

The laurel grove of the Caesars: looking in and looking out*

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Abstract

The present paper represents an attempt to imagine the visual impact of the garden terrace in the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta. Excavations on the terrace have brought to light numerous planting pots and the remains of a double aisled portico. This evidence allows for a tentative reconstruction, which brings about considerations about the intentions behind the design of the garden sector of the villa and its date. It is argued that the sculpting of the hilltop should be understood as an intentional act to dominate the visual ideology of the landscape, where the outward display and the view had by others of the villa and its laurel grove was the prime concern. It is suggested that the complex might have served as a visual statement of the sacral dimension of the Augustan rule, alluding to the architecture of a sanctuary. In connection to this, other monuments, such as the *tropaeum* at Nikopolis, are brought in as analogies.

Introduction

Whereas the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta is well known for its garden frescoes and the cuirassed statue of Augustus found in 1863, the actual plan of the villa is still incompletely understood. According to the information given in the excavation reports from 1863-64 quite an extensive part of the remains were exposed, but the only structure left visible in the subsequent years was the subterranean room with the garden frescoes.¹ Thanks to the work carried out by the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma from 1982 onwards, a large part of the living quarters of this famous villa have now been brought to light, dating from the late Republic to the early fourth century AD.²

It has long been recognized that the complex is divided into two sectors of almost equal size; the one to the W consists of the rooms of the villa, whereas the one to the E constitutes a seemingly empty terrace.³ This terrace, framed by substructures along the S side, and a marked

difference in level (some 5–7 m) along the N side, has remained understudied over the years. In 1956 Heinz Kähler carried out a limited investigation of the terrace, with the intention of finding the original spot of display for the statue of Augustus. From the weeds growing across the dry field (the terrace was still used for agriculture) he was able to discern the outline of parallel walls, which hinted at porticoes running along the W and E side respectively.⁴ Limited excavations proved him right, and a sounding conducted against the second, higher terrace, further revealed buttresses set between parallel walls (*Fig. 1*). Since no floor was found in front of these, Kähler excluded the existence of a portico along the N side, and interpreted these remains as a kind of “hanging garden”.⁵ The S side of the terrace, on the other hand, showed no traces of walls (except the substructures, on which see more below), which led to the conclusion that this side had only held a demarcation in the form of a balustrade, which allowed a view of the Tiber and the Roman Campagna below.⁶ In conclusion, Kähler suggested that the famous laurel grove of the Caesars might have stood on this terrace.⁷

However, the results of the investigation left several questions open. It is difficult, for example, to deduce from Kähler’s sketch whether the W portico corresponds to the easternmost rooms of the villa, discovered during the 1980s, or actually represents an individual structure in front of these. The aim of this contribution is to account for the finds made during more recent excavations and, more importantly, to discuss the possible ideological and architectural context for the layout of the garden terrace.

* I am greatly indebted to the *Fondazione Famiglia Rausing*, whose generous support made the Garden Archaeological Project in the Villa of Livia possible, and to Dott. Gaetano Messineo, who invited the Swedish Institute in Rome to work on the site. My thanks are extended to Daniel Fuglesang for correcting my English.

¹ For the history of the studies at the site, see Calci & Messineo 1984, 7–13. It seems unlikely that the 1863-64 excavations reached beyond the living quarters of the villa. For a reprint of the 19th century reports, see *ibid.* 66–71.

² Calci & Messineo 1984; Messineo 1991; Messineo 2001.

³ Kähler 1959, 9–10; Messineo 1991, 221. In the sake of clarity I will use the terms West, East, North and South in the following, although it is recognized that the villa is not exactly orientated along the cardinal points.

⁴ Kähler 1959, 9.

⁵ Kähler 1959, 10.

⁶ Kähler 1959, 10.

⁷ Kähler 1959, 27.

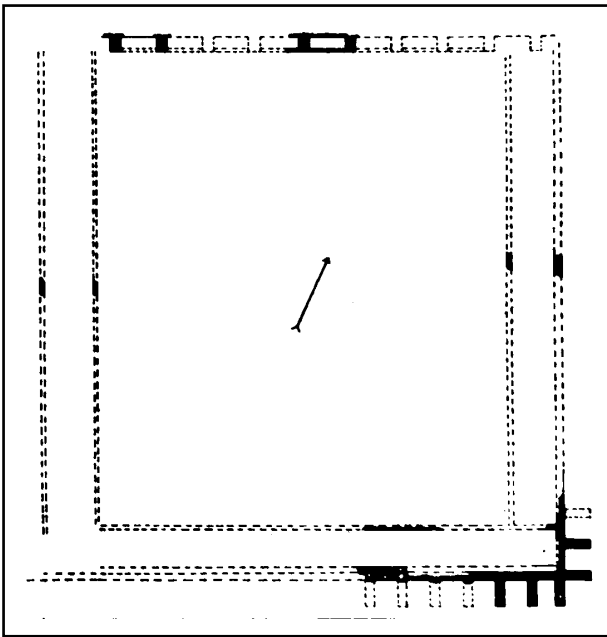


Fig. 1. The Garden terrace in 1956 (After Kähler 1959, 8, fig. 2).

The archaeological evidence

In 1996 the Swedish Institute in Rome launched a five year project in collaboration with the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma and Gaetano Messineo, with the aim of extending the knowledge of the gardens in the Villa of Livia. Preliminary reports on these excavations have appeared elsewhere, wherefore the results need not be repeated here in detail.⁸ Suffice it to recapitulate the extension of the excavation, and the finds of primary concern for the present discussion (Fig. 2). During the first season, a series of trial trenches were laid out from the exit of the villa towards the centre of the terrace. Apart from establishing the ancient level of the terrace, these excavations brought to light a foundation wall running parallel to the villa, a wall most likely to be identified with the one located by Kähler in the 1950s. The wall was found to stand in a *fossa* and an underground room cut into the bedrock, and was surrounded by a substantial earth fill on both sides. Since this did not contribute to our understanding of the garden in a strict sense, this area was not further investigated.

A geophysical survey was conducted on the terrace the following year. While the resistivity dataset gave no clear suggestions of any formal layout of garden beds or rock-cut pits as known from other gardens,⁹ there were clear indications of walls along all sides but the south one, as well as a large rectangular anomaly at the centre of the terrace.¹⁰ On the basis of this, the areas of further investi-

gation were chosen, albeit by necessity restricted to only small portions of the terrace.

Investigations in the central area brought to light fragments of terracotta planting pots and traces of stake holes, but no rectangular feature could be confirmed, and modern ploughing had brought havoc down to the bed rock in most places.¹¹ This was especially the case in the area in front of the E portico, which was investigated during the last season. That the terrace once held a garden is beyond doubt though, in light of the scattered fragments of 17 planting pots, or *ollae perforatae*, encountered in these two areas.

A third area of excavation focused on the NE corner of the terrace. Here, walls running E-W and N-S seemed to have formed the limit of the terrace. Behind the wall along the N side a complex structure of parallel walls and buttresses set against the upper hill came to light. Water was found to have been drained through tubes from the rectangular compartments into a channel running in front of them. A tentative identification of this structure as a kind of “hanging garden”, following Kähler’s suggestion, should most likely be refuted.¹² The walls should preferably be understood as to have a retaining function — such buttresses are, after all, a common feature in connection to terrace walls in uneven terrain all around Rome — with the combined purpose of preventing moisture from damaging the wall of the portico in front.

The existence of a portico had been confirmed already during the second season. Thanks to the collapse of the E wing’s back wall into a rift in the tufa bedrock, architectural members had been preserved from later re-use or demolition. This material comprised pieces of brick-built columns, stucco flutes, a torus of an Attic column base, a lime stone achantus leaf from a Corinthian capital, and parts of a terracotta sima.¹³ However, it was only during the last season’s penultimate week that foundations for columns turned up, together with a second wall of the eastern wing. It suddenly became apparent that we were dealing with a two aisled portico, and it is only to be regretted that there was no time or resources left to continue and expand the excavation at that point.

On the basis of these discoveries, it was suggested that a double aisled portico ran along the E and N sides of the terrace, and probably along the W side and possibly along the S side too.¹⁴ These preliminary conclusions demand a more elaborated assessment and discussion, to which I now will turn.

⁸ Liljenstolpe & Klynne 1997-1998; Klynne & Liljenstolpe 2000.

⁹ Jashemski & Ricotti 1992, 586–587 with references to other sites.

¹⁰ Liljenstolpe & Klynne 1997-1998, 136 fig. 11.

¹¹ Klynne & Liljenstolpe 2000, 226.

¹² Thus *contra* Klynne & Liljenstolpe 2000, 230.

¹³ Liljenstolpe & Klynne 1997-1998, 141, figs. 19–21; Klynne & Liljenstolpe 2000, 232.

¹⁴ Klynne & Liljenstolpe 2000, 231–232.



Fig. 2. Excavated areas 1996–1999 (After E. M. Pinto-Guillaume, elaborated by A. Klynne).

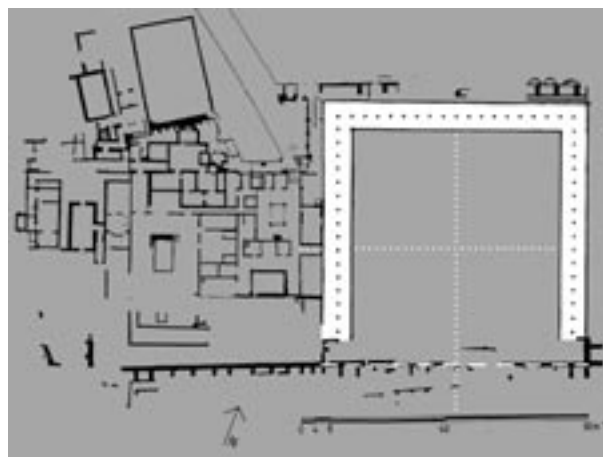


Fig. 3. Suggested interpretation of the archaeological record, showing a *porticus triplex* (After E. M. Pinto-Guillaume, elaborated by A. Klynne).

A *porticus triplex*?

It is apparent that the S side of the terrace is the most elusive zone, and at the same time crucial for our understanding of the design and appearance of the terrace in antiquity. The geophysical survey did not define any anomalies in this area; neither did the mechanical excavator find traces of walls when making a minor sounding. In all, this complies with Kähler's suggestion that the S side had remained open. I find it unlikely that sight was obstructed by a large perimeter wall, moreover presenting a blank non-communicative façade to onlookers from the outside. Thus, if we extrapolate the information obtained from the excavations, the evidence suggests that a Π -shaped portico once constituted the frame for the terrace (Fig. 3).

There is one apparent weakness with this interpretation, however, at least if one prefers to see a perfect symmetry of the portico's layout. The back wall of the northern wing measures 74 m, or 250 Roman feet. If we reckon with a perfect square of 250 x 250 feet, the back wall of the south wing would come exactly on top of the substructure walls (indicated with a dashed line in Fig. 3). These substructures, however, lie c. 4–6 m below the level of the garden terrace, and c. 6–8 m in front of its present edge. Due to the steep slope and thick vegetation, this side of the hill is not easily accessible for investigations. Whether the present limit of the terrace corresponds to the ancient one or not, or if a landslide has brought with it a now lost structure, protruding some eight meters out in the air, is difficult to judge from the terrain. The possibility of a *cryptoporticus* running along the edge of the hill should not be ruled out, but one would expect at least some traces

of its concrete vaulting to have remained visible, which is not the case.¹⁵ In particular, one would expect that an inner wall against the terrace should have been better preserved than the one in front, but the poor remains of a thin wall which has slid down the slope here, has more in common with the foundation walls for the portico than a support for heavy concrete vaulting. In conclusion, the access to such a *cryptoporticus*, most likely with an entrance at one of its ends, is hard to picture, both for topographical reasons as well as considerations on its relation to the living quarters or the garden.¹⁶ In light of our present knowledge, it therefore seems reasonable to suggest that the S side held a narrow platform, lying slightly below the garden terrace and its parapet.

At the same time — and in my view more important — the symmetry indicates that the shaping of the garden terrace, that is *both* the substructure *and* the portico, form part of an integrated whole, planned and built contemporaneously in a single action.

In connection to this, it is crucial to note that the *basis villae*, i.e. the entire length of substructures in front of the villa, show two different building phases. As observed by Messineo, the substructure in front of the living quarters has buttresses of 1.8 m length, whereas the buttresses of the garden terrace substructure measure 3 m in length. A joint is clearly discernible at the point where the two walls meet, as the western half of the substructure turns perpendicular to the north, thus forming an angle. Even though the tesserae of the reticulate facing is of equal size in both stretches of the *basis villae*, this clearly indicates that their erection took place at two different occasions, which implies that the garden terrace adheres to an older nucleus of the villa.¹⁷

¹⁵ Kähler 1959, 10 states that traces of mortar on the substructures hinted at a hollow space behind them, but it is not clear what he meant with this. Calci & Messineo 1984, 36 follows Kähler when hypothesizing the existence of a *cryptoportico*. No excavations have ever been undertaken in this area.

¹⁶ On the design of *cryptoporticoes* in connection to terraces and porticoes, see Luschin 2002, 32–34. For a catalogue of *cryptoporticoes* along one just one side of a terrace, *ibid.* 53–62.

¹⁷ Messineo 1991, 248–251; Messineo 1992–93, 11; Messineo 2001, 26 and Tav. I.

Dating the structures

The date of the substructures poses some problems, and calls for a closer discussion. It was on the basis of its reticulate facing that A. Nibby in fact identified the site in 1828, claiming a close resemblance to the building technique of the Mausoleum of Augustus.¹⁸ G. Lugli, in his turn, was of the opinion that the somewhat irregular facing of the substructure by the SE corner of the terrace resembled *quasi-reticulatum*,¹⁹ but concluded that they belong to *opus reticulatum* of a primitive phase, dating to the end of the Republic.²⁰ The next in line was H. Sulze, who argued that the substructure should be dated to the middle of the first century BC.²¹ Finally, thirty-four years after his first study, Lugli classified this wall under the heading of *opus quasi-reticulatum* dated to 100–55 BC, and there it has remained ever since.²²

The core of the problem is that the suggested dates rely on a complex series of comparisons not only of walls, but also of mosaic floors, in the subterranean rooms in the villa itself, in the Auditorium of Maecenas and in the House of Livia on the Palatine. One common premise is that Augustan reticulate *tesserae* ought to be made of reddish tufa, as known from better dated monuments in Rome, and that yellow-grey *tesserae* precedes them. But the judgments of the colour of the substructure's *tesserae* diverge between the three scholars, who describe them as "red", "light grey" and "brown-red".²³ I would rather define them as pale yellow or white (Munsell 2.5 Y 8/2). It would go beyond the scope of this paper to relate for this wall dating in detail, especially when it comes to the two phases in the House of Livia.²⁴ Suffice it to say that Sulze was convinced that the mosaics in the Auditorium of Maecenas predate 35 BC, which in his view should date both the mosaics in the subterranean room in the Villa of Livia and the substructures to the same period.²⁵ Later research, however, has shown that date of the *horti*

Maecenati, and consequently the Auditorium, cannot antedate the mid 30's BC.²⁶

Now, the very foundation on which Sulze's argumentation rests is, *nota bene*, his interpretation of the passage in Suetonius, where we hear of the *omen* that happened to Livia in 39/38 BC (Suet. *Galba* 1.1). Since it occurred when she was "returning to her estate", the villa was accordingly standing at that date. Further, she had probably inherited it from her father in 42 BC, which made Sulze conclude that the walls must be older than that.²⁷ Remove this chronological prop, and his argument shatters.

That the facing of the substructure *resembles* the one of quasi-reticulate work is, however, not conclusive for their dating. The phasing out of this technique overlapped the one of *opus reticulatum* at many places, as shown for example in the walls in Sepino (built between 2 BC and AD 3).²⁸ It remains an open question, I think, whether one prefers to describe the facing on the SE substructure at Prima Porta as *quasi-reticulatum* or rather a somewhat carelessly executed *opus reticulatum*.²⁹ Again, no excavations have been undertaken in this area that could shed light on these questions. On the other hand, we now know much more about the site than was the case in the first half of the 20th century.

The building technique of the portico on the terrace is clearly *opus reticulatum*, with *tesserae* measuring 7 x 7 cm. The NE corner is reinforced with tufa quoins, measuring 18–20 x 9 cm. These stones are all made from yellow-white tufa (Munsell 2.5 Y 8/2) and have their equivalence in the reticulate walls of Augustan date inside the villa. The black and white mosaics in the villa have now, at places, been found to lie on top of earlier floors, dating to the first half of the first century BC.³⁰ Further, a wall of *opus reticulatum* was found under the floor of the corridor which leads from the living quarters out to the garden terrace.³¹ Thanks to the recent re-studies of the walls of the villa, the Augustan rebuilding can now be more fully comprehended.³²

Since no foundation trench for the portico walls could be established, the dating rests on indirect evidence in form of refuse accumulated on its outside. This debris contained a large amount of *terra sigillata italica*, which could be dated to c. 10 BC–AD 15.³³ Even though we

¹⁸ Nibby 1837, 31.

¹⁹ Lugli 1923, 29: "...i filari non sono regolari e danno ancora l'impressione di un *quasi-reticulatum*..."

²⁰ Lugli 1923, 40.

²¹ Sulze 1932, 180–181.

²² Lugli 1957, 502, 504 and Tav. CXXXVII, 2. For a recent repetition, see Marta 1991, 22.

²³ Nibby 1837, 39: "tufa locale rossa"; Lugli 1923, 29: "grigio chiaro"; Sulze 1932, 179: "braunrot". Lugli was of the opinion that the stones originate from the hill of Prima Porta itself: *ibid.* 29.

²⁴ For a long and detailed survey of earlier research, see Reeder 2001, 16–29, which unfortunately is hampered by lack of first hand experience of the walls exposed during more recent excavations inside the villa. Reeder argues for a Republican date, and believes that the *Drusi hortos* mentioned in the letters of Cicero is synonymous with the villa at Prima Porta, *ibid.* 29–34. In conclusion, she suggests that the garden terrace was added to the villa c. 40–30 BC, *ibid.* 21.

²⁵ Sulze 1932, 181–182.

²⁶ Häuber 1996, 73 suggests even the year 33 BC, seeing the water management on the Esquiline as a prerequisite for the gardens.

²⁷ Sulze 1932, 181.

²⁸ Lugli mentions this, of course, and leaves the question open to what extent *quasi-reticulatum* remained in use down to the reign of Augustus, especially in theatres and amphitheatres. See Lugli 1957, 502–503.

²⁹ Due to the thick vegetation in front of the hill (and clandestine squatters), it is today extremely difficult to approach these remains. Not many people may have first hand experience of the wall.

³⁰ See M. Carrara in this volume.

³¹ Calci & Messineo 1984, 46 and fig. 49.

³² For this, cf. Carrara (forthcoming).

³³ See Klynne 2001, 225–226, tables 1 & 2; Klynne 2002, 99–103 and tables 6–8.

have no idea of telling exactly when the inhabitants started to throw their broken utensils outside the portico's NE corner, this at least gives an *ante quem* of c. 10 BC for the portico.

To sum up this far, the dating of the large scale project of reshaping the hill at Prima Porta may still seem conjectural, as the traditional date of the substructure and the portico points in different directions. I would suggest, however, that the date of the portico carries greater weight, and that the construction (together with the substructure) should be placed somewhere in the period between c. 35–10 BC, in any case after the betrothal of Livia to Octavian in 38 BC, and certainly not in the decades before that. We must then ask ourselves: For what reason was such a large edifice erected anyway?

A luxury garden?

The huge dimensions of this portico (c. 68 m long and 74 m wide) can not be sufficiently stressed. It is in fact larger than the Piazza d'Oro in Hadrian's villa at Tivoli (63 m long and 54 m wide), and comes close to the *Porticus Liviae* on the Oppian (115 m long and 75 m wide), or the Flavian garden in the Vigna Barberini on the Palatine (85–102 m long and 85 m wide). It would have contained some 100–150 columns, depending on if the columns of the front row were more closely set or not. To understand this portico as an introvert pleasure garden would, I think, be misguided. Moreover, the double colonnade is almost without parallel in other villas (the above-mentioned Piazza d'Oro being one of few exceptions). Closer parallels would rather be public porticoes, which often form part of triumphal *monumenta* put up *ex manubiis*. As an extravagant peristyle garden for private use, it would come close to an act of *luxuria* to which Augustus showed such disapproval.

Further, the remains do not indicate that the portico was intended to face the living quarters. The narrow exit from the villa is set off axis, and, at first glance, betray no wish to create a sight line that is so common in Roman villas, e.g. at *Volusii Saturninii* at Lucus Feronia.³⁴ The design instead points to a central axis running N-S, in the direction of the Campagna below and the Alban Mountains at the horizon (dotted lines in *Fig. 3*). It is intriguing to note, though, that the sight line from the exit runs exactly across the centre of the garden, if we only consider the planted area and at the same time picture the substructures as its limit.

This outward directed orientation, together with the Π-shaped portico, brings to mind well known sanctuaries in Latium, such as at Gabii, Praeneste and Tivoli. It seems reasonable to suggest that this portico, which gives the impression of having been added to, and not integrated with, the villa, was intended to frame something of great importance. Let us therefore turn to the foundation legend of the laurel grove.

³⁴ Bodel 1997, 28 fig. 1.

The laurel and Augustan ideology

The story is familiar: In the year 39/38 BC, a hen of remarkable whiteness, carrying a sprig of laurel in its beak, was dropped unharmed in the lap of the future empress by an eagle. Livia nursed the hen and its offspring, and planted the laurel at her estate. Eventually a whole grove grew up, from which the emperors of the Julio-Claudian family took the branches for their triumphal wreaths. Shortly before the death of Nero, the grove withered away and the hens died, thus forming an omen of the coming extinction of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.³⁵

The political and symbolical importance behind this “pretty story”, and its bearings for the *villa ad Gallinas*, also when seen in relation to the garden frescoes and the statue of Augustus, has been the subject of several studies by Marleen B. Flory and Jane Clark Reeder.³⁶ Both scholars emphasize how this *miraculum* served a multifunctional purpose of great psychological value for shaping the public opinion, and legitimising rule and heirs for the Imperial couple. Flory draws attention to how the Imperial family step by step tried to monopolize the symbol of the laurel, and Augustus' liking for arboreal mythology — a mutual interest to others before him — is well attested.³⁷ The role of Apollo and the laurel in Augustan art and ideology is commonplace and need not be treated further here.

According to Pliny, the *hauruspices* had ordered that the laurel should be preserved with religious care, which implies that the place was consecrated, in one way or another. It has in fact been suggested that the Villa of Livia may have functioned as a shrine to the Julio-Claudian line, and that at least parts of it were eventually declared to be a *sacrarium*.³⁸ Leaving aside the vexed question on the exact nature of the plantation — the sources speaks of “shrubs”, “trees”, “a grove” — the political dominance of Augustus's family nevertheless became both symbolically and concretely manifest by help of the trees.³⁹ The grove emphasized the god-given ability and power of the *gens Iulia*, representing the miraculous beginning of the first *princeps*.⁴⁰

The tradition of going here and picking laurels for triumphs, and to return soon afterwards in order to replant the branch, were most likely occasions connected with ceremonies of official character for a select audience.⁴¹ Such actions must have put this site on the mental map of the Romans at that time. For a traveller on an outward journey from the city, the hill forms a notable landmark: It was the very hill from which the power of Apollo (and the Imperial family) emanated. I therefore agree with Flory, that the villa must be understood as something more than

³⁵ The sources are Plin. *HN* 15.136–137, Suet. *Galb.* 1 and Dio 48.52.3–4.

³⁶ Flory 1988–89; Flory 1995; Reeder 1997; Reeder 2001.

³⁷ Flory 1995, 52–57. Further Kellum 1994, 211 and *passim*.

³⁸ Kellum 1994, 223; Reeder 1997, 94 and n. 18.

³⁹ Flory 1995, 55.

⁴⁰ Flory 1988–89, 355.

⁴¹ Kellum 1994, 223.



Fig. 4. The hill of Prima Porta, September 2004 (Photo by author).

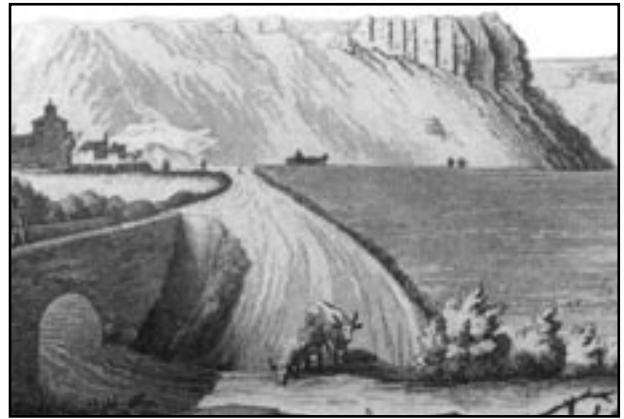


Fig. 5. Drawing of the Prima Porta hill from 1828 (After Messineo 1991, 220, fig. 259).

just a home of Livia. I don't agree, however, when she classifies the grove as "...a sacred grove whose remoteness from the city added to its mysteriousness."⁴² On the contrary, I believe, the intention was to expose it for on-lookers from the outside. As pointed out by Nicholas Purcell, owners of platform villas were not only concerned about providing a good vantage point for themselves, but also "... the view had by others of their villa and of the vantage points from which it could be seen."⁴³

Looking at the *lauretum*

The impression of the *basis villae* and the 20 meter high hill, on which the *villa ad Gallinas* once stood, is today seriously obscured by the modern buildings and the vegetation in the suburb of Prima Porta (Fig. 4). In the early 19th century, however, the place presented a sight probably more in accord with the ancient conditions (Fig. 5). In the scenario here proposed, the architect was concerned with outward display and the view had by others of the villa, making the divine intervention which made Augustus' rule legitimate perceptible for everyone who travelled along the road or on the river (Fig. 6). I therefore suggest that the creation of a dramatic setting served to communicate the message about the property, and play with the image of a sanctuary.

At the same time, the scenery was open to an array of associations, calling other residences and sanctuaries in the vicinity of Rome to mind. This solution would join the tradition of platform villas of the late Republic, where victorious generals sought to express near divine status and ruling legitimacy through architectural display. This overlap of private and public functions of the Roman house and their *horti* has been treated in several studies by well known scholars of Roman topography. Filippo Coarelli, for example, has pointed out how spacious *horti* combine the function of house, theatre, and temple and served as settings for politically oriented feasting.⁴⁴ As for

the specific case of the *domus* of Augustus on the Palatine, Tim Wiseman has discussed the amalgam of history and legend connected to its topographical location, and the visual impact of the residence, overlooking the Forum Boarium and the Tiber.⁴⁵

The garden terrace in the Villa of Livia fits into this context. In fact, it may be interpreted as a much more conscious act of creating a "mythological landscape" from scratch, with the intention of dominating the visual ideology of the landscape through the intersection of oral traditions and visual monuments. The terrace, the portico and the grove together form a perfect *nemus*,⁴⁶ and by creating this panorama, history and myth were blended to fit what has been called the story-world of Rome.⁴⁷

Apollo and Augustan victory

Having said this, I would like to turn to Epirus and the monument built in order to commemorate the victory at Actium over Anthony and Cleopatra. Located on the spot where Augustus had pitched his tent the night before the battle, this was, in the words of Cassius Dio, "...a kind of open-air dwelling-place of Apollo" (51.1.3). Konstantinos Zachos has recently published the results from the resumed excavations at Nikopolis, and offered a reconstruction of this *tropeaum*.⁴⁸ Previous work on the site has established that the monument was set on two terraces. The retaining wall of the lower terrace in front is built in *opus quasi reticulatum*.⁴⁹ The second higher terrace, which had the *rostra* fit into its retaining wall, measures c. 63 x 59 m, but the entire structure would, if the lower terrace is included, constitute more or less of a square.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Wiseman 1987, 399–402.

⁴⁶ On the meanings of *lucus* and *nemus*, see Coarelli 1993, 52.

⁴⁷ As most recently discussed by Wiseman 2004.

⁴⁸ Zachos 2003, 69, fig. 5.

⁴⁹ Zachos 2003, 70 and fig. 6.

⁵⁰ Due to the partial collapse of these walls the measurements are imprecise. It should be noted, though, that the lower terrace is somewhat wider than the upper one. Cf. Zachos 2003, 70–71 and figs. 4 & 5.

⁴² Flory 1988–99, 354.

⁴³ Purcell 1987, 196.

⁴⁴ Coarelli 1983, 215.

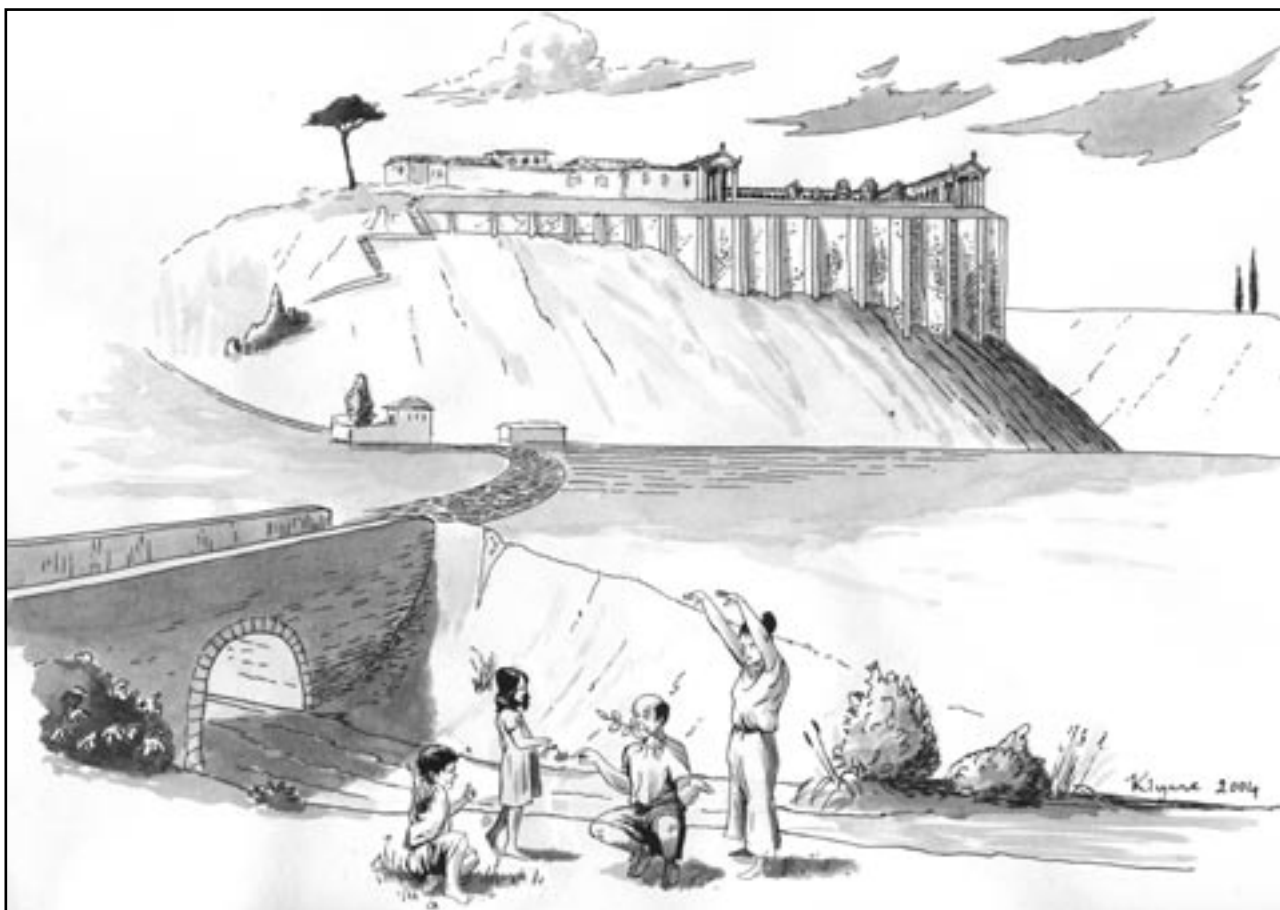


Fig. 6. Proposed reconstruction showing the visual appearance of the Prima Porta hill and the *villa ad Gallinas* with its garden terrace during the time of the Julio-Claudian emperors (Drawing by author).

On this upper terrace, excavation has now brought to light a stylobate and foundation walls from a Π -shaped stoa, together with fragments of Doric, Ionic and Corinthian capitals.⁵¹ As Zachos observes, the monument shows acquaintance not only with Late Republican sanctuaries in Latium, but also those in the Hellenistic world, above all the sanctuary of Athena in Pergamon.⁵² Of special interest here is the fact that terracotta planting pots were found on the terrace, indicating that the area held a garden.⁵³

Could it be possible that this monument and the garden terrace in the Villa of Livia have more than a formal likeness? The probability of this should not be exaggerated, but we are inevitably dealing with two sacred hills of Apollo, closely associated to Augustus, each connected to the “beginning” and “end” of a troublesome and important period of his career. I would argue, further, that the similarities between the acropolis of Pergamon (with its sanctuaries and royal palace) and the Villa of Livia (with its garden terrace) appears even stronger than is the case for Augustus’ *domus* on the Palatine, where “Der Sieger von Actium wohnte also nicht nur neben, sondern bei und mit seinem Schutzgott.”⁵⁴

If this argument is accepted, another consequence follows. It has been suggested that a presumed bronze original of the Prima Porta Augustus was set up in the sanctuary of Athena at Pergamon. First proposed by O. Brendel in 1964, this idea was later elaborated by H. Ingholt in 1969. According to an inscription found on the Round Monument on the court, an honorary statue of Augustus Caesar “overseer of land and sea” had been erected on the 200 year old victory monument of Attalos I.⁵⁵ Moreover, the six famous statues of the dying Gauls were probably removed and replaced by trophies commemorating Augustus’ military achievements in 31 and 20 BC.⁵⁶ The personifications on the cuirass of the Prima Porta Augustus, Ingholt argues, not only reproduce these trophies but also explains the enigmatic unfinished figures on the back, which would depict the trophy from Actium.⁵⁷ Although speculative to some extent, this suggestion would fit in the context related for above: A copy of the statue, or better an adaption of it,⁵⁸ was set up on the terrace at Prima Porta, now holding a laurel in one of his hands.⁵⁹ It

⁵⁵ Ingholt 1969, 306–307.

⁵⁶ Ingholt 1969, 308–309.

⁵⁷ Ingholt 1969, 313.

⁵⁸ Pollini 1978, 340.

⁵⁹ Its exact position will perhaps never be solved. I concur with Pollini 1987–88, 104–105, and fig. 2, that the statue was found at the SW corner of the hill close to the subterranean room, and not in front of the garden terrace, as Kähler argued. That the

⁵¹ Zachos 2003, 77–78.

⁵² Zachos 2003, 69.

⁵³ Zachos 2003, 81, fig. 24.

⁵⁴ Zanker 1983, 23.

must be remembered, though, that the very existence of this “ghost statue” at Pergamon, and its bearings for the typology of Augustan portraiture, is an utterly complex question, which cannot be treated in depth here.⁶⁰

This digression leads us back to the proposed date for the terrace and the portico. Whether it was built before or after the *tropaeum* at Nikopolis, or perhaps even conceptualized from reciprocal considerations, cannot be judged from our present knowledge of the archaeological record. If the portico at Prima Porta was standing already in 29 BC, when Octavian collected the laurels for his triple triumph, one has to picture the lavish architectural backdrop having been built just for one sacred tree, which perhaps is unlikely, but not impossible. It ought to have been finished, though, in time for the Secular Games in 17 BC, when the statue of Augustus (according to the orthodox date) was put up.⁶¹ A likely period for its construction — which cannot have been engaged upon for decades — would thus fall in the 20’s BC, which is also the common dating of the garden frescoes in the subterranean room.

As mentioned above, the terrace seems to lack planting pits, a feature one would expect to be a part of a formal layout of a garden. But the future size of the grove could not have been foreseen from the outset, as the trees multiplied gradually over the years through layering, until they eventually appeared as a coppice, or a *silva* (Plin. *NH* 15.137). As for the planting pots encountered on the terrace, one might picture surrounding planting beds with flowers of symbolic qualities — iris, roses, poppies etc. as rendered in the garden frescoes — making the terrace appear as a *paradeisos*, emphasising the fecundity of the new Golden Age.

...*silva omnis exaruit radicitus*...

According to the ancient sources, the villa experienced some sort of disaster shortly before the death of Nero. Judging from the material found inside the channel behind the portico’s N wing, the slope was levelled during the third quarter of the first century AD, and the portico was dismantled. Later on, the NE corner of the portico was covered by debris containing African Red Slip ware and amphorae *Mauretania Caesarensis*, indicating that the area had become a locus for garbage disposal dur-

findspot ought to be close to the statue’s original position is, in my view, not convincing, since it could have been moved around several times during the centuries before it finally came to rest. Opinions differ on which hand held the laurel. Cf. Simon 1986, 56 fig. 59 and references.

⁶⁰ Cf. Boschung 1993, 53–55. Whereas Boschung rejects the idea of a “proto-Prima Porta” type inspired by the statue in Pergamon, he finds it remarkable that scarcely any of the several Prima Porta type heads found in the Greek east – of which one is from Pergamon – can be regarded as imported from Italy, *ibid.* 87.

⁶¹ Boschung 1993, 53–54 advocates a date of *c.* 27 BC and not, as almost universally accepted, around 17 BC.

ing the second and third centuries AD.⁶² Only the W wing seems to have been rebuilt. In the fill around its foundation wall, mentioned above, African Red Slip Ware was common, as well as several pieces of stucco fluting and fillets, presumably originating from the original portico. Whereas life in the villa continued, the propaganda value of the grove was no longer needed. It is understandable if the emperors after Nero, which did not belong to the bloodline of Augustus, were reluctant to nourish the place, at least the grove and its architectural setting, which thus faded from public awareness.

Summary and conclusions

Throughout this paper I have argued that the garden terrace at the Villa of Livia did not constitute an introspective pleasure garden, nor a *hortus* in the market-garden sense, but a deliberately exploited plot of land, aimed at commemorating and visualising the sacral dimension of the Augustan rule. It is acknowledged, however, that the evidence for a *porticus triplex* framing the terrace is limited and ambiguous, and that my argument comes close to a *petitio principii*. Nevertheless, I would conclude that Kähler was right when he assumed that the terrace once housed the laurel grove of the Caesars, and that the archaeological evidence indeed hints at a context of extreme importance, consistent with the proposals made by Flory, Kellum and Clark Reeder.

For the first time, we may visualize the garden of the sacred grove, framed by a backdrop of an appropriate architectural style, playing on the idea of a palace-temple complex. Built during the 20’s BC, it was intentionally designed to dominate the visual ideology of the landscape and connect with the image of a sanctuary. By investing the residence with a religious aura, it triggered onlookers to associate with the sacral dimensions of the place and the god given power of the founder of the new Golden Age.

If this interpretation is right, it would definitely put an end to the belief that the *ad Gallinas albas* was merely Livia’s country villa (the name ‘Villa of Livia’ is, after all, a modern coining). It should instead be linked to the residences and monuments of the Augustan period that are known to have had an ideological basis for reshaping the topography, such as the *Domus Augusti* on the Palatine, *Forum Augusti*, *Porticus Liviae*, and the Mausoleum of Augustus. As such, the *villa Caesarum* at Prima Porta has the potential to contribute to the major current debate on the historical development of Rome’s suburban landscape, as well as the aesthetic and ideological role of Imperial gardens.

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⁶² Klynne 2002, 30.

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