The Oplontis Project 2005-6: observations on the construction history of Villa A at Torre Annunziata

Michael L. Thomas and John R. Clarke

The main goal of the Oplontis Project is to study and publish the architecture, decoration, and relevant finds associated with Villa A (fig. 1) at Torre Annunziata. Although numerous articles and guidebooks have been published on the villa since its initial excavation from 1964 to 1980, a systematic study has yet to be conducted. Tourism and exposure to the elements have already taken a toll on the fragile remains: paintings have faded, exposed walls have crumbled, and sections of mosaic floors have subsided. The Oplontis Project, sponsored by the University of Texas at Austin, intends to produce a multi-authored monograph of the villa and its associated finds and to create a complete digital photographic archive, a digital plan, and a navigable 3-D Virtual Reconstruction, utilizing a combination of a Total Station, CAD, and computer gaming technology. We also hope to make available in digital format a representative corpus of pre-existing scholarly work.

Our work began in 2005 with the study of the archives and creation of a research design. A field season followed in May-June 2006, and another in October 2006. Within the study of the architecture and decoration we will address several further questions:
1) What is the exact chronology of the villa, and how did its appearance change over its life?
2) Did the villa have direct access to the sea and was it built on an artificial platform or did it take advantage of the natural topography?
3) Was the complex always used as a villa or did its function change during its later history?
4) How was this space used and experienced by its owner(s), invited guests, clients, freepersons, and slaves?

History of the site

Identified on the Tabula Peutingeriana, a 12th-c. copy of a Roman map, Oplontis was a seaside town just west of Pompeii. Today the site is occupied by the town of Torre Annunziata. To date, archaeologists have identified three ancient sites in the area: Oplontis A, B, and C (fig. 2). Oplontis C, located c.100 m to the east of A, yielded little more than a small section of a colonnade. Oplontis B, 150 m to the east of C, though sometimes called a ‘villa’, in actuality is a large two-storey emporium; it awaits systematic study and publication.

The post-antique history of Oplontis begins in 1590 when the Count of Sarno engaged architect Domenico Fontana to construct a canal to bring the waters of the Sarno river from Serino to Torre Annunziata, where they would power a grain mill. The canal cut across the S side of Villa A (its retaining wall still marks the S boundary of the archaeological park). At the time

2 It is probable that Villa A stood either directly on, or within sight of, the sea. Located at the SW corner of the servants’ peristyle (32) is room 36, a tunnel not cleared by the original excavations since apparently noxious gas was leaking out of the volcanic material filling the passageway. There is still some mystery surrounding its function: possibly it provided passageway to a cistern, wine cellar, or cryptoporous within a basis villae, or possibly it was simply a tunnel leading to the sea, perhaps excavated though a natural cliff. After uncovering a further 2 m of tunnel through rock-hard pyroclastic material, terminating almost directly below the Sarno canal, our team was forced to halt work by an unstable vault; there was no sign that the tunnel turns or terminates.
4 A more detailed history can be found in De Caro (supra.) 375-77.