

Brief guide to Oplontis



POMPEI
ERCOLANO
BOSCOREALE
OPLONTIS
STABIA



Brief guide to **Oplontis**

POMPEI
ERCOLANO
BOSCOREALE
OPLONTIS
STABIA

Rules for visiting the excavations

Welcome to the Vesuvian archaeological areas.

In the archaeological areas the law D. Lgs 81/08 is applied according to the historical and archaeological important heritage protection rules and restrictions, especially in the archaeological Vesuvian area.

We especially ask you to follow the rules* below for a more enjoyable and safer stay:

- 1.** Be extremely careful when moving about. Do not stand on the edge of the digs or climb the walls.
- 2.** Please respect all entrance and access restrictions.
- 3.** Please show respectful behavior; refraining from making unnecessary noise, writing on the walls, and littering. Please place all garbage in the containers provided.
- 4.** Photographs and movie filming are authorized solely for private use; you must contact the Soprintendenza before filming with tripods, flash and artificial lighting, or for any commercial use.
- 5.** Guides do not work for the Superintendency. They are official and authorized by the Regione Campania. They have to show their licence under request.
- 6.** It is forbidden the access

with purses, backpacks and any type of luggage.

7. Smoking is not permitted.

8. Pets are not allowed.

People with motor difficulties and heart problems should be especially careful.

We recommend that you wear low-heeled shoes on your visit.

*from the Regulations for visitors to the Excavations (n. 213 dated 22.01.01)

Brief history of Oplontis and its villas

Among Vesuvian archaeological sites, buried following the dramatic eruption in 79 A.D., *Oplontis* is probably the one that offers the most significant monumental evidence of the Pompeii suburbs.

The group of Roman era buildings found, beginning in the Bourbon period, in the modern city of Torre Annunziata, is comparable to an actual city suburb, administratively subject to the jurisdiction of Pompeii, with its typical array of villas and a few public buildings linked by streets, similar to what has been found in *Stabiae*.

What is special about *Oplontis*, a place name found solely in the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, ancient map of the roads that crossed the regions of the Empire, is the presence of two monumental buildings of different purposes. The first-the so-called Villa of Poppea-was a grandiose and luxurious residential complex; the second, the Villa of *L. Crassius Tertius* (currently not open to the public), was a business center around processing agricultural products, particularly wine and oil. In addition, an uncovered spa in Punta Oncino confirms the hypothesis that *Oplontis* was a small town, thus also containing public buildings.

The Villa of Poppea, brought to light between 1964 and 1984, is the most classic example of an

"*otium*"* villa, built near the coast where-also due to the healthy climate-those who lived there could recover in body and spirit far from the hectic lifestyle of the capital. Adorned with spectacular painted decorations in Pompeii's 2nd style*, enhanced with admirable ornaments such as the white marble sculptures that decorated its gardens and pool, the building offers all of the technological features typical of every patrician residence, whose rooms are laid out in conformity with the simplest architectural plan in the oldest part, more complex in the more recent areas.

Attributed to Poppea, wife of Nero, according to a few mentions of the Empress, the villa (the oldest part of which dates from the mid-1st cent. A.D., and was later expanded) must have been part of the extensive land holdings in possession of the imperial family along the Campania coast. After the emperor's death, the building must have been transferred to another owner, who ordered some remodelling work, still in progress at the time of the eruption.

Atrium



The tour begins exactly where the main entrance stood in ancient times. The real entryway was in the south, where there is currently a man-made canal, a byway of the Sarno River, created and used until fairly recently to supply water to the mills of Torre Annunziata.

The grand sitting room, with an opening in the roof (*compluvium*)* and corresponding tub in the center of the floor (*impluvium*)*, to collect rainwater; with a floor entirely made of mosaic*, is characterized by the presence of exceptionally fine monumental frescoes in Pompeian 2nd style*, probably by the studio shop that worked in Boscoreale during the same period (approximately mid-I BC). The realism that suffuses these decorations, whose purpose was to use illusion to expand the physical limits of the walls, is clear if one observes the architectural structures of columns, high podiums on steps, false doors with metal parts, and embellished with the finest detailing, such as the torch resting on the steps, or the heads in circular elements (*imagines clipeatae*), at the top of the west wall.



Kitchen

2



The most important of the service rooms has a large masonry bench along its north side, with a brick-covered work surface, where food was cooked in terracotta or bronze pots resting on iron supports over the fire. In the part below there are small rooms with semicircular openings, to store wood.

Along the east side of the floor is a round tub used to drain liquids.

A platform is visible on the south side, which presumably housed servants' quarters, accessed by means of a staircase in an adjacent room.



Calidarium

3



As in other residences of people belonging to certain high social levels, the Villa of Poppea also had its own private baths, consisting of the rooms that normally made up such facilities. The *calidarium* (bathroom heated with hot air) of the Villa of Poppea has the typical features of this type of rooms, meaning the *tegulae mammatae*, terracotta slabs kept away from the wall by corner protrusions, and the *suspensurae*, hollow earthenware columns or small brick pillars upon which the floor rested.

These details both allowed hot air to flow along the walls and under the floor; ensuring that the heat in the room remained relatively constant.

The painted decorations covering the walls refer to the so-called 3rd style* of Pompeii, in which realistic elements appear; which in this case consist of slender columns supporting architraves* in the central part of the wall, and slim architectural partitions for purely decorative purposes at the top, into which small landscape or figure paintings were inserted, or even large paintings that were generally copies of the classical Greek tradition.

The painting inserted in the center of the east wall depicts the myth of Hercules* in the garden of the Hesperides*.



Tepidarium

4



Throughout the bath sectors, both public and private, alongside the *calidarium* was the *tepidarium*, a room heated-unlike the previous one-with warm air: this room does not have the *tegulae mammatae* on the walls, containing instead *suspensurae* under the floor; visible through a metal grate, and made up of brick pilasters.

The frescoes, with black background at the bottom, red in the middle, belong to the 4th style* of Pompeii, which favours a purely decorative taste in painting, with large panels occupying the middle section of the wall, bearing paintings of birds pecking fruit, flanked by upright stems in turn topped by slender, schematic architectural structures. The latter have nothing to do with the illusionist realism of the 2nd style*, but are instead presented as imaginative compositions despite their use of actual architectural elements.



Sitting room

5



This large sitting room is certainly one of the rooms that most effectively represents the luxury and majesty of the Oplontis residence, for both its size and for the fresco decorating the only uncovered wall. It was presumably used as a dining room; we imagine that in ancient times it was open to the south with a view of the sea through a large door and a window, of which we can see the imprint today.

The most striking element for the visitor is certainly the spectacular wall painting, also belonging to the 2nd style*, in which the illusionist realism is rendered by means of an artistic portrayal of a sanctuary of Apollo, divinity symbolized by the Delphic tripod located amid trees and shrubs beyond a gate with architrave*, opening between two tall columns resting on a podium. This extravagant fresco, inspired by the Hellenic Baroque style and theatre scenery, recalled by the perspective colonnades on the sides, has a few notably fine details such as the peacocks or theatre masks, which fit well into the complex decorative structure.



Triclinium*

6



This was the dining room, ordinarily used as such, in which the triclinium cots on which guests ate lying down were arranged along the walls, while the food table was located in the center of the room, over a mosaic with polychrome rhomboid shapes.

Also in this room, the 2nd style* wall decoration has a podium at the bottom, over which rise columns of marble colored or decorated with metal segments. In the center of the east and west sides there is a door, beyond which one can see round cuspidate temples*, with statues of female divinities inside, and perspective colonnades similar to those already seen in sitting room 5. On the north wall, beyond a gate, a tall column supports a statue of a feminine divinity in a garden. The most interesting feature of this wall is the decorative motif consisting of a basket of figs, a skillfully rendered naturalistic motif, located below an arch in the upper right.



Cubiculum*

7



This small bedroom had beds placed in special niches, with vaulted ceilings, on the east and north sides, with a passageway later opened from the back wall.

Of considerable interest are the imprints of the door, and especially the window, which was ajar at the time of the eruption.

The frescoes in 2nd style* are very similar to those in atrium 5: here again the decoration consists of illusionist architectural structures, less imposing and proportionally smaller in relation to the smaller size of the room.

The stucco-framed niche vaults were decorated with a coffered motif, while the lunettes showed landscape scenes.



Sitting room

8



The frescoes in 2nd style* on the walls of this sitting room, which opens onto the portico 9, stand out from the others not so much because of the overall structure of the decoration which, as usual, has a podium supporting columns with architraves* over passageways, as for the details included here and there, through which the craftsmen wished once again to enhance and somehow soften the severity of the decorations, while simultaneously demonstrating his considerable artistic skill.

On the north side, in the lower right, a fruit basket appears covered by a thin veil while, still on the right but above, the transparency of the glass of a cup of pomegranates is rendered with great skill. On the opposite south side, at the bottom, a tall support holds a sort of cake, while at the top center of the western side is a lovely example of a mask recalling the theatrical backdrops of classical Hellenic Greek tradition, which originated the 2nd style* decorative complexes.



Portico

9



Symmetrical in relation to the other; nearly identical, which extends to the west of the atrium, this portico has a structural peculiarity in its columns, which are joined by sections of wall in opus craticium*, with wooden frames filled with stone blocks, into which it is quite possible a gate was inserted: this expedient had to be adopted to protect the back rooms from being too hot in summer, and too cold in winter.

The above rooms-which, like the portico, were soberly decorated in 4th style* with a red or white background-were small bedrooms, in one of which it has been possible to recreate the decorated ceiling.

In 3rd style*, thus from a previous era, is instead the fresco of the cubiculum* at the beginning of the portico, in the northwest corner, with a yellow background at the bottom and in the central panels, separated by candelabra and pilasters, while at the top appear architectural elements in perspective on a white background, finely rendered with calligraphic precision.



Peristyle*

10



In addition to the large northern *viridarium**, which was the “public” garden so to speak, the Villa of Poppea also offered this other garden, which differs from the other in being more intimate and secluded, and which made it possible to spend a few hours of the day resting and meditating. Today it has been planted with bay trees, a species assumed to have been grown there in ancient times.

The garden is enclosed within a three-armed colonnade (*porticus triplex*), with brick columns covered with white stucco. The interior walls are decorated in 4th style*, with panels with a red background in the central area. A decoration in 4th style* is also present on the architraves* supported by columns.



Corridor



This room, which has two perpendicular arms, surrounds and links a few public rooms built in the pool area.

The west-east arm leads directly to the rooms around the immense tub: on the south side is the entrance to a tiny room containing the only productive sector of the villa, at least in the part that has been brought to light. This is a small wine press which, considering its compact size, must have been used solely to satisfy the needs of those who lived in the building.

The frescoes in 4th style* that cover the walls, on a primarily red background, clearly show that—unlike many Pompeii houses, where during the same period wall decorations were often fairly mundane—in this grandiose patrician residence the frescoes are extremely high in quality, as can be seen by observing the details in the middle of the central panels, with birds pecking at fruit. Of considerable interest is the ceiling in the other south-north arm, also in 4th style*, completely rebuilt immediately after the excavation.



Reception room (oecus)

12



The unusual shape of this living room is a sort of adaptation to the particular configuration of the public sitting room, located in front of the garden facing the pool and opening onto it through a window. This polygonal sitting room, accessed through a passageway in the northeast corner, had no frescoes on the walls, which were instead covered at the bottom by wainscoting in colored marble, with wooden rustic work* panels above. The floor was covered in marble tiles, of which only traces remain, as they were removed due to plans to replace the floor as part of the overall remodelling taking place in the building.



Reception room (oecus)

13



Perfectly symmetrical compared to the previous room 12, this room has the same function and the same kind of painted decorations.

The two rooms are linked by a short corridor; also decorated in 4th style*, which crosses the back of the polygonal sitting room and acts as a landing.



Pool

14



The sector affected by the latest expansion of the villa centers around the pool, whose huge tub (61 x 17 m) shows certain technical details—such as being tilted southward to allow the water to drain—that make it one of the best examples of a structure dedicated to sport and personal care in general.

Among other things the pool was placed in a luxurious natural setting, surrounded by meadows, trees and plants, where the owner met his need to combine vegetation and superior craftsmanship in a single context by including a few splendid white marble sculptures, excellent Roman copies of Greek originals.

A portico originally stood along the western side of the tub, onto which opened a series of different kinds of rooms, and whose inner wall was decorated in 4th style* on a white background, with a few supremely executed decorative details (landscape paintings, plant and animal elements). The work of remodelling the villa involved rebuilding the roof and removing the columns, which were not found in their original places but stored in another part of the building.



Hospitalia

15



Among the rooms that open onto the pool colonnade, a core group of rooms at the north end stand out, especially due to their decorative simplicity. The walls are covered with white painted backgrounds at the top, and red, yellow or black backgrounds in the lower portion, completely free of even the simplest decorations typical of the 4th style* present in other rooms. This feature, along with the fact that these rooms are in a part of the building rather separate from the other rooms, for added privacy, has led us to believe that they were *hospitalia*, or rooms set aside for guests invited at various times of the year to stay at this luxurious residence.



Viridarium*

16



The Villa of Poppea offers not only the lush gardens that were typically present in large residential villas, but also small indoor gardens, obviously roofless, with central flowerbeds containing small or medium-sized plants, but whose walls bear painted decorations depicting real existing plant elements. Amid the lush vegetation, whose reproduction on the walls echoes the illusionist realism of the 2nd style*, are other naturalistic elements such as birds, or typical garden ornaments such as the fountain tubs, which enliven and enhance the decoration. The unusual configuration of this room is probably due to its later inclusion in the series of adjacent rooms, to which it was forced to adapt.



Sitting room

17



Probably intended as a dining room, this room is perfectly symmetrical to the other sitting room 19. Both rooms have a semicircular niche on the east side, in which a sculpture was originally placed for decoration.

The most striking feature of this sitting room is the ceiling, which it was possible to rebuild, with very few fragments, thanks to careful restoration. The decoration recalls the decorative patterns of the 4th style*, with the difference that, while geometric partitions are usually simply painted, in this case they were physically rendered using stucco frames and round or rhomboid undercut motifs, which animate the surface to create a fascinating alternation of light and shadow.



Sitting room

18



Observing the layout of the villa, notice how the oldest part of the building meets certain criteria of symmetry, with the atrium representing the midpoint around which the various rooms were arranged.

Although the most recent core of the building meets less rigid, freer architectural standards, note that there is also symmetry in the row of rooms overlooking the pool, of which this large sitting room is the center.

The sitting room, opening onto the north garden on the back through a large window, had walls covered to a certain height with prized marble, while the floor was of *sectile opus**, thus made up of marble tiles in various colors, of which only a part is visible today. The east side, opening onto the portico around the pool, had two very tall columns that were removed, like those of the portico, for restoration.

On the north and south sides two windows open onto square *viridaria**, entirely similar to room 16 above. In this case, a visitor standing in the center of the room can enjoy the view on two sides of the succession of internal outdoor gardens alternating with indoor rooms, in an intriguing interplay of light and shadow.



Sitting room

19



As already mentioned, this room is absolutely identical to the previous room 17. The wall covering consisted of colored marble on the lower part.

Another *viridarium**, this one extremely small, is visible through a window on the south side. It is entirely similar to the others, both for the presence of the flowerbed, and for the wall decoration. It should be emphasized that owners of villas at the time were extremely sensitive to naturalistic elements, whether real or reproduced in paintings, to the point where they would take advantage of even the smallest available space for this purpose.



Corridor

20



The main link between the residential core of the building, from an older period, and the more recent sector primarily dedicated to personal care (thus the pool area) consists of this long corridor; quite wide and tall, along the walls of which are placed two rows of benches, probably used by those waiting to access the pool or simply for resting.

The ceiling of the room is divided by beams into square sections, decorated with large panels in 4th style*, characterized by concentric geometric partitions linked by garlands and other plant elements vegetation and embellished with details such as animals, squares, and Medusa* heads, all rendered with great elegance and precision. Not only the central panels are painted, but also the beams and the tall windows that open onto the peristyle* 10.



Latrine

21



The walls of the shared latrine are completely covered with white plaster: along the east, north and west sides were special bored shelves, built into the stonework and presumably made of wood, below which ran a canal lined in signinum opus*. This canal made it possible to clean the system using the water contained in a tub placed at the entrance to the room.

The same room holds another latrine, simpler in structure, placed along the south side and separated by a masonry partition.



Peristyle*

22



This small internal peristyle*, previously incorrectly tagged as “servants' quarters” due to the presence of a few rooms for servants along the east side, has several rooms of various types on both the lower and upper floors, the latter accessible by a staircase: these are small rooms, simply plastered in white. The definition of “servants' quarters” was probably also given due to the wall decorations, made up of panels with grey and black stripes, often present in servants' rooms but also those for patricians, as can be seen in this same villa in the lower part of the walls in corridor 20. Actually, while the next room 23 faces this peristyle*, and is certainly patrician, it should be noted that as it is occupied in the center by a *viridarium** with fountain, it represents another passageway between the actual residential area and the pool zone. It includes rooms for servants, unlike other villas, where these were kept in an entirely separate section.



Lararium

23



As already mentioned, this large, patrician room opens onto the peristyle* 22. It is a lararium, a room designed to hold the images of the lares, protectors of the house and family; worship ceremonies might be held in their honor in this same room.

The altar on which the images of devotion, generally consisting of marble or bronze statues, were placed stood in a niche on the western side, and consists of a tall, monumental stone base covered with painted plaster. Extremely interesting is the charred remainder of the wooden beam that stood over the niche.

The walls of the room are decorated with frescoes in 4th style*, with a white background, with fine architectural or naturalistic decorative elements.



Sitting room

24



Added later, along with the porticoes overlooking the north garden, following the first construction stage that involved the atrium, the large sitting room-which probably also acted as an ample dining room-has two tall brick columns in front, covered with white plaster. The floor is a black and white mosaic, and has stylized plant motifs on the thresholds between the columns. The walls are not covered with anything: there were probably plans to redecorate them once the remodeling work was finished. The remodeling itself is the reason for the presence of a few columns, from the pool portico, moved from their original site and placed along the walls of this room.

The sitting room is flanked by two symmetrical porticoes, with columns also plastered in white, inner walls decorated in 4th style* with panels having a red background, yellow in the central area. To the west one can see where the arm of the portico not yet uncovered extends to the west, under what is now via Sepolcri.



Viridarium*

25



The garden that presumably bordered the villa to the north is immense: in addition to a variety of plant species that have been identified and replanted, it also contained a number of marble sculptures, especially Herms* on pillars, whose brick bases still remain. Lush and luxuriant, the *viridarium** was intended primarily for strolling and resting. On the east side are casts made of the roots of tall trees, most likely sycamores.

The hedge-lined boulevards converge in the north, where there was presumably a group of sculptures or a fountain. This midpoint had to be clearly visible to those arriving at the entrance to the villa, thus the atrium, as the endpoint of a perspective sequence of architectural and naturalistic elements.



Glossary

architrave: horizontal structural element resting on columns or pilasters

rustic work type of wall covering with rusticated ashlar, stone projections that are deliberately rough-hewn, to highlight the chiaroscuro and volumes
signinum opus: powered terracotta, mixed with lime and sand, used to cover floors and walls to keep out moisture

compluvium: opening in the center of the atrium roof in houses, which conveyed water into the impluvium*

cubiculum: bedroom with vaulted niches in the walls, into which the beds were inserted

cuspidate: terminating in a spire, a structural element that is pointed at the top

Hercules: Greek hero, son of Zeus and Alcmene, protagonist of undertakings frequently depicted in Greek and Roman works of art

Herm: sculpture on a tapered pilaster; depicting a bust or head, which takes its name from the practice of depicting the god Hermes (Mercury) in ancient Greece

Hesperides: daughters of the Night, in whose garden were the Golden Apple trees that Hercules, in one of his twelve assignments, had fetched and brought to the King Eurystheus
impluvium: low basin in the center of the atrium in houses, into which rainwater flowed from the roof through the compluvium*

Medusa: mythical character whose key feature consisted of snakes for hair

mosaic: floor or wall covering consisting of tiny stone or glass paste tiles-black and white or polychrome-arranged together to create geometric patterns or figurative scenes

opus craticium: economical building technique with square wooden frames, filled with gravel bound using lime and mud

sectile opus: floor or wall decoration made of marble tiles, outlining geometric or figurative patterns

peristyle: garden surrounded by colonnade porticos

first style: painted wall decoration (III-early I st cent. BC), also known as 'structural', which imitates architectural elements made in stucco and decorated to imitate marble

Glossary

fourth style: painted wall decoration (second half of the 1st cent. A.D.), also known as 'fantastic', which amplifies the architectural fantasy of the 'second style'* and the decorative tone of the 'third style'*

second style: painted wall decoration (early 1st-20 BC), also known as 'architectural', which picks up the elements of the first style'* and develops them using not stucco but painting, making them increasingly complex, realistic, with sensitivity to perspective

third style: painted wall decoration (20 BC-50 A.D.), also known as 'ornamental', which rigidly divides the surface vertically and horizontally by means of architectural or plant or linear elements, in the center of which are decorative motifs and decorated panels

triclinium: dining room, where people ate while lying on cots placed around 3 sides

Delphic tripod: a tripod sacred to Apollo, divinity whose primary place of worship was in Delphi, in Greece

"otium" villa: a residential building generally used for rest or vacation

viridarium: a garden area that might contain marble or bronze sculptures as well as plants and trees

This small guide
collects short
introductions for
visiting the most
important dig sites.
Some of them can
be temporarily
closed.

It is strictly
prohibited to
distribute this
publication
without regular
authorization
issued by the
Soprintendenza
Archeologica of
Pompeii.

image and communications

letterpress

photographs

printing

translations

Zelig

SAPES

Luciano Romano

Eidos Longobardi

Castellammare di Stabia

www.nleditore.it

Studio Essepi, Milan

POMPEI
ERCOLANO
BOSCOREALE
OPLONTIS
STABIA



Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo