

The Gardens of Pompeii

Riassunto

L'area archeologica pompeiana occupa circa 44 ettari : di questi circa la metà erano coperti da un groviglio inestricabile di rovi. Un'attenta opera di bonifica e di riconversione della vegetazione ha permesso di selezionare le sole specie desiderate, mentre la distruzione tra parti una volta coperte (ed ora sottolineate dal pietrisco di lava) ed aree verdi favorisce da una parte una più facile lettura dell'area archeologica, e dall'altra una sua più facile manutenzione.

Quest'opera di bonifica ha permesso di recuperare un gran numero di aree verdi, alcune ripiantate in diverse epoche della storia degli scavi, altre mai sistemate. A queste ultime sono da ascrivere tutte quelle scavate negli anni 70 nella zona di Via Castricio e oggetto di studio da parte della Jashemski.

Le aree verdi di più antico impianto, impiantate secondo la moda del tempo, conservano spesso esemplari di alberi ed arbusti di notevole grandezza, che possono arrivare anche a 150 anni di età : esse sono state conservate così come sono, perché comunque rappresentano un momento della storia del restauro.

In taluni casi, come quello ad esempio di L. Tiburtino, rigorosamente ricostruito negli anni 30 sulla scorta dei dati di scavo, si è provveduto a ripristinare le parti lignee ormai distrutte.

Lungo la Via di Castricio sono state sistemate le aree verdi secondo criteri filologici forniti sia dai dati di scavo che da eventuali indagini palinologiche : in mancanza di tali dati sono stati lasciati prati naturali per la conservazione delle specie autoctone.

La massima espressione di tali ricostruzioni filologiche è offerta da alcuni giardini lungo la Via Nocera scavati 4 anni fa e dal giardino della Casa dei Casti Amanti tornato alle luci un anno fa, il cui studio è quasi terminato.

In A.D. 79, the eruption of Vesuvius « sealed » the urban orchards and gardens of ancient Pompeii. It is only in the last few years that full attention has been given to this buried treasure, and more sophisticated techniques have been used in its investigation. As a result, we are continually being rewarded by new surprises which sometimes force us to re-think our

old views. Examples of this treasure are the numerous small intensely cultivated orchards which adjoined the houses in the less rich districts, the large urban vineyards, and the green areas used for mixed agricultural and manufacturing activities.

However, at Pompeii, many gardens can be seen that have been rebuilt in an arbitrary fashion during the 250 years of excavations, that is, following the fashion and aesthetics prevailing at the time of their reconstruction. For instance, let us read this passage, written in 1801: «... ruins acquire a more natural look, when they are mingled with grass and bushes. Nature seems to regain possession of sites of which architecture had robbed her, with a kind of triumph. Nothing proves the antiquity of a place more than finding a site today, which was once adorned with a building, now covered with trees and thorn bushes.

A mass of ivy arising from within a ramshackle tower; a cherry tree which flowers, lonely and crooked, amid ruined walls; blackberry bushes blossoming from fissures; a brook murmuring among ruins: these are the various surroundings, often companions of true ruins, that do mark the force of time... Ruins should present themselves to our eyes: they should be discovered while hidden and enveloped, as they are, in darkness and melancholy. Suddenly seen in a lonely place among stone-heaps and thorn bushes, after one has travelled along tortuous paths, they will excite and occupy our imagination».

Thus wrote Ercole Silva, a noble of Milan, and a forerunner of modern studies of garden architecture, referring to the landscape garden which had arrived in Italy from Europe as an expression of the neoclassical and pre-romantic taste.

Pompeii, which was gradually being returned to the light of day, had largely contributed to that «aesthetics of ruins» that was so much in fashion at that time. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the romantic idea of ruins abandoned to wild vegetation having been dismissed, the concept of a faithful reconstruction of gardens prevailed, but the accuracy adopted in carrying out the excavations, which were at last stratigraphic, and in recovering the shapes of lawns (flower beds) and paths by techniques involving taking casts of trees and bushes, was not accompanied by a corresponding care in choosing the species to be planted. So it was that agaves and mesembrianthemums, tangerine trees, and carnations adorned the revived Pompeii gardens (for instance at the «Pansa» and the «Golden Cupids» houses). It was only since 1879, when Orazio Comes, Professor of Botany at the University of Portici, began studying the species depicted on frescoes and mosaics, that some order was put into this field: the house of the Vettii brothers and the «Centenary» house are typical expressions of this period.

At the beginning of this century the archaeologist Spano began systematically excavating the gardens of the «seventh region», a district of ancient Pompeii, recovering the geometry of flower beds, and sites and dimensions of the tree and bush species cultivated in ancient times. He relied on the studies carried out by Comes to determine the species to be replanted, but soon abandoned himself to the charms and fascination of classical reminiscences, and so made arbitrary arrangements instead of correct reconstructions (e.g. in the «Labyrinth» house, following a mosaic found in the house and depicting a labyrinth, and in the house no. VIII, 7, 5, following another mosaic, which can be seen in the Archaeological Museum of Naples, and showing an *hortus conclusus* (that is, a garden enclosed within wooden or cane fences).

In the thirties, greater attention was paid to the excavation data, botanists were consulted on the identification of casts, and the use of plants known to have been planted in gardens of the Roman period, made it possible to carry out some fairly rigorous reconstructions. A good example of this can be found in the house of Loreius Tiburtinus. Nevertheless, new periods of improvisation followed and in some gardens exotic species were planted which had certainly not been known in classical ages.

Finally, in the seventies, prof. Wilhelmina Jashemski used really rigorous methods and sophisticated analyses for the first time in green area excavations, thus making scientific replanting possible.

Nowadays, the analysis of seeds found in the ground, and palynological and dendrological surveys applied to the stratigraphical excavations, allow us to identify the vegetation of the Roman garden. This is not, unfortunately, possible at all archaeological sites. It is Pompeii, sealed by its pyroclastic blanket in A.D. 79, which offers this extraordinary opportunity.

The most recent garden excavation in Pompeii is that belonging to the house of the «Chaste Lovers», under the direction of the archaeologist, A. Varone. The viridarium brought to light in the early months of this year is made up of a lawn transected by paths of flattened earth. The flower beds, fenced off by cane trellises (holes found in the earth mark their lozenge-shaped pattern) formed a complex geometrical design which lengthened the depth of field and squared off what was an assymetrical access to the garden. The species of plants cultivated in the home, which were also planted symmetrically, had both ornamental and practical uses: The grey-green leaves of the *Artemisia*, *Lychnis* and *Cerastium* contrasted with the emerald-green of the juniper. The flowering of roses followed by *Lychnis* and *Cerastium*, ensured touches of continuous colour in the viridarium, but each plant also had a medicinal, seasoning, or culinary purposes.

The garden of the «Chaste Lovers» house has confirmed what we find depicted in mosaics and frescoes. In fact, mosaics and frescoes of the

Roman era have often shown us images of gardens enclosed within wooden or cane fences. It was always believed that these pictures were the visualisation of the concept of the garden, and that the true Roman garden was modelled on the *ars topiaria*, as described by Pliny. On the other hand, it was believed that the plants, which were depicted so accurately that it was possible to identify them to species, were those actually cultivated. In recent years, a more naturalistic approach to the interpretation of the frescoes, and the application of modern technology to the stratigraphical excavation of gardens has enabled us to discover the true composition of gardens in the Roman era, and in particular, of those in Pompeii. A more accurate reading of the frescoes has revealed, for example, that the plants were depicted according to allegorical principles: in fact, in a single fresco, we may find plants in bloom that would have flowered at different times of the year. This is something that would not have occurred if the frescoes were a copy of real gardens. However, this does not undermine the importance of these paintings and mosaics, because, especially in the past, they have enabled us to identify the flora known to the ancient world.

What traces of the Roman gardens unearthed for us at Pompeii do we find in the Italian gardens of the following centuries?

The medieval garden, visible in many miniatures, copied the *hortus conclusus* model, being an area enclosed by wooden or cane fencing. At first, in the Age of Humanism, and then during the Renaissance, the reading of the Classics, and Pliny in particular, gave rise to the idea that the Roman garden was dominated by the squared hedges achieved from the *ars topiaria*. Grottoes, statues, rockeries, and long water channels decorated the gardens, conforming to the descriptions left by the ancient writers. It is interesting to note, for example, the similarity between the ponds at Villa Lante in Bagnaia (in the province of Viterbo) and those in the House of Loreius Tiburtinus brought to light at Pompeii. These sumptuous « Italian gardens » characterized by extreme geometrical patterns, reflected in their rigorously squared hedges and trees, were not, however, unknown in Naples. A splendid tapestry, conserved in the Convent of San Domenico Maggiore, shows a seventeenth century Neapolitan garden, with symmetrical borders enclosed by cane trellises with exotic flowers, recent importations from the New World, peeping through.

This continuity between the Pompeian garden, as designed for the house of the « Chaste Lovers », and the seventeenth century Neapolitan garden depicted in the tapestry, is quite remarkable. It is as though a long tradition had cancelled out the centuries separating the two ages.

The arrival of the landscape garden in the eighteenth century spelled an end to the extreme geometry of the flower beds, and gardens acquired the grace of open spaces. The Classical World was not forgotten, however, and there was hardly a shady corner which did not hide a little temple.

In the second half of the eighteenth century the rediscovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum rekindled interest in the Ancient World. Thorn bushes and ivy were meticulously arranged between the cracks in the fake ruins which adorned the most hidden recesses of parks and gardens, to stir the romantic souls of the time into a tormented state such as that invoked by the sight of ancient cities buried under lava. These fake ruins, which can still be admired today in the English Garden at the Reggia do Caserta, or in the Park at Schoenbrunn, were the last manifestation of the influence of Roman and especially Pompeian gardens through the centuries. It is noticeable, however, that certain specialist magazines are once more beginning to interest their readers in the geometrical figures created by the *ars topiaria*.

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