

THE REGIO V EXCAVATIONS



After decades we are excavating again in the part of the town which until now had never been investigated. Ongoing investigations have yielded important data for our understanding of the ancient city, as well as exceptional discoveries.

In yellow the perimeter of the excavation fronts. In green the not yet excavated area. The arrows indicate the excavation area of the wedge

These archaeological study and research activities form the essential basis of safeguarding and development operations, since only a deep knowledge of the archaeological context can guarantee its protection over time.

The new excavations form part of a larger stabilisation intervention which is focusing on the more than 3 km of the fronts which run along the 22 hectares of the unexcavated area, with the aim of reprofiling the fronts by reshaping the slope and stabilising them, in order to avoid the threatening pressure of the soil on the already excavated structures. In order to protect the buildings which had emerged in the 19th century, it became particularly necessary in the area of the so-called 'wedge' to conduct a significant excavation of over 1000 square metres, to move the front back and guarantee the stability of the uncovered structures.



Drone photo - The wedge before the excavation

An additional part of the ancient city, with alleys and domus, has been brought to light, revealing highly valuable decorative elements (including frescoes and mosaics) as well as numerous finds (including several everyday objects) and several victims of the eruption.



the wedge excavation area

In the area of the so-called wedge, between the House of the Silver Wedding and the Vicolo di Marco Lucrezio Frontone, two entire domus and 'Vicolo dei Balconi' have emerged, which has allowed us to reconnect the large arterial road of Via di Nola, already uncovered and visited by tourists, to the Vicolo delle Nozze d'Argento, which has thus far not been entirely brought to light.

Of the two houses, the **HOUSE WITH THE GARDEN**, so named for the garden with a frescoed portico, is known for the discovery of the charcoal inscription which changes the date of eruption. Facing onto the porch, we have the beautiful room of the megalographs, while next to the atrium we find the room of skeletons, where the remains of a dozen individuals who took refuge here in a vain attempt to save themselves were found.

In some service rooms on the other hand, a wooden box containing female jewellery and good luck amulets was found, which probably belonged to one of the victims found in the house.



The house takes its name from the large open space with a portico, within which palaeobotanical analyses have been conducted on the discovered plant traces, which are providing a complete picture of the plant species that were present there at the time of the eruption. Although the house was also compromised by tunnels, most of its decoration remains well preserved, and shows traces of ongoing work at the time of the eruption. The entrance from Vicolo dei Balconi. The residential complex was primarily accessed from Vicolo dei Balconi, via a monumental door with two 'dado' capitals and a masonry cornice; the narrow entrance led into an atrium which in turn was connected to the garden via an open portico supported by masonry columns resting on a plinth decorated with frescoes, featuring a black background upon which flowering plants were depicted.



The Room of Skeletons Inside one of the rooms which faced onto the portico, which unlike the others, survived the initial phase of the eruption (the shower of lapilli), to then be destroyed and filled by the pyroclastic flow, skeletal remains of at least five individuals were found, who evidently had sought refuge in the innermost room of the house, but found only death there. The investigation of this room, which is still ongoing, has revealed the presence (which had been indicated by suspect holes in the walls) of one or more tunnels from earlier excavations (which may pre-date the onset of official studies in 1748), which caused a disturbance of the intercepted skeletons, whose bones were displaced at various points in the room.

The Frescoes of the Portico and of the Rooms Both the portico and the rooms which face onto it are richly decorated with frescoes. One room in particular has yielded a small sacral idyllic painting at the centre of a wall with false architectural decoration. The painting depicts scenes of worship within a wooded environment. Similar paintings, which are sadly in worse states of preservation, decorated two other walls of the same room.

The Megalographs



The adjacent room was, however, decorated with scenes of larger dimensions, almost true megalographs. In one we can recognise Venus with a male figure (perhaps Adonis or Paris) and with Eros, while in another painting we see Venus depicted in the act of fishing with Eros.



There is also a highly sophisticated portrait of a woman in this room, which perhaps depicted the domina. In the two aforementioned rooms, and in another room with a simple wall decoration, the remains of a frescoed ceiling have been discovered collapsed on the floor, with traces of the lattice upon which the plaster was made to stick. Although in a highly fragmented condition, the entire recovery of preserved pieces will however allow us to reconstruct the decorative motifs, yielding a notable contribution to our knowledge of Roman painting, given that the ability to reconstruct frescoed ceilings in their entirety is notoriously rather rare.



The house, as previously noted, was likely undergoing refurbishment at the time of the eruption; this may explain why, alongside rooms with frescoed walls and ceilings, and cement flooring with marble slabs or tesserae in certain instances, there were some rooms with walls which had simply been plastered, and even without any flooring, such as in the atrium and entrance corridor.

Graffiti and charcoal inscriptions

The walls of the atrium and entrance corridor have preserved a considerable amount of graffiti which is currently being studied, and which contains phrases of an at times obscene character, and drawings (including some stylised faces). Drawings traced with lime or chalk have also, unusually, been well preserved, including one depicting a caricatured human face in the profile. There are others in charcoal, also depicting human faces. Among examples of the latter case, there is also a charcoal inscription, which would support the hypothesis that the eruption of AD 79 may have occurred on the 24th October, rather than the 24th August.

Finally, in one of the rooms of the Garden House, jewellery and small objects of a feminine nature have been found, which were used for personal adornment or to protect oneself from bad luck.



Kept in a wooden case and recently restored to their original splendour by restorers of the Restoration Laboratory of the Archaeological Park of Pompeii, they were a part of the family valuables that the inhabitants of the house were perhaps unable to take away before trying the escape.

The imprint of the wooden chest which contained the finds, whose bronze hinges have been well preserved inside the volcanic material unlike the decomposed wooden part, has been identified next to the imprint of another chest or piece of furniture in the corner of one of the service rooms, which was probably used for storage.

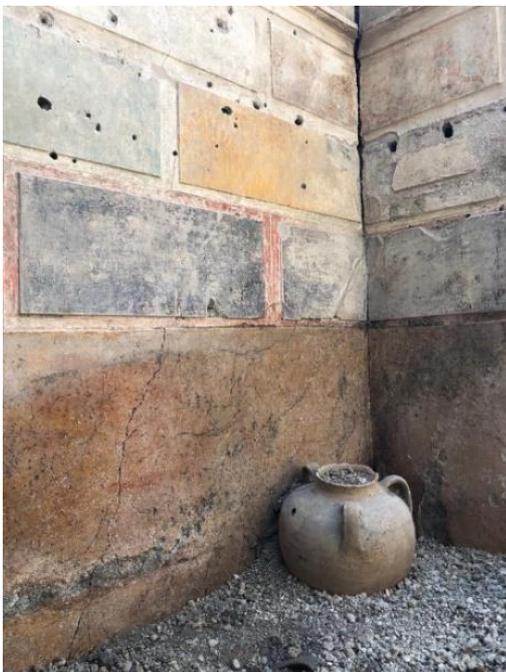
Numerous precious objects have been found at the bottom of the imprint, including two mirrors, several necklace pendants, faience decorations, bronze, bone and amber, a vitreous ointment, phallic amulets, two roughly 8cm fragments of an ear of wheat and a human figure, both in amber and probably with apotropaic value and various gems (including an amethyst with a female figure and a carnelian piece with the figure of a craftsman). Several pieces are characterised by the high quality of the materials, as well as the craftsmanship. Among the examples of glass paste, those engraved on one side with the head of Dionysus and on the other with a dancing satyr are extraordinary.

The other *domus* is the **HOUSE OF JUPITER**, which features valuable First Style paintings and floor mosaics, with iconography which is unparalleled at Pompeii, such as the myth of Orion mosaic, which depicts the catasterism of Orion, or his transformation into a constellation. The house takes its name from the fresco of the *lararium* located in the garden, in which the deity is depicted. The *lararium* had already been discovered during excavations conducted in the 19th century, when the house was only partially investigated..

At the moment of the eruption of AD 79, the dwelling was undergoing refurbishment. The ongoing excavations have allowed us to identify various tunnels, which were dug in the eighteenth century and early decades of the nineteenth century in order to recover precious objects, which unfortunately compromised the structure of the house in various locations.

Despite this, the mosaic flooring, the frescoes and, in some rooms, the rich clay-based and metallic furnishings, have been well preserved.

Today's excavation work has yielded the structure of a dwelling with a central *atrium* surrounded by decorated rooms, with an entrance along Vicolo dei Balconi, and an open colonnaded space at the back onto which three other rooms face.



The First Style Paintings

The *atrium* and surrounding rooms have revealed a rich First Style (2nd century BC) decoration, with stucco panels imitating marble slabs (*crustae*), which are painted in bright colours (red, black, yellow & green) and frames with indented moulding. The *atrium*, which retains its First Style decoration in the preserved section, was probably complemented by a Doric stucco frieze, with a blue and red finish, in the upper part, as evidenced by the numerous fragments that were recovered from the collapsed section.

It is highly probable that the owner of the house deliberately kept this older decoration in the First Style in these spaces, while in other Pompeian dwellings, it was frequently replaced by more modern decorations.





The Flooring and Figured Mosaics. The floors of the *domus* are primarily clay-based cements (so-called 'signinum' or 'cocciopesto'), sometimes with white marble mosaic tesserae laid at regular intervals, or with irregularly positioned marble flakes. In two rooms, however, the central part of the floor is decorated with exceptional rectangular mosaic panels of great artistic quality, with incomparable and extraordinary depictions, and which at first glance, appear to refer to seldom represented myths, probably of an astrological theme.



Lastly, traces of a fire were discovered in a room of the *domus* which borders the House of the Silver Wedding, and which had already been largely investigated in the past. The fire blackened the frescoed wall, and also affected furnishings, among which was probably a bed, as the fragments of carbonised wood and cloth would appear to suggest. This is an extraordinary find, considering how rare it is to find fabrics at Pompeii.

The Furnishings

In both dwellings, various furnishings have been recovered, including objects of daily life, which attest to the life that went on, unaware of the imminent tragedy, as well as objects of particular value. Two bronze jugs (*oinochoai*) with handles decorated with figurative designs, and enriched with small silver inserts, come from the House with the Garden, along with an iron brazier discovered in the portico together with a biconical terracotta container. The furnishings discovered within the House of Jupiter are richer, and primarily concentrated in two rooms. Of particular note is the floor of the room decorated in the First Style, which was completely covered with clay and bronze vases of various kinds, which had probably been carefully placed there due to the ongoing refurbishment works inside the *domus*.



Along **Vicolo dei Balconi**, so-called because of the discovery of collapsed balconies, numerous electoral inscriptions have come to light on the second floor of the surrounding buildings, and at the northern crossroads a thermopolium has emerged, with a beautiful fresco of a Nereid on a sea horse on the front of the counter. On the other side, a counter with various items of crockery on the top and amphorae leaning on the front is depicted in fresco, in the same manner that the real counter was found in at the time of discovery, with various amphorae leaning in front of the Nereid fresco.



The *Thermopolium*, from Greek “**θερμός**” (hot) and **πωλέω** (to sell), generically indicated a place where drinks and food were consumed. Foodstuffs were stored in large jars (the *dolia*) set into the masonry counter, and were consumed during the *prandium* - the light midday meal.



At this same intersection, the **skeleton of the first victim** found at this excavation site was uncovered, above 2/3 metres of pumice at the height of the second floor of the buildings. The victim had with him a small bag with twenty **bronze and silver coins**.



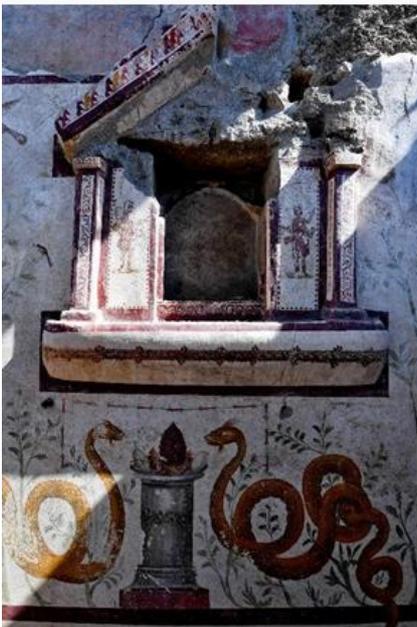
The most recent discovery in this area is a fresco depicting two gladiators at the end of a fight, with one winning and the other, who has been wounded, succumbing. The two gladiators engaged in the fight are a Murmillo and a Thracian (traditional opponents in the clashes) and they are portrayed on a white background bounded by a red band on the three sides: on the left the Murmillo is armed with a gladius (the Roman short sword), a scutum (the large rectangular shield) and a typical wide-brimmed helmet (galea) equipped with a visor and a crest; on the right there is a visibly injured and apparently losing Thracian, with his shield on the ground, and perhaps in the act of surrender. The fresco, which measures about 1 by 1.5 meters, emerged in the room behind the clearing at the intersection of Vicolo dei Balconi and Vicolo delle Nozze d'Argento.

It has a trapezoidal shape because it was located under the stairs of what may have been a shop, as shown by the still clearly visible imprint of a wooden staircase.

It is highly probable that the painting decorated a place where gladiators spent time. Indeed not far away was a gladiator barracks, where among other things the highest number of graffiti inscriptions referring to this world come from. Perhaps it was a seedy tavern, equipped with an upper floor which housed the business owners or even prostitutes.

As argued by the Director General of the site, Massimo Osanna: "We do not know what the final outcome of this fight was. One could die or have mercy. In this case there is a characteristic gesture that the Thracian is making with his hand, to beg for salvation. It is the gesture of *adlocutio*, which was usually made by the Emperor or a general to grant mercy". In other words, it was a desperate attempt to invoke the *missio* (at the end of the fight, the spectators shouted "*Mitte*", let him go, or alternatively "*lugula*", cut his throat) and thus have his life saved.

The room where it was discovered has only partially been brought to light: on one side, another small portion of fresco is emerging which reveals the presence of another figure. This suggests that *Regio V* may yet have further exciting surprises in store.



A little further along the excavation fronts, additional discoveries have been made. Heading towards **Vicolo di Marco Lucrezio Frontone**, a sumptuous painted *lararium* of about 4m x 5m has been found. It is one of the most elegant to have emerged in Pompeii, and pertains to a room of a house which had already been partly excavated at the beginning of the twentieth century, with access from Vicolo di Lucrezio Frontone.

At the centre of a wall with idyllic landscapes and a lush natural scene with plants and birds, there is a sacred *aedicula*, with painted figures of the '*Lares*' (protectors of the house) at the sides, and two large 'agathodaemon' (good demons) snakes below, as a symbol of prosperity and good fortune.

In a continuous game between illusion and reality, painted plants mix and blend with the real ones which perhaps grew luxuriantly in the flowerbed below the *lararium*, while a painted peacock seems to step on the ground of the garden. In the same way, the altar between the two snakes, complete with offerings (a pinecone and eggs) corresponds with a stone *arula* (small altar) found in the garden, where burnt traces of the offerings to honour domestic deities, guaranteeing the well-being and prosperity of the whole family, still remain. On the opposite wall, on the other hand, a hunting scene on a red background, with several light-coloured animals surrounding a black boar, seems to symbolically allude to the victory of the forces of good over evil.



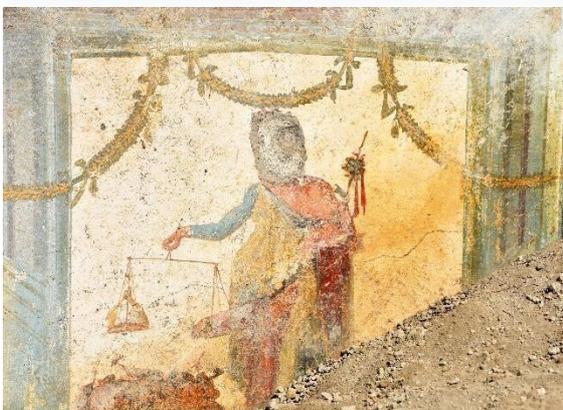
Along Via Vesuvio, the **House of Leda and the Swan**, which takes its name from the elegant fresco of Leda that decorated an alcove, has emerged.



The scene, which is full of sensuality, depicts the union of Jupiter, transformed into a swan, and Leda, the wife of Tyndareus, King of Sparta. From the double embrace, first with Jupiter and then with Tyndareus, the twins Castor and Pollux (the Dioscuri), Helen (future wife of Menelaus, King of Sparta and cause of the Trojan war) and Clytemnestra, bride and murderer of Agamemnon, would be born.



Behind the alcove, the so-called Narcissus *atrium* has come to light. This takes its name from the presence, at the centre of the brightly coloured wall, of the figure of Narcissus, reflected in the water and enraptured by his own image, according to classical iconography. In this house the traces of the stairs which lead to the upper floor can be clearly seen, as well as the traces of an under-the-stairs room used as for storage, where a dozen glass containers, eight amphorae and a bronze funnel have been found.



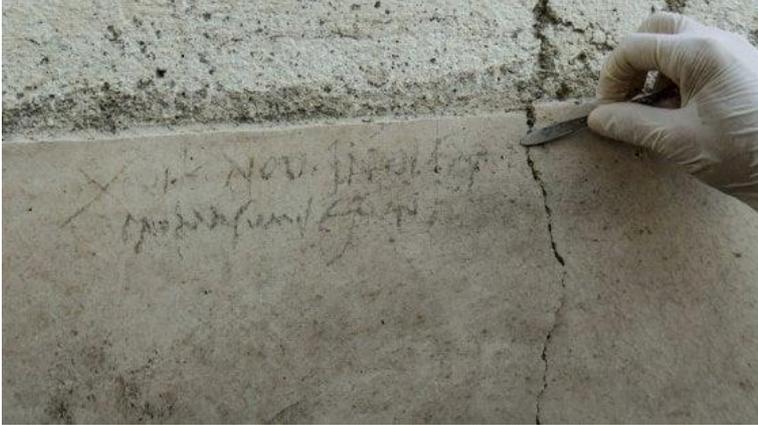
From the entrance corridor, the elegant residence already welcomed its guests with the auspicious image of **Priapus** who, as in the nearby House of the Vettii, weighs his large phallus on a set of scales.

Continuing along Via Vesuvio, a fountain with a mosaic of Dionysius and Ariadne with iconography similar to the central panel of the hall of the Megalograph, in the room of Villa of the Mysteries, has come to light. The mosaic has been restored at the Park's Restoration Laboratory.

THE CHARCOAL INSCRIPTION

The discovery of the charcoal inscription in a room of the House with the Garden, during the new excavations of *Regio V*, supports the theory that the date of the eruption was in October and not in August.

The inscription is in fact dated to the sixteenth day before the Kalends of November, corresponding to the 17th October, and it says:



“XVI (ante) K(alendas) Nov(embres) in (d)ulsit pro masumis esurit(ioni)”, or **“On the 17th October he indulged in food excessively”** (*Antonio Varone, archaeologist*)

or according to another reading: **“XVI (ante) K(alendas) Nov(embres)in olearia /proma sumserunt(...)”** - **“On the 17th October they took in the olive oil pantry [...]”** (*Giulia Ammannati, Professor of Latin Paleography – Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*).

The inscription appears in a room (the *atrium*) of the house which was being renovated at the time of the eruption, unlike the rest of the rooms which had already been completely refurbished. That these ongoing works were present only in some rooms leads us to think that these were interventions which were underway during the last months of the year of the eruption. Furthermore, since charcoal is so fragile and evanescent that it could not have lasted for a long time, the date of October AD 79 is more than likely - a week before the great catastrophe which, according to this hypothesis, took place on the 24th October. This discovery confirms a series of literary and archaeological evidence which in the past had already led scholars to hypothesise an autumn AD 79 date for the eruption of Vesuvius.

First and foremost, the transcriptions of Pliny's famous letter, the original of which has not survived, refer to different months (August, September, October and November), a confusion which was inevitably produced, from time to time, by the act of copying the texts. Therefore the dating of August 24th, which occurs in certain versions, is not beyond dispute.

During the excavations, numerous other finds dating to the autumn period were also found, including braziers and dried fruit, including walnuts, figs, pomegranates, chestnuts and marc remains - a sign of the recent grape harvest. Even the remains of clothes found on some bodies of the victims of the eruption have led us to question whether it was summer.

Last but not least, a silver coin with the effigy of Titus, and an inscription celebrating him as Emperor for the fifteenth time, provides us with a precise timeframe (albeit partially deteriorated, on the basis of comparison with literary evidence), certainly later than the month of August in AD 79.

New methodologies

The excavations conducted in *Regio V* used a methodology based on cutting-edge technologies (from the drone to georadar, the endoscope and the laser scanner) and close multidisciplinary collaboration between professionals (in addition to architects, archaeologists, restorers, vulcanologists, paleobotanists, anthropologists and archaeozoologists). This has allowed us to record each excavation phase in depth, analysing it from different points of view, and to understand aspects which are useful for reconstructing of Vesuvian life and its landscape in AD 79. The constant presence of an anthropologist at the excavation, for example, has allowed a real-time study of the skeletons of the victims, of their context and dynamics and of their deaths, which is much more detailed than in the past. The ongoing studies, on DNA too, will also allow a precise reading of their eating habits, medical conditions, age and family relationships. Moreover, for the first time it has been also possible to observe and record in detail the excavations which were conducted in the past, thanks to the survey of the numerous traces of tunnels which may well pre-date the beginning of the excavations of Pompeii in 1748.

