



The ancient Roman town of Herculaneum, where Piso's Villa nearby, continues to be explored and studied to this day.

*By Don Fenton* 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2021

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2,000 years ago, this Epicurean endured racism and gave us the only classical Roman library.

**I**t's early morning at the sumptuous villa near the little town of Herculaneum. A cool breeze gently blows over the water and climbs the multi-level balconies that rise up the side facing the sea. This is the summer retreat of a successful Roman art lover and politician who calmly walks the length of the garden pool, with its drunken Silenus riding a wineskin, and talks with friends about Epicurean philosophy.

*Non fui. Fui. Non sum. Non curo.*

In 79 AD this villa, the town and the nearby coastal retreats of Pompeii, Oplontis, Boscoreale and others were buried in a day by the surprise eruption of Mount

Vesuvius. Herculaneum, and this villa, were preserved under 20 metres of lava and ash. And here, unlike at Pompeii, the falling debris buried and sealed everything in a tomb-like preserve such that second story rooms survived, as did wood and other organic materials – a loaf of bread fresh from the oven, a bowl of eggs, a little child’s bed.

The villa lies just outside the town on the edge of the sea, now inland, after two millennia of silt accumulation. Romans happily fled here to escape the hustle, bustle, heat and noise of Rome, the largest metropolis of the ancient world, a city of a million people. They came to enjoy their otium, the opposite of work, or negotium. It was an Epicurean paradise where one could live a little time of quiet contemplation, enjoying the surrounding beauty. The architecture, art and sculpture found here are among the finest in antiquity, proudly displayed today in the National Archeological Museum in Naples.

Travelers from Rome would have headed south on the Appian Way toward Capua and Campania, about 150 Roman miles, a trip lasting several days with many places along the way to rest, eat, sleep and feed and tend to the animals, as indicated on this ancient itinerarium.



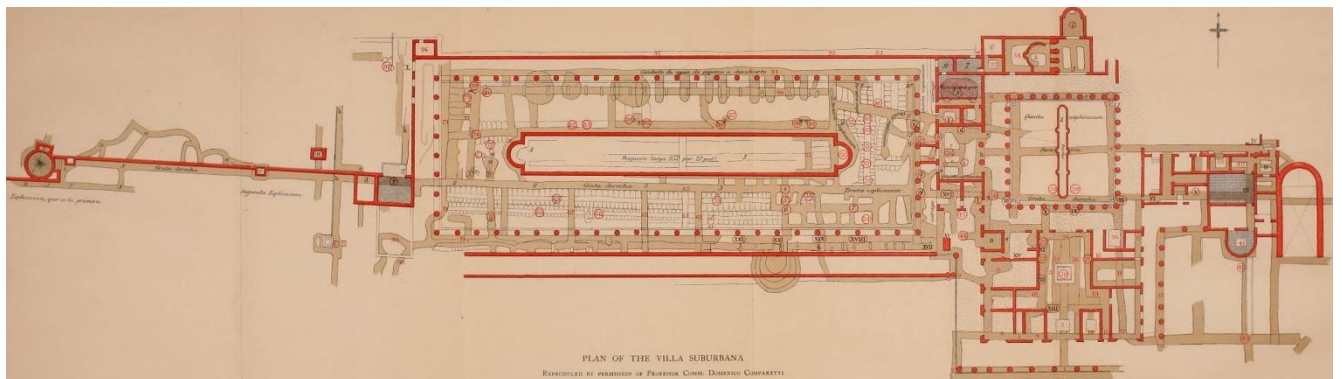
Herculaneum on the tabula Peutingeriana, not far from Oplontis and Pompeii.

We know, however, from reading Horace on a funny and fabulously told journey from Rome to the Adriatic Sea with Virgil and Maecenas, that a day’s travel might at times accomplish only a few miles, this one due to mosquitoes, sore eyes, stomach ailments, and drunken intermediaries.

Not long afterward, the villa was gone, vanished, erased from memory.

In the 1730s, when the town was discovered after being forgotten since the early empire, it was well-diggers and treasure hunters who tunneled down through something resembling solid rock and found it, carrying off their booty of priceless sculpture. A new interest in the collection of artifacts from antiquity included kings and queens who wanted to show off the past glories of their kingdoms. Excavations began at Herculaneum in 1738, paid for by a curious King Charles VII of Naples with a good eye for classical art, and the villa was discovered in 1768. Among the early finds at the villa was the library of Philodemus, a so-called third rate Epicurean philosopher whose books were found here along with parts of the classic text *De Rerum Natura*, *On the Nature of Things*, by the celebrated 1<sup>st</sup> century Epicurean, Lucretius.

A few decades later Karl Weber, a Swiss engineer, made sketches of the villa by following the underground tunnels, realizing it's true size and importance. The result caused a sensation in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe and beyond, adding this site to the Grand Tour and inspiring painters like Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema.



A copy of Weber's drawing of the villa from underground tunnel excavations near Herculaneum in 1749 or 1750.

At first, the scroll 'books' found in the form of charcoal briquettes were used for heat in fires. Some of the first books from this, the only ancient Roman library ever found, were destroyed until one was dropped and the text inside revealed. Today, archeologists are still studying and painfully deciphering the texts from the Greek half of the original Greek and Latin library. The Latin has yet to be uncovered, much to the dismay of scholars. Since Philodemus knew Horace and Virgil, one enticing idea is that he might very well have included some of their Latin writings in his library. Are they yet to be found?

Early archeology and the first 'archeologist' began to take on any real significance in the narrow modern sense in the 1820s and 30s, becoming more of a discipline in

the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Archeology grew into a tool of historical research in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with important advances in technology.

It was during this period that the American oil baron and art collector J. Paul Getty commissioned a copy of the villa, based on Weber's drawings, and gave us the Getty Villa at Malibu Beach in southern California to house his collection of Greek and Roman art. His villa echoes this ancient world treasure on the Amalfi coast.



The Getty Villa in Malibu, California is modelled on Weber's drawings and the art found at Piso's 1<sup>st</sup> century villa.

Today, archeologists continue their work in Herculaneum slowly revealing the multi-layered story of this extraordinary place and this time.

Looking back to the 1<sup>st</sup> century, as our Roman art lover and politician peacefully, perhaps fearlessly, as Epicureanism would expect, walks the lengths of his garden pool, we discover the man. His name is Piso, from Lucius Capurnius Caesoninus Piso. He probably built this villa with some of the wealth he acquired through

taxes, and other means, while Governor of Macedonia in 58 BCE, a plum appointment by the Roman senate.

Piso is the father of Calpurnia, the 3 or 4<sup>th</sup> wife of none other than Julius Caesar. The one who was with him the morning he walked to his assassination in the theatre of Pompey, built by his former rival with a temple in the centre to circumvent building codes at the time, in the civil war that ended the Roman Republic. Calpurnia had a dream that Caesar should be wary on that day, the Ides of March, a little while later confirmed by the utterance of a soothsayer on the way.

Caesar must have walked around this same garden pool at the villa, under the shaded portico, the water sparkling, reflecting the sunlight above. He may even have weighed in on the Epicureanism his new father-in-law espoused. Non fui. Fui. Non sum. Non curo. It's tempting to ponder as he was about to embark on the conquests of Spain and Gaul, then the civil war, his murder and the end of the republic. After all, he left a million dead in his conquests. Non sum. Non curo.

Piso had earned the Governor appointment after supporting the Senate with the exile of the great Cicero, Marcus Tullius, the famous scholar and statesman. Cicero, as Consul in 63, had exposed and condemned a conspiracy by the young nobleman Cataline and ordered the execution of its leading members before they could stand trial. Cicero argued he had the right to do this under the law.



Cicero denounces the young aristocrat Cataline in the Senate House, the Curia Julia, in Rome, 63 BCE.

New legislation condemned Cicero. He appealed to Pompey the Great, to no avail, and went into exile in Greece in 58.

Piso was consul that year. Exile was harsh and enemies of Cicero tried to destroy his wealth and power in the process. When Cicero returned, his property had been confiscated, his home on the Palatine Hill demolished, along with two of his villas, and he sought revenge on Piso.

It is because of this that we have a vivid description of Piso, the man, in Cicero's hate filled speech to the Senate on his return from exile.

“A Syrian, a man whom nobody knows, some one of that body of lately emancipated slaves, made consul. For that complexion, like that of slaves, and those hairy cheeks and discoloured teeth, did not deceive us: your eyes, your eyebrows, your brow, in short your whole countenance, which is, as it were, a sort of silent language of the mind...those foul vices of yours; few of us who knew the deficiency of your abilities, your stolid manner, and your embarrassed way of speaking. Your voice had never been heard in the forum; no one had had any experience of your wisdom in counsel; you had not only never performed any, I will not say illustrious exploit, but any action at all that was known of either in war or at home. You crept into honours through men's blunders, by the recommendation of some old smoke-dried images, though there is nothing in you at all resembling them except your colour.”

This is the man that owned the villa that is now called the villa of the papyri, thanks to the papyrus library. I call it Piso's villa as do many historians. The villa contained a priceless collection of art.



Resting Hermes from the villa of Piso.

In 2016, a Pulitzer Prize winning book called *The Swerve* was published about the discovery of a copy of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, *On the Nature of Things*, in a monastery in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The very same book that we have, an original edition, from the Piso villa in Herculaneum. The swerve is the slight atomic diversion in a world made of atoms without gods, or heaven or hell, or any kind of design beyond just what is here, what we see and experience.

The author, Stephen Greenblatt, theorized that the swerve gave us the Renaissance. Perhaps the swerve also gave us the end of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the Empire at the battle of Actium in 30 BC, at the dawn of the Augustan Age and the beginning of the Pax Romana.

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\* *Non fui. Fui. Non sum. Non curo.*

*I was not. I was. I am not. I do not care.*



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