

Villa Magna near Anagni: the emperor, his winery and the wine of Signia

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The letters of Marcus Aurelius

Writing to his tutor, Fronto, the future emperor Marcus Aurelius describes his stay at an imperial estate near Anagni, southeast of Rome.

IV.4: M. Caesar to his teacher M. Fronto, greeting.

After I climbed up into the carriage and said goodbye to you, we had a not so uncomfortable journey, but we were sprinkled by rain for a little bit. Before we got to the villa, though, we turned off towards Anagnina, almost a mile from the road, and then we saw that ancient town [...]

IV.5: Hail, my dearest master!

We are well. Today I studied from the ninth hour to the second hour, being well disposed from food; from the second hour to the third, I walked around most cheerfully in front of my bedroom in my sandals. Then I put proper shoes on as well as my cloak (for we had been instructed to appear like this), and went out to greet my lord. We set out for a hunt and performed rather great feats. We heard through some talk that boars had been captured, but there was no chance to see anything. Still, we climbed a pretty steep hill, then after midday we went back home, and I set myself to my books. So with my shoes off and my clothes set aside on the bed, I stayed for two hours on my couch. I read Cato's oration *On the property of Pulchra* and another one in which he impeached a tribune [...]

IV.6: Hail, most charming teacher!

We are well. I overslept a bit on account of a slight cold, but this seems to have subsided, so at the eleventh hour of the night until the third hour of the day I read from Cato's *De Agricultura* a bit and wrote a little bit (less badly than yesterday, thank god). Then, after greeting my father, I relieved my throat by swallowing honey water all the way down and then spitting it back out — better I say this than 'gargling', though this word is found in Novius and others, I think. So with my throat tended to, I set out for my father and stood by him at the sacrifice. Then I went to lunch. What do you think I ate? Just a small bit of bread, but I saw others eating beans, onions, and small fish with roe inside. Then we set ourselves to the task of picking the grapes; we sweated, and rejoiced, and, as the author says, "we left high-hanging grapes surviving". At the sixth hour we returned home.

I studied for a little while, and ineptly at that. Then I spoke a lot with my mother, who was sitting on the couch. My conversation was this: "What do you think my Fronto is doing just now?" Then she said, "What, on the other hand, do you think my Gratia is doing?" Then I said, "What about our little sparrow, small Gratia?" While we were chatting and conversing about these things, which one of us loved the one or the other of you more, the gong rang, that is, it was announced that my father had gone over to the bath. Having bathed, we therefore dined in the pressing room (we didn't bathe in the pressing room, but, having washed, we ate there) and we happily heard the peasants bantering. Then, I came back, but before turning over on my side and beginning to snore, I set out my homework and gave my kindest master an account of the day; I would gladly endure the annoyance of missing him a bit more, if I could (transl. M. Andrews)

Apart from showing Marcus, then little more than 20 years old, as a willing if playful student of rhetoric, poetry and agriculture, the passage emphasizes the importance of the

* E. Fentress is responsible for the sections on "The site", "The imperial winery", and "Discussion: functional luxury", M. Maiuro for those on the letters, the identification of the estate, the dating of the villa, the wine of Signia and the economy of the villa. "Previous structures in the area of the villa" was written jointly.