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Convivial spaces: dining and entertainment in the Roman villa*

Katherine M. D. Dunbabin

When one visited a wealthy Roman in his villa, the main social events centred around dining. Guests might indeed spend part of their day riding or hunting, at the baths, in reading and discussion; but the crowning point was dinner, which began in mid afternoon and might last well into the night. The written sources make this eminently plain; from Cicero's anxieties about entertaining Julius Caesar at his villa at Puteoli (*Ad Att.* 13.52) right through to Sidonius Apollinaris' account five hundred years later of his stay as a guest at two neighbouring villas in Gaul (*Ep.* 2.9), it is the meals that are the focus of the hospitality. And the success of the meal was determined, not only by the quality and variety of the food and drink served, but by the elegance of its setting. These concerns were not peculiar to country life; in town too, dining was the central event of Roman social life, the main opportunity for the rich man's conspicuous display. But although much of the ceremonial of dining, and the ostentatious consumption that accompanied it, could be exercised equally in town or country, the villa owner had certain opportunities not present in town, above all in providing a suitable setting for the meal.

Many accounts, from the late Republic to the end of the ancient world, illustrate the concern of the villa owner for the selection of rooms for dining, with care for such matters as their siting to ensure a view or the provision of favourable climatic conditions: for instance, Lucullus' villas near Tusculum, with open-air dining chambers for summer use (*Plut., Luc.* 39, 3-5); the younger Pliny's lengthy descriptions of the various dining spaces and their attractions in both his Tuscan and Laurentine villas (*Ep.* 2.17; 5.6); and Sidonius' account of the dining-room at Avitacum (*Ep.* 2.2.11).¹

It is important to remember that outdoor settings for the meal can be as lavish as those indoors. Indeed, often outdoors and indoors merge, so that a waterfall may run through the dining-room, as described in Sidonius' poem on the castle of Leontius (*Carm.* 22.206-10), while Pliny describes a *cenatiuncula* in which a marvellous spring rises (*Ep.* 4.30.2). There is a theatrical quality about many such settings, where part of the entertainment comes from the setting itself. Thus Varro and, less successfully, Lucullus set up *triclinia* in the midst of aviaries, where the birds flutter around the guests as if in a little theatre; and Hortensius had a *triclinium* in the midst of his wild beast park, where a singer dressed as Orpheus sang among the beasts (*Varro, Rust.* 3.4.3; 3.5.9-17; 3.13.2-3). More eccentrically, both the emperor Gaius and Licinius Mucianus gave banquets inside hollow plane trees, one with 15 guests and the servants, the other with 18 (Pliny, *NH* 12.9-10); while Elagabalus' declawed lions and leopards, trained to jump onto the couches in the middle of the meal, belong in the same tradition, though the guests may not always have appreciated the fact (*SHA, Elagabal.* 21.1).

In more conventional settings, an enormous variety of entertainment might be offered. We hear most often of music, from the lyre and flute to the water-organ, and of singing and dancing; while the more sedate preferred recitations, poetry, and story-telling.² Livelier and more

* This paper was originally presented at the First Williams Symposium (on the Roman villa) in May 1990 at the University of Pennsylvania, and it was intended to be published in the proceedings of that symposium. The long delays which have afflicted the publication of those proceedings have made it desirable to publish it separately, lest it become obsolete. I have, however, left it in approximately the form in which it was delivered, apart from adding more recent references wherever possible. It was meant to provide an overview, and many of the points deserve much fuller treatment than is possible here.

1 For the dining-rooms in Pliny's villas, see Förtsch 1993, 100-16, with extensive discussion of parallels.

2 Numerous examples in Bonaria 1983, who covers other *acroamata* as well as music.