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‘Textual Tuscula’: The Sociopolitics of Villa and Book in Cicero’s Technical Treatises

Starting with *de Oratore* in 54, and increasingly in the technical treatises of his later years, Cicero forges in his *praedium Tusculanum* a fantastic spatial parallel to his aggressively literary project of containing and displaying the products of Greek cultural production in a definitively Roman *monumentum*. As the Republic becomes less receptive to his political advances, and the forum less amenable to his oratorical ones, Tusculum, and especially Cicero’s villa there, takes center stage in the orator’s invention of a radically portable intellectual and literary space.

Cicero’s *technica* have been the object of renewed interest in recent years, and *de Oratore* in particular has been recognized for its importance to Cicero’s literary and intellectual program (Wisse 2002). Villas and literary representations of villas have received similar scholarly attention (D’Arms 970; Towe 2000; Newlands 2002), and the specific setting of *de Oratore* has received some scholarly note (Zetzel 2003). But as much as the aristocratic villa (and Tusculum in particular) figures as the geographic frontispiece of a large number of the *technica*, to date no significant work has been done on the overarching sociopolitical function of these ‘literary villas’ within the intellectual discourse of the late Republic. In this paper I argue that, in the orator’s “invention” of his Tusculum as first a repository and showcase of Greek art and, subsequently, the dramatic setting for his collection and display of Greek thought, Cicero creates in his ‘literary villa’ a utopic parallel to the *technica* as escapist collections of Greek intellectual theory contained, and offered for display, in a literary form as unimpeachably Roman and disingenuously apolitical as the *suburbana villa*.

The paper consists of three parts. I first review briefly the circumstances that precipitated Cicero’s acquisition of Tusculum, and suggest that his choice of this villa, and indeed his plans for its literary future as the frontispiece of the *technica*, may be located in his somewhat strange publication of the never-delivered *Actio Secunda* of his prosecution of Verres in 70. Next, I examine some of the details of his decoration of the villa, especially those of his acquisition of artifacts (*Ep. Att.* 1.5, 1.6) and his tendency to link literary with artistic collection and display (*Ep. Att.* 1.7, 1.10, 1.11, 1.4). Finally, I turn to Cicero’s “invention” of Tusculum as a definitively literary space of collection, display, and ‘Romanization’ of the Greek in both *de Oratore* (the focus of this paper) and subsequent dedicated dialogues (cf. *de Orat.* 1.28, 1.98; *Tusc. Disp.* 1.7-8; *de Div.* 2.7; *de Fin.* 1.1; cf. *Ep. Fam.* 9.18). In conclusion, I argue that villa and dialogue work as conceptual doubles in Cicero’s creation of the technical treatise as both a kind of ‘gentleman’s cabinet’—in which the intellectual products of the Greek world are transformed into the collectible ‘stuff’ of a disaffected Roman elite—and, by extension, a kind of conceptual literary villa—what we might conceive of as a ‘textual Tusculum’—to which this elite might seek respite from, and yet respond to, the pressures of an increasingly antagonistic political sphere.