

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

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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 1980,¹ 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?²
- 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.³ 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.⁴ 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

1 These include A. De Franciscis, "La villa romana di Oplontis," in B. Andreae and H. Kyrieleis (edd.), *Neue Forschungen in Pompeji und den anderen vom Vesuvausbruch 79 n.Chr. verschütteten Städten* (Recklinghausen 1975) 9-38; L. Fergola and P. G. Guzzo, *Oplontis. La villa di Poppea* (Milan 2000); More recently see S. De Caro, "Oplontis," in M. R. Panetta (ed.), *Pompei: storia, vita e arte della città sepolta* (Vercelli 2005) 372-98. The most thorough analysis of the villa's painting and mosaic is to be found in J. R. Clarke, *The houses of Roman Italy, 100 B.C.-A.D. 250* (Berkeley, CA 1991) *passim*.

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 *cryptoporticus* within a *basis villae*, or possibly it was simply a tunnel leading to the sea, perhaps excavated through 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.

3 M. Prosperi, "Oplontis suburbio di Pompei. Dalla Tabula Peutingeriana." *Antiqua* 4.15 (Oct.-Dec. 1979) 21-26.

4 A more detailed history can be found in De Caro (supra.1) 375-77.