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The making of an élite house: the House of the Vestals at Pompeii

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Interpreting Pompeian housing

Any understanding of the social context of ancient houses demands knowledge of how they developed over time. This paper examines changing patterns in the development and growth of the House of the Vestals (VI, 1, 7) at Pompeii over four centuries. Our conclusions are based on thorough excavation and recording of the standing building. The sequence recovered contributes to the overall debate on the development of Pompeian houses.

There is a long history of studies on the development of the Roman house, in which Pompeii has always occupied a central position, but, as A. Wallace-Hadrill (1997, 219) has noted, these studies are often flawed as scholars simply “repeated an evolutionary account of the development of the Roman House that is based on remarkably little material”. The standard accounts have displayed a striking resilience, despite their original formation in the 19th c. (e.g., Overbeck and Mau 1884; Mau 1899). The main tools used to construct the histories of Pompeian houses have been stone and masonry typologies (cf. Carrington 1933; Adam 1994). The uses of particular stones and building styles were assigned to particular periods, and traced in the standing remains to interpret the structural development of a property. However, reservations about this approach have been growing. Following their excavations in Insula I, 9, Fulford and Wallace-Hadrill (1998) explicitly questioned this method of dating properties, and in his work on the House of the Menander Ling (1997, 17-19) acknowledged the limitations of stone and architectural typologies, preferring the better-sequenced styles of wall-painting to provide a *terminus ante quem* for structures to which paintings were applied. For added chronological refinement, Ling’s project (1997, 19; Arthur 1997) also used pottery embedded within the fabric of walls.

The most reliable archaeological dating, however, comes not from construction typologies but from stratigraphic excavation. A. Maiuri (1930) first pioneered at Pompeii a policy of ‘wise destruction’ (Carrington 1934) when he dug small trenches to answer specific questions on the historical development of the House of the Surgeon, the property adjacent to the House of the Vestals, and our research in the House of the Vestals is concerned with establishing a sound chronological sequence through detailed excavation. This house fits into a broader research program by the Anglo-American Project which adds space to sequence by applying the same approach to the whole of a city block, Insula VI, 1 (cf. Bon *et al.* 1997). Our work and other modern stratigraphic excavations (e.g., Bonghi Jovino 1984; D’Ambrosio and De Caro 1989; Carafa 1997; Fulford and Wallace-Hadrill 1998, 1999) tend to be of larger extent than the trenching by Maiuri (1930) and Laidlaw (1993), yet all share similar aims of elucidating the patterns of growth and development in Pompeii’s houses.

The House of the Vestals is located in the NW corner of Pompeii by the Herculaneum Gate. It fronts directly onto the Via Consolare (fig. 1). Clearance in Pompeii in the second half of the 18th c. began outside the Herculaneum Gate in the Street of the Tombs and from 1764 proceeded along the Via Consolare, under the guidance of F. La Vega (De Carolis 1999, 23; cf. Hamilton 1786; Fiorelli 1860; Eschebach *et al.* 1993, 150-55; Pagano 1997; for plans of areas cleared, see David 1997). The House of the Vestals was thus one of the first parts of the town to be cleared of volcanic débris and much of its decoration was systematically stripped. Today some of the decoration survives in the Naples Museum and in the Louvre. Unfortunately, as the decoration left *in situ* has suffered badly from over two centuries of exposure, the level of preservation is not particularly high; nevertheless, it has been possible to reconstruct much of the wall and floor decoration from documentation in the early records of the Pompeian authorities (Fiorelli