

CLCS4009

READING ANTIQUITY: A SURVEY OF ANCIENT LITERATURE



Lecture 16: Rural
Rome: Virgil's
Eclogues and
Georgics;
Horace's *Epodes*
and *Epistles*

Lecture Outline

- The *locus amoenus* (“pleasant place”) of the Roman countryside present across the history of Roman literature
- The contrast between the city and the country:
 - The hard work of the country
 - The poverty
 - That a city man cannot cut it in the country
 - The longing for the countryside: the unattainable peace of the countryside
- The linking of that longing to historical and political developments
- Too much of a good thing...: Nature as threat

Roman farm and country life



Virgil's *Eclogues*

- This is a particularly Roman phenomenon...
- ...but there are some Greek precursors as well:
 - The pastoral poetry of Theocritus: Arcadia
 - The ancient novel: its description of the countryside
- ...i.e. predominately from the Hellenistic period
- ...i.e. from a period with which we have already noticed Roman authors of the late Republic and early Empire share a lot of ideas / practices
 - Literary style
 - Content and topics
- The *Eclogues* published c. 35 BC: before the battle of Actium

*Tityre, tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi
silvestrem tenui Musam meditaris avena;
nos patriae fines et dulcia linquimus arva.
nos patriam fugimus; tu, Tityre, lentus in umbra
formosam resonare doces Amaryllida silvas.*

Tityrus, thou where thou
liest under the cover of
spreading beech, broodest
on thy slim pipe over the
Muse of the woodland: we
leave our native borders
and pleasant fields; we fly
our native land, while thou,
Tityrus, at ease in the shade
teachest the woods to echo
fair Amaryllis.

Virgil's first *Eclogue*

- The sibilances of the verse imitate the shepherd's pipe
- The first image of Tityrus under his tree is a typical example of a topical *locus amoenus*
 - What is a *topos*?
- The reader might expect a classical pastoral poem with only implicit connections to the contemporary society...
- ...but odd words such as *patriae fines* intrude

Intrusions in Arcadia?

TITYRUS

[6] O Melibeous, it is a god who gave us this peace – for a god he shall ever be to me; often shall a tender lamb from our folds stain his altar. Of his grace my kine roam, as you see, and I, their master, play what I will on my rustic pipe.

MELIBOEUS

[11] Well, I grudge you not – rather I marvel; such unrest is there on all sides in the land. See, heartsick, I myself am driving my goats along, and here, Tityrus, is one I scarce can lead. For here just now amid the thick hazels, after hard travail, she dropped twins, the hope of the flock, alas! On the naked flint. Often, I mind, this mishap was foretold me, had not my wits been dull, by the oaks struck from heaven. But still tell me, Tityrus, who is this god of yours

- ‘The shepherd remains forever in the shade of the trees, but we – the speaker, the author, the reader – know even as we catch sight of the idyllic scene that this is somewhere we cannot stay.’ (Heyworth, 2005, 152)
- The idyllic is always tempered by the cruelty of nature or life intruding
 - Cf. Ara Pacis
- As a whole, the first Eclogue offers not an escape but a discussion of contemporary issues:
 - The land confiscations in the wake of the civil war
 - The domination of the city of Rome itself

Virgil's *Eclogues* as a Poetry book

- One of the first examples remaining today of a tightly constructed Roman poetry book
 - Close intratextual links between poems
 - Cf. the opening poem and the end of *Ecl.* 10:
 - *These strains, Muses divine, it will be enough for your bard to have sung, as he sits and waves a basket of slender willow. These strains ye shall make of highest worth in Gallus' eyes – Gallus, for whom my love grows from hour to hour as fast as the green alder shoots up when spring is young. Let us arise. The shade is oft perilous to the singer – perilous the juniper's shade, hurtful the shade even to the crops. Get home, my full-fed goats, get home – the Evening Star draws on.* (Verg. *Ecl.* 10.70-77)
 - E.g.: 'Odd-numbered poems exploit the form to present exchanges, polemical and competitive in 3 and 7, collaborative in 5.' (Heyworth, 2005, 150)
 - Callimachean influence in the size of the material
 - 'slim pipe' flags this up to the reader already in the first poem

Horace's *Epistles*

- Will give us another example of the contradictions inherent in Augustan descriptions of the countryside
- Literary letters taking many of their traits from everyday letter-writing but they were written for publication rather than for one single addressee
- These letters stand between the traditions of philosophical and satirical letter collections
- The life in the city is therefore a crucial topic
 - Cf. Roman satire
- ...and many of the letters aim to give a flavour of the narrator's life as a city man

Horace, *Epistles* 1.14

Steward, of woods, and the little farm that gives me back / Myself again, farm you loathe
though it serves five households, / And sends five honest fathers to Varia's market, / Let's
see if I'm better at rooting thorns from the mind, / Than you from the soil: whether
Horace or farm does best. / Though I'm kept here, by Lamia's filial affection / And grief:
he mourns his brother, sighs inconsolably / For his lost brother, yet thought and feeling
draw me back, / Longing to burst the barriers that obstruct the course. / I call the country-
dweller, you the townsman, blessed. / One who admires another's lot, naturally hates his
own. / Each man's foolish to blame a blameless place unfairly: / The mind's at fault,
which can never escape itself. / Drudging away you sighed secretly for the country, / A
steward now you long for city games and baths: / You know I'm true to myself, and I'm
sad to leave / Whenever some hateful business drags me to Rome. / We like different
things: that's the true disagreement / Between us. What you call empty, inhospitable /
Wasteland, is lovely to one who shares my views / And hates what you think fine. I see
that it's brothels / And greasy stalls that stir your desire for town, the fact / Your patch
would yield pepper and spice sooner than grapes, / And there's never an inn nearby to
offer you wine, / No pipe-playing whore, to whose wails you can dance, / Pounding the
earth: yet you labour in fields, long untouched / By the hoe, tend to the unyoked ox, and
feed him cut grass: / Wearied, the stream makes more work, when rain has fallen, /
Diverted by earthworks, to spare the sunlit meadow

The Country according to Horace

- I call the country-dweller,
you the townsman, blessed. /
One who admires another's
lot, naturally hates his own
- [...] yet you labour in fields,
long untouched / By the hoe,
tend to the unyoked ox, and
feed him cut grass: /
Wearied, the stream makes
more work, when rain has
fallen, / Diverted by
earthworks, to spare the
sunlit meadow.
- 1.14 neatly establishes that
the country is always
someplace else – or that
those who enjoy it do so only
as a temporary escape
- Connections to satire (Hor.
Serm. 1.1) in a way underlines
how dependent the narrator's
perspective is on city life
- Also makes clear that the
idyllic life in the country
really depends on work: this
is Tityrus' stream too

The City according to Horace

- You know I'm true to myself,
and I'm sad to leave /
Whenever some hateful
business drags me to Rome
- I see that it's brothels / And
greasy stalls that stir your
desire for town, the fact /
Your patch would yield
pepper and spice sooner than
grapes, / And there's never
an inn nearby to offer you
wine, / No pipe-playing
whore, to whose wails you
can dance
- Viewpoint and self-
presentation of the
narrator?
- Would his leisurely life in
the country be possible
without the city?
- The need to consider this
poem in context: the
collection of *Epistles* as a
whole

Res Gestae Divi Augusti

19. I built the senate-house and the Chalcidicum which adjoins it and the temple of Apollo on the Palatine with porticos, the temple of divine Julius, the Lupercal, the portico at the Flaminian circus, which I allowed to be called by the name Octavian, after he who had earlier built in the same place, the state box at the great circus, the temple on the Capitoline of Jupiter Subduer and Jupiter Thunderer, the temple of Quirinus, the temples of Minerva and Queen Juno and Jupiter Liberator on the Aventine, the temple of the Lares at the top of the holy street, the temple of the gods of the Penates on the Velian, the temple of Youth, and the temple of the Great Mother on the Palatine.

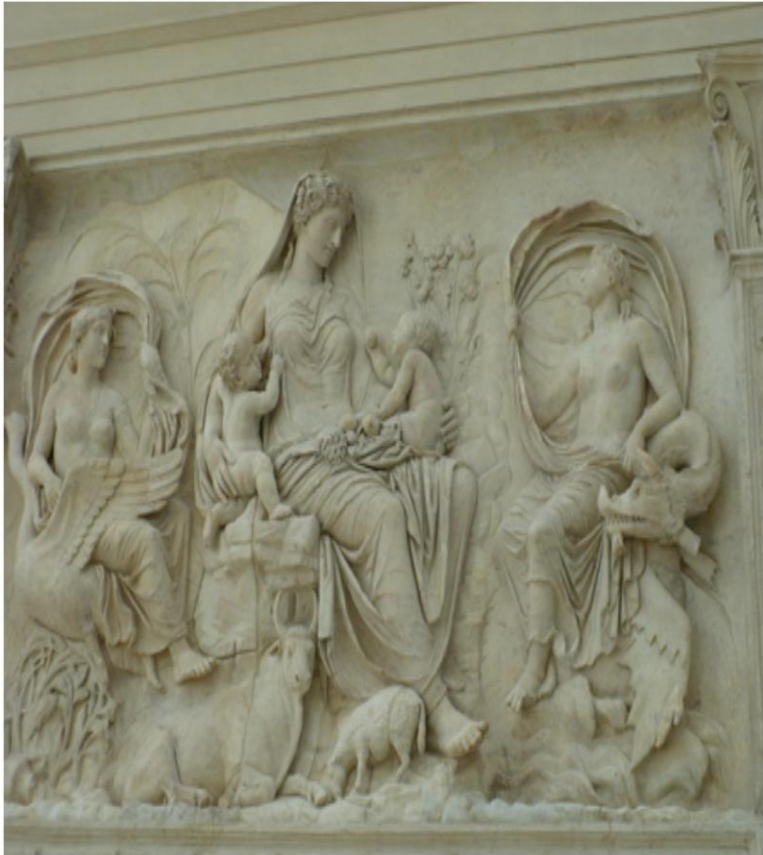
Res Gestae Divi Augusti

20. I rebuilt the Capitol and the theater of Pompey, each work at enormous cost, without any inscription of my name. I rebuilt aqueducts in many places that had decayed with age, and I doubled the capacity of the Marcian aqueduct by sending a new spring into its channel. I completed the Forum of Julius and the basilica which he built between the temple of Castor and the temple of Saturn, works begun and almost finished by my father. When the same basilica was burned with fire I expanded its grounds and I began it under an inscription of the name of my sons, and, if I should not complete it alive, I ordered it to be completed by my heirs. Consul for the sixth time (28 B.C.E.), I rebuilt eighty-two temples of the gods in the city by the authority of the senate, omitting nothing which ought to have been rebuilt at that time. Consul for the seventh time (27 B.C.E.), I rebuilt the Flaminian road from the city to Ariminum and all the bridges except the Mulvian and Minucian.

Building Works at Rome (Augustan Period)

- As clear from Augustus' *Res Gestae*, this is a period of intense building and re-building in the city (and surrounding countryside)
- Pride in the city
- However, even the public building works undertaken by Augustus illustrate the Roman preoccupation with nature/countryside:

The Ara Pacis and the Country



- The bountiful earth
- Linking of natural motifs indicating fecundity with mythological and historical motifs
- Motifs from the Ara Pacis spread to other art of the period
- ...but note also that nature needs to be held in check
- *Pax victoriis parta*: peace born out of victory

The dangers of the country



Threatening nature

- 'Nature is ordered, but not excessively so' (Galinsky, 1996, 152)
- The altar, including the floral elements, is a celebration of the new age and the prosperity it brings...
- ...but it also indicates that this is not an idyll that looks after itself: it is not, and does not claim to be, a return to the Golden Age
- It indicates threats that need to be controlled
- Cf. Verg. *Ecl.* 1.46-48: *Happy old man! So these lands will still be yours, and large enough for you, though bare stones cover all, and the marsh chokes your pastures with slimy rushes.*

Other poems on country life

- Horace, *Epode* II: the praise of the ideal country life (although see the cynical last four lines of the poem)
- Virgil's *Georgics* (in four books): the poem is 'didactic': it teaches about farming (BUT Seneca says that Virgil was more interested in perfect expression than perfect truth and wrote not to teach farmers but to delight readers).

Lecture Summary

- Descriptions of countryside life are very frequent in Roman literature
- They are reflective of the Roman ideal of *simplicitas*, of having little, but just enough; particularly prominent in Augustan times
- This ideal, however, stands in contrast to the increasing emphasis on and pride in the city of Rome itself
- The countryside is repeatedly described in positive terms from the perspective of those in the city – very rarely by narrators actually there: it is the place where the grass is always greener

Preliminary Reading

- For the next lecture (after Reading Week), please read:
- Plato's *Symposium*
- Aristotle's *Poetics*