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Visualizing Pliny's villas

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REINHARD FÖRTSCH, *ARCHÄOLOGISCHER KOMMENTAR ZU DEN VILLENBRIEFEN DES JÜNGEREN PLINIUS* (Philip von Zabern, Mainz am Rhein, 1993). ISBN 3-8053-1317-9. 202 pp., 86 plates.

PIERRE DE LA RUFFINIÈRE DU PREY, *THE VILLAS OF PLINY FROM ANTIQUITY TO POSTERITY* (University of Chicago Press, 1994). ISBN 0-226-17300-3. 377 pp., 198 figs., 48 color pls.

"... Quoniam ego ignoro, inquit, *quid sit villa*, velim me doceas, ne labar imprudentia ..." Varro, *RR* 3.2.3

"What is a villa?" asks the augur in Varro's mock Platonic dialogue. His query reminds us of our modern struggle to define that elusive and dynamic phenomenon: the Roman villa. In the diatribe against private luxury that follows, Varro's speakers articulate the sum of contradictory forms and purposes the villa had become by the mid-1st c. B.C. Nearly two centuries later, the wealthy administrator Pliny adds to our picture by describing in letters two of his country estates — the longest, most specific contemporary accounts of Roman villas we have. This review examines two recent explorations of Pliny's villas. While R. Förtsch's Göttingen dissertation aims to historicize Pliny the villa-owner by comparing the described components of his estates with archaeological remains, P. Ruffinière du Prey, an architectural historian at Queen's University in Montréal, celebrates the ongoing tradition of imaginative restitutions of Pliny's villas since antiquity.

Förtsch's study is timely. The past few decades have seen numerous excavations of villas coupled with a resurgent interest in Roman domestic life. The retrieval of villa gardens, the contextual studies of sculpture, mosaics, and painting, and new examinations of literary sources for evidence of social rituals provide an expanded framework within which to consider Pliny's words. In addition, literary description itself has become a focus, as philologists and art historians engage in a lively dialogue about the verbal and the visual, often attempting to locate a "common denominator" behind texts and images such as Roman education, and specifically rhetorical training.¹

In a broader disciplinary context, du Prey's book also appears at an opportune moment. His final chapter, "The joys of emulation", charts a revival of interest in Pliny's villas among architects, artists, and architectural historians since the international architectural competition and accompanying exhibition, "La Laurentine", was held in Paris in 1982 and in Montréal in 1983 (for which du Prey was guest curator). His narrative of the reception of Pliny's letters speaks to the current interest in historiography, and although Förtsch's book appeared too late to be included, it adds another voice to du Prey's history as the first rigorous engagement with the text by a classical archaeologist since K. Lehmann in 1936 and H. Tanzer in 1924.²

1 Among the many publications are H. Mielsch, *Die römische Villa* (Munich 1987); A. Carandini, A. Ricci, and M. de Vos, *Settefinestre: una villa schiavistica nell'Etruria romana* 3 vols. (Modena 1985); M. R. Wojcik, *La Villa dei Papiri ad Ercolano* (Sopr. Arch. di Pompei. Monografia 1, Rome 1986); R. Neudecker, *Die Skulpturenausstattung römischer Villen in Italien* (Mainz 1988); E. K. Gazda (ed.), *Roman art in the private sphere* (Ann Arbor 1991) 145-56 for more bibliography; J. Clarke, *The houses of Roman Italy 100 B.C.-A.D. 250* (Berkeley 1991); A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and society in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Princeton 1994) [both reviewed in this issue]; C. Edwards, *The politics of immorality in ancient Rome* (Cambridge 1993) 137-72; J. Elsner, *Art and the Roman viewer* (Cambridge 1995) 49-87; O. K. McEwen, "Hadrian's rhetoric II: thesaurus eloquentiae, the villa at Tivoli," *Res* 25 (Spring 1994) 51-60. On ekphrasis and viewing in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, see most recently S. Goldhill and R. Osborne, *Art and text in ancient Greek culture* (Cambridge 1994).

2 The exhibition at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal and the Canadian Center for Architecture