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A GARDEN OF THE SOUL AND AN INTERPRETATION OF THE LIFE: THE HYPOGEAL PAINTING OF GARDEN ROOM OF THE VILLA OF LIVIA

Introduction

Nature frequently enters with significant prominence into the representation of ancient Rome, playing a leading role in landscapes as the background of human activities, such as in gardens and in views of 'ideal places.'¹ Furthermore, a great number of naturalistic details can be detected inside the fantastic world of the 'grotesques,' or in sculpted surfaces, where they appear in a cryptic and metamorphic continuity, which should no longer be seen only as oddity or eccentricity.

Indeed, looking with attention at such naturalistic data, a high number of botanical taxa (78 families, 159 genera, and 168 species), as well as animals (mostly birds, but also mammals), have been identified in pictures and in carved surfaces of ancient Roman culture.² Why such a significant number? A first reason arises upon considering that the naturalistic knowledge of the ancient people was remarkable, since they depended on plants and animals for all fundamental aspects of life, such as nutrition, medicine, dressing, protection from atmospheric elements, and managing handicraft activities. Obviously, some elements of nature had

a wider recurrence, but also rare species cannot be neglected.³ But this is not the only cause.

A further explanation of such a great quantity of represented and useful plants arises when considering a second question: which was their function and meaning? Today, all too often, images of botanical diversity are simply not recognized, and the use of natural elements in the past appear erroneously to have only been employed as elements of decoration. Indeed, they were much more, since devout believers would have necessitated a further and greatly heightened role.⁴ In fact, we must remember that ancient people lived in direct contact with nature and to their mentality, nothing was casual, but all was related to the favors of the gods, with each phenomenon signifying something in its display. In the ancient society, both the 'ideal' or 'architectonic' garden landscape, from the simpler to the most complex ones, greatly underscored religious values, and always expressed the idea of divinity.⁵ Images represented a powerful tool of symbolic representation and even illiterate people were undoubtedly able to 'read' and interpret the iconographic language, knowing the nature and its phenomena in a deep way.⁶

Alphabet and Syntax of the Representation in the Garden Room of the Villa of Livia

In this view, the garden representation in the underground rooms of the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta (first century BC), have been studied by many authors with different approaches,⁷ but in no manner should be seen as a mere description of an idyllic and beautiful landscape. The Garden Room is often described as a *triclinium* (i.e. dining room), in absence of evidence of specific elements, and because of its rectangular shape and dimensions (11,70 meters long, 5,50 m wide). It has also been interpreted as an interior grotto or *nymphaeum* (i.e. a grotto of the nymphs), which had a sacral dimension, and which were popular in the opulent residences of the Roman elite. In all cases, the room seems to have been designed not only for the private delectation of the imperial family, but also for visitors of a social elite, offering a verdant blessing of peace, a view of blooms or fruiting trees, as the representation of a prosperous era.

Several scholars interpreted the garden view in the whole as a tool of glorification of the fecundity of the Augustan *aurea aetas*⁸. More recently, other scholars underlined “the multiple allusions to Augustan policies and actions, as well as further allusions to deities, areas outside the empire, and foreign power.”⁹ It was also suggested that the “illusionistic features seem to portray the illusionistic-escapist spirit of Augustan times from both the social and the religious aspects,”¹⁰ whereas other contributions gave data on horticultural skills, which can arise from an observation of pruned trees.¹¹

Indeed, the illusionistic idea represented by such a special garden is not only a representation of a perfect place, such as in a modern *trompe l'oeil*, ideal to refresh in the hot seasons. The whole representation had a much more complex and detailed meaning, which requires a deep understanding of the general structures, as well as of their particular details.

Here, the natural landscape has the highest space, and *the place* itself shows differences from a typical garden place, lacking any typical garden statues, *hermae*, or fountains, with the only built-up elements being the marble balustrades and the *incannunciate* (made with reeds). The place also differs from a wild nature representation and the context seems to show an emblematic role, displaying some clear characters of a cave (traces of stalactites on the top of the sky/ceiling). Furthermore, the partition of the space, with paths and geometries contribute to its interpretation.¹² This author considers Nature as a cardinal element for such interpretation, and will analyze both the ‘alphabet’ and the ‘syntax,’ indicated in the selection of natural elements as communication for viewers.

The letters of such an alphabet arise from the different represented plants (24 species¹³), and birds (pigeon, quail, blackbird, thrush, oriolus (golden bird), crow, nightingale, and sparrow¹⁴), each one probably having a specific meaning. In the case of birds, most of them are freely flying and only one is caged. Further, I wish to stress that the highest number of used plants were well known to the visitors of the place, since they constituted (overall wild and some cultivated) a high quantity of autochthonous species in the Latium region, belonging to the Mediterranean maquis and forests (i.e., oaks, laurels, myrtles, boxes, arbutus, such as from ‘flowering elements’). The stone pine has a controversial geographical area of distribution, but it had a clear diffusion in the Roman area still in such times. The few ‘exotic’ elements originate from the Eastern Mediterranean basin (cypresses, quinces) or palaeo-tropical and Iranian regions (i.e. palms, pomegranates), but they were similarly well known; only one species comes from the Euro-Siberian context until the Alps (the spruce), and it was also known considering the wideness of the area of Roman influence.

It is also interesting noting that the plant representation lacks a seasonal consistency, in that some plants are depicted as in springtime (e.g. most flowers) while others are in an autumnal or ‘harvest’ habitus (e.g. most trees bearing fruits, such as quinces, pomegranates, arbutus). It

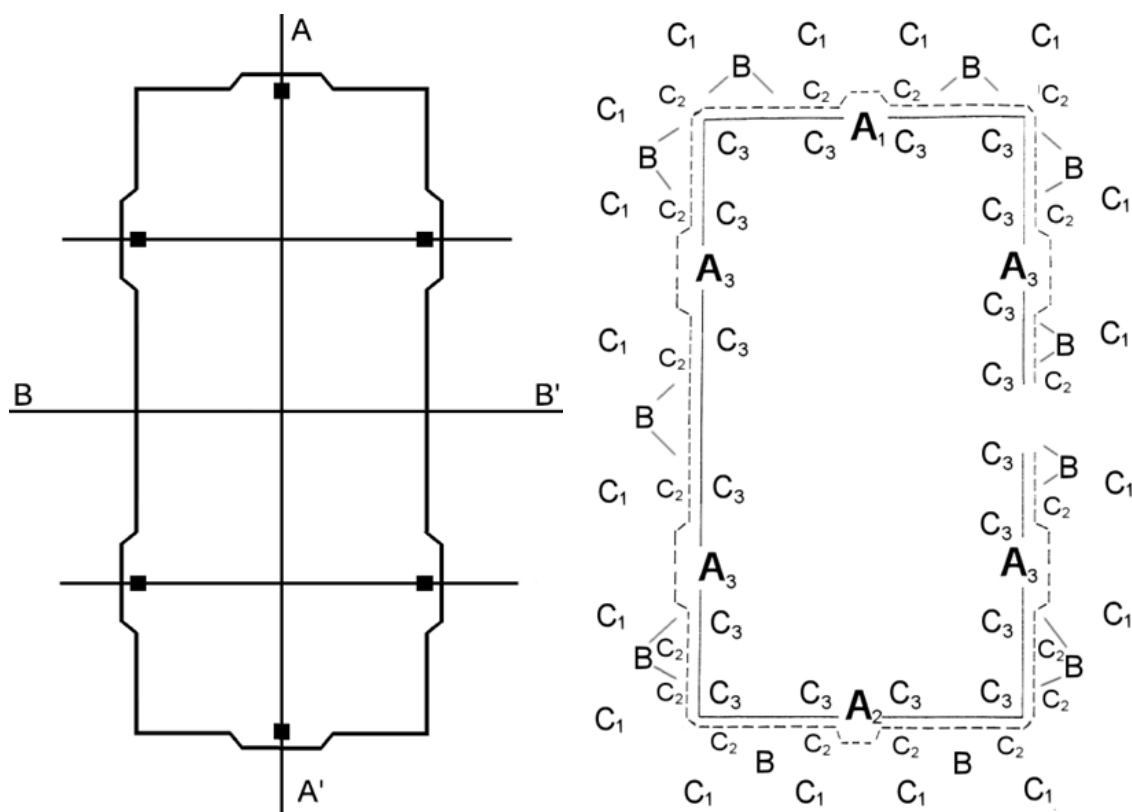


Fig. 1 a) Bilateral axis of symmetry among the plant representation in the Villa di Livia Garden representation; b) A1=*Pinus pinea*; A2=*Quercus robur*; A3=*Picea excelsa*; B=*Punica granatum* + *Cydonia oblonga*; C1=*Cupressus sempervirens*, *Nerium oleander*, *Quercus ilex*, *Buxus sempervirens*, *Phoenix dactylifera*, *Laurus nobilis*, *Arbutus unedo*, *Myrtus communis*, *Viburnum tinus*; C2=*Papaver somniferum*, *Chrysanthemum coronarium*, *Anthemis cotula*; C3=*Phyllitis scolopendrium*, *Viola reichenbachiana*, *Iris*.

probably means that the most relevant objective of the painting is to favor their perception, and they are represented following the season where their most typical elements (flowers or fruits) become clearly detectable.

The syntax of such a means of communication arises from the position of each element, and from the careful and orderly sequence of trees, herbaceous plants, as well as from the representation of birds. The clear symmetry, and hierarchical disposition of the natural elements show a key of interpretation to the entire composition. A special order also arises from the clear symmetry of all the space, with a double bilateral axis, which is

also emphasized by the plant dispositions (Fig. 1a). In fact, the layout of the plants does not appear to be casual: some species have a clear special emphasis, due to their location on a visual plane, whereas others show lower evidence. The most remarkable elements are those which are located inside niches, and despite their low frequency (only one or four repetitions), they have a high visual relevance, as true protagonists of the scene (called A in Fig. 1b, and in Fig. 2). These are a young pine (*Pinus pinea*) in a symmetric opposite position displaying an oak (*Quercus robur*), in the main axis, and four elements of spruces (*Picea excelsa*) in the second axis. A further alternance among

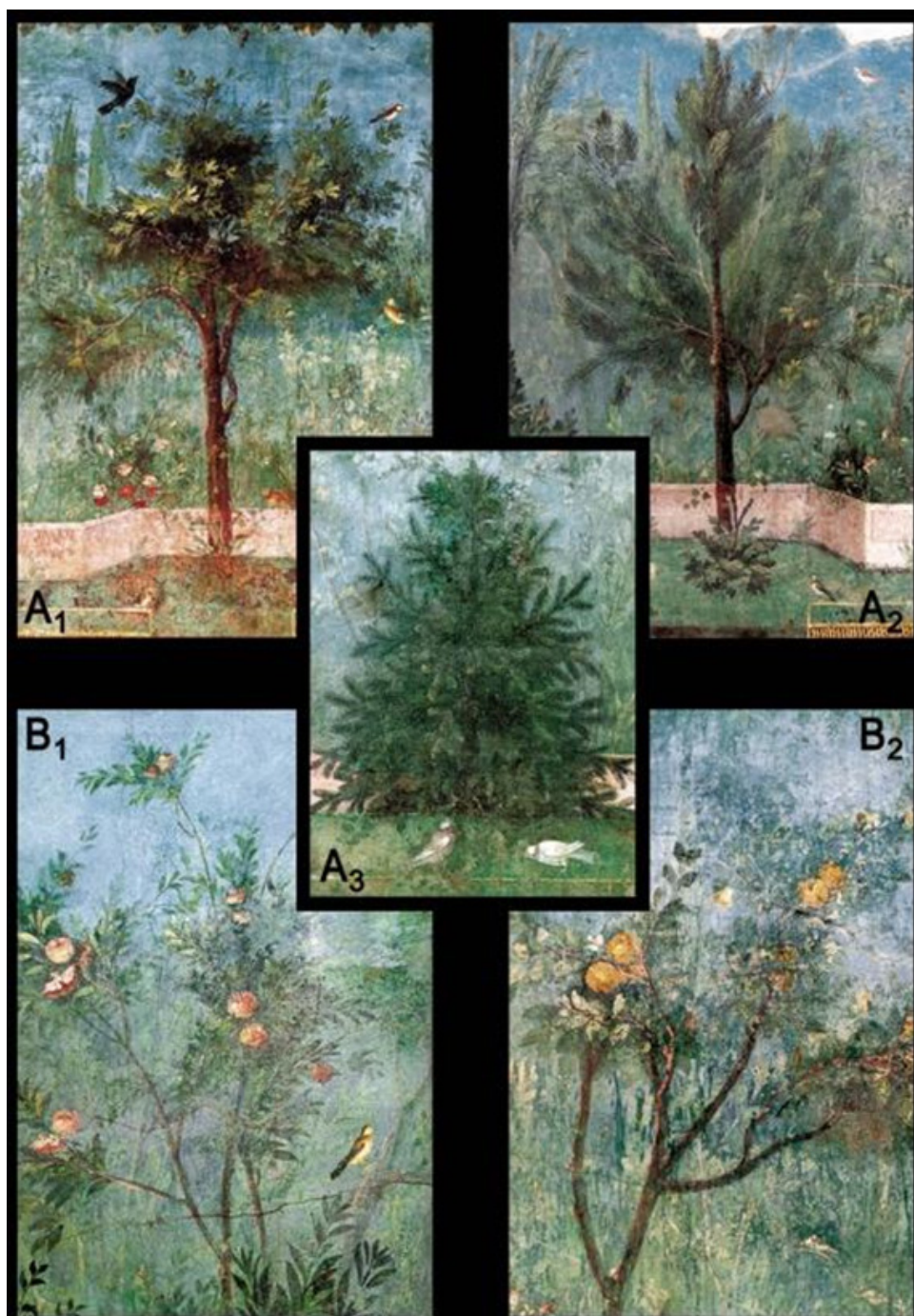


Fig. 2 The most remarkable plant elements of the Livia's Garden: On the top: A1 in the main axis, species, which are located inside niches (oak (*Quercus robur*) in a symmetric opposite position to a pine (*Pinus pinea*); in the central area, plants located along the second axis, A2 spruces (*Picea excelsa*); on the bottom, B, alternance among quinces (*Cydonia oblonga*) and pomegranate trees (*Punica granatum*).

quinces (*Cydonia oblonga*) and pomegranate trees (*Punica granatum*), which are located immediately close to them should be noted (called B in Fig. 1b). In the hierarchical view are plants which occur in the background of the balustrade behind them, or along the small pathways (called C in Fig. 1b).

The Hypothesized Meaning of Nature's Representation

The Plants

Following a previous study,¹⁵ I stress that the dominant elements (oak/pine) seem to be joined to the fundamental binomial elements indicating the creation of life, such as divine power, being symbolically related to Jupiter/Zeus (as the King of the Gods in the Greek-Roman Pantheon) and Cybele/Hera (as the Great Mother and in the role of the Queen and Wife of Zeus).¹⁶ In the classical tradition, all natural phenomena depend on the conjunction and equilibrium among them. Following such valence, some scholars also hypothesized that an ideal linkage could be made to Augustus and Livia¹⁷ in their powerful role. The third element (spruce) has instead a clear funerary valence at the Roman time, considering that Pliny called it “feralis arbor at funebri indicio.”

The binomial continuous alternance among pomegranate and quinces has also a not negligible meaning. Pomegranate is not only linked to the cult of the Great Mother, but also to the moon goddesses Kore and Persephone, besides Dionysus and Aphrodite. It is a symbol of fertility and regeneration. Quinces were consecrated both to Hera and Aphrodite, and they represented the ‘golden apples’ (*mala aurea*) of the garden of Hesperides.¹⁸ Such a garden also was symbolically located in an island where Jupiter and Hera were married and overall, close to the place where the world ends (*finis terrae* and Hesperides originated, *vesperus*, i.e. sunset). Such golden apples represented not only a wish of happiness and prosperity, but also of immortality.

In a striking contrast of meanings, elements linked to death (see *Chrysanthemum coronarium*, *Viola sp.*, *Papaver somniferum*, *Phyllitis scolopendrium*, *Nerium oleander*, *Cupressus sempervirens*), are juxtaposed with those linked to the idea of life and regeneration (*Phoenix dactylifera*, *Laurus nobilis*). Even if illustrated repetitively, the plants belong to Aphrodite's sphere (e.g. *Myrtus communis*, *Rosa sp.pl.*) seem to play a secondary role.¹⁹ Plants of the Dionysian sphere (*Hedera helix*, which is not frequently recurrent) or of Apollonian ones (*Laurus nobilis*, which is represented more frequently but only in the background), do not show an evident role as protagonists in such a representation, even if I would not suggest neglecting discussion of their general symbolic role. Indeed, it is well known that the area of Prima Porta had been named *ad gallinas albas* after the legend of a prodigious event, related by Pliny, in which a white fowl holding a laurel branch in its beak, fell from the talons of an eagle down unto Livia Drusilla's lap. Livia soon thereafter became Octavian Augustus' wife. Following the diviners' orders, the emperor kept the fowl and its offspring, then planted the laurel which soon grew in a dark sacred grove and its branches would serve to make the wreaths crowning the emperor's head to celebrate his triumphs.

The botanical selection in which the seasons are thus mixed, substantiates Kellum's.²⁰ idea that the garden “with its balance of the wild and the cultivated, far more closely resembles the humble garden of the Virgil Georgics, whose owner »matched in contentment the wealth of kings«, and „was the first to pluck roses in spring and apples in autumn.”

The Birds

We must remember that the number of represented bird species is very high²¹ and it overcomes what is detectable in a simply natural place. Various scholars stressed that each species of bird in the ancient representation embodies a different symbolic value²² in relation to their specific attributes. Here, I underline that, as a whole, they

have a common significance as messengers of the gods' divine will, similarly (but with inferior values) to the angels in Christian religion. Birds were a conduit between the sky and the earth, and they were considered able to carry divine prediction (the word 'auspicious' derives from '*aves spicere* = birds looking,' referring to the ancient sacerdotal powers of interpreting avian messages).

Birds also represented the soul, and, as observed by Jones,²³ the appearance of the domestic caged bird in Roman domestic culture is very striking. Birds are a metaphor for freedom, and the caged nightingale is an image of the human soul trapped in the body. Thus, the predominance of birds in the Livian frescos unequivocally substantiates an interpretation of the place as a garden of the soul.

The Place

We cannot neglect that the garden is painted in an underground room, where light could enter only through two cryptoporticus windows opened along the main axis, and despite the illusionistic effect of the garden itself, the representation of an underground world is further underlined by the clear depiction of a cave with stalactites, which surrounds the sky. It clearly has an emblematic meaning, since a cave can be seen as an archetype place of rebirth, or initiation, and it explains why, starting from prehistoric times, such rituals were mainly celebrated in a cave.²⁴ Furthermore, in the Platonic view, a cave represents a place where the souls are captured by the Gods, and where they are waiting for a light, which could indicate the way to reach truth.

Conclusion

It is appropriate to review the interpretations of these paintings, when they are described only from an illusionistic point of view, or as a simple representation of Augustus' promised Golden Age. A more complex symbolic and philosophical purpose was probably inspired by the selection and

representation of natural species, and such value was certainly detectable by the ancient visitors of the Roman elite.

This garden seems an 'ideal place,' in which the plants (each one referring to different gods and myths) and other natural elements (different birds as representation of the soul) communicate the philosophical and religious representation of human life. The driving forces are represented by the archetypes of 'Mother and Father' of the Gods, as the divinities regulating all natural events and life, and by elements which describe the inevitability of death. Prosperity and good luck are also constant repetitive elements, illustrating that life is transitory, but able to renew and regenerate itself in the cosmic cycle of Nature, and that death is not final, being that the soul is immortal.

Notes

- ¹ Giulia Caneva, Ettore Pacini, Maria Adele Signorini and Angelo Merante, “La fitoiconologia per il riconoscimento e l’interpretazione delle rappresentazioni artistiche,” in Giulia Caneva, ed., *La Biologia vegetale per i beni culturali, vol. 2* (Firenze: Nardini Editore, 2005), 85-128.
- ² Alma Kumbaric and Giulia Caneva, “Updated Floristic Biodiversity of Roman Iconography,” *Rendiconti Lincei* 25 (2) (2014): 181-193. In such work the species have been identified based on the most diagnostic morphological aspects (the general habit of the plants, typology, shape, size and color of fruits and flowers, such as morphology and layout of the leaves), such as considering the habitat and the likely frequency in the adjacent natural contexts. Historical data, i.e. *The Natural History* of Pliny the Elder and the most relevant palaeobotanical information about the natural potential vegetation of the Roman area.
- ³ Alma Kumbaric, Valentina Savo and Giulia Caneva, “Orchids in the Roman Iconography: Evidence for the First Representations,” *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 14 (4) (2013): 311-316. In general *Acanthus mollis*, *Vitis vinifera*, *Phoenix dactylifera*, *Punica granatum*, *Ficus carica*, *Laurus nobilis*, and *Hedera helix* proved to be the species represented most frequently, due to their strong association with mythological and religious symbolism.
- ⁴ Giulia Caneva, *Il codice botanico di Augusto. Roma, Ara pacis: parlare al popolo attraverso le immagini della natura = The Augustus Botanical code. Roma: speaking to the People through the images of nature* (Roma: Gangemi, 2010); Giulia Caneva, “Il giardino come espressione del divino nelle rappresentazioni dell’antica Roma,” in Kathleen Coleman and Pascale Ducrey, eds. *Le jardin dans l’antiquité. Tome LX* (Genève: Fondation Hardt, 2014), 301-361.
- ⁵ Pierre Grimal, *I giardini di Roma antica*, translated by Vincenzo Abrate (Milano: Garzanti, 1994); Zohreh Hosseini and Giulia Caneva, “Lost Gardens: From Knowledge to Revitalization and Cultural Valorization of Natural Elements,” *Sustainability* 14 (5) (2022): 2956.
- ⁶ Giulia Caneva, Valentina Savo and Alma Kumbaric, “Big Messages of Small Details: Nature in Roman Archaeology,” *Economic Botany* 68 (1) (2014): 109-111; Valentina Savo, Alma Kumbaric and Giulia Caneva, “Grapevine (*Vitis vinifera* L.) Symbolism in the Ancient Euro-Mediterranean Culture. Notes on Economic Plants,” *Economic Botany* 70 (2) (2016): 190-197; Giulia Caneva, Arianna Monaco, Paola Virgili and Flavia Bartoli, “Re-flowering flowers: the hope of an eternal blooming since Roman times,” *Flora Mediterranea* 29 (2019): 27-44.
- ⁷ “Dr. Möller: die Botanik in den Fresken der Villa Livia.” [Sitzungsprotokolle]. *Mitt. Deutsch. Arch. Inst. Röm. Abteilung V* (1890): 78-80 [66-83]; Mabel McAfee Gabriel, *Livia’s Garden Room at Prima Porta* (New York: New York University Press, 1955); Carmelo Calci and Gaetano Messineo, *La Villa di Livia a Prima Porta* (Roma: De Luca, 1984), 7-20; Salvatore Settis, “Le pareti ingannevoli. Immaginazione e spazio nella pittura romana di giardino,” *Fondamenti XI* (1988): 3-39; Barbara A. Kellum, “The Construction of Landscape in Augustan Rome: The Garden Room at the Villa ad Gallinas,” *The Art Bulletin* 7 (1994): 211-224; Kaja J. Tally-Schumacher and Nils P. Niemeier, „Through the Picture Plane: Movement and Transformation in the Garden Room at the Villa ad Gallinas at Prima Porta,” *Chronika* 6 (2016): 58-71; Nava Sevilla-Sadeh, “Escapism and the Sublime: The Meanings of Illusionism in Livia’s Garden Paintings,” *Studies in Visual Arts and Communication* 6 (2) (2019): 3-14. https://journalonarts.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/SVACij-Vol6_No2-2019_Sevilla-Sadeh_Escapism-and-the-Sublime.pdf.
- ⁸ See: Reinhard Förtsch, „Ein Aurea-Aetas-Schema,” *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung* 96 (1989): 333-345; Gabriel, *Livia’s Garden Room at Prima Porta*; Barbara A. Kellum. “The Construction of Landscape in Augustan Rome: The Garden Room at the Villa ad Gallinas.” *The Art Bulletin* 7 (1994): 211-224.
- ⁹ See: Kaja J. Tally-Schumacher and Nils P. Niemeier, „Through the Picture Plane: Movement and Transformation in the Garden Room at the Villa ad Gallinas at Prima Porta,” *Chronika* 6 (2016): 58-71.
- ¹⁰ As mimesis that promises prosperity and abundance; realism that promises everlasting happiness; optical illusion that promises that nothing exists beyond this goodness; and a symmetrical composition that promises a world of equilibrium and harmony, see: Sevilla-Sadeh, “Escapism and the Sublime: The Meanings of Illusionism in Livia’s Garden Paintings.”
- ¹¹ Kathryn L. Gleason, “The Lost Dimension: Pruned Plants in Roman Gardens,” *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 28 (3) (2019): 311-325.
- ¹² Frederick M. A. Jones, “Drama, Boundaries, Imagination, and Columns in the Garden Room at Prima Porta,” *Latomus* 72 (4) (2013): 997-1021.
- ¹³ See the list of species: Giulia Caneva and Lorenza Bohuny, “Botanical Analysis on the Livia’s Villa Painted Flora (Prima Porta, Roma),” *Science and Technology in Cultural Heritage* 4 (2003): 149-155. *Picea excelsa*, *Acanthus mollis*, *Arbutus unedo*, *Buxus sempervirens*, *Chrysanthemum coronarium*, *Anthemis* sp., *Cornus mas*, *Cupressus sempervirens*, *Cydonia oblonga*, *Hedera helix*, *Iris* sp., *Laurus nobilis*, *Myrtus communis*, *Papaver somniferum*, *Phoenix dactylifera*, *Phyllitis scolopendrium*, *Pinus pinea*, *Punica granatum*, *Quercus robur* gr., *Quercus ilex*, *Rosa centifolia*, *Viola* cfr. *reichenbachiana*, *Nerium oleander*, *Viburnum tinus*.
- ¹⁴ For birds see: Antero Tammisto, “Birds in Mosaics: a Study on the Representation of Birds in Hellenistic and Romano-Campanian Tessellated Mosaics to the Early Augustan Age,” *Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae* 18 (1997); Antero Tammisto, “The Representations of the Capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*) and the Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*) in Romano-Campanian Wall Paintings and Mosaics,” *Arctos-Acta Philologica Fennica* 23 (1989): 223-247; Antero Tammisto, “Gli uccelli nelle pitture di giardino della Casa della Venere in Conchiglia,” *Rivista di Studi Pompeiani* 23 (2012): 29-38.
- ¹⁵ Giulia Caneva, “Ipotesi sul significato simbolico del giardino dipinto della villa di Livia (Prima Porta, Roma),” *Bullettino della Commissione archeologica comunale di Roma C* (1999): 64-79.

- ¹⁶ Giulia Caneva, *Il pino domestico. La Nazione delle Piante* (Bari: Laterza, 2019).
- ¹⁷ Reinhard Förtsch, „Ein Aurea-Aetas-Schema,“ *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung* 96 (1989): 333–345.
- ¹⁸ As later misinterpreted (see the orange garden of Giacomo Boni on the Aventine hill in Rome) the famous *mala aurea* in the Hesperides' Garden clearly could not possibly be orange trees, which came from the East much later: first, the bitter orange tree with the Arabs, and then, the sweet orange tree with the Portuguese colonies.
- ¹⁹ Giulia Caneva, *Il codice botanico di Augusto. Roma, Ara pacis: parlare al popolo attraverso le immagini della natura = The Augustus Botanical code. Roma: speaking to the People through the images of nature* (Roma: Gangemi, 2010).
- ²⁰ Barbara A. Kellum. “The Construction of Landscape in Augustan Rome: The Garden Room at the Villa ad Gallinas.” *The Art Bulletin* 7 (1994): 211–224.
- ²¹ Mabel McAfee Gabriel. *Livia's Garden Room at Prima Porta*. New York: New York University Press, 1955.
- ²² See: Antero Tammisto, “Birds in Mosaics: a Study on the Representation of Birds in Hellenistic and Romano-Campanian Tessellated Mosaics to the Early Augustan Age,” *Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae* 18 (1997) René Guenon, *Simboli della scienza sacra = Symboles fondamentaux de la Science sacrée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), translated by Francesco Zambon (Milano: Adelphi Edizioni, 1975); Ashleigh Green, “Lesbia's Controversial Bird: Testing the Cases for and against Passer as Sparrow,” *Antichthon* 55 (2021): 6–20.
- ²³ Frederick M. A. Jones, “The Caged Bird in Roman Life and Poetry; Metaphor, Cognition, and Value,” *Syllecta Classica* 24 (1) (2013): 105–123.
- ²⁴ E.g. Eleusian and Mythraic rituals.

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