

Villa Hadriana as a Microcosm A Space of Artistic Interaction in 18th- and 19th-Century Europe

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The Villa Hadriana near Tivoli (30 kilometers northeast of Rome) is the largest preserved ancient architectural site outside of an urban center. Emperor Hadrian (76-138) realized the complex between 117 and 138 C.E. as a summer residence, seat of government, and retirement residence. Simultaneously, it seems, it was a vivid microcosm of the Roman Empire. The villa follows a uniform design and, with respect to the size of its built-up area comprising around 60 buildings, it is considered the largest architectural ensemble between the Greek colonization of the Italian peninsula (8th to 6th centuries B.C.E.) and the 19th century. The known extension of the villa consists of 120 hectares and thus exceeds the area of late antique Milan, the capital of the Roman Empire in the 4th century; it corresponds to approximately twice the size of Pompeii. In 1999, UNESCO recognized it as a World Heritage Site. For centuries, this remarkable complex has held extraordinary appeal for artists and art dealers, architectural patrons, writers, tourists, architects, and archaeologists.

The research project examines some perspectives that deviate from purely archaeological approaches regarding the multifaceted reception – particularly artistic – of the Villa Hadriana in the (early) modern period in Europe. The study focuses on two fundamental aspects:



Tivoli (Rome) Villa Hadriana, Large Baths and Canopus (Photo Cristina Ruggero)

First, the still inadequately understood significance of the Villa Hadriana as an “ancient microcosm” or “globalizing area”, as a “dynamic contact zone” or “space of artistic interaction” will be elaborated. With my project, I attempt to expand the concept of cultural transfer beyond its reduction to a mere adoption of art works and architectural ideas. I would like to demonstrate that at the site of an ideal antique culture, a common space for experience and interaction arose, which functioned as a basis for European understanding and contributed to expanding the horizons of the actors as well as to the development of individual and national concepts.

The ruins of the villa complex would have functioned as a dynamic contact zone, in which a transcultural and transnational transfer of ideas and forms occurred. This could have led to shaping identity in the receiver countries and to intensified development of a national consciousness for the participants. Here I have a geographic concentration on Europe as the area of influence and activity and a chronological focus on the 18th and 19th centuries. According to my working thesis – to be further refined - it is remarkable that representatives of different countries implemented a kind of “national” approach in relation to the Villa Hadriana.



Aristeas and Papias, Young Furietti Centaur from the Villa Hadriana, 117-138, marble, 136 cm. Rome, Capitoline Museums (Photo Cristina Ruggero)



Egyptianizing sculptures from the Villa Hadriana, 117-138. Munich, Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst (Photo Cristina Ruggero)

Second, reception, presentation and transformation of meaning of the portable decorative elements (sculptures, mosaics, and architectural ornament) of the villa complex will be examined through selected examples as *disiecta membra* in their “recontextualization” in private collections and museums. The Villa Hadriana evoked different reactions in the course of the centuries with its myths and with the survival of Greek and Egyptian civilization in portions of its architecture, in sculptures, as well in the subjects represented. It stimulated lively intellectual debates across Europe regarding the potential of “classical” culture and led to an integration in the history of knowledge in which the complex – for example in didactic instruction in academies – was taken into account. In the various areas of inquiry, this deals primarily with a focus on the receiver groups of artists, architects, and draughtsmen.



Charles-Louis Clerisseau, Ruins of the Central Hall of the Large Baths at the Villa of Emperor Hadrian in Tivoli, 1750s, Drawings, Gouache, 435 x 604 mm. St. Petersburg, Hermitage, Inv. OP 2592

(Photo: <https://www.thermitage.org/Charles-Louis-Clerisseau/Ruins-of-the-Central-Hall-of-the-Large-Baths-at-the-Villa-of-Emperor-Hadrian-in-Tivoli.html>)



Charles-Louis Clerisseau, Fragment of a Marble Frieze with Hippocampi. From the Villa of Emperor Hadrian in Tivoli, between 1749-1755, Drawings, 102 x 237 mm. St. Petersburg, Hermitage, Inv. OP 2274
(Photo: <https://www.thermitage.org/Charles-Louis-Clerisseau/Fragment-of-an-Ornamented-Frieze.html>)

With their (literary and visual) records, the representations and conceptions, finds and impressions, aspects and notions of the Villa Hadriana were transmitted, which raises the following questions, among others: Which stimuli, associations, and effects emanated from the villa, and how were these implemented at home? Which messages were transmitted and processed with the adaptation of removed decorative elements in new settings? Considering the concept of cultural nations and national identity, the project examines how this phenomenon arising in the 18th century further developed.



Tivoli (Rome), Villa Hadriana, Larario, Excavations by Columbia University, New York City, U.S.A. (APAHA)
Field Director: Daira Nocera; Co-Directors: Prof. Francesco de Angelis und Prof. Marco Maiuro (June 2017)
(Photo Cristina Ruggero)

Beyond this, the architectural finds, the building surveys, as well as the multifaceted representation of the complex and the finds of objects in the course of the centuries will illuminate the beginnings of the excavation campaigns as mere unearthing and recovery of artifacts up through the modern discipline of archaeology with its scientific documentation.