and famous persons who on visiting the site uttered memorable one-liners about its impact or meaning.

For this very reason, Irwin is at his best when he discusses the Alhambra’s history after 1492, when the Nasrid sultans were defeated and sent into exile, and the palace became the occasional royal residence of Isabel and Ferdinand and their successors. From this moment onward, the historical reception of the Alhambra is the focus, and the stories Irwin recounts are increasingly romantic tales of lost splendor, ruin, and decadence with, not surprisingly, orientalist overtones. The author’s treatment of the nineteenth century is interesting, because as a historian he is sensitive to the fact that the history of the distant past—in the Iberian case, the rule of the Nasrids, Castile-Aragon, and the Hapsburgs—is filtered through the more immediate past. Hence, much of what we know about the Alhambra today was delivered via architects and gentleman-scholars such as Richard Ford, Jules Goury, Washington Irving, and Owen Jones. In some cases, these writers recorded parts of the Alhambra that have since disappeared either through deliberate removal (the wooden vaulting of the Partal Palace is today housed in Berlin), disaster (such as the fire that ravaged the Generalife in 1958), or lamentable decisions made by past conservation architects. Irwin observes with true insight that in the modern age, the tourists themselves become part of the ongoing history of the Alhambra (67).

However, in some places, the bias toward historical reception leads to some overgeneralizations. For example, he asserts that many visitors find the Alhambra’s architecture to be “the most beautiful in the world” (15). But this was not always so. The Alhambra was disdained by modernists in the mid-twentieth century because the exuberant ornament hid the structural logic of the architecture. The dazzling muqarnas domes in the Hall of the Two Sisters and Hall of the Abencerrajes can only be regarded as a tour de force if one is willing to forego a rational understanding of spatial volume, because the domes appeal not to the intellect but to the senses, not to comprehension but raw perception. Similarly, one cringes when Irwin writes that the “history of medieval Spain is, more than anything else, the struggle for supremacy in that peninsula between the Muslims and the Christians” (16). Although his bibliography indicates that he has read the more nuanced explanations offered by Jerrilynn Dodds, Thomas Glick, Maria Menocal, Raymond Scheindlin, and myself (to name only those authors writing in English), he nonetheless ignores the immense evidence of convivencia and mudéjar communities and represents Spain as a thoroughly bipolar entity, which it was not. The question of acculturation and the nationalist and politicized debates that have been waged among scholars over convivencia and literary genres such as muwashshabat poetry is not addressed by Irwin, probably because to do so would depart from the book’s chatty format and because it might bore the nonscholarly audience.

The book rambles from one topic and historical period to another. It is more the type of thing that one reads on the plane en route to Granada, whetting one’s appetite with, well, historical gossip. Yet, despite my criticisms, I think the book will appeal to a general educated audience for its wit and its deft ability to weave together archaeology, social history, and historiography from the nineteenth century to the present in a lively, if slightly coy, way.

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Baroque Rome

Tracy L. Ehrlich

Landscape and Identity in Early Modern Rome: Villa Culture at Frascati in the Borghese Era


Only the most comprehensive studies on Roman villas—whether ancient or early modern—grapple with the full range of complex issues necessary to understand the buildings beyond their architectural form as cultural and even religious artifacts. Revealing great scholarly dexterity, Tracy L. Ehrlich has produced one such examination of the Villa Mondragone in Landscape and Identity in Early Modern Rome: Villa Culture at Frascati in the Borghese Era. From the 1540s to the 1620s, when Frascati was the villeggiatura favored by popes, the Villa Mondragone was constructed as a modern and sustainable landscape in the vein of Tusculum; this book reconstructs it in agricultural, aristocratic, and religious terms. Cardinal Scipione Borghese, the villa’s patron and Pope Paul V’s nephew, “encouraged visitors to engage with and participate in this landscape not with their bodies but with their minds” (242). Ehrlich invites us to do the same, to visit this place intellectually, and in so doing transports the reader to the heyday of Frascati.

Landscape and Identity in Early Modern Rome is magnificently descriptive and astutely synthesized, and its four parts (organized in nine chapters) are tailored to benefit the whole. The book is accompanied by a less essential glossary and partial chronology of early modern popes. The book deals with the specifics of renovating and expanding the Villa Mondragone, while attending to larger issues of the papacy, villeggiatura, agriculture; to intellectual and cultural activity; and, perhaps most significant, to the contemporary understanding of classical antiquity.

Part one, “The Roman Setting,” provides a strong foundation for under-
standing the papacy and aristocracy and the Borghese. Although details may be familiar, they are conveniently arranged to inform a wealth of original material concerning the Borghese family. Although much is known of Paul V’s efforts to modernize Rome through technological advances, architectural commissions, and intellectual and cultural activities, Ehrlich makes us privy to his more private strategy. Unsatisfied with previous Borghese residences, such as the Quirinal Palace, a Pincian villa, and Villa Como, Scipione purchased the Villa Mondragone, complete with two palaces, for 300,000 scudi. Scipione’s building program at Villa Mondragone included the construction of a third palace in an effort to catapult the Borghese family from ecclesiastical nobility into the secular aristocracy. As Ehrlich points out, Scipione was inventing a “Roman pedigree” (45).

Shifting focus away from Rome in part two, “The Frascati in the Renaissance: Tuscolo Restituto,” considers the revival of the ancient villa culture, or villeggiatura, and the first papal villas. As the author deftly narrows the perspective from broad villa culture to architectural content, the reader begins to discover less the rehashing and more the reshaping of history. Avoiding pedantry, Ehrlich emphasizes the activities as much as the features of each villa, providing evidence for the villeggiatura that galvanized papal interest in Frascati.

Part three, “Frascati in Its Heyday: The Borghese at the Villa Mondragone,” deals directly with the renovation and expansion of the Villa Mondragone by the Borghese. From multiple perspectives—architecture, ceremony, leisure, and politics—Ehrlich provides broad and deep insight into the development of this landscape for a pope by his cardinal-nephew. Here is where the author best excavates the past, detailing each of the three palaces that comprised the domain, as well as their gardens. As discussed in chapter five, Scipione and his architect Jan van Zanten reconfigured the entire estate to create a more holistic interpretation of his own ambitions and values, which favored scale, antiquity, and ritual above iconography. Ehrlich attributes any modest features remaining after Scipione’s improvements to the influence of Paul V, whose unaltered papal apartment retained a simpler character. As recounted in chapter seven, banquets, music, hunting, collecting antiquities, contemplation, and other activities of seasonal living at Villa Mondragone occurred across the vast acreage of the grounds, yet after the death of Paul V in 1621, “Scipione knew that his power to command Roman social circles and European politics was ephemeral” (193). Although Scipione was central to the design of this papal retreat, the pope had made Scipione’s achievements possible.

Part four, “Land, Landscape, and Family Lore,” addresses the Villa Mondragone as an agricultural and aristocratic landscape. Cognizant of the villa’s role in symbolizing his family’s place in Roman society, Scipione cultivated goods and pleasure equally at his estate. The Villa Mondragone was profitable as a vast vigna, a dynastic seat, and an artistic and cultural artefice.

In a triumphant final chapter, “Land into Landscape,” Ehrlich distills the otherwise dizzying, complex discourse of cultural landscape history. Scipione Borghese presented Romans with a new paradigm, a hybrid baronial estate, religious retreat, and classical villa. Ehrlich presents historians with a more lucid understanding of the evolution from Renaissance to Baroque landscapes. If “landscape is a construction that depends on symbolic and cultural meanings that human beings impose on the countryside” (242), then the Villa Mondragone is centered at the nexus between past and present, form and ritual, society and religion, and land and landscape. A visitor in 1659 referred to the villa’s view of the plains of the Roman Campagna as “the most beautiful prospect in the world” (264). Ehrlich’s study creates a rival prospect, providing 360-degree views of Baroque Rome in the foreground and the discipline of landscape studies beyond.

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Richard Bösel
Orazio Grassi, architetto e matematico gesuita. Un album conservato nell’Archivio della Pontificia Università Gregoriana a Roma


The volume under review marks the first extended study of the work of the Jesuit Orazio Grassi, who served the Society of Jesus in various capacities—as architect, mathematician, consiliarius adificiorum, college rector—in Rome and Liguria. Richard Bösel’s study is timely, since Grassi is the kind of figure who has seized the attention of scholars who have learned from Michel Foucault that our interests should lie in the epistemological project of the Baroque rather than its inevitable demise. This project was embodied most notably in the life’s work of Athanasius Kircher, a wide-ranging Jesuit intellectual, about whom there has been a recent renaissance of scholarship. Very few architects pertained to such a category, as was made evident a few years ago in an exhibition about Francesco Borromini co-curated by Bösel that presented him as uomo universale, whose work touched on diverse aspects of early modern science. With this book we can now add Grassi to the short list of Baroque architect polymaths, for, in addition to being an architect, he was a key contributor to the Catholic debates on astronomy, a geometer, cartographer, inventor of objects and ornaments, theoreticist, and writer on various topics (he produced a lost dictionary of architecture, a commentary on Vitruvius, and at least one key sacred drama).

This monograph, mostly in the form of a catalogue, was occasioned by the discovery—at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome—of a portfolio of 150 drawings and thirty-nine seventeenth-century engravings of architectural subjects that likely belonged to Grassi. Prior to the discovery of these objects (not all by Grassi and some only tentatively attributed to him), Grassi’s work was known primarily through the drawings attrib-