

Evidence of demolition and remodeling at Villa A at Oplontis (Villa of Poppaea) after A.D. 45

Michael L. Thomas and John R. Clarke

In collaboration with the Soprintendenza archeologica di Pompei, the Oplontis Project is conducting an exhaustive study of the excavated remains of Villa A at Oplontis (fig. 1). The project's ultimate goal is to produce a full documentation of architecture, decorative systems, and finds. The final publication will include a detailed web-based catalogue keyed to high-resolution, one-to-one digital photographs mapped onto an accurate 3D model of the villa.¹ Villa A² is sometimes called the Villa of Poppaea owing to its purported association with the family of Nero's second wife, Poppaea Sabina. It is well-known for its spectacular examples of Second-, Third-, and Fourth-Style painting,³ as well as for its immense scale and potential imperial connections, but despite numerous smaller studies and guidebooks⁴ it has never been systematically documented and published. Neglect and exposure to the elements have already taken a toll on the fragile remains; despite a recent conservation effort costing 1.2 million euros, the physical state of the villa continues to worsen. Wall-paintings and mosaics have deteriorated significantly since their discovery in the late 1960s and 1970s, while improperly stored and catalogued finds have been lost or damaged. The project also seeks to address several questions raised by the remains, including issues of ownership, function, and social history.

Fieldwork in 2005-2006

Primary foci of the fieldwork have been the construction and decorative chronology. In order to document the changing form of the villa over its 100+ year history, the project combines stratigraphic excavation with analysis of masonry and decorative systems. After initial archival work in 2005, excavation began (2006) with a small sounding at the S end of the swimming pool designated Oplontis Project 1 (OP1 on fig. 1). This trench tested the theory that the pool may have been longer in an earlier phase. Finds included fragments of Julio-Claudian *terra sigillata* along with many fragments of wall-painting and stucco. A fragment of a Fourth-Style painting, the first of many to come, securely dated this fill layer after A.D. 45. While we believed at the time that we may have found evidence of an access ramp for the pool, we now know that the pavement was more likely a work surface possibly associated with the construction of the E wing. Initial analysis of the painting and masonry in 2006 brought to light numerous undocumented examples of structural and decorative modifications. Work begun in 2006 has

1 The King's Visualisation Lab (KVL), at King's College London, directed by R. Beacham, is working with us to create this 3D model. KVL hosts a national arts and humanities visualization support network (<http://3dvisa.cch.kcl.ac.uk/index.html>) working with partners at the University of Florence and through The London Charter (www.londoncharter.org). Cf. the lab's work on the Theater of Pompey (<http://www.pompey.cch.kcl.ac.uk>) and R. Beacham and H. Denard, *Living theatre. Roman theatricalism in the domestic sphere* (New Haven, forthcoming).

2 There are three different sites (labeled A, B, and C) at what was believed to have been ancient Oplontis.

3 The earliest datable decoration is the Second-Style painting in several rooms at the villa's central core. Our study of a construction-worker's trench in room 15 (one of the Second-Style rooms) found evidence of what may have been an earlier pavement of the villa.

4 See, e.g., A. De Franciscis, "La villa romana di Oplontis," in B. Andreae and H. Kyrieles (edd.), *Neue Forschungen in Pompei und den anderen vom Vesuvausbruch 79 n. Chr. verschütteten Städten* (Recklinghausen 1975) 9-38; L. Fergola and P. G. Guzzo, *Oplontis. La villa di Poppaea* (Milan 2000). More recently see S. De Caro, "Oplontis," in M. R. Pannetta (ed.), *Pompeii: storia, vita e arte della città sepolta* (Vercelli 2005) 372-98. For analysis of the decorative programs, see S. De Caro, "Sculptures of the Villa of Poppaea at Oplontis: a preliminary report," in E. MacDougall (ed.), *Ancient Roman villa gardens* (Washington, D.C. 1987) 77-133; J. R. Clarke, *The houses of Roman Italy, 100 B.C. - A.D. 250* (Berkeley, CA 1991) *passim*; and B. Bergmann, "Art and nature in the Villa at Oplontis," in *Pompeian brothels*, *JRA Suppl.* 47, 2002) 87-128. Also important is the paleobotanical research published in W. Jashemski, *The gardens of Pompeii. Herculaneum and the villas destroyed by Vesuvius* (New Rochelle, NY 1979-93).