

Preparing for A105: think again about Roman Villas

(Book 4, p. 77)

Images from classical mythology and 'high culture'

Sperlonga involves a particularly ambitious use of mythology, but subjects from myth – many also known from famous works of classical literature – were also popular in the art that adorned villas. Often these figures must have been chosen simply to illustrate familiar tales. For instance, the panel in the centre of the wall depicts two famous lovers: Bacchus (the god of wine) and Ariadne (a heroine with whom he fell in love). But mythological subjects could also offer particular intellectual, moral or spiritual themes and they were often depicted in thematic groups for viewers to ponder. All this made them subjects well suited to the contemplative aspect of leisure. You can see examples of this in the House of Menander in Pompeii, whose final phase of interior decoration included many favourite combinations of subjects, such as the goddesses Diana (associated with hunting) and Venus (goddess of love) who were depicted like cult-statues in niches and Bacchic subjects (with connotations of pleasure and abandonment to Bacchus, who represented the liberating effects of intoxication). It also included literary themes, with scenes of the sack of Troy and portraits of two famous Greek playwrights, Menander and Euripides.