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The Late Antique and Early Medieval Gardens of the East

As a scholar who focuses on the gardens of later periods (fourth century AD and beyond), I come to the gardens of Rome with what I suspect are different expectations and interests than those who see the fourth century as the upper limit of their own focus. For me, the shady paths, orchestrated views, and soothing fountains of the Republic and the Empire are not ripe fruits ready to be harvested as examples of the pinnacles of garden design and experience of their time. Nor do they represent the end of an era as the specter of Gibbons would have us believe. Instead, for me they represent both a new beginning and a reminder that the world did not simply stop turning for the gardeners of the ancient Mediterranean as Rome waxed and waned, especially those not among the most elite, but did indeed continue to change and to develop along with society and culture in general. Below, in discussing what those who continued to garden inherited from their more ancient Roman predecessors, I would also like to suggest that such a discussion implies a lack of pronounced end or complete disappearance of the Roman garden itself.

Although the issue of continuity and change may seem one that is without much pizzazz, from the point of view of the Byzantine and early Islamic worlds, it is one that proves quite intriguing¹. This is especially true in the case of the former where a comparative lack of evidence causes us to look over the walls of Republican and early Imperial villas with yearning into the gardens preserved by Vesuvius². In the case of the latter, the continued debate over the nature of architectural phenomena such as the 'desert castles' increases our envy over more "straight-forward" sites such as Pompeii³. As a result, it is extremely useful to be able to identify probable models and sources and to chart their existence and development over time in order to help to fill out the picture. When one does this and looks at the gardens of the third and fourth centuries as a starting point, the results are quite striking, even if, with hindsight, they are not altogether surprising. In addition, the issue of continuity and change is significant because important questions still remain as to whether the transformation that occurred in cities of the eastern Mediterranean in the seventh century had an effect on gardens and what that effect might have been⁴.

One of the first areas in which we see continuation from the Roman garden forward in time is also perhaps one of the last we would expect to see change, i.e. among the upper classes of the early Byzantine Empire (fourth-seventh centuries AD). Specifically, there seems to be a consistency in the attitudes of the

¹ For an in-depth treatment of continuity and change from the point of view of Byzantium, see KAZHDAN, CUTLER 1982, 429–78.

² The most recent discussion of the lack of archaeological evidence, but also the potential for archaeological contributions to the study of Byzantine gardens, is LITTLEWOOD 2002b, 215–219.

³ For a recent discussion of this debate and its origins, see WALMSLEY 2007, 18–21 and 99–107.

⁴ For a brief discussion of this as a question that "should be considered," see WOLSCHKE-BULMAHN 2002, 8. See also, KAZHDAN, CUTLER 1982, 429–78 on the transformation itself and its effects on other aspects of life in seventh-century Byzantium.

upper classes towards gardens during this time. From the time of Marcus Terentius Varro onwards, agriculture and horticulture were considered to be gentlemanly pursuits, and as Anthony Littlewood has pointed out, these beliefs or opinions continued to be held by the Byzantine upper classes⁵. In one instance, a letter from the emperor Julian (r.355-363) to a friend contains a somewhat off-hand boast concerning a vineyard he had planted on his grandmother's estate in Bythnia with his own hands: "Moreover there is there, as a humble monument of my husbandry, a small vineyard that produces a fragrant, sweet wine, which does not have to wait for time to improve its flavour"⁶. Nor does it seem that he was the only emperor with a green thumb. The emperor Herakleios (r.610-641) is known to have created parks and vegetable gardens, and the emperor Theophilos (r.829-842) not only continued the trend in the construction of gardens, but tied these in to the creation of his palaces. Later emperors constructed a mix of hunting parks, formal, enclosed gardens associated with and integrated into their palaces, and combinations of the two⁷. What is more, in a move that seems to echo the frescoes of the Pompeian Second style, the above-mentioned Theophilos encouraged the creation of wall mosaics displaying garden scenes⁸. Here too, this does not seem to have been exceptional and it appears that such practices continued among the elite until the seventh century⁹.

In part, this enthusiasm for gardens and the connection of the Byzantine emperors and nobility to certain ancient (and especially imperial) garden traditions can be explained through the imagery and symbolism that came to be associated with them. Most of this imagery centered around various interpretations of creation or renewal, with the garden seen alternately as a bride, creation, paradise, the world, or a setting for victory¹⁰. Other, more direct equations and associations were also made, however. In some, the garden represented the emperor's virtues. In others, his virtues were equated with flowers. In still others, gardens created by an emperor became a means through which to draw parallels to or perhaps even equate his creative powers with those of the Lord¹¹.

In addition to what has been called the "rhetoric of renewal," it is apparent that another aspect of gardens that continued into the Byzantine era was an understanding of the beneficial effects of gardens on one's health and life, with a focus on views, light and air (although here one could argue that this seems a strange thing to "lose" and that the Byzantine populace certainly would have been able to figure this out for themselves)¹². The reliance on classical knowledge surrounding all things agricultural and horticultural in Late Antiquity in the East can be seen in the fact that in the sixth century, when the citizens of Honoratae wanted to present a gift to Anicia Juliana, an imperial lady, the book they chose was an herbal, now known to us as the Vienna Dioscorides¹³. Of course, one major difference from their pagan predecessors exists in the fact that the Byzantines could also cite biblical exhortations to eat "the fruit of the labour of your hands" (Psalm 128:2) and "plant gardens and eat their produce" (Jeremiah 29:5).

In terms of the institution or tradition of the hunt, the symbolism and pure enjoyment of this activity were also retained by the Byzantines. The fifth century provides evidence of hunts organized on family estates¹⁴. Later centuries were to see the hunt become an integral part of imperial rhetoric and symbolism¹⁵.

⁵ LITTLEWOOD 1997, 16.

⁶ WRIGHT 1980, 3:77–80, at 79; see also, LITTLEWOOD 1997, 16.

⁷ The most useful discussion of the location and appearance of the gardens and parks of Constantinople is MAGUIRE 2000.

⁸ LITTLEWOOD 1997, 17 and 33 with further references. The author also provides further examples on these pages.

⁹ BRUBAKER, LITTLEWOOD 1992, 230.

¹⁰ MAGUIRE 1994, 181 and 187–93; LITTLEWOOD 1997, 21. In addition, see LITTLEWOOD 1997, 18, for the notion that in early sixth century, at least, the Vandals of North Africa had absorbed Roman ways, including the use of gardens as an "assertion of imperial might", with further references.

¹¹ MAGUIRE 1994, 189–91, with further references.

¹² LITTLEWOOD 1997, 23 and 38; MAGUIRE 1994.

¹³ LITTLEWOOD 1997, 17. This occurred shortly after AD 512.

¹⁴ ROSSITER 1989, 103 with further references.

¹⁵ MAGUIRE 1994, 191–3.

In this respect, Henry Maguire has noted that the beasts that served as game could also represent either the emperor's internal demons or his external enemies¹⁶.

The further spread of the classical Mediterranean attitudes, if not necessarily the exact form and function of these gardens, to the early Islamic world (especially the Umayyad dynasty) might seem surprising at first considering the differences in culture, geography, and in some cases, even climate. However, the following observation by Oleg Grabar that these gardens, especially when woven into a palatial context, would have been simply part of an international "class culture" does seem to explain what we see today when studying the various sources.

The realm of the prince as it was made visible to others was, at this time, as unaffected by the faith as the prince's private palaces were earlier. Herein lies a key aspect of princely culture and hence of princely art. Because it was not modified or controlled by the faith and because it took its themes and practices from the enormous body of habits and motifs inherited from the classical and Near Eastern traditions, it created a system and vocabulary that could be understood by all comparable princely realms¹⁷.

Although there is as yet no evidence for it in the Late Antique period, a striking, though unfortunately also somewhat ephemeral area of continuation exists as far forward as the Middle Byzantine (843-1204) and Late Byzantine (1261-1453) periods. This is not a particular type of garden per se, but nevertheless fits under the larger umbrella of managed gardens, and is important for understanding the symbolism associated with them, especially in the later periods. In continuing the tradition of imperial triumphs, we have several texts that described the use of cut branches and flowers to prepare the city of Constantinople for the emperor's victorious entrance¹⁸.

Although ephemeral and therefore perhaps out of reach for us visually, the descriptions that survive remind one of the transformation that occurs on most university campuses around the times of homecoming, graduation, or parents' weekend when hundreds of flowers can appear seemingly out of nowhere and literally turn the campus into a living garden. For example, in order to set the stage for a late ninth-century triumph of Basil I in Constantinople, the route was garlanded "with laurel and rosemary and myrtle and roses and other flowers...[and in addition, the ground] was completely covered in flowers"¹⁹. At a later date, Constantine IX was maligned for his constant manipulations of gardens and the landscape as he transformed hill into flowering field, to the amazement of some commentators²⁰.

Of course, the eastern Mediterranean from the fourth through seventh centuries was a different world than Republican or Imperial Rome and differences in the approach to gardens did exist as well. One thing that seems very striking and that perhaps provides an avenue of inquiry to be tracked backward into the Classical period (where examples such as Hadrian's Villa do exist) is the almost complete integration of palace and garden into a coherent unit, as opposed to two separate, yet adjoining parts. Another is that eventually, although it is not certain when, we see the influence of gardens from the Persian tradition appearing in both Byzantine and Islamic gardens in the way they were designed and even in the way that they were planted²¹. And although we must remain vigilant in the use of *ekphrases* as sources of information, the literary descriptions of gardens can often be traced back to Classical and biblical models. However, it should also be noted that in practice it does seem that the Byzantines were not simply passive recipients of the Classical heritage. There is evidence, for example, that the gardens of the elite were frequently the setting for various agricultural experiments²².

¹⁶ MAGUIRE 1994, 192.

¹⁷ GRABAR 1973, 171-3, at 173. Page references will differ in different editions of this book.

¹⁸ MAGUIRE 1994, 186-7.

¹⁹ As quoted in MAGUIRE 1994, 187. The triumph occurred in 878.

²⁰ MICHEL PSELLOS 1928, 2:56-63 and 70-1 for the passages and their context.

²¹ LITTLEWOOD 1997, 25-33.

²² BRUBAKER, LITTLEWOOD 1992, at 214 and 216.

I would like to conclude with what I hope will not be too naïve of an offer. Until this point, everything I have mentioned represents a (still somewhat nebulous due to the perceived lack of sources) beginning for Late Antique, early Byzantine and early Islamic gardens and the benefit of looking into this subject would seem to flow only in one direction. But perhaps there are some areas where such an investigation can “flow backwards” so to say, and offer some information of relevance for the ancient gardens as well. One area may be the striking coherence and unity of landscape and architecture mentioned above. Despite the continuous efforts of the other authors in this section to rectify the situation, it seems that this is still a realization many scholars have yet to accept for the Roman period. Another area may be in the focus on non-elite houses. Such a focus is forced upon us due to the nature of the archaeological sources for the later periods and the nature of Roman settlement in the eastern empire. For example, rural villages such as those studied in northern Syria may also offer insights for both periods²³. One such insight is what seems to be a focus on the productive side of garden estates and plantations in the post-second century period, one that can perhaps be applied to more ancient examples with good harvest²⁴. The medicinal gardens of hospitals and monasteries may also prove fertile²⁵. This is something that is often lost in the focus on pleasure, although the latter is perhaps something that is timeless and without necessary fast and hard beginning or end, which is a state of being that I am hoping the reader will consider for the Roman garden as well.

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²³ ROSSITER 1989, 101–110.

²⁴ An example of this is the way in which Anthony Littlewood divided his recent discussion of the current scholarship concerning Byzantine gardens into two sections on pleasure gardens and productive gardens. See LITTLEWOOD 2002a.

²⁵ For a discussion of Byzantine monastic horticulture, see TALBOT 2002; HIRSCHFELD 1992.

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