

# The roof and suspended ceiling of the marble room in the House of the Telephus Relief at Herculaneum

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The timber roof and suspended ceiling of the marble room in the House of the Telephus Relief were discovered during a larger project to enhance Herculaneum's ancient shoreline, one of many initiatives undertaken by the Herculaneum Conservation Project (HCP).<sup>1</sup> Preliminary work to drain rain and groundwater led to the cleaning of the E part of the ancient shoreline, an area never fully investigated during previous excavations (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> The work was carried out between August 2009 and June 2010 in the area between the S corner of the Suburban Baths and the adjacent wing of the House of the Telephus Relief.<sup>3</sup> Beneath the layer of solidified volcanic material from the eruption of A.D. 79 was discovered a collapse of timbers, covering an area about 55 m<sup>2</sup>. Thanks to the particular conditions of its volcanic burial, the wood was perfectly preserved and not carbonized (fig. 2).<sup>4</sup> Tests carried out by CNR-IVALSA showed that almost all the samples were from the silver fir species.<sup>5</sup> From the positions in which these timber elements had fallen, together

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- 1 The Herculaneum Conservation Project ([www.herculaneum.org](http://www.herculaneum.org)) is an initiative of the Packard Humanities Institute (and its Italian arm, the Istituto Packard per i Beni Culturali) in collaboration with the Soprintendenza Speciale per Pompei, Ercolano e Stabia; a third partner, the British School at Rome, was involved from 2004 to 2014, the period in which the work described in this article took place. See A. Wallace-Hadrill *et al.*, "Special edition on the Herculaneum Conservation Project," *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites* 8.4 (2007); D. Camardo, S. Court and J. Thompson, "Ten years of the Herculaneum Conservation Project," *PBSR* 80 (2012) 360-62.
  - 2 P. Pesaresi, "I lavori di risanamento dell'antica spiaggia e i primi passi verso la sua valorizzazione," *RStPomp* 21 (2010) 153-54.
  - 3 For initial information on the discovery, cf. D. Camardo and M. Notomista, "Lo scavo e il recupero del tetto in legno dell'amb. 18 della Casa del rilievo di Telefo," *RStPomp* 21 (2010) 154-55. The programme of HCP site works was planned and directed by architect Paola Pesaresi, with support from structural engineer Giovanni Vercelli and specialists from Studio Massari.
  - 4 Some 30% of the original roof was excavated by the HCP team; the missing portion lies underneath the escarpment that forms the edge of the archaeological site or had been removed during the 1980s excavations. For a brief note on the earlier discovery, see T. Budetta, "Attività dell'Ufficio Scavi di Ercolano: 1987-1988," *RStPomp* 2 (1988) 236-37; ead., "I nuovi scavi nell'area suburbana di Ercolano," in L. Franchi dell'Orto (ed.), *Ercolano 1738-1988. 250 anni di ricerca archeologica* (Rome 1993) 680-81. The finds' exceptional state of conservation allowed the individual pieces of wood to be analysed in depth and for construction details to be examined, greatly aiding our understanding of exactly how the roof had been constructed and the various phases in which the timber had been worked; for further details on all the technical aspects, see a forthcoming article in *RömMitt*.
  - 5 On the studies by CNR-IVALSA, see the report by N. Macchioni, B. Pizzo, C. Caparetti, L. Sozzi and S. Lazzeri available in the archive of the Ufficio Scavi di Ercolano and the HCP archive (UD\_148). These analyses seem to confirm information provided by the ancient sources and recent studies on the large-scale use of fir in ancient carpentry: Vitruvius 2.9.8-9 and 11-12; Pliny, *NH* 16.18-19; M. Fioravanti and R. Caramiello, "Il legno e la sua lavorazione," in A. Ciarallo and E. De Carolis (edd.), *Homo faber* (Milan 1991) 85; S. T. A. M. Mols, *Wooden furniture in Herculaneum: form, technique and function* (Amsterdam 1999) 81; id., "Identification of the wood used in the furniture at Herculaneum," in W. Jashemski and F. G. Meyer, *The natural history of Pompeii* (Cambridge 2002) 225-34; M. Fioravanti, "Le specie legnose e le tecnologie di lavorazione del legno: risultati di studi tecnologici condotti sui reperti lignei dell'area archeologica vesuviana,"