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Viewpoint

## **Green spaces and health: The Locus amoenus in Horace's poetry and its connection to mental and physical well-being**

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### **Abstract**

Horace, one of the most important Roman poets during the reign of Emperor Augustus, frequently intertwined the themes of nature and mental and physical wellbeing in his poetry. He employed the literary device of the Locus amoenus (Latin for 'pleasant place') to depict an idealised, peaceful natural setting complete with shady trees, green meadows, flowing water, and gentle breezes. This setting contrasts with the fast-paced life of Rome. Horace often presented the natural world as a remedy for the mental and physical ailments caused by urban life. This highlights his understanding of the importance of a green environment and nature-based urban planning in promoting a healthy lifestyle. Modern research supports this idea, demonstrating that urban green spaces have a positive impact on mental and physical health by providing stress relief and psychological relaxation, encouraging physical activity and stimulating social interaction. These findings emphasise the importance of preserving existing green spaces and incorporating more vegetation into urban areas to help maintain public health.

### **Grüne Umgebung und Gesundheit: Der Locus amoenus in Horaz' Gedichten und sein Zusammenhang mit dem geistigen und körperlichen Wohlbefinden**

Horaz, einer der bedeutendsten römischen Dichter zur Zeit von Kaiser Augustus, verband in seinen Gedichten häufig die Themen Natur und Wohlbefinden miteinander. Mit dem literarischen Mittel des „Locus amoenus“ (lateinisch für „angenehmer Ort“) beschrieb er eine idealisierte, friedliche Naturlandschaft mit schattenspendenden Bäumen, grünen Wiesen, fließendem Wasser und sanften Brisen. Diese Kulisse steht im Kontrast zum hektischen Leben in Rom. Horaz stellte die Natur oft als Heilmittel für die durch das städtische Leben verursachten geistigen und körperlichen Beschwerden dar. Dies unterstreicht sein Verständnis für die Bedeutung von grüner Umgebung und einer naturorientierten Stadtplanung zur Förderung eines gesunden Lebensstils. Moderne Forschungsergebnisse stützen diese Vorstellung und belegen, dass städtische Grünflächen einen positiven Einfluss auf die geistige und körperliche Gesundheit haben. Sie bauen Stress ab, bieten psychische Entspannung, regen zu körperlicher Aktivität an und fördern soziale Interaktion. Diese Erkenntnisse unterstreichen, wie wichtig es ist, bestehende Grünflächen zu erhalten und mehr Vegetation in städtische Gebiete zu integrieren, um die öffentliche Gesundheit zu fördern.

### **緑空間と健康：ホラティウスの詩におけるロクス・アモエヌスと、精神および身体への充実感との関連**

アウグストゥス帝の時代における最も重要なローマの詩人の一人であるホラティウスは、その詩作において自然と心身の充実という二つのテーマを頻りに結びつけていた。彼は「ロクス・アモエヌス」（ラテン語で「心地よき場」の意）という文学的表現を用い、木陰、緑の草原、流れる水、そして穏やかなそよ風をもって、理想化された平和な自然の風景を描写した。この背景には慌ただしいローマでの生活との対照がある。ホラティウスはしばしば自然を、都市生活によって引き起こされる精神および身体的な不調に対する治療法として表現した。これは、健康的なライフスタイルを促進するための、緑豊かな環境や自然に照準を合わせた都市計画の重要性を彼が理解していたことを示している。現代の研究結果はこの考えを裏付けており、都市の緑地が精神および身体的な健康に良い影響を与えることを証明している。緑地は、ストレスを軽減し、精神的な安らぎをもたらす、身体活動を促し、社会交流を支援する。これらの知見は、公衆衛生を促進するために、既存の緑地を守り、さらに多くの緑を都市部に取り入れることがいかに重要であるかを強調している。

**Keywords:** Green space; Locus amoenus; Health; Well-being; Public health; Horace.

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A *locus amoenus* (Latin for pleasant/charming place) is an idealised, idyllic or symbolic landscape, which is sometimes associated with Elysium (Russell, 1997). It is usually described as a pleasant green space with typical features such as trees, groves, shade, meadows, flowers, gentle breezes, and running water (Schönbeck, 1962). This literary topos was widespread in ancient texts, with examples ranging from Homer to Horace, and continued through the Middle Ages and Renaissance (Curtius, 2013).

Unlike the pastoral idylls of Vergil in his *Bucolica*, the *locus amoenus* in the poetry of Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus, 65–8 BC) is often closely associated with the concepts of moderation and mindful living. In the third stanza of his ode 'Aequam memento', addressed to the Roman military commander and politician Quintus Dellius, Horace provides an example of a *locus amoenus* (Carmina II, 3, 9–12; see Chase, 1895):

*quo pinus ingens albaque populus  
umbram hospitalem consociare amant  
ramis? quid obliquo laborat  
lympha fugax trepidare rivo?*

To what end do the tall pine and the white poplar love to join their branches to form a hospitable shade? Why does the fleeting water struggle its way down its winding course? (All translations from Latin are by the author.)

The answer to these two rhetorical questions is to create the perfect setting in which to enjoy wine and the other pleasures that life has to offer (Carmina II, 3, 13–16; see Chase, 1895):

*huc vina et unguenta et nimium brevis  
flores amoena ferre iube rosae,  
dum res et aetas et sororum  
fila trium patiuntur atra.*

Ask them to bring us wine, perfume and the short-lived beauty of roses while your circumstances, age and the dark threads of the Three Sisters allow it.

Horace encourages Dellius to remain calm and composed in both good times and bad, to accept his inevitable death, and to make the most of life's pleasures while he can. Circumstances (*res*) may change, he will grow older (*aetas*), and above all, death will come, symbolised by the black threads of the Three Sisters (the Fates), and no one knows when. This should urge us to savour the present moment and make the most of it. This sentiment echoes the well-known exhortation 'carpe diem' from the ode to Leuconoe (Carmina I, 11, 6–8; see Chase, 1895):

*..... sapias, vina liques, et spatio brevi  
spem longam reseces. Dum loquimur fugerit invida  
aetas: carpe diem quam minimum credula postero.*

Be wise, strain (drink) your wine, and long hope should be cut back into our short space. While we are talking, envious time has fled away: seize the day (live for the moment) and put as little trust in tomorrow as possible.

Another well-known example of a *locus amoenus* in Horace's work is his depiction of the Bandusia Spring ('*O fons Bandusiae*', Carmina III, 13; see Chase, 1895). Located at his country estate in the Sabine Hills, it may have been named after a similar spring near his birthplace in Apulia (Nisbet and Rudd, 2004). In the ode 'Velox amoenum saepe Lucritelem' (Carmina I, 17; see Chase,

1895), Horace invites a lady friend named Tyndaris to his farm, promising her peaceful shelter in a secluded setting filled with strawberry trees, wild thyme, and wandering goats. This conjures up an image of a life of pastoral leisure and tranquillity.

To make his descriptions of the *locus amoenus* more vivid, Horace often uses specific nouns (e.g. 'pine', 'white poplar') instead of general ones (e.g. 'tree') (Vitas, 2018). The *locus amoenus* in the poetry of Horace often has sexual connotations, symbolising the regenerative powers of nature, fertility, and erotic encounters. In the Ode 'Aequam memento', the image of the intertwining pine and poplar, as well as the phrase *consociare amant* (see above), may allude to sexual intercourse. *Lympha fugax* also refers to the realm of eroticism. *Lympha* is a synonym for 'nymph'; in other words, nymph can refer to water, while *lympha* can refer to a nymph (Pöschl, 1994). In an erotic context, *trepidare* refers to movement during lovemaking (Pöschl, 1995), and the phrase *laborat lympha (=nympha) fugax trepidare* (the nymph strives to move back and forth) may lend the sentence a hidden meaning.

In epode 16 ('*Altera iam teritur bellis civilibus aetas*'; see Chase, 1895), Horace urges the Romans to abandon their city torn by civil wars and flee to the 'Blessed Isles', a utopian, unpolluted land. The imaginary landscape that Horace paints—one that is beautiful in every respect—is characterised primarily by its agricultural virtues rather than its scenic charms. In his '*Ars Poetica*', however, Horace criticises the use of purple prose (*purpureus pannus*) and opposes the tendency, frequently found among poets of his time, to embellish their poems with lavish descriptions of natural objects (Epistola ad Pisones sive de arte poetica, 14–18; see Chase, 1895). This suggests that Horace and other poets were indeed well aware of the charms of nature (Buys, 1872).

Horace's writings suggest that he was fickle in his praise, praising country life while in Rome and city life while in the countryside (Epistola I, 8, 12; Satirae II, 7, 28–29; see Chase, 1895). In this regard, the two mice in the story of the town mouse and country mouse (Satirae II, 6, 80–117; see Chase, 1895) may represent the two souls within him (Holzberg, 2009). However, Horace seems to have been, at heart, a great lover of country life.

Horace's reference to *amoenus* places in his poetry highlights the ancient Roman understanding of green spaces as healthy retreats. For Horace, good health was the most important aspect of life in the country. In his letters, he discusses the health-giving properties of forests (Epistola I, 4, 4; see Chase, 1895) and states that he requires the countryside to be physically and mentally well. He also extols the virtues of hedonism and the pleasures that nature provides in abundance (e.g. Carmina II, 3, 5–12; Epistola I, 14, 35; see Chase, 1895). Horace's love of the outdoors may have been formed during his childhood in Venusia, a small town in southern Italy, where he spent his early years roaming the countryside around his father's farm (Haight, 1910).

Many years later, Horace returned to life in the countryside when Maecenas, the literary patron of the Augustan Age, gave

him a small estate, a villa and some farmland, as a gift (Lugli, 1926). The area, located in the Sabine Hills northeast of Rome, was renowned for its ancient austerity. In his affectionate account of the area, Horace describes the surrounding hills, a clean, cool stream, and oak trees providing ample shade (Epistolae I, 16, 5–14; see Chase, 1895).

For Horace, the *locus amoenus* was not merely a backdrop, but a central ideal in life. In his works, he frequently portrays nature as a tranquil place, contrasting it with the bustling, overcrowded city of Rome. Horace's picturesque landscape descriptions have influenced artists for centuries, e.g. the Gardens of Horace by Camille Corot (Heilmann et al., 1996). The following features are particularly characteristic of his depictions of nature:

- His estate in the Sabine Hills was his personal retreat, offering peace and tranquillity. Horace extols the simplicity and tranquillity of this place in his works, describing it as the source of his poetic inspiration.

- Horace often describes the ideal landscape as having rolling hills, shady woods, clear springs and small streams. This creates a peaceful and inspiring atmosphere, perfect for philosophical reflection and poetry. In one of his most famous odes (Carmina III, 13; see Chase, 1895), he celebrates the crystal-clear *fons Bandusiae*. His description of the bubbling water beneath the shade of the trees is a prime example of the *locus amoenus* theme.

- Horace often uses a beautiful landscape as a metaphor for the transience of time. Against the backdrop of a *locus amoenus*, he urges us to embrace his famous '*carpe diem*' philosophy (see above) and savour the moment in harmony.

- In his second epode, Horace describes a man who, free from financial worries, tills the fields of his ancestors (Epodon, Carmen II, 1–4; see Chase, 1895):

*Beatus ille qui procul negotiis,  
ut prisca gens mortalium,  
paterna rura bobus exercet suis,  
solutus omni fenore.*

Blessed is the man who, free from the concerns of business, works his ancestral lands with his own oxen, like the ancient race of men, and is free from all usury.

This ideal of a simple, nature-loving, rural existence has influenced European literature for centuries. The image of distinguished figures personally guiding the plough was well known in classical Roman agriculture (e.g. Cincinnatus before his appointment as dictator) and remained so right up to the modern era (e.g. Emperor Joseph II in Austria).

In general, Horace did not describe nature for its own sake but used it as a setting for human activity or as a means of illustrating his own life. He appears to have loved the countryside for its inherent beauty, the simple life it offered, and the good health it bestowed on its inhabitants (Haight, 1910). Horace's depiction of the *locus amoenus* is closely linked to themes of physical and mental well-being, serving as a protective, therapeutic landscape. His connection to nature may have offered him an escape from the unhealthy, chaotic

atmosphere of urban Rome, providing stability during times of political turmoil (Stothard, 2025).

The Roman concept of the *locus amoenus* is similar to the modern idea of a restorative green environment. Studies have shown that such environments can reduce mental fatigue and relieve stress (Glover et al., 2024; Lange and Nakamura, 2025). Horace's reference to *loca amoena* includes the opulent gardens of Maecenas on the Esquiline Hill, which featured cultivated orchards and pools. These gardens transformed a former burial ground for the poor and a slum of prostitutes into a healthier outdoor walking area (Satirae I, 8, 14–16; see Chase, 1895):

*nunc licet Esquilis habitare salubribus atque  
aggere in aprico spatium, quo modo tristes  
albis informem spectabant ossibus agrum.*

Now, you can enjoy living in the healthy Esquilines area and take a stroll through the sunny fields, just as the mourners used to gaze upon the field of white bones.

This highlights Horace's understanding of the importance of green spaces and nature-based urban planning in promoting a healthy lifestyle. This intuition is supported by modern research which demonstrates the positive impact that urban green spaces have on mental and physical health. Spending time in these areas can reduce stress, lower cortisol levels, reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes, and improve mental well-being (Li and Lange, 2023; Wang et al., 2025). In addition, recent research supports the health-promoting effects of walking and physical activity in general (Lange, 2018, 2024, 2025; Lange et al., 2023a,b). It has also been shown that exercising in green spaces offers additional mental and physical health benefits compared to exercising indoors or in built-up environments (Laezza et al., 2025). A large number of premature deaths in European cities could be prevented by increasing exposure to green space (Pereira Barboza et al., 2021).

Modern urban lifestyle is associated with chronic stress, insufficient physical activity and exposure to air pollutants and noise. Urban green spaces, such as parks, residential greenery, and playgrounds, can promote physical and mental health, and reduce morbidity and mortality in urban residents by providing stress relief and psychological relaxation, supporting physical activity, stimulating social interaction, and reducing exposure to various environmental hazards (World Health Organization, 2016). In ancient Rome, access to green spaces such as Maecenas' gardens was restricted to the wealthy. Today, however, green spaces are open to everyone for the benefit of public health. Findings linking green spaces to various health outcomes emphasise the importance of preserving existing green spaces and incorporating more vegetation into urban areas in order to help maintain public health (Bryer et al., 2025).

In addition, Horace's famous line '*carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero*' (see above), is a timeless call for serenity that resonates with modern mindfulness practices. It encourages us to consciously shape and appreciate the present moment rather than placing our trust in the future. Therefore, we should embrace the fleeting nature of life, avoid procrastination, and live in the moment.

**Conflict of interest**

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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