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Living in paradises – late antique imagery as reflections of life and afterlife

In many categories of ancient literature, by far more in Greek than in Latin, the desire for an afterlife in the Elysium is a frequent theme. Beginning with orphic and other mysterious or religious texts (including various inscriptions like the Derveni Papyrus), which occur from the early archaic to late antique times, but also in philosophy from Parmenides to the Neoplatonism, in Homer (esp. Ulysses and Achilles at the gates to the underworld) as well as in tragedy, poetry, and rhetoric scripts, the sources tell of a desperate need for hope related to the afterlife.

On the other hand, archaeology has brought to light a vast number of private houses and also public buildings in sacred precincts, prytaneia and other banquet halls (to mention only the most important types), which contain groups of rooms with programmatic furnishings in mosaics, wall paintings, and sculptural adornments hinting at Dionysic or similar conceptions of an (after)life in paradise. Especially in the luxurious households of the senatorial order in late antique countryside (*villae urbanae*), like the Villa Casale near Piazza Armerina in Sicily, but also already in dwellings of the municipal aristocracy (like the 'Terrace House II' in Ephesos) in the 2nd and 3rd century AD we may trace the urgent will to form one's environment with depictions of myths appropriate for consolation.

There is abundant research literature about that phenomenon, even if – due to fragmentary preservation or excavation – archaeological cases where we can follow the contents of the whole program are rare. But it would bring a completely new note to the discussion if the concept of resonance could be related to these houses. To ask what in detail had been the ideas behind the stony legacy, to reconstruct the direction ways in which the patron and his family or guests were going, what was the role of architecture (including gardens, porticoes etc.) and its adornments, what was the core of actions in daily life or festivals. Was there a wish for resonant experiences and how could one manage to get a chance for repeating those moments? Certainly, they read or declaimed the texts, stored in the private library, performed theater-plays, executed processions, and most of all, had symposia, during which all the declamations and performances took place. But how could the architectural framework help in these efforts, to have more than a good time, but to catch a glimpse of salvation as hope for what would happen after death?

The dissertation project is designed to reconstruct this role of architecture (gates, courtyards, gardens, peristyles, corridors, assembly and banquet halls and small niches, dark rooms without windows and so on), in asking what function at what stage of a ritualised meeting, religious ceremony and/or banquet it might fulfill. The solution lies in retracing the way of guests and processions through the house, the single stations and the final place(s) where the expected divine appearance (*epiphania*) or other experiences might happen. The endowment

of rooms, depicting gods and goddesses, the myths of heroes and half-gods who overcame death, returned from Hades or, at best, became Olympic gods like Hercules and Dionysos, must have had a certain arrangement from a starting point escalating emotions and expectations till the grand final in a 'sacred' place. These places might, most likely, have been niches and rooms with glass-mosaics showing Dionysos and Ariadne in Paradise or similar sceneries.

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