

## Horace's Sabine Farm

by R.A. Faber

One of the benefits the poet Horace (65-8 BC) enjoyed from the patronage of Maecenas and Octavian was the "Sabine farm", a country estate he received some time before 31 BC. Whereas some debate about the location of this farm continues, most agree that the ruined foundations on a hill above a little river named Licenza, about 44 kilometres north of Rome, form the site of Horace's country house. The general location seems to accord with the place described by Horace: a little spring producing fresh water, the cool climate, and the sloping hills. It is perhaps not surprising that the pleasant estate plays an important role in the poetry of Rome's greatest lyricist.

The poet himself describes the farm as "not very big, with a garden, and beside the house a stream that flows continually, and a little wood to complete it. All this and more the gods have given me (*Satire* 2.6.1-3)." While Horace calls the farm "not very big", the estate was large enough that he could lease sections to five tenant farmers and their households, while keeping a home farm worked by eight slaves. Indeed, according to a recent revision of the evidence by R. Lyne (in *Horace. Behind the Public Poetry*), Horace's means were not so modest as some, including the poet himself, would have us believe. The tenant farmers would have provided considerable income from the farm, not to mention the plots worked by the slaves. What is more, in addition to the Sabine estate, Horace possessed

three, perhaps as many as five, other properties! While he may not have been as wealthy as Cicero or other fabulously rich Romans, Horace did live a comfortable life.

Of the several explanations offered for Horace's self-portrayal as a man of moderate means, the political one is most obvious. Having fought for the republican cause that lost to Octavian's forces in 42 BC, Horace may wish to gloss over the fact that he enjoys the patronage of the very person he'd opposed less than a decade earlier. There are other, perhaps equally compelling reasons why Horace depicts himself as being of modest income and of no ambition. Throughout Horace's poetry the Sabine farm performs important philosophical and literary functions. These functions, as we shall see, require the representation of the Sabine farm as a small, unpretentious property.

While it would be exaggeration to state that the Sabine farm is merely a literary device of the poet, it would be accurate to suggest that it is employed by Horace in promoting his philosophical and literary ideals. One important and recurring philosophical theme in his writings is contentment with one's material status in life. In a poem that commences with the words "no ivy or gilded ceilings glitter in my house", Horace denounces greed and material ambition. In promoting the golden mean in acquiring material possession, the poet describes his own position: "...though I am poor, the rich man courts me. Content with the Sabine farm, I do not make appeals for more to my wealthy friend, nor trouble the gods above (*Odes* 2.18.10-14)." Self-sufficiency and contentment are expressed by the Sabine farm.

Another theme developed through the image of the Sabine farm is the opposition between city and country and the diverse aspects of life associated with them. Rome is the place of political and social ambition, unlike the countryside. The latter provides the *locus amoenus*, the "pleasant place" to which we all wish to escape now and again. Disavowing any aspirations but literary ones, Horace notes that the countryside provides refuge from the business of the city: "the cool grove and the light bands of Nymphs and Satyrs remove me from the masses (*Odes* 1.130-32)." There are those who aspire to political life, who desire greater possessions and honour. But all who yield to these common desires will discover that illness, jealousy, and ultimately death accompany them as they climb the ladder of perceived success. Therefore, Horace asks, "why should I exchange the Sabine valley for burdensome wealth? (*Odes* 3.1.47-48)." Rather the quiet, modest life of the country estate than the

hustle and bustle of big-city life. While the country mouse may not be wealthy, he does sleep peacefully at night.

Closely related to the themes of material satisfaction and spiritual tranquility suggested by the Sabine farm is the topic of poetic inspiration and composition. While other genres of poetry such as epic or tragedy may be more readily linked to Rome, personal lyric poetry is best associated with the Sabine farm. In this way the poet unites his philosophical and literary programmes. Sequestered from the masses at Rome, the poet enjoys the privacy of the country home. Avoiding the city and its dog-star's heat, the poet receives inspiration in the sequestered valley where he can "sing to a Teian lyre of Penelope". The grove, filled with nymphs and satyrs, that is, creatures of the imagination, provides poetic inspiration. While other poets may aspire to the so-called higher genres of epic and tragedy, Horace is satisfied with personal lyric and its more humble styles. In this way a modest Sabine farm becomes for Horace the expression of his poetic ideals. Combining the philosophical and literary ideals into one expression, the poet writes: "... to me honest Fate has given a little farm, the delicate breath of the Greek Muse, and disdain for the jealous masses (*Odes* 2.16.37-40)." It is no wonder, therefore, that the Sabine farm is such an important and recurring motif in the poetry of Horace.