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Contents

GRITH THAGAARD LOFT: Villa Landscapes in Pompeian Wall Painting – a Different Approach 7

JESPER MAIBOM MADSEN: Signs of Prosperity on the Roman Villas in South Italy during the Third Century 29

MARINA VIDAS: The Copenhagen Cassoni. Constructing Narrative Images for Quattrocento Audiences 55

MONIKA MÜLLER: Civitas coelestis ex angelis et hominibus. Ekklesiologische Aspekte im Bildprogramm von Pietro al Monte di Civate 67

CAROLIN BEHRMANN, ARNE KARSTEN, PHILIPP ZITZLSPERGER: The Roman Papal- and Cardinal Tombs of the Early Modern Age 101

HANNE KOLIND POULSEN, Mode and Meaning. The Frescoes of Giovanni Antonio da Pordenone in the Cathedral of Cremona 119

PATRICK KRAGELUND, Rostgaard, Fabretti and Some Paper Impressions of Greek and Roman Inscriptions in the Danish Royal Library 155

ROSSELLA CARLONI: Scultori-restauratori nella Roma di Thorvaldsen. Giuseppe Franzoni e Lorenzo Moglia 175


STEEN BO FRANDSEN: Mito di Roma 247

Authors’ addresses 255
Villa Landscapes in Pompeian Wall Painting – a Different Approach
by GRITH THAGAARD LOFT

Introduction

The Roman villa, luxurious in life-style, lavish in decoration, was an inspiration to society both in its own time and from the Renaissance right down to the present day. Villa architecture with its amazing porticoes, gardens and views is celebrated in Roman literature and wall painting, and thus gives life to the many archaeological villa sites preserved today. The life of the Romans on these villae maritimae is memorably described in Roman literature. Pliny the Younger tells us not only about his villas’ splendid architecture, but also about how he spent his day when he stayed on them. He describes, with extraordinary vividness, the relaxation, the reading, the walking in the shade of the porticoes, the afternoon naps in the cool rooms, the writing of letters and the discussion of poetry with guests. Walking today amid the ruins of these villas, we can thus easily imagine what life must have been like in them and understand their importance in ancient Roman society.

Research on Roman villas now falls essentially into three parts: villa paintings, villa literature and archaeological remains. The paintings, the villa landscapes, have been examined rather sporadically since the pioneering study by M. Rostovtzeff in 1904. Rostovtzeff showed the close connection between six villa landscapes, villa literature and the archaeological remains. These six villa landscapes are the four landscapes from the tablinum of the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto in Pompeii (figs. 5-8) and the famous two landscapes now in the Museo Nazionale di Napoli (figs. 1 and 2).

Rostovtzeff’s article provided the foundation for all future research on the villa landscape. He rightfully pointed out the close connection between the villa landscapes and the villa literature. He also identified archaeological parallels to the paintings. His research in this field has led, however, to the general assumption that villa paintings were, or were intended to be, a faithful reproduction of the Roman villae maritimae. That is how the villa landscapes are often interpreted in research on Roman villas. In most books on Roman villas the villa landscapes are thus used as illustrations of actual villa architecture, an approach based on Rostovtzeff’s seminal paper on the six villa landscapes of 1904.

Inspired by this interpretation of villa landscapes, and in the light of new finds, I started working on the villa landscapes in 1999. Through this research I have found that not only do the villa landscapes contain information about villa life in general, but also give an insight into the use of wall paintings in Pompeii, and the influence of villa life in Pompeii. They also yield some information about how mural painters were organized.

The villa landscapes

The villa landscapes belong to the large group of Roman landscape paintings. Landscape paintings already appeared in the First Pompeian style and developed into their canonical form during the Second style. In this form the landscapes paintings are aediculae pictures with painted frames. They were mainly placed in the centre of the panels; but were sometimes placed on the upper parts of the walls or in the decoration of the base. So several landscape paintings could co-exist on the same wall. The largest group of landscape paintings consists of mythological paintings that have a figural mythological scene in a landscape setting, often with architecture, as a main motif. The ar-
architectural landscapes form the other large group of landscape paintings. It is to this category that the genre of the villa landscape belongs. As opposed to the mythological paintings, the architectural landscapes are not always the largest of the landscape paintings on the wall; are not always placed in the central panels in the wall decoration; and do not have a figural scene as their main motif. Instead they are often placed in the outer panels of the mural decoration and always have architecture in a landscape setting as their motif.

The villa landscapes have a lot in common with the other types of architectural landscape paintings: sacro-idyllic landscapes (fig. 3), harbour landscapes (fig. 4), cityscapes, and sanctuary landscapes.

A villa landscape can be described as a small aedicula picture — average size is 34 x 20 cm — with buildings and other types of architecture in a landscape setting often by the sea and with trees rising behind the buildings. The combination of these buildings can vary, but the main motif of a villa landscape is always a portico building. This is the most important element of the villa landscapes; it represents the portico facade of a building complex. Smaller buildings, often called diaeta — small shrines — and towers are commonly placed beside the portico facade. The architectural landscape of the villa paintings thus consists of a portico facade and in most cases also several other small buildings grouped around it. To some extent people and statues — a staffage — are depicted in front of and around the villa. The people are walking, many are fishing, and some carry bags. In the
A majority of villa landscapes the buildings are placed on a podium structure, which in many cases serves also as a pier.

The different types of architectural landscape paintings all illustrate buildings in a landscape setting. Some of them even have buildings with portico facades as a part of their architecture. Indeed, what seems to separate the villa landscapes from the other types is the emphasis on the portico as the main motif of the architectural landscape in combination with other buildings. In the sacro-idyllic landscapes, by contrast, the main motif is a small shrine, a holy tree or other sacred elements depicted in a very elaborate landscape scenery. The cityscapes and harbour landscapes, in turn, illustrate landscape settings with many buildings – most of them with portico facades. In the harbour landscapes large ships are depicted approaching the rather large pier. The sanctuary landscapes resemble the villa landscapes, in that they show a smaller number of buildings than the two former groups and also include porticoes. The difference between the villa landscapes and the sanctuary landscapes lies in the fact that in the sanctuary landscapes the porticoes mainly border the sanctuary’s temple, and are not therefore the facades of buildings, but free-standing buildings in themselves. The emphasis of the picture as a whole, furthermore, is not on the porticoes, and people are often shown sacrificing at the temple.

Of course, it is not surprising that the portico appears in different versions in the different types of architectural landscape, since the portico was a widespread architectural feature in both private and public – political as well as sa-
cred — contexts not only in Roman, but also in Greek society. But in some cases this makes the classification of an architectural landscape as either one or the other difficult or impossible. To be able to classify the different types more easily, a study of all the types of architectural landscapes would be necessary. But this has not yet been done.

In my work on the villa landscapes I have focused on those from Campania. The present study is based on previous research and my own investigation of villa landscapes in the Campanian cities and in the archaeological museum in Naples. I identified in all 26 villa landscapes and a further five architectural landscapes, which cannot be classified as villa landscapes, cityscapes or sanctuary landscapes, largely due to their poor state of preservation. The number of villa landscapes is surprisingly small. Nonetheless the importance of the group should not be underestimated.

The chronological frame of these villa landscapes extends from the late Third to the late Fourth style in Pompeian wall painting — i.e. from about AD 40 to 79. Only six villa landscapes can be assigned to the Third style, and these are the six discussed by Rostovtzeff in 1904. By far the largest group belongs to the Fourth style, and mainly the Neronian Fourth style, dating from shortly before and around the earthquake in AD 62.

I have dated the villa landscapes on the basis
of the context of the wall paintings in which they are situated. Those landscapes without any known provenance in the archaeological museum in Naples I have dated on the basis of my stylistic analysis of the other landscapes. This analysis is based on the work of Peters, who showed in his monograph of 1963 how Roman landscape paintings evolved from a very detailed and precise rendering to a sketchier and less detailed one. This development will be discussed more fully below. A. Barbet showed a similar development in his discussion of embroidery borders in the Fourth Pompeian style.12

This stylistic development of landscape painting in general is consistent, I believe, with that of the villa landscapes: they develop from being very elaborate, comprising many buildings, numerous people and statues placed round them, and a rich natural setting, towards an almost bare setting where almost only the portico facade is left, depicted with trees behind it, and placed on a podium with no figures around it. The representation of the villa in the late Fourth style is thus almost a schematized or formulaic version of the elaborate villa landscapes of the Third and early Fourth style. This could of course pose a problem in the classification of the villa landscapes, since the facade stands alone without buildings around and behind it. Even if the late villa landscapes have degenerated and do not illustrate actual build-
ings with portico facades, the emphasis of the picture on the portico is still clear; the portico, and not a temple or a tree, remains the main motif of the architectural landscape.

The provenance of the villa landscapes
The title of this article refers only to the villa landscapes from Pompeii. In general the villa landscapes are almost exclusively found in Campania, our main source for Roman wall paintings. If one takes a closer look at Campania, however, the distribution of the villa landscapes varies tremendously within the known sites. Thus I have only been able to find one villa landscape from Herculaneum. The existing references to villa landscapes from Herculaneum are misleading; they refer in fact to other types of architectural landscape. Out of the remaining 25 landscapes, five landscapes are from Stabiae; and of these four from the Villa di San Marco. That leaves 20 villa landscapes with a provenance, either specific or general, from Pompeii. Five of these landscapes have no more specific provenance other than Pompeii, and these five are known to be from only three contexts.

The overall provenance of the villa landscapes thus shows that they were prevalent in Pompeii. Even though there may be villa landscapes of which I have not been aware, the distribution pattern seems very clear. Of course, the fact that large parts of Herculaneum are still unexcavated should be kept in mind. However I do not think that an excavation of the entire city would add much to the number of extant villa landscapes. Pompeii and Herculaneum are very different cities, both in terms of domestic architecture and in terms of wall painting. It is unlikely that the kind of wall paintings displayed in Pompeii, which include villa landscapes, would ever be found in Herculaneum's unexcavated areas.

The four (or five) villas of Stabiae present a different issue. The villas are not totally excavated, and have not been excavated at all since the campaigns of 1749-1782 and 1951. Despite this uncertainty, one overall conclusion can be drawn: Of all the known villas in Campania, not only in Stabiae, the Villa di San Marco seems to be the only one with villa landscapes. No villa landscapes are found in other areas such as the Villa Campo Varano/Villa di Arianna, Villa Imperiale, Villa di Boscotrecase or in the other villas of Stabiae. It may therefore be assumed that the villa landscapes were not a general, or even a widespread, feature in villa decorations. All these villas contain landscape paintings of one type or another – but no villa landscapes as here defined.

One could speculate that the villa landscapes of the Villa di San Marco, the exception to the rule, might have been a result of the owner's specific wish. Three of these villa landscapes are tondi; they come from the villa's large peristyle, where they were situated in the central panels. A total of 17 of these tondi from the same villa are conserved in a very varied state of preservation in the museum in Naples. The other 14 tondi show other types of architectural landscape. In the same peristyle, rectangular architectural landscapes are also displayed in the smaller panels between the central ones. None of these can with certainty be classified as villa landscapes.

Such a concentration of architectural landscapes in one villa, and what is more in one area, is very unusual. Not only does the Villa di San Marco appear to be the only villa in the area with villa landscapes, but it comprises an unusually large number of architectural landscapes in its decoration.

It may be concluded, therefore, that the general context of the villa landscapes, as a genre of art, is to be found not in the luxury villas, but in domestic contexts in Pompeii. Probably the house owners of Pompeii were fascinated and inspired by villa life, luxury, and architecture, and wished to emulate (if only vicariously) a life unattainable to the average Roman citizens of Pompeii.

Pompeii
Within Pompeii the contexts of the 20 villa landscapes show a very definite pattern: Only two villa landscapes are from contexts other than domestic. They are respectively the villa landscapes from the Terme Suburbane and from the Tempio Iside, where their presence seems rather random. It may thus be concluded that the villa landscapes were predominately...
part of domestic contexts and very rarely present in the public sphere.

Of the remaining 18 villa landscapes no less than 11 are concentrated in three of the known contexts, where there placing was deliberately chosen. The contexts in question are the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto (V 4, 11a), Casa del Citarista (14, 5/25) and Casa di Venere in Conchiglia (II, 3, 3). These three contexts all contain more than one villa landscape: The House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto (MLF) contains four, the Casa del Citarista (CC) five, and the Casa di Venere in Conchiglia (VC) two. These houses thus represent a rather large concentration of villa landscapes. The seven remaining villa landscapes in Pompeii are all found in contexts of only one villa landscape; nor do they occupy the same prominent positions. The evidence suggests that their presence is incidental and that they were not especially chosen as motifs. The opposite situation in the above-mentioned three contexts makes them more interesting for further investigation.

The villa landscapes from the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto are all situated in pairs in the tablinum on the northern and southern walls in the centre of the outer central panels. Mythological paintings are represented in the two inner central panels. On the northern wall the two villa landscapes represent different landscape settings; the left landscape (fig. 5) is a pi-shaped villa in two stories set in a garden with beds in front of the villa. In the centre of its facade the villa has an apse structure with a tholos building. Six statues are aligned in front of the portico facade. Trees, perhaps water, and different types of buildings are displayed behind the villa. The right villa landscape (fig. 6) represents a single-storey gamma-shaped villa situated by a small pier. Both statues and hermai are placed on the pier in front of the villa. Whether some of the statues are meant to represent people is impossible to say. A small boat is approaching the pier. Trees are depicted behind the villa.

The left villa landscape on the southern wall
Fig. 6. In situ, House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto (V 4, 11a), tablinum, northern wall, right panel. Photo Poul Madsen.

(fig. 7) is similar. The villa is also gamma shaped and situated by a small pier with hermai and statues placed on it. But several smaller buildings are depicted in the lower left corner, as also behind the portico villa. Trees and mountains are painted behind the villa. The landscape on the right side of the wall (fig. 8) is either a villa landscape or a cityscape. Several portico buildings are depicted on a pier with statues placed on it. A boat is sailing towards the pier. Trees and mountains are visible behind the villa. The scene probably represents a villa consisting of several buildings.

A comparison of the four villa landscapes from MLF shows quite clearly, especially by the way the trees are rendered, that they were painted by three different craftsmen. Two painters worked on the villa landscapes of the northern wall and only one on those of the southern wall.

These villa landscapes are among the most exquisite of their genre. The details, such as the leaves and the architecture, are very carefully rendered. The landscapes surrounding the villas are also very elaborate and varied. The six known villa landscapes of the late Third style all illustrate this tendency, which is general for the landscape paintings and the wall paintings tout court of the Third style. The wall decoration of MLF is thus fine, rich in details, and very carefully rendered; it is often cited as an example of the accuracy of the late Third style in Pompeii.

The villa landscapes of the Casa di Citarista represent a very interesting case as they are all situated on the entablature of the peristyle columns (room no. 17). Such a location for a villa landscape is unique. Unfortunately we have no precise record of how the friezes were situated on the entablature, nor of their exact height. The landscapes of the friezes are not all preserved, but judging from those that do survive, the number of villa landscapes would have been fairly high; out of the nine surviving architectural landscapes from CC five are villa landscapes. The landscapes on the parts of the
Fig. 7. In situ, House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto (V 4, 11a), tablinum, southern wall, left panel. Photo Poul Madsen.

Fig. 8. In situ, House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto (V 4, 11a), tablinum, southern wall, right panel. Photo Poul Madsen.
three preserved friezes are separated by the representation of water and thus form a continuous scenic water landscape. They represent some of the earliest villa landscapes, where the portico facade is reduced to almost a pavilion without any representation of the actual buildings behind it, thus emphasising the importance of the portico as a symbol of the villa.

Considerable architectural variety is displayed in the five villa landscapes from CC. On MN 9610 the second architectural landscape from the left is a villa landscape (fig. 9). The villa is semicircular with a portico facade and is placed on a podium. Both statues and people together with smaller buildings are depicted on the podium in front of the villa. Trees are depicted behind the villa, and behind them a pinkish sky. The other villa landscape on this frieze (fig. 10) is a gamma-shaped villa, but the villa is shown from the outside, and not from the inside as the gamma-shaped villas from MLF. No buildings are depicted in front of the villa on its podium, on which statues and people are rendered. Trees rise behind the villa, and several buildings are shown behind it on the right.

On MN 9496 the second architectural landscape is a villa landscape (fig. 11). The gamma-shaped villa depicted in it is shown from the outside. It is placed on a podium around which people and statues are depicted. In front of the villa a larger round building of three stories is represented. The only landscape setting behind the villa is of trees. The other villa landscape on this frieze (fig. 12) is of a different style, since it is T-shaped and situated on a podium pier. A tower, statues and two people fishing are shown on the pier. A boat is approaching the villa. Almost geometrically rendered trees are placed behind it.

The last frieze, MN 9606, is badly preserved and only comprises one villa landscape; the third architectural landscape from the left. The villa is gamma-shaped, but shown in an almost frontal position. It stands on a podium pier, on which a few statues and hermai can be recognized. A tower is depicted to the left of the villa. The usual trees are depicted behind it.

Judging from the villa landscapes from CC, only one painter worked on each frieze. The stylistic differences between the friezes are very clear. But equally clear is the overall stylistic development that led from the villa landscapes of MFL to those of CC. The villa landscapes are not as precisely executed as the ones from MLF, but they include just as many details and elaborate surrounding landscapes. The details, like the oscilla on fig. 10 and the hermai between the columns on fig. 12, are only found elsewhere in the villa landscapes from the Villa di San Marco. As far as the villas themselves go, they represent some of most imaginative types such as a semicircular villa. The style however is sketchier, more schematic, than the Third style, and more comparable with the wall paintings of the early Fourth style from the time around the earthquake. The rendering of the trees is a clear example of this sketchier style.

The decoration of this peristyle in CC is very sparsely preserved. Whether it dates before or after AD 62 remains unclear; its date is much debated. Stylistic factors like the sketchy style, the presence of a podium and the extensive depiction of a staffage around the villas concur, however, to associate these villa landscapes with the late Neronian Fourth style just around AD 62.

In the Casa di Venere in Conchiglia (VC) the two villa landscapes are also situated in the peristyle, however in a more traditional setting. They are located on the eastern and inner northern walls by the entrance. The villa landscape on the eastern wall (fig. 13) depicts a villa on a podium with a small shrine to the right in front of it. Two people fishing are shown to the right. Trees are depicted behind the villa. The villa landscape on the northern wall (fig. 14) is of a different style, since it is T-shaped and situated on a podium pier. A tower, statues and two people fishing are shown on the pier. A boat is approaching the villa. Almost geometrically rendered trees are placed behind it.

The setting of this latter villa is more elaborate than that on the eastern wall. The two villa landscapes from VC thus differ in style and, it goes without saying, were executed by two different painters. But they are both, in their general style, even sketchier than the ones from CC. It is clear, therefore, irrespective of their context, that they are to be dated to the late
Fig. 9. MN 9610. Casa del Citarista (I 4, 5/25), peristyle no. 17. Photo Poul Madsen.

Fig. 10. MN 9610. Casa del Citarista (I 4, 5/25), peristyle no. 17. Photo Poul Madsen.
Fig. 11. MN 9496. Casa del Citarista (I4, 5/25), peristyle no. 17. Photo Poul Madsen.

Fig. 12. MN 9496. Casa del Citarista (I4, 5/25), peristyle no. 17. Photo Poul Madsen.
Fig. 13. In situ, Casa di Venere in Conchiglia (II 3, 3), peristyle, eastern wall by entrance. Photo Poul Madsen.

Fig. 14. In situ, Casa di Venere in Conchiglia (II 3, 3), peristyle, inner northern wall by entrance. Photo Poul Madsen.
Fourth style. The almost bare landscape in the villa landscape on the eastern wall is a extreme variation of the tendency I have detected in the late Fourth style villa landscape in general, characterized by very sparse landscape settings surrounding the portico villas set on large podiums with trees behind them, and few or no buildings behind and around the portico.

The wall paintings of the peristyle are very simple with alternating yellow and red central panels and golden embroidery borders. This very simple style is typical of the Flavian period and corroborates the stylistic dating of these two villa landscapes. The villa landscapes from these three houses thus illustrate not only the stylistic development, but also the chronological range, of the villa landscapes.

A prominent position is characteristic of all of the above-mentioned villa landscapes from Pompeii. They are situated either in the tablinum or in the peristyle, which were the areas of the houses most expressive of their owners' prestige. The guests of the house and the owners themselves would therefore have been presented with two or more villa landscapes in prominent positions within the rooms, and also on the walls of the peristyle. The friezes, in particular, occupy a unique position; and this uniqueness also points to the fact that they were especially chosen for the villa landscapes. The fact that the friezes were all found in association with at least one other villa landscape supports the theory that the villa landscapes were deliberately chosen to be depicted in these three houses. In view of the rarity of the villa landscapes, this theory is even more convincing.

Four of the villa landscapes from the museum in Naples, MN 9406 and MN 9844, also support the above-presented theory on the distribution pattern of the villa landscapes – even if they have no more specific provenance than Pompeii. The four villa landscapes are found in pairs and have undoubtedly been placed together in their original collocation.

Rostovtzeff included MN 9406 (figs. 1 and 2) in his seminal study of 1904. So these two villa landscapes are among the best known. But they are not typical of the villa landscapes, since they are of an almost square format, which results in a very unbalanced composition. They are, however, remarkable for their very fine and detailed representation of the architecture, which can only be compared with the villa landscapes from MLF. In my opinion these two villa landscapes are earlier than the ones from MLF and represent a prototype of the villa landscape. The square format supports this theory, since the landscape paintings of the Third style often were of a square format. These two villa landscapes should therefore be dated to the Third style. In what contexts they were originally placed cannot be determined, but the fact that they are a pair supports my theory that the motifs included in them were specifically chosen.

Despite that, MN 9844 must be dated to the late Fourth style. The two villa landscapes in question are tondi. Their sketchy style and sparse landscape setting undoubtedly date them within the later Fourth style. These two villa landscapes are presumably earlier than the villa landscapes from VC, their closest parallel. Their composition leaves no room for any extensive scenery behind the villas. Only trees are rendered there. Fig. 15 is not very well preserved, but a compact villa with towers rising over the roof can easily be recognised, as can two rather large people in front of the villa. The other villa landscape on MN 9844 is better preserved. A gamma-shaped villa standing on a high podium and with towers on its roof can be dis-
cerned. Rather large people are walking in front of the villa and in what must be water, since a boat is rendered. Again the fact that these two villa landscapes were originally displayed in the same context leads to the assumption that the motifs were especially chosen.

Though the total quantity of villa landscapes, found in contexts that illustrate the pattern presented above, is not large, it forms a high percentage of all the villa landscapes. No statistical conclusions can be drawn on the basis of so small a sample, but the general distribution pattern is very convincing. Due to their rarity, concentration in few contexts, and prominent positions, the villa landscapes must have been carefully selected, presumably by the owner of the house, as motifs to decorate the domestic contexts in question. We do not know why the villa landscapes should have been selected for inclusion in these wall decorations, but their distribution pattern, as presented above, suggests that this selection cannot have been coincidental.

The domestic provenance
At the time of the earthquake a new type of house was developing in Pompeii. This new type of domestic architecture is characterized by the imitation of villa architecture in the gardens. Greater emphasis was thus placed on the garden, which in these houses is thought to have been the area of greatest prestige, as opposed to the tablinum of the atrium house. These houses are not large; they are mainly of modest size. Through rebuilding and expansion they differ architecturally from the atrium house, but were mainly built over the core of one.

Paul Zanker was the first to point out this tendency in later Pompeian domestic taste. Since then it has been assumed that the villa landscapes, because of their motifs, formed part of this trend. For this to be the case, the villa landscapes would have to be found in the same houses that exemplify this new trend in domestic architecture.

The houses mentioned by Zanker as belonging to the “villa-imitating type” are houses like the Casa dell’Efebo (I 7, 11), Casa di Apoline (VI 7, 23), Casa del Ancora (VI 10, 7) Casa di D. Octavius Quartio (II 2, 2) and others. They are all what might be called an advanced type, characterized not only by the reduction of the atrium to an entrance and the elimination of its adjacent tablinum, but by a very elaborate garden architecture that is by far the most dominant part of the house. The features built into these gardens imitate those of the garden architecture of the villas; though they vary from house to house, the evident motivation to imitate the villas was the same. On the other hand, the advanced houses are each architecturally unique; their architecture seems to have been designed to meet the very specific wishes expressed, in all likelihood, by the owner of the house himself. In the House of D. Octavius Quartio the wall paintings, which are unique both in type and motif, also seem to reflect the patron’s specific wishes.

The House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto is a very typical atrium house with a small garden at the back with columns on one side. It is one of the best preserved houses in this regio of Pompeii and lies on a narrow street; all the greater, then, is the visitor’s surprise at the splendour and preservation of its decoration in general. The house is not flamboyant in style, but is decorated with great care and a wealth of detail. It is of medium size and has a very traditional floor plan with atrium and tablinum and a newer tablinum facing onto the garden. There is nothing progressive about the architecture or wall painting of this house; a more traditional – perhaps conservative – taste was prevalent in MLF. Yet its owner was very particular about how it was decorated.

In size the Casa di Citarista is one of Pompeii’s largest. Originally, however, it was a regular atrium house in Pompeii’s first regio. It gained its present impressive size by incorporating the surrounding atrium houses and by the addition of three peristyles. One could argue that this house fits the description of the villa-imitating houses, but compared to the houses in Zanker’s article, it is not particularly innovative in terms of the villa-imitating elements and is of much larger size. A closer comparison can be made with the Casa del Menandro (I 10, 4), Casa del Labirinto (VI 11, 10), and Casa del Fauno (VI 12). These houses are of the same im-