Peopling the Past Video 11: Victoria Austen

Transcript

Video begins with instrumental music played over the title card which reads "Peopling the Past"

We hear Austen speak: "Hello, welcome to Peopling the Past. My name is Dr. Victoria Austen and I'm currently a lecturer in the Classics Department at the University of Winnipeg."

Austen sits in front of the camera. She has blonde hair and is wearing a black shirt.

Austen: "What topic are you talking about today? Today I'm going to talk to you about ancient Roman gardens, or more specifically, I'm going to introduce to you some of the main categories of gardens from the late Republic and also the early Empire."

The slide now shows the Neumagen Relief, which is a late Roman tomb sculpture that shows a school scene with pupils and a teacher. The text reads "What topic are you talking about today?"

Austen: "But before we dig into the Roman evidence, we should first consider the basic question of what actually is a garden? Gardens and the act of gardening are a feature of practically every human community and as such we tend to recognize them fairly easily, but it is clear from just these images here that you can see that garden across history come in many different shapes and sizes, and this in turn actually makes it quite difficult for us to define the spaces and provide a list of necessary conditions that a garden must meet in order to actually be called a garden."

The slide shows three images of gardens from around the world (the Beamish Museum garden in England, the Getty Villa in Los Angeles, and the Isshinin Buddhist Temple Garden in Kyoto). There is text on the slide with the header "What is a garden", with a quote by Humphrey Repton (1816), that reads "Let us begin by defining what a garden is and what it out to be."

Austen: “It is significant then that despite the many possible manifestations of what can constitute a garden, scholars continually assign two core principles to the space, albeit to various degrees. First is the notion of a garden boundary—think a white picket fence as you can see in the top image here, and the second is the notion of cultivation. So just as Victoria Pagán states here, the garden can generally, regardless of the form, be defined as a space set aside from its surroundings and one that is developed into something different from those surroundings through a process of cultivation. And this deliberate cultivation is then representative of a gardener's aim of controlling nature just enough to satisfy their needs; and that might be a physical need for food, like in a vegetable garden, or it may be an aesthetic need for pleasure—a nice, beautiful flower bed.”

The slide shows two images of gardens. On the top is an image of a house in Ontario Canada, and on the bottom is the interior garden from the House of Menander at Pompeii. Text on the slide includes a quote from Victoria Pagán (2006), which reads: “A garden is a three dimensional space within a clearly defined boundary, whose foundation is soil, in which plants are deliberately cultivated for the purpose of providing food or aesthetic pleasure."

Austen: “So for the ancient Romans, the garden was, just as it is today, a recognizable and defined space within their culture often marked off by a boundary, and it provided a setting for or a backdrop to a whole range of activities and practices. In fact, the Latin word for garden "hortus" emphasizes that idea of enclosure or boundedness. It is derived from the Greek "chortos" which means an enclosed space space used for growing food, and it's also noteworthy that Romans deemed their garden boundaries worthy enough of a protection of a god—Priapus. Depicted here, who as a rustic scarecrow-like figure, defended the garden from potential thieves or transgressors. And the god's presence in the garden can be seen as both a productive and also a prohibitive symbol. His often-exposed phallus acts as a fairly crude warning against potential perpetrators whilst acting still as a sign of his fertility. So, these two roles really align nicely with the two core principles of garden space: boundedness and cultivation.”

The slide shows a painted relief of the Roman god Priapus standing in a Roman garden from the Lupanar in Pompeii. The text on the slide was read out by Austen.

Austen: "What sources or data do you look at? Well, when it comes to studying Roman gardens, I am in many ways quite spoilt for choice in terms of source material. There is a significant amount of evidence for gardens in the late Republic and early Empire and also a huge amount of diversity within that corpus both in terms of the different types of gardens that we know of and also the range of media that this evidence appears in. So, this volume and diversity really seems to suggest that garden culture held a particularly special place in the Roman imagination."

The slide shows three images. On the left is a statue in stone of a seated scribe from ancient Egypt. In the center is a cuneiform clay table from Mesopotamia. On the right is a wall painting from Pompeii known as the Sappho Tondo. Though it does not depict the famous author, it shows the portrait of a well-dressed woman with a writing utensil poised to her lip. The text on the slide reads "What sources or data do you look at?"

Austen: "Now archaeological investigation of the natural world is usually particularly complicated due to nature's intrinsic ephemeral status. But, along the Bay of Naples in Italy, we have what's a really unique opportunity to analyze the green spaces of the ancient Roman world. When the Vesuvian volcanic eruption occurred in 79 CE, the entire city of Pompeii, and also much of the surrounding region, was essentially completely frozen in time, buried under a thick layer of ash that sealed the underground area in a unique state of preservation."

The slide shows a map that shows Italy's western coast, around the region of Mt. Vesuvius and its eruption. There are sites identified on the map, and a dark rounded cloud imposed over the area, indicating the impact of the eruption. The text on the slide has the title "Gardens in the Vesuvian Region", with the following bullet points:

- Vesuvian eruption of 79 CE
- Pompeii & Herculaneum
- Villa sites along the Bay of Naples: Villa of Publius Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale, Villa of Poppaea at Oplontis, Villa of San Marco and Villa Arianna at Stabiae

Austen: “Wilhelmina Jashemski's pioneering research along the Bay of Naples and in Pompeii specifically provided a really important stimulus for the study of ancient Roman gardens. Beginning in the 1960s, Jashemski combed through every inch of garden space in the city of Pompeii, carefully documenting the surviving evidence in all its possible manifestations including garden plants obviously, but also architectural structures, ornamental features, and also depictions of gardens and plants in surviving wall paintings. Her creation of a systematic methodology for the excavation of the Vesuvian gardens has really allowed scholars to address previously under-appreciated aspects of the daily life of Pompeii, namely those activities and economies associated with the garden.”

The slide shows images of the 1964 excavations of gardens in the Vesuvius region. The image on the left shows a tall stone wall with people excavating a garden next to it. The right image shows a woman sitting next to a collection of excavated pottery. The text on the screen was read out by Austen.

Austen: “If you already have an image of a Roman garden in your mind, it is likely that it comes from these domestic settings in Pompeii, and it is even more likely that you have one particular type of garden in mind, which we can see here, and that is the peristyle garden. Here's the example from the House of Menander. And these peristyle gardens are primarily ornamental, ideally surrounded by four covered walkways supported by a series of columns, just as you can see here. Originally, these peristyle gardens appear to have been located at the rear of the house, but later examples from Pompeii, like the House of Menander, show an evolution towards a more central location in the domestic setting. And in this central location, these garden spaces become spaces of mediation and transition, a kind of very elegant route of access to different areas of the home.”

The slide shows an image of the peristyle garden from the interior of the House of Menander at Pompeii. The garden is enclosed by the building on four sides, with an open sky above. There are colonnaded porticos alongside the edge of the garden. This garden has an aesthetic focus, with hedges and small tress are trimmed neatly and placed deliberately to fit the square pattern of the courtyard. The text on the screen was read out by Austen.

Austen: “It's important to note though that the peristyle garden is only one of many different types of garden space in the Roman world, each with their own name and each with their own emphasis, and that emphasis may be practical, it may be aesthetic, or perhaps even religious, and I've just showcased here just a few of the various terms and subcategories of garden spaces in the Roman world.”

The slide shows two images. The top image shows a market garden and vineyard from Pompeii. The plants are organized into neat rows. The bottom image shows a Domestic shrine, known as the “Enchanted Garden” in Pompeii. The text on the slide gives a bulleted list of different kinds of gardens:

- Traditional 'kitchen' gardens (or hortus in latin)
- Market gardens and vineyards
- Ornamental domestic garden (*xystus, viridia, ars topiara* in latin)
- Domestic shrines or lararia
- Tomb gardens (*cepotaphium* in latin)

Austen: “Alongside these very real and physical garden spaces, the material evidence at Pompeii also demonstrates how much the Romans enjoyed depictions of garden spaces; and here we have a really stunning example of one of these garden themed frescoes from the House of the Golden Bracelet. And this particular fresco was actually located in a corridor-like space adjacent to the real peristyle garden, so you have a really nice play here going on between the real garden space and also the depiction of garden space in close proximity.”

The slide shows a garden fresco scene from the House of the Golden Bracelet. It depicts a garden with Roman decorations including a birdbath and stone reliefs. In the garden are birds of a wide variety.

Austen: “And even outside of Pompeii it is not unusual to find depictions of garden prospects in domestic settings during this late Republican or early Empire period. Here we have an example panel from the famous Garden Room at Prima Porta, and this is part of a floor-to-ceiling, all surrounding fresco inside the Villa of Livia, the wife of the actual emperor Augustus.”

The slide shows a fresco depicting another garden from Livia's Garden Room from the Villa of Livia. This garden has tall tress bearing fruits and flower bushes. There are two birds in the trees.

Austen: "And how can this topic or material tell us about real people in the past?"

Slide shows four images. On the left is a Greek marble grave stele of a little girl holding a bird. To the right of this is a Greek vase painting scene that shows women weaving at a loom. To the right of that are model figures of bakers preparing and baking bread from ancient Egypt. On the right is a painted "mummy portrait" of a young man from the Fayum in Egypt. The text reads "How can this topic or material tell us about real people in the past?"

Austen: "First, as a physical space, the remains of gardens can help inform us on the horticultural activities of the Romans of the past. These kind of natural history investigations allow us to think about what was planted by the Romans, and also where, and this also gives us clues as to why these particular plants may have been planted in these locations. And complementary literary sources are also very useful to think about who was working or managing these garden spaces. Pliny the Elder, for example, suggests that the garden was traditionally the responsibility of the woman of the house, whereas Columella, writing more about a larger agricultural estate, he discusses garden spaces as part of the roles of the "vilicus" or the overseer or manager basically of that estate."

The slide shows a picture of Wilhelmina and Stanley Jashemski excavating a garden at Pompeii. The slide title reads "A Physical Space", which is followed by a bulleted list:

- Natural history investigations—plant identification, botanic analysis, soil analysis
- Whose responsibility was the garden?
- Role of the *villicus* (from Columella)?

At the bottom left of the slide is a text box that includes a quote from Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (19.57), which reads: "...people in the old days used to estimate farmers by their garden produce, and thus at once gave

verdict that there was a bad mistress in the house when the garden outside (which used to be called the woman's responsibility) was neglected, as it meant having to rely on the butcher or the market."

Austen: "But we always have to remember that the garden is not just a physical space. It really transcends its physicality as a setting in which societies like the Romans embed powerful myths, beliefs, and also fictions. If we go back to Livia's Garden Room, we should remember that this is not just simply a beautiful garden fresco, but it can also be understood as part of a very deliberate monopolization of specific plant types to establish a sort of botanic mythology around the emperor Augustus and his family. Laurel and oak, for example, feature prominently in this garden fresco—and here we have a prominent oak tree panel from the Garden Room. And both laurel and oak were significant for the emperor Augustus. They played a central role on the day that he was actually given the name Augustus, changing from Octavian. And also the Villa of Livia itself was also said to be the location of a very sacred laurel grove from which the emperor Augustus picked leaves for his triumphal crowns. So, the power of the Roman garden then lies in its simultaneous existence as an idea, as a place, and also as an action."

The slide shows another part of the previous fresco from the Villa of Livia, showing a single tall tree and three birds flying around it. The bulleted list of the text on the screen is read out by Austen. Below this is a text box with a quote from Cassius Dio (53.16.4), which reads: "For the right to place the laurel tress in front of the royal residence to hang the crown of oak above them was voted to [Augustus] to symbolize that he was victor over his enemies and saviour of his citizens.'"

Austen: "Thank you for watching, and don't forget to also check out the Peopling the Past website for more ancient world content."

Cut to the last slide which shows the credits for this episode:

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