruciform pits and symbolically making sacrifice of children.[24] Although it is apparently an unexplored topic, we can but imagine that the advanced colonisation policy of the Roman Empire violated these cults and their geomantically arranged boundaries. If not before, it was certainly the case when the terrain had been divided according to the *agrimensores*' grid: a system which, by definition (cf. chapter 4), breaks with geomancy's boundaries, stemming as they do from the terrain (PLATE 12 and FIG. 4.54).

Having maintained earlier that the products of land surveying – fields, roads, fences, and so forth – would be lost on pictorial landscape because of its rocks and aqueous chasms, my observation can now be corroborated by its shrines, which indeed mark boundaries that are inherent to the terrain rather than boundaries that are imposed from above in the form of land surveying. Even though roads and fields have actually often been included in the rural cults' geomantic demarcations, they are invisible to the idyllising pictorial view that looks into the quasi-perspectival depth: an urban gaze qualified by the Golden Age paradigm's preference for *terra* and aversion to territories. The consequence is a primitivisation of the rural cults. From the mixed pastoral-georgic sphere they are displaced to the purely pastoral: the Golden Age domicile.

More in accordance with real cult practice, shrines in the Roman wall paintings celebrate nature's inherent powers, her *numen*. In the sacred sphere itself, the closest this *numen* gets to visualisation is in the statues of Juno, Priapus, Faunus, Pan and other rural deities who often escape closer identification.[25] As an indication of the numinous forces of the landscape, actual deities might, however, also appear in the company of the land formations they personify. This was precisely the case in the *Odyssey Landscapes*. A related example, a mosaic from Pompeii (FIG. 6.16), depicts a mountainside and a cave as background to their own three deities, among them a god of water springs with a pitcher in his hand.[26] Deities such as these are here so closely linked to the landscape that they do not enter into any narrative action in front of it.

However, even without gods – either as statues or mobile figures – the *numen* of nature, and especially of the rocky ground, is emphasised in Roman painting. In chapter 2 we saw how the chthonic earth is generally manifested in the *terraced rock* – the growing stone with references to the fertile-chaotic underground – and there are also many examples of these rocks in the sacral-idyllic landscapes. Nor would it be misleading to see the chthonic mirrored in the very way in which the figures are placed in the uncultivated stone environment of the sacral-idylls – and this regardless of the narrative context in other respects. Despite the rough and

Fig. 6.16. *Mountain and Water Spring Gods* (*c.* 50-75 AD), mosaic from Pompeii. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

hard surface of the stones, the human figures in the sacral-idylls thus feel remarkably at home in the harsh environment: touching the rock, using it as a footstool, seat or even couch. In a Pompeian scene with *Io and Argos*, Io is seated on a rock, while Argos has his right foot and hand placed on each its rock outcrop (FIG. 6.17).[27] And in *Dionysus and Ariadne of Naxos*, Ariadne has lain down in front of a low shelf of rock, while Dionysus and his *thiasos* draw near to her through a narrow passage between two distant rocks (FIG. 6.18).[28]

Even though it is unlikely that there is a conscious programme - an iconography - behind these recurring contacts with the earth, on a paradigmatic level they can be interpreted as evidence of the antique belief in the healing power of the

Fig. 6.17. *Io and Argos* (*c.* 0-50 AD), fresco from Pompeii, Macellum. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

underground, in the necessity to be in contact with the bare earth. That the residents of Dodona in the *Illiad* are seen as particularly inspiring in matters of prophesy is thus because they have unwashed feet and sleep on the bare ground.[29] Similarly, many warriors, known as *monosandaloi*, kept one foot naked in battle in order to ensure a strengthening contact with the underground.[30] And for Lucretius it is also part of the shepherds' simple happiness that when dancing they stamp rigidly on naked Mother Earth.[31]

The cult beyond the images

If there are thus many references to actual practice in the sacral-idyllic landscapes, this, however, is not synonymous with an unprocessed 'realism'. Even though, around 75 AD, Pliny was still able to state that the earth "makes us also sacred, even bearing our monuments and epitaphs and prolonging our name and extending our memory against the shortness of time",[32] by and large we have to note that the cult in the actual Roman landscape was a cult in crisis.

Since Xenophanes (*c.* 500 BC) had suggested that myths could be understood allegorically and not as real events, a significant strand in Greco-Roman culture

Fig. 6.18. *Dionysus and Ariadne of Naxos* (*c.* 0-50 AD), fresco from Pompeii, Strada d'Olconio 3-5. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

demonstrates a scepticism towards the existence of deities in the sublunar world. Lucretius, the Epicurean representative of this view in Rome, wants, for example, to show "what animals arose from the earth, and what have never been born at any time; [...] and in what ways that fear of gods crept into the heart [of the human race], which in our earth keeps holy their shrines and pools, their altars and images."[33] Lucretius links this superstition to the first days of the human race, when

> rivers and springs invited them, as now the rushing of water down from the great mountains calls loud and far to the thirsting hordes of beasts. Next as they roamed abroad they dwelt in familiar woodland precincts of the Nymphs, whence they knew that some running rivulet issued rippling over the wet rocks in abundant flow and dripping upon the green moss, with plenty left to splash and bubble over the level plain.[34]

Even today, Lucretius declares, echoing valleys are locally assumed to be populated with nymphs and goat-hoofed satyrs, just as there are abundant stories of woodland music played by Pan on his pipe and of fauns who indulge in noisy nocturnal revelries. But to Lucretius' mind, stories such as these have the sole

objective of counteracting the idea that the rural populace lives in "a wilderness which even the gods have left", if they are not merely to tickle the ears of a too greedy humankind.[35]

If this scepticism was not, as here, articulated explicitly, it was certainly enforced by the owners of the *latifundia*. The wall paintings emphasise the freedom of the cult-worshipping rural people, but rural people of the real world who were unfortunate enough to be slaves on the large farms were afforded absolutely no freedom to cultivate any religious tendencies. Columella's *De agricultura* (*c.* 60 AD) even says of the estate manager – *vilicus* – who is himself a slave: "He must not think of offering sacrifices except on an instruction from his master; and he must not on his own initiative have any acquaintance with a soothsayer or fortune-teller [...]", these being two classes of people "who incite ignorant minds through false superstition to spending and then to shameful practices [...]."[36] The subordinate slaves would, of course, have even fewer rights.

But the period around the founding of the Empire was not only a time of scepticism and oppression; it was also a time characterised by frustration over the decline of the Roman religion. Rural shrines were probably the most vulnerable area, threatened as they were by systematised agriculture, building activity and general neglect. As early as the 3rd century BC, epigrams were complaining about the destruction of trees, sacred groves and burial gardens.[37] And in Augustus' day, Propertius laments the fate of the shrines originally worshipped by the rural people: "But now the shrines lie neglected in deserted groves: piety is vanquished and all men worship gold."[38]

This Golden Age *field* notion of an original simplicity threatened by a modern craving for luxury was a widespread topos. Varro states that the sacred groves around the Esquiline Hill have been reduced because everywhere greed is the goddess;[39] Quintilian that the grand trees of the old groves are worshipped less for religion than for beauty;[40] and Pliny writes:

> Once upon a time trees were the temples of the deities, and in conformity with primitive ritual simple country places even now dedicate a tree of exceptional height to a god; nor do we pay greater worship to images shining with gold and ivory than to the forests and to the very silences that they contain. The different kinds of trees are kept perpetually dedicated to their own divinities, for instance, the winter-oak to Jove, the bay to Apollo [...], the poplar to Hercules; nay, more, we also believe that the Silvani and Fauns and various kinds of goddesses are as it were assigned to the forests from heaven and as their own special divinities.[41]

With his belief that forest shrines thrive as they did formerly, and that they are valued just as fully as those made of precious materials, Pliny is raising an optimistic voice, though. In the previous century, Cicero had even protested that the facility of the augurs had been lost as a consequence of the aristocracy's neglect, and that the rituals were preserved even though their significance had been set aside.[42]

Thriving in parallel with this pessimism there was a widespread eagerness to rekindle religion. In his *Odes* Horace wrote: "Thy father's sins, O Roman, thou, though guiltless, shalt expiate, till thou dost restore the crumbling temples and shrines of the gods and their statues soiled with grimy smoke."[43] And, concerned about the disappearance of the sacred place, Varro wrote *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* (*Antiquities of Things Divine*), a work about Rome's religious past. *Antiquitas* – old deed or ancient times – was characteristically a recently-developed word, which had emerged alongside nostalgia for the national past.[44] However, despite all such nostalgia, Augustus, a unifying force in the rekindling of religion, was determined that these temples, with himself as "founder and renewer of all the temples", would no longer show signs of age.[45] They did anyway, for even though in 28 BC the Emperor allegedly renovated eighty-two old temples and shrines, their wood and terracotta were still in striking contrast to the newly-built temples constructed in marble. Ara Pacis in Rome, for example, features as a rural wooden enclosure translated into marble and inflated to gigantic proportions.[46] The rekindling of religion was further complicated by the new Oriental mystery cults, which were at cross purposes with Roman patriotism.

The cult landscape of the sacral-idyllic paintings, then, interplays with this development in all its contradictory dynamics. On the one hand, the images correspond to the Augustan attempts at rekindling religion by depicting a dying rural cult still going strong. On the other hand, the depiction takes place at such a suitably great distance from rural cultic practice – namely on the private walls of the well-to-do – that its predominant impression is that of decorative nostalgia. One manifestation of this ambiguity is seen in the images' strange mixture of poverty and luxury. The simple rural people might very well be moving around among crudely-hewn altars and simple Priapus statuettes, but the shrines might also – like Ara Pacis – be strikingly well-equipped: not the image-less groves of Pliny, but shining statues of gods in sumptuous architectural settings. Furthermore, the actual environments of the shrines become more luxurious over the course of time. Whereas the Second and the early Third Pompeian Styles (the latter more surface-bound) are characterised by modest rural houses, the end of the Third Style onwards teems with *villae urbanae*: column-clad and often double-winged residences.[47] In one scene we are even transported to the harbour of a shining city, where idols stand in state on rows of tall columns (FIG. 6.7). Even here, however, the idyllic illusion is maintained, as

the harbour's promontories are dotted with solitary fishermen holding rod and net. Similarly, it is unlikely that the primitive fishermen and shepherds should be thought, as Bergmann suggests, to be employed by wealthy villa-owners.[48] These owners never come into view, so the rural people's status is more accurately located in an indeterminate position between nomad and resident. The owners' dream of deluxe properties placed in an ownership-less Golden Age world?

That the sacral-idylls conjure up a simulacrum rather than a 'realistic' cult landscape does not, however, mean that this simulacrum is pure fiction. To some extent it could actually be identified with another simulacrum: the environment of the existing villas. When laying out the large villas from the late republican period onwards, it was inevitable that an occasional shrine would be swallowed up. This was the case, for example, with the sacred grove Lucus Feroniae, which was part of the grounds at the villa of the Volusii family.[49] These privately-owned shrines reinforced the identity of the villas and bound them to the patriotic past that Augustus was trying to rekindle. Nonetheless, the villa-owners' problem was that their properties were seen as decadent luxury in comparison with the modest estates. In *De re rustica* Varro wonders "[w]hy, your villa is plastered with paintings, not to speak of statues; while mine, though there is no trace of Lysippus or Antiphilus, has many a trace of the hoer and the shepherd."[50] Although they remained luxury objects, the job of the garden statues was actually to generate an unspoiled nature. As indicated in chapter 4, gardens, peristyles and courtyards recreated the milieu of poor rural people and their cult sites: caves, trees, altars and columns. Among the typical signs of an opulent villa, Propertius thus includes the artificial cave with a spring.[51] In the House of the Moralist in Pompeii, banquets, the diners reclining on couches, took place around a Grove of Diana with its tree, shrine and statue.[52] And, according to Pliny, even certain untreated trees were used as pseudo-sacred objects, as expensive as marble columns.[53] From this sophisticated angle even 'proper' idols thus became a kind of fine art. In Martial's *Epigrams*, a Priapus statuette can therefore go the whole way and ask that the small prosperous farm be protected – not as a result of the statuette's magic powers, but because it is a noble work of cypress in line with Phidias' craft.[54]

Did Roman culture also reach the romantic heights of including the *ruin* among its garden *follies*? The question apparently remains unanswered, but very occasionally we do indeed come across ruins among the sacral-idylls' otherwise so intact buildings. There seem to be two types, both cylindrical: [1] the ruined fortification tower, which is seen in, for example, the House of Argus in Herculaneum (FIG. 6.19);[55] [2] the ruined tower shell surrounding a sacred column, as we see in several frescoes (FIG. 6.20) and in the famous Hellenistic *Bauern relief*, now in the Munich Glyptothek (FIG. 6.21).[56] Both might depict the effect of age and possibly even neglect; in the case

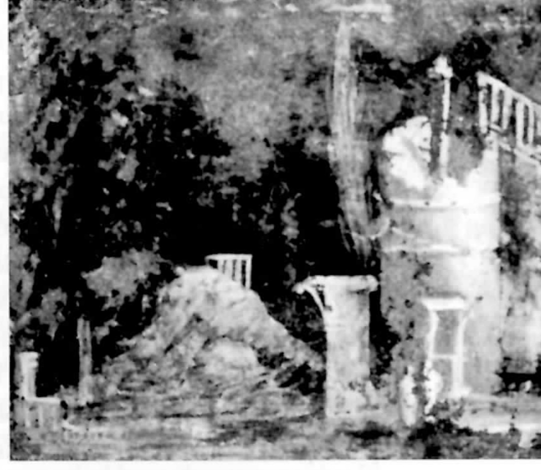
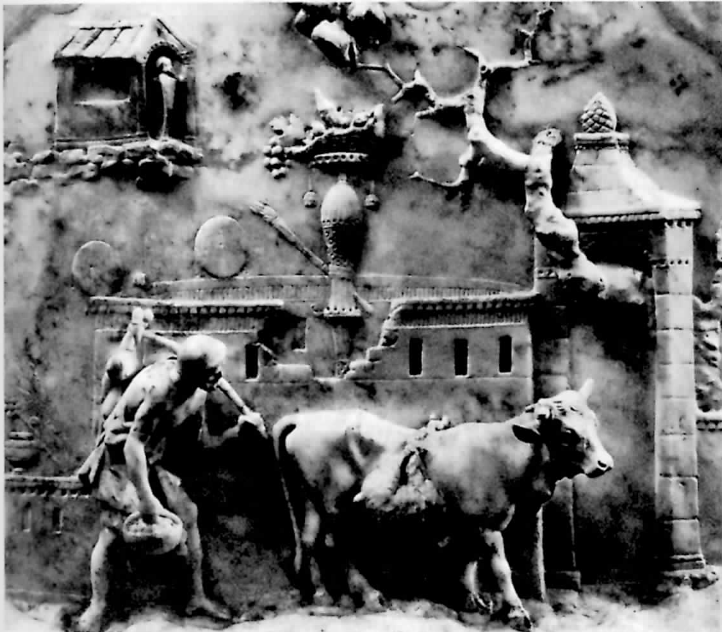


Fig. 6.19. *Sacral-Idyllic Landscape* (*c.* 50 AD), fresco from Herculaneum, II, 2 (House of Argus).

Fig. 6.20. *Sacral-Idyllic Landscape with Ruined Shrine* (*c.* 50 AD), fresco from Stabiae, Villa San Marco. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

Fig. 6.21. *Old Peasant in front of Rustic Shrine* (1st century BC?), Hellenistic relief (known as the *Bauern Relief*). Munich, Glyptothek.



of the latter, thus along the lines of Horace's "crumbling temples and shrines of the gods and their statues soiled with grimy smoke."[57] Whether or not this involves indignation or, on the contrary, an incipient delight in the beauty of decay, similar to that encountered in modernity, is an open question, albeit the latter option is tempting. But if that is the case, it can at most be a question of an embryonic stage, as the characteristics of the ruin – traces of prolonged decomposition, transitory stages between beginning and completion, continuous nuances – are all features that come into conflict with the Golden Age paradigm. The decomposition and transitory stages signify the impact of weather and time, and the nuances refer to an infinite pictorial space – both quintessentially modern features, which only appear occasionally in antiquity, later to be developed in a more diagrammatic way in the Middle Ages. Spengler is therefore still accurate when he deprives antiquity of "pious preservation of ruins" and furthermore remarks:

> That a Greek would have regarded the formation of patina as the ruin of the work, we can hardly doubt. It is not merely that the colour green, on account of its "distant" quality, was avoided by him on spiritual grounds. Patina is a symbol of *mortality* and hence related in a remarkable way to the symbols of time-measurement and the funeral rite.[58] [Spengler's italics]

6.4 The leisure landscape

Descriptions by Vitruvius and Pliny the Elder vs. extant visual evidence

Many of the features discussed so far are put into relief if we turn our attention to the two most comprehensive contemporaneous references to Roman wall paintings, those made by Vitruvius and Pliny. First Vitruvius who, shortly before 27 BC, describes what corresponds to the Second Pompeian style (beginning of 1st century BC onwards):

> Then they proceeded to imitate the contours of buildings, the outstanding projections of columns and gables; in open spaces, like exedrae, they designed scenery on a large scale in tragic, comic, or satyric style; in covered promenades, because of the length of the walls, they used for ornament the varieties of rural places [*varietatibus topiorum*], finding subjects in the characteristics of particular places; for they paint harbours, headlands, shores, rivers, springs, straits, temples, groves, mountains, cattle, shepherds. In places, some have also the anatomy of statues, the images of the gods,

> or the representations of legends; further, the battles of Troy and the wanderings of Ulysses over the countryside [*per topia*] with other subjects taken in like manner from Nature.[59]

By way of comparison, Pliny, approximately one hundred years later:

> Nor must Spurius Tadius [possibly Studius or Ludius] also, of the period of his late lamented Majesty Augustus, be cheated of his due, who first introduced the most attractive fashion of painting walls with pictures of country houses and porticoes and landscape gardens, groves, woods, hills, fish-ponds, canals, rivers, coasts, and whatever anybody could desire, together with various sketches of people going for a stroll or sailing in a boat or on land going to country houses riding on asses or in carriages, and also people fishing and fowling or hunting or even gathering the vintage. His works include splendid villas approached by roads across marshes [?], men tottering and staggering along carrying women on their shoulders for a bargain [?], and a number of humorous drawings of that sort besides, extremely wittily designed. He also introduced using pictures of seaside cities to decorate uncovered terraces, giving a most pleasing effect and at a very small expense.[60]

Both descriptions conform closely to the extant sacral-idyllic paintings, albeit they are neither systematic nor exhaustive. Among the stationary features of the landscapes, certain topic groups are conspicuous, most as intersections between the two literary references: *water*: rivers (V&P), springs (V), canals (V&P), marshes (P), fishing (P), coasts (V&P), seaside cities (P) and harbours (V); *undulations*: mountains (V), hills (P) and headlands (V); *areas of plant life*: woods (P), groves (V&P) and landscape gardens (P); *shrines*: groves (V&P); temples (V), statues (V) and images of gods (V); *architecture*: seaside cities (P), harbours (V), country houses (P) and porticoes (P). This structuring evokes a landscape very similar to the one we see in the surviving images: a plant-clad mountainous terrain submerged in quantities of water – water suggested by a total of nine different themes; in this terrain, moreover, shrines and architecture.

The descriptions also display, however, certain differences. Vitruvius makes no mention of landscape activities beyond pastoralism, or of narrative themes such as the battles of Troy and Ulysses' travels. Pliny passes over both, but he does refer to a lot of other genre-like activities: strolling, sailing boats, riding asses or carriages, visiting country houses across marshes, staggering around with women on one's shoulders, fishing, fowling, hunting and harvesting grapes. Yet, bearing in mind the extant sacral-idyllic paintings, we should note Pliny's silence on sacrifices, indeed on the sacred dimension altogether, apart from groves. This dimension is, however,

found in Vitruvius, who refers to groves, temples, statues and images of gods. On the other hand, he makes no reference whatsoever to any Spurius Tadius (or Ludius or Studius), nor does he mention country houses, porticoes and landscape gardens.

Are these differences due to the writers' more or less random knowledge and disposition or an actual development in the painting? In support of the latter, both writers are looking backwards: Vitruvius to the period from *c.* 90 BC and down to his own day in *c.* 30 BC; Pliny towards that time and on to the mid-1st century AD. Narrative themes in the panorama sequences could therefore very well have been an early fashion (cf. the *Odyssey Landscapes*, often dated to *c.* 40 BC). And even though nothing in the extant painting indicates that landscape images before Vitruvius were devoid of genre elements (as his own silence – apart from pastoral motifs – could suggest), or that sacrality subsequently died out (as Pliny's omissions indicate), it still seems likely that wall painting in this its final antiqe blossoming actually tended increasingly towards the blithe and genre-like. In particular, it is conceivable that luxurious villas with porticoes were first introduced in Augustus' day. Nevertheless, the conclusion has to be that the sacral-idyll, with some variations, was a fixed genre between *c.* 90 BC and onward to Pliny's day. If Spurius Tadius or Studius or Ludius was an actual existing innovator – which is not improbable – he could not have been active as late as Augustus' time, but only at the introduction of the Second Pompeian style in *c.* 90 BC.

If I now turn away from the sacrality of the sacral-idyllic landscapes and look at their idyll – a step which Pliny tempts us to take – it would be appropriate to dwell on the population of the landscapes. Who are they actually and what are they doing? The answer is already suggested by Pliny's cheerful tone of voice, with comments such as "humorous drawings", "extremely wittily designed" and "pleasing effect and at a very small expense". It is indeed possible to divide Pliny's actions into two types: [1] *recreational movements* and [2] *recreational occupations.*[61] The first category covers all travel around the landscape: walking, driving in carts, riding asses, sailing, tottering – all movements characterised by nonchalance, freedom and no binding to a single place. These nomadic displacements overflow continuously into the second category comprising pastoralism, fishing, fowling, hunting and grape harvesting, for, as the reader will know, these are the primary occupations of antiquity, the pre-civilisational pursuits, which are carried out effortlessly, independently and without processing nature. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that agriculture – the laborious work of civilisation – is conspicuous by its absence. The harvesting of grapes already challenges the idleness to such an extent that Pliny has to insert an "even" (*aut etiam*).

This literary image is corroborated in abundance by the observable painting. Among the countless delicate silhouettes restlessly travelling the length and breadth

of the Roman landscape images, we meet men with one or more sticks, men carrying packs and men with sacks on staffs (**FIG. 6.8**);[62] furthermore, ass riding and ass driving (**FIG. 6.8**), boatmen and shepherds with staffs and dogs (**FIG. 6.13**),[63] plus countless fishermen with nets and rods (**FIGS. 6.7** and **6.8**).[64] Also, people resting, women with children (**FIG. 6.10**) and women gardening.[65] Only the occasional atypical figure ruptures the idyll with something that looks like more laborious work. This is true of the depiction of building workers in a damaged fresco from Calidario del Bagno's San Marco.[66]

This scarcity of sweat is also confirmed by the few frescoes excavated at Pompeii depicting indoor-work and commerce. These scenes, which all seem to have been commissioned by shop-owners or merchants – some of them former slaves – in the late period between 62-79, are typically displaced to the margins of the decorative programmes. Moreover, apart from a single instance of carpentry, they mostly deal with 'lighter' work such as selling of everyday goods, cloth-making, fulling, gold-working and perfume-making (the last three occupations, in Casa dei Vettii, are even performed by playful *putti*).[67] Accordingly, what was until recently taken as a monumental depiction of commerce, the famous 'bakery' scene, probably celebrates a baker's dole of bread to the populace, a gracious gesture again resulting from the Golden Age *field* and its displacement of work and trade.[68]

And, of course, in the outdoor scenes the cornfields have to be left out. The previous observation that this was the result of impassable terrain can now be joined by a parallel cause: there are no farmers to plough, sow and harvest them.[69] The only feature the sacral-idylls offer by way of cultivation is the very occasional vineyard. One example of this is the Pompeian fresco with an exceptionally green and grapevine-clad mountain flanked by Bacchus, who is carrying a thyrsus and is also clad in grapes – like a veritable Ephesian Artemis (**FIG. 6.22**).[70] As the fresco was part of a household shrine – a *lararium* – Bacchus is performing a liquid offering (*libation*) to the guardian spirits of the house. And so the life-giving dimension of wine again lifts it out of the sphere of work.

Nor do the estates reveal much about their function, isolated as they are from the surrounding terrain. However, a distinction is made between the opulent villas with their peristyles and the smaller, modest farms evocative of a more unspoilt era, such as that of Romulus or Cato, for example; of the latter, Horace writes: "For them private assets were small [...]. No colonnades measured out by private rods trapped the cool shade of the northerly Bear [...]."[71]Although idealised, the small farms were often equipped with a round or square tower, possibly with a sloping roof. As can still be seen in Italy today, conveniently dry towers such as these were used as storerooms for fruit, hay, fodder or grain – if, that is, they were not *diaetae*, these being chapels or, for the grander households, rooms for meditation. In the

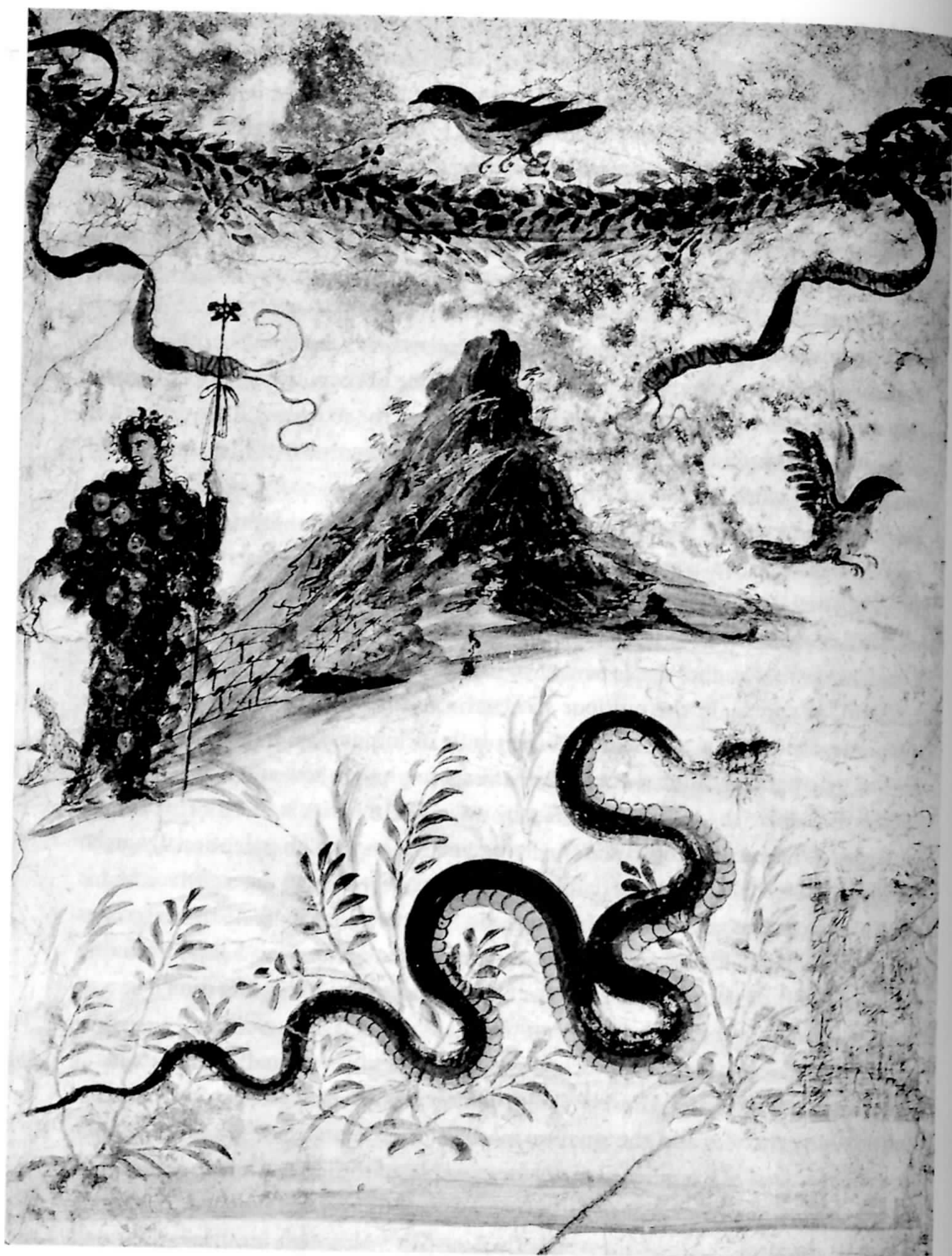


Fig. 6.22. *Bacchus and Mountain with Vines* (*c.* 0-79 AD), fresco (section) from Pompeii. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

Boscoreale cubiculum, we can even see the ladders which Columella says should be used to reach the granaries (FIG. 6.9).[72]

The only elements that could seriously upset the idyll are the many motifs taken from the world of seafaring: harbours, boats, Odysseus' travels, and so forth. As we have seen earlier, seafaring and its related enterprise, trade, are an indication of the post-Golden Age reality and thus in conflict with the idyll. Yet, seafaring would seem – like death and violence – to constitute an area of exception, which can be depicted because of its heroic and graceful qualities.[73]

Life in the actual Roman countryside

Not surprisingly, this recreational life of the sacral-idyllic landscape may be seen in a rather dialectic relationship to life as it was actually lived on the land. It was certainly still possible, especially in outlying mountain areas, to find farm workers who were free agents,[74] but in the low-lying country – the chief bastion of civilisation – the situation was the same everywhere: if not massive *latifundia* owned by wealthy city-dwellers and worked by slaves, then at least farms on which manual labour and ownership were separate functions. Varro takes the Aristotelian line and considers slaves to be among the tools on the farm, more specifically: "talking tools", as distinct from the semi-talking cattle and non-talking farm implements.[75] This slave-bound reality was as far removed as is imaginable from the mobile leisure life of the images. Of the estate manager who supervises the other slaves, *vilicus*, Columella pronounces:

> He should not frequent the town or any fairs except for the sale or purchase of something necessary; for he ought not to go beyond the limits of the estate nor by his absence give the slaves the opportunity of stopping work or committing misdemeanours. He should prevent the making of paths and new boundaries on the estate. He should receive a visit from any stranger as rarely as possible, and then only when he comes as a friend of his master. He should not make use of his fellow-slaves for any service to himself nor allow any of them to go beyond the boundaries of the estate except under stress of great necessity.[76]

This slave-based agriculture, with mobility restricted to an absolute minimum, with the boundaries of the estate to be respected and remain unchanged – where, in short, the greatest conceivable contrast to the sacral-idylls' free, nonchalant and multifarious modes of moving around is put into effect – found support in the classically-derived branches of Roman thinking, in which Plato's and Aristotle's arguments were repeated: in the urbanised state, the free citizen does not have time to cultivate the soil in person, and so the work has to be entrusted to another

social rank. As this social rank is, however, subject to a purpose beyond itself, it is unfree and inferior. Plutarch (*c.* 46 AD-*c.* 120 AD) claims that "while we delight in the work, we despise the workman", and gives the examples of the dyers and perfumers, both groups seen as low and sordid.[77] And Cicereo, possibly the most influential representative of this way of thinking, was of the opinion that physical work decreased interest in higher matters, because it lacked *liberales doctrinae* and *ingenuae artes*. In Cicero's *De oratore*, Antonius, as an expression of his contempt, calls the Orator a man with but the one talent: "Just a galley-slave or porter, [...] in fact as a fellow destitute of breeding and a mere boor."[78]

And yet, there was still a nostalgic yearning for the Roman empirical past – a past with small farms and field hands who were farmers, citizens and soldiers rolled into one.[79] According to Pliny, the fields were "tilled in those days by the hands of generals themselves", which was ideal as things thrived better "under honourable hands". The star model, Cincinnatus, was twice appointed dictator, all the while ploughing his small plot of land at the Vatican.

> But nowadays those agricultural operations are performed by slaves with fettered ankles and by the hands of malefactors with branded faces, although the Earth who is addressed as our mother and whose cultivation is spoken of as worship is not so dull that when we obtain even our farm-work from these persons one can believe that this is not done against her will and to her indignation. And we forsooth are surprised that we do not get the same profits from the labour of slave-gangs as used to be obtained from that of generals.[80]

With this last comment, Pliny is referring to the widespread agricultural crisis that weighed heavy on the early Empire. Pliny goes so far as to state that "large estates have been the ruin of Italy, and are now proving the ruin of the provinces too – half of Africa was owned by six landlords, when the Emperor Nero put them to death".[81] Even Columella, the unscrupulous regulator of the use of slaves, is in agreement and adds as cause the owners' absence and lack of interest. The reason for the exhaustion of the earth is not due to the earth itself, but because agriculture has been entrusted to "all the worst of our slaves, as if to a hangman for punishment", while we ourselves have crept inside the city walls, where "we ply our hands in the circuses and theatres rather than in the grainfields and vineyards." Even though Columella is also nostalgic for the rural discipline of the past, he nonetheless acknowledges that it has gone out of fashion, because it is "disgraceful and, in a sense, degrading or dishonourable to men of free birth." Columella's solution is therefore not a case of: back to the fields. Rather, he recommends – exactly as Xenophon had done four hundred years previously – that land should

be acquired close to the owner's home, so that he can visit it frequently and keep a very careful eye on it.[82]

Here we have the ambivalence again: on the one hand, longing for free farmers; on the other hand, contempt for manual work. In instances where the longing for rural life is expressed pictorially, it is therefore correspondingly blocked by the disgust for hard work before reaching the actual depiction of agriculture. The result is a blind spot in the pictorial view: the classical. The longing evades agriculture and ends up further out on the land and further back in time, namely at the semi-primitive occupations, the recreational time of which becomes a rustic mirror image of urban life's *liberales doctrinae*.

This blindness, in its pure form, was gradually isolated to the wall paintings of the private sphere. For included in the Augustan reforms was not only the rekindling of the old cult practice, but also the original, free agriculture.[83] As we will see in the next chapter, this endeavour did not actually result in a class of free farmers, but was rather one of the first steps in the development towards the feudal society of late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Looking at pictorial art, however, the Augustan agricultural reforms would only seem to have been made their mark in the public and not the private context. While a number of public Roman reliefs from this period adopt motifs with cereal culture, this culture does not materialise in the sacral-idyllic paintings. We have to go all the way to late antiquity, with its blurred boundaries between private and public, before residences are decorated with motifs from work on the land, including cereal culture.

Nor, therefore, do we find unconditional parallels in the painting to Virgil's *Georgics* (36-29 BC), the first extant didactic poem since Hesiod to be entirely devoted to farming.[84] Even though the *Georgics* was commissioned by the prosperous Maecenas, it was backed by the political power of Augustus. The emperor had confiscated large tracts of land, and Maecenas makes a speech recommending that he sells most of them, lending out

> all the money thus realized at a moderate rate of interest. [...] In this way not only will the land be put under cultivation, being sold to owners who will cultivate it themselves, but also the latter will acquire a capital and become more prosperous, while the treasury will gain a permanent revenue that will suffice for its needs.[85]

The *Georgics* is, albeit very indirectly, propaganda of sorts for these propositions attempting to reinstitute the old Roman free way of farming. The poem claims to want to instruct erring farmers, who are suffering from the effects of civil war and economic privations. Although it renders farm work visible, frequently emphasising the hard toil and battle with the weather, it is still unclear as to whether the farm

owners actually participate in the work or are merely supervisors. The following words, which are used very occasionally in the less work-ideologically loaded *Eclogues* and the *Aeneid*, do not feature at all: *servus* (slave), *servitium* (slavery), *dominus* (master), *domina* (lady), *opera* (average day's work for farm hands), *famulus* (male slave), *famula* (female slave); even the pragmatic word *colonus* (a farmer paying rent to a landowner) is consistently replaced with the less businesslike *agricola* or *rusticus*.[86] The poem, therefore, is still far from reflecting both the contemporaneous slavery and the feudal future of late antiquity.

The *Georgics* covers the following main topics: ploughing, sowing, weather, trees (especially olive and grapevine), animal husbandry and bee-keeping. The subject matter of the sacral-idyllic paintings is incompatible with the first three, but can be reconciled with the others. A more direct kinship is therefore to be found in the farm poem's predecessor: the *Eclogues* (also known as *Bucolics*, 37 BC), the Roman heir to Theocritus's *Idylls*. Here we do indeed encounter, as in Theocritus, scattered references to agriculture – the first *Eclogue* laments the way in which war ravages the domestic fields and ears of corn; the fifth, how the cornfields fall into decay after Daphnis' death[87] – but apart from these, the *Eclogues* mainly take place in an uncultivated nature, the chief dramatis personae being shepherds. As is the case with the *Georgics*, the employment status of the shepherds is extremely unclear. Tityrus in *Eclogue 1* is a freed slave;[88] Corydon in *Eclogue 2* is in love with his master's beloved Alexis, and must therefore be a slave, albeit he brags of his plentiful flock.[89] However, even though slave status is also possible in other *Eclogues* – for Damoetas, Menalcas and Moeris – what is most striking is that shepherds all have plenty of leisure time in which to cultivate broken hearts, singing competitions and delight in natural beauty.[90]

The points of similarity between the sacral-idyllic paintings and Virgil's *Eclogues* should not be interpreted as direct influence; rather, the two media run parallel to one another, influenced by the same epistemic *field*. This independence is corroborated by the derivation of many pictorial motifs from Greek and not Roman literature. If the sacral-idylls are related to a literary text, the most likely candidate is thus Theocritus. Fishermen, for example, feature both in Theocritus' *Idylls* and the paintings, but not in Virgil. However, there are still many elements of the sacral-idylls – harbours, villas, shrines, the Egyptian ingredients, etc. – that do not feature or are but scantily in evidence in the work of the Alexandrian poet; the sacral-idyll is therefore primarily a pictorial genre in its own right.

Given that the rural life of the sacral-idyllic paintings is displaced in location vis-à-vis the urban beholder, there are very hazy boundaries between the 'ordinary' rural life and the description of actually exotic worlds – worlds at a distance from the known world. The sacral-idylls turn their gaze both to a closer, civilised exoticism,

Fig. 6.23. *Pygmies on the Nile* (*c.* 0-79 AD), fresco from Pompeii. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

Fig. 6.24. *Egyptianising Landscape* (*c.* 0-79 AD), engraving after fresco from Pompeii. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale.

the Egyptian, and to a more distant, seriously primitive one, that of the Pygmies. The dwarf-sized, black-skinned, large-headed Pygmies were thought to live in the area around the upper reaches of the Nile, resulting in a humorous borderline genre of the Egyptianising landscape. On this periphery of civilisation, and surrounded by the Nile marshland, the Pygmies live in close proximity to the water's population of wild beasts, against which they are consequently obliged to make a stand. A Pompeian fresco illustrates this gruesome struggle with crocodiles, hippopotamuses and other foe (FIG. 6.23). As can be seen from the thatched, cylindrical huts, the genre also excels in studies of primitive architecture (FIG. 6.24). The whole sequence from the semi-civilized Egypt to the distant, primitive areas at the source of the Nile can be seen depicted in the panoramic *Nile landscape* from Palestrina (late 2nd century BC?; FIG. 6.1). The rococoesque amusement with which the Pygmies are treated in frescoes and mosaics is consistent with the literary descriptions of distant races (Herodotus, Pliny, and so forth). While beings from the adjacent wilderness can still have a fertilising or demonic power, those from faraway areas are mostly fascinating by virtue of their strangeness.[91]

6.5 Origins of the sacral-idyllic landscape

At what point does the painting with landscape as its main theme emerge, and is it possible to pin down particular sources by which it is inspired? First, we must establish what exactly is meant by an image having landscape as its main theme. As we have seen, representations of nature without human figures are far from rare in pre-modern pictorial art, so a landscape image as such will first be valid when it has a degree of spatiality and actual implementation of depth of field. As landscape images with depth of field are, however, without the *numen* that validated their predecessors' figureless existence, they must now have a figurative presence to take over this function. If the landscape of an image that includes human figures is to be considered its main theme, then it must either have no narrative motif or the narrative motif must be subordinate to the space; in other words, we are dealing with a painting of the category 'landscape with...'.

As indicated in chapter 1, lack of evidence – written and pictorial alike – means that what can be said about the genesis of landscape painting in antiquity is going to be rather hypothetical. Woermann was probably on the right track when he called Greek stage design "mother of landscape painting",[92] because theatre scenery would presumably have provided the first monumental representations of nature in Greek art, just as it comprised the first forum for perspective with effects of light and shade: skiagraphy or scenography. But judging by their successors in Roman

wall painting – particularly the Boscoreale villa's satyric cave with its closed rock wall and only potential depth of field – plus my earlier deliberations on the *numen*/human presence in antique representations of depth, there would also seem to be clear limits as to how far stage scenery devoid of human presence can open up. It is not until we have compositions which include human figures that the definitive opening up towards the wide open spaces can take place and an actual landscape painting emerge.

The more specific date at which this breakthrough happened in the time-span between classical stage scenery and sacral-idylls is impossible to pinpoint, but a reasonable suggestion is the 2nd century BC. The end of the century probably produced the abovementioned Palestrina mosaic, which shows the varied life along the Nile from a bird's eye perspective. And if we combine extant statements by Valerius Maximus and Diodorus Siculus, it appears that Demetrius, an Alexandrian painter who, when living in Rome, gave shelter to the exiled King Ptolemy VI (*c.* 186-145 BC), could be referred to as *topographer.*[93] This term can almost only mean 'place painter', bearing in mind that in the following century Vitruvius used the very word *topia* of the rural places in the sacral-idylls and the Odyssey illustrations. Perhaps the first landscape paintings even originated from Demetrius' birthplace Alexandria, Theocritus' home city. The sacral-idylls' Egyptian elements and use of Greek literary motifs might therefore be vestiges of the genre's origins.[94] Against the background of the influence of theatre scenery on landscape painting, one argument for an Alexandrian origin is Aratus' (*c.* 271-213 BC) comment, according to Plutarch, that "everything in Egypt is play-acting and painted scenery".[95] If Ludius was a real-life pioneer, his contribution could then have been to take a genre that was fully-developed in Alexandrian panel painting and transfer it to the fresco, which was the genre that became the Roman speciality.

The precise extent to which the fully-crystallised landscape painting exploits theatre scenery is, however, hard to determine as we know very little about the look of this scenery. It was quite definitely influenced by the scenery's seductive illusion. *Skenographia* and its synonym *skiagraphia* found, as mentioned, such favour that the words were quickly used of perspectival and light/shade representations of every kind. In the 2nd century AD Strabo is still saying that "the crowns of those hills" above the river flowing alongside Campus Martius in Rome give the impression of *skenographia.*[96]

But how full an image of nature could scene painting actually offer? In Vitruvius' later discussion of scene painting it comes under the three categories of tragic, comic and satyric:

> The tragic are designed with columns, pediments and statues and other royal surroundings; the comic have the appearance of private buildings and balconies and projections with windows made to imitate reality, after the fashion of ordinary buildings; the satyric settings are painted with trees, caves, mountains and other country features, designed to imitate rural places [*topeodi*].[97]

As described by Vitruvius, these categories are each represented by a wing in what were known as *periaktoi*, these being three-sided revolving devices flanking the centre stage – a royal palace – and supplying the changing acts with the right backdrop. It is not quite clear as to whether the satyric scenery comprises variations on a specific image or if there are many types, but the latter would seem to be most likely. The Boscoreale caves must at least reflect this satyric tradition, because here we find caves and trees, just as the rock walls can be regarded as a mountain. This assumption is corroborated by the only surviving satyr plays – Euripides' *Cyclops* and Sophocles' fragmentary *Ichneutai* – both of which stipulate a cave in the background.[98]

Vitruvius' description should not, however, be interpreted as if each type of scenery belongs to a particular type of play. Theatre history studies of Greek scenography might well provide hypothetical categories of scenery which are remarkably close to those of Vitruvius – partly architectural, partly representing nature – but these categories relate in a rather irregular way to the types of drama. A tragedy, for example, does not necessarily insist on palace architecture as a background, but can just as well take place in untamed nature, and the location often changes within the same drama.

If we turn to the appearance of the scenery representing nature, the question is again if there was a wide variety, a few variations or possibly just the one type. The latter option is advanced by H.G. Beyen, who is of the opinion that tragedy and the satyr play have one type of scenery: that which is reflected in the Boscoreale cubiculum.[99] The theatre historian Pickard-Cambridge finds the situation more complicated, albeit he is very swayed by the idea of a fixed cave setting. Although he never advances a clear-cut hypothesis, a close reading of the dramas has led him to the concept of a standard set made of wood or canvas, which can be rearranged as desired. Besides architectural scenery with palaces, temples, private houses and tent camps, he mentions, as regards representations of nature, a rock with a central cave, a rural district with or without cave, a seashore with rocks and finally a grove or woodland area.[100] One example of the woodland type is *Oedipus at Colonus*, which takes places in front of a sacred, screened grove.[101] Bearing the Roman wall painting in mind, it is tempting here to imagine a genealogy leading to garden frescoes such as Livia's. The other stage settings, with their emphasis on wilderness, rocks and water, are also conspicuously in keeping with the later sacral-idyllic landscapes.

Even though landscape painting – like the illusionistic architectural scenery – would thus seem to be stylistically and in terms of content influenced by the theatre, I must however repeat that a number of its characteristic elements – rocks, caves, water, wilderness – cannot be restricted to any particular iconographic genre, but are laid down in the landscape paradigm as such. And if we do accept a degree of influence from theatre scenery, it must again be noted that the framed landscape painting has crossed a threshold which most probably blocked its predecessor, i.e. that of pictorial space. The new wide open spaces being explored in the sacral-idyllic landscapes are inconceivable without the presence of human figures. The sacral-idylls will therefore only be able to share space with an architectural setting qua inserted panels *in* it and not via window openings *through* it. Breaking through the wall and directing a continuous panoramic gaze from interior to distant expanses would have to await the painting of post-1420 modernity.

Jacob Wamberg

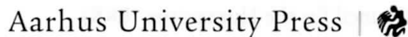
Landscape as World Picture

Tracing Cultural Evolution in Images

VOLUME I

From the Palaeolithic Period to the Middle Ages

Translated by Gaye Kynoch



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