

This is the first page only. On how to acquire the full article please click this link.

## Spear-won land at Boscoreale: on the royal paintings of a Roman villa

R. R. R. Smith

One of the most important wall-painting cycles surviving from antiquity is now divided between the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Museo Nazionale in Naples (figs. 4-10).<sup>1</sup> The paintings come from a Roman villa at Boscoreale, near Pompeii, and were made in the middle of the 1st c. B.C. Their subject is Macedonian and royal, and they are generally agreed to be copies or versions after a lost Hellenistic frieze of the late 4th or 3rd c. B.C. Other wall-paintings survive from the villa, but it is on this royal frieze that this paper will focus.

A new interpretation of what precisely is represented in one of the main scenes, the controversial 'Macedonia' panel (fig.4), provides the occasion for a wider assessment of the frieze. What are the Hellenistic themes and ideas that connect the self-contained panels of the frieze? Why were they reproduced on the walls of a Roman villa? And why are there no other paintings like them in the very extensive remains of later Pompeian wall decoration? The Boscoreale frieze, we will see, is to be understood as an extreme instance of the desire of late-Republican aristocrats to evoke a regal setting in their villas. Before coming to details, it may be useful to say something more generally on the Hellenistic décor of Roman residences in the late Republic.

### Hellenistic décor of Roman villas

The luxury villa was the main context for the conspicuous consumption of Hellenistic art and culture by the Roman aristocracy. In public life at Rome, a senator aimed to cut a severe figure of traditional Roman values — austere, practical, conservative. Such was the moral currency of senatorial competition. In the private life of his household and in his villas, however, the rules were different. Stupendous wealth derived from recent conquest and looting in the Hellenistic world, combined with the ready availability of Hellenistic cultural goods, had led to a parallel area of competition, that of the extravagant display of refined living — of building, decorating, eating, philosophizing. The means for all this came from the Greek East, both the repertoire of ideas and the service personnel — the artists, decorators, chefs, and intellectuals. The name given to the whole phenomenon by most Roman aristocrats in 'public' contexts was *luxuria* — a simple code-name for the Hellenistic arts of living which, in other, 'private' circumstances, were to be openly embraced. The Roman house and luxury villa were, of course, hardly private residences in the modern sense. The Roman aristocrat, in addition to his cultural pursuits, also received there clients and associates in graded social procedures from the morning audience (*salutatio*) to the grand dinner. His residences were private in the important technical sense that the aristocrat was not there conducting affairs of the state (*res publicae*) but his own affairs (*res privatae*). A noble's residence was thus both his business headquarters and the locus for his hellenized life of cultured leisure (*otium*). Given the villa's technically 'private' character, the aristocrat was here free from 'public' restraints on the decoration of his life, free from traditional limitations on the grandeur of his personal *mise-en-scène*.<sup>2</sup>

---

1 For much useful comment, assistance, and advice that greatly improved this paper, the author would like to thank the following very warmly: A. Atwell, L. Bier, R. Billows, R. Brilliant, C. Faltermeier, J. Mertens, J. Van Voorhis; lecture audiences at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Emory University, Harvard University, the University of Washington at Seattle; and the anonymous reviewers of this journal.