

Looking out, Looking in: *Villae Maritimae* on the Bay of Naples

The presence of built structures in highly visible and physically prominent locations along coasts broaches questions regarding how the ancient actors responsible for their erection communicated notions of economic control, political dominance, social identity, and class to a dynamic audience of itinerant travelers (Horden and Purcell 2000). The potential for the early Imperial Roman villas (*villae maritimae*) along the shores of the Bay of Naples to have functioned in such a capacity remains underexplored. Present scholarship on Roman villas tends to prioritize the internal vantage-point of the villa-owner, emphasizing how the *paterfamilias* manipulated coastal architecture to frame theatrical vistas out to sea for the enjoyment of those inside his seaside estate (e.g., Bergmann 2002; Howe 2018).

This paper contributes to discussions about Campanian *villae maritimae* by reversing the traditional visual perspective. In addition to creating striking pleasure retreats for villa-owners and their guests, I argue that luxury villas on the Bay of Naples coast were designed to project elite Roman identity outward to seaborne spectators voyaging through the Bay. Given the region's economic significance to the broader Roman Empire by the 1st century CE and the extensive circulation of varied populations through its ports, the Bay of Naples had become an ideal staging ground for the exhibition of aristocratic Romanness to seafarers. I suggest that this dialogue across the sea between landed Roman elite and visitor to the Bay influenced the concentration, placement, and design of *villae maritimae* to an extent heretofore unrecognized.

I take inspiration from frameworks developed for interpreting viewer experience of religious structures encountered from the sea, including Bonna Daix Wescoat's phenomenological research on pilgrims arriving at the Sanctuary of the Great Gods at

Samothrace (2017). Using the ample literary and archaeological evidence available for travel-density in pre-eruption Campania, I first demonstrate that the Bay of Naples functioned as a bustling, cosmopolitan thoroughfare, presenting villa-owners with an ever-changing audience of visitors and viewers. I then examine visual representations of *villae maritimae* in the villascape frescos that adorned numerous Pompeian homes. The popularity of these villa scenes in the decorative schemes of non-elite dwellings indicates the transmission of cultural messages emanating from the architecture of *villae maritimae*. The most prominent villascape motif in Pompeian paintings—columned façades drawn from the architectural idioms of public architecture—recurs frequently in the archaeological remains of *villae maritimae* across the Bay of Naples. I reconstruct the seaward approaches of Villa A “of Poppaea” at Oplontis and the *villa maritima* on the Capo di Sorrento to demonstrate their city-like appearances.

My methodology shifts the emphasis from upper-class domestic experience to intended reception by, among other social classes, the numerous non-elites who frequented the area’s waterways. By adopting architectural forms with sweeping visual impact, designers of *villae maritimae* created sophisticated communicative tools that bridged physical and cultural distance by broadcasting easily understandable messages across the water. Greek-inspired architecture on villa façades projected aristocratic Roman identity through the language of public buildings, which by the early Imperial period, had thoroughly infused the self-fashioning of Roman elites (Zanker 1988). Viewers of myriad backgrounds would discern the monumentality of *villae maritimae* and the aristocratic Roman practices implicit within, even if some of the nuance was lost in translation. At the same time, these visual strategies enforced the cultural disparities between landowners and numerous seafarers—many of whom were of the lower, working classes and from areas other than central-southern Italy—by emphasizing the villa-owners’

participation in a cultural milieu in which such travelers were often excluded. Social distance was signified not only by the Hellenic architecture or the dominance of landscape, accessible only to elite Romans, but also by viewers' literal alienation from the villas as they drifted past on ships. The Bay of Naples in the 1st century CE was often the first glimpse of foreigners to Roman Italy. Campania—and by extension, its coastal villas—had therefore become an introduction to Rome and what it meant to be “Roman,” boiled down and intensified for show via *villae maritimae*.

Works Cited

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