



E-Journal

Scavi di Pompei

Early Results of the 2023 Excavation Season at Oplontis Villa B

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When Vesuvius erupted in AD 79 the site known today as Oplontis, Villa B was a busy commercial and residential complex located along the coast about three miles from ancient Pompeii. Italian authorities unearthed it between 1974 and 1991 in a series of campaigns together with its more famous neighbor, Villa A also known as the Villa of Poppaea. Today the site presents a layout centered around

a two-story colonnaded courtyard (*fig.1*). Excavators found over 1400 *amphorae* in the process of being washed and readied to receive a new vintage of wine (Thomas 2015; Thomas 2016; Muslin 2016; Pecci *et alii.* 2017; Muslin 2019; Van der Graaff Muslin forthcoming). To the north, highlighted in yellow, the site preserves the ruins of a Roman street lined with two-story rowhouses (Van der Graaff et

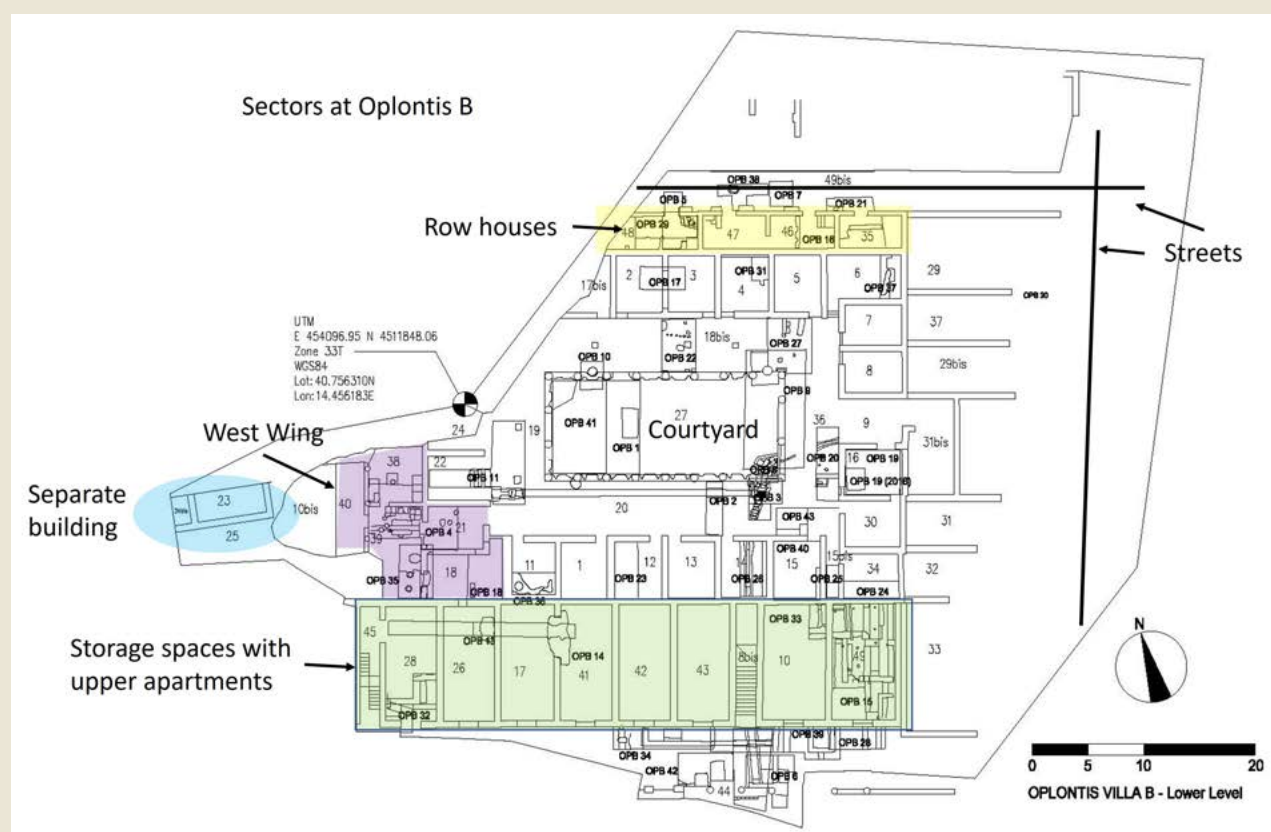


fig.1

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alii 2020). To the south, highlighted in green, are the remains of barrel-vaulted storage spaces that supported apartments on the second floor. In room 10 excavators found the remains of 54 skeletons of victims seemingly awaiting rescue but overwhelmed by the force of the volcano (D'Ambrosio 1987; Ward 2016). Since its first discovery scholars have dated the complex based on construction materials in a manner that is typical of Pompeian archaeology. The presence of columns built from large drums of Nocerá Tuff stone in the courtyard led to the inevitable conclusion that the core of the structures dated to the mid-second century BC (Maggi 1977; Malandrino 1981; Lagi de Caro 1983; Fergola 2004). The complex has remained largely unstudied ever since its discovery despite its significant potential to contribute to the story of the region. Starting in 2012, the Oplontis Project has taken on the mission to study the buildings and their artifacts using art-historical, artifact, and architectural analysis, as well as archaeological excavations (Thomas 2013; Van der Graaff *et alii* 2016; Van der Graaff 2016; Van der Graaff *et alii* 2019; Clarke *et alii* 2021; Van der Graaff *et alii* 2023). This article presents the results of those studies including the campaign conducted in 2023. It proposes new dates for the six excavated buildings as well as a minimum of five construction sequences over the lifetime of the building.

The trenches excavated on the southern and western side of the site have provided the richest evidence for earlier architectural phases (*fig. 2*). Here our team has managed to identify a series of independent structures below the level of AD 79. Although the precise dates remain the object of study, the results attest to at least five architectural phases in the areas excavated up to 2023, the earliest of which dates to the first half of the first century BC. Subsequent phases represent construction that was ongoing to the time of the eruption. The color-coded plan highlights the architectural remains and their association with the complex. The results indicate that the first three of these phases had little to do with the layout of the courtyard as it



fig.2

stands today. Unfortunately, the circumstances of their discovery at relatively deep levels in confined spaces has limited the information we were able to retrieve concerning their function. Phase 1, highlighted in purple, and evident in trenches OPB 32, 42 and 15, emerged in the form of foundation walls carefully demolished in antiquity. The foundations recovered in OPB 32 and 42 run at an angle compared to the later complex, suggesting a different orientation to the structures in this early phase. This wall had a foundation trench that included fragments of Dressel 2-4 amphorae in its fill, in turn suggesting that its construction did not occur before 70 BC. In phase 2, shown in red, workers built the structures associated with the foundations recovered in trenches OPB 4, 32, 15, and 44. Again, the information about these structures is fragmentary. In trench OPB 15 a foundation wall and two nearby water channels associate with this phase. The presence of running water undoubtedly related to some sort of



fig.3



fig.4

artisanal function. Trenches 4 and 44 on the western side of the site contained the remains of further foundation walls associated with this phase. These walls seem to be linked to create a space, one that included a threshold to a door facing west. Their orientation does not fit with any of the later architecture. Another series of foundation walls, displayed in violet, this time identified in trenches OPB 6, 15, 34, 39 and 42, belonged to a large structure on the southern end of the site in Phase 3. The walls recovered in trenches OPB 34 and 6 run at right angles: one toward the ancient coastline to the south and the other in an east-west direction. A basin-like structure recovered in trench OPB 39 contained a lime-rich fill deposited when it went out of use in antiquity. The basin had some sort of association with lime production which ancient Romans used for both agricultural and architectural applications (Cato 36-37; Vitruvius II, 5, 1). A large wall recovered in trench OPB 42 nearby operated as a pier of sorts connecting Oplontis B with the sea to the south (Di Maio 2016; Muntasser Di Maio 2016; Van der Graaf *et alii* 2022). Our results suggest that the first construction of the remains associated with this phase cannot have occurred before the late first century BC. Indeed, the surviving masonry of these walls consists of a neat opus reticulatum that first appears in the region of Pompeii in the late first century BC. The principal remains associated with Phase 3 are somewhat removed spatially from the courtyard building to the north. Nevertheless, they may belong to an early

version of it. A clue comes from two cistern heads on the northern side of the complex that seem to predate the subsequent Phase 4 when a series of channels fed water to the complex, shaded in yellow on plan. These channels arrived from the north and west draining out toward the south where they clearly cut through earlier Phase 3 walls. This drainage system passed underneath the complex, suggesting they had a contemporaneous use. In Phase 5 the complex experienced some architectural changes shaded green on the plan. Workers walled off the spaces on the western side of the site to create a separate series of spaces that no longer communicated with the courtyard. Access now occurred through corridor 40 that linked to a street further north. These changes occurred no earlier than the Claudian period as coins and Fourth-Style fresco fragments recovered beneath the pavements of these spaces suggest. It is in this phase or in a subsequent Phase 6 that the complex sees the construction of the barrel-vaulted spaces to the south. The foundations of these spaces cut through all the previous architecture. A prominent fill layer brought in to complete a new floor level contained fragments of terra sigillata bowls dating to the Neronian period, suggesting their construction after the earthquake of AD 62. Fourth-Style fresco fragments found in postholes beneath the floor of space 49 indicate a similar date of construction.

The 2023 Excavation Season

In the excavation season of 2023, the team reopened trench OPB 11 and excavated five others: Trench OPB 45 in space 44, OPB 46 in room 1, OPB 47 in 20, OPB 48 in 18bis, OPB 49 in 36, and OPB 50 in space 30 (fig. 3). The aim of our investigations was to clarify the various phases of the complex and to document the pavements of AD 79.

The team first excavated unit OPB 11 in 2014, extending over the length of room 22 and into the peristyle to the east. By the end of the excavation the unit had revealed a channel running north-south in the eastern quarter of room 22 (*fig. 4*). The channel lacked its cap stones and a rubble fill supported a floor above. Workers had filled in the channel when it went out of use well before the eruption of AD 79 (Van der Graaff *et alii* 2016). Another channel appeared running in an east-west direction in room 20. Clearly the two water features met, but the team did not find that juncture as it lay buried beneath worked stones. In order to further expose the water feature, the team expanded the unit to the south in 2023. The team also sought to clarify the relationship of the room with space 38 to the west where trench OPB 44 had revealed a much earlier wall beneath a connecting door that workers walled shut in antiquity. The excavation revealed two foundation trenches for the southern and western walls of the room that were cut through a hardened layer of pyroclastic flow belonging to an earlier eruption of Vesuvius. Builders reached another pyroclastic stratum below it that they used as a foundation platform to build the walls. Among the most diagnostic finds within the foundation trenches was a rim of a Dressel 1c amphora produced between the late second century BC and the mid first century BC (Lamboglia 1955; Beltrán Lloris 1970; Will 1979; Will 1987). It indicates that the room dates to no earlier than the first half of the first century BC. The foundation trenches also revealed that the two drainage channels worked together with this early first phase of the room. The channels do not appear to cut through the masonry. At least one floor level covered the channels in this phase: one funneled water from the north and the other from the south. The T-shaped junction tied toward the east into a shallow settling tank designed to filter impurities. At the time of excavation in 2014, the tank displayed a broken floor, indicating that it had gone out of use well before the eruption. A white mortar functioned to waterproof the channels

indicating that they carried fresh water which, further down the line, mixed with wastewater from the latrine that was recovered in unit OPB 3 (Thomas *et alii* 2013). The continued course of the channels to the south and north remains unknown. However, the southern channel must turn abruptly to the west under space 21 since we did not find further traces of it in trench OPB 18 (Van der Graaff *et alii* 2016). Another possibility is that there is an unknown underground storage cistern under space 22. A clear floor level covered the foundation trenches. The construction of the room cut through the foundation wall recovered on the other side of the wall in trench OPB 44. No traces emerged of the earlier wall recovered in neighboring space 38. The western portion of the unit revealed a pit dug into the floor. Its purpose remains unknown; however, its rounded shape and size suggest that it may have once held a dolium. A threshold of rubble masonry appeared in the western wall below the opus reticulatum masonry fill of the door, suggesting that this is the phase when it opened toward the east of room 22. The final phase of the space consisted of a thin *cocciopesto* floor recovered through the trench. As attested in the previous excavation of 2014, workers in antiquity removed the cap stones of the water channels and filled them in, signaling they were out of use (Van der Graaff *et alii* 2016). It is unclear how the room communicated with the peristyle to the east. Although the trench did not produce evidence of a threshold, presumably some sort of door cut through the masonry when workers walled up the western door. A small niche on the upper corner of the western wall may have functioned to illuminate an otherwise dark room.



fig.5

OPB 45

The team opened trench OPB 45 on the last large section of uninvestigated area in the southwestern area of space 44. It is here, outside of spaces 42 and 43 that Italian workers had dug a hole for a water collector to drain the site. The team conducting this construction effort found a wall at the time and subsequently moved the collector slightly to the south where our team encountered it in 2021. The team thus sited trench OPB 45 to recover the remaining stratigraphy and document the wall. The northern side of the trench featured a deep cut reaching up to 2 meters deep and 1.9 m in diameter left by the construction work for the collector. Despite its presence, the team was able to recover a considerable amount of intact stratigraphy on the southern side. Excavation work in the unit ended when the team reached a depth that risked making the trench walls unstable (*fig. 5*). The wall at this point was about 20 cm deep set within a stratum composed of earth, rubble, and broken pots. The original excavation diary points out that the wall continued for about a meter in depth with a prominent foundation step. The wall featured a construction technique with round stones and large blocks of lava. It stood at a slight angle toward the northwest, suggesting that it may connect to the wall recovered at a similar depth in unit OPB 38 further west. Workers in antiquity brought in a fill to cover the wall after its demolition. The fill supported a cocciopesto surface that must, in terms of chronology, be the same as the concrete surface uncovered elsewhere in space 44, and covered the previous architecture

in OPB 42 and OPB 6 to the east (Van der Graaff *et alii* 2019) Such a depositional sequence suggests that the natural terrain descended quickly toward the northwest. A foundation cut in the cocciopesto indicates the workers built the southern retaining wall in the last phase. The wall featured a lower-level foundation upon which workers built the two brick piers on each side as well as the masonry between them. A stratum of brown beaten earth (*terra battuta*) with a supporting fill about 20 cm thick formed the surface of AD 79. Inside this stratum was another subsurface that displayed heavy burning and contained much charcoal. It is unclear what caused this accumulation. It may represent an isolated event. The brown *terra battuta* layer lay beneath debris from the eruption that was still in situ. As elsewhere in the area, this debris featured an accumulation of alternating lapilli beds and pyroclastic flows that undulated heavily (Van der Graaff *et alii* 2016; Van der Graaff *et alii* 2019; Van der Graaff *et alii* 2023). One of the beds of lapilli contained a concentration of iron nails set out in two rows. Undoubtedly, they belonged to a wooden framework that had long since rotted away. The strata presented little in the form of artifacts or roof tiles, suggesting that the eruption's force blew them away to the south.



fig.6

OPB 46

The aim of Trench OPB 46 was to investigate Room 1 facing the peristyle. It is here that the first excavators reported finding a series of amphorae belonging mainly to imported types (Scientific archive PAP, Giornali di scavo 28-23). Their presence led Adele Lagi de Caro to identify this as a sort of Grand cru in the building dedicated to the storage of more prestigious and expensive import vintages (Lagi de Caro 2015). When excavated in 1975, room 1 also reportedly contained a grape byproduct called marc, perhaps the residue of wine packaging. Difficult excavation conditions led to the fragmentation of this amphora assemblage that we analyzed in 2017 and 2023 and discuss further in the ceramics study section. The 2023 excavations of room 1 presented a cocciopesto floor belonging to the final phase before the eruption. In places it displayed holes inside which were fragments of terracotta tiles. These fragments turned out to be roof tiles placed upside down to create a floor in the room that belonged to an earlier phase (*fig. 6*). The floor featured at least forty-four such tiles laid next to each other and covered with a thin patchy layer of lime. The end flange of each tile matched the next one creating dimples in the floor that workers may have used to mount scaffolding. The tiles were heavily damaged with numerous small fractures throughout the floor. In the area close to the door the lower third of an amphora spike lay embedded in the floor. Next to it was a feature composed of a thicker and more durable lime and a wear pattern suggesting the presence of a swiveling structure such as a gate. On the southeastern side of the space, at least nine tiles were missing either purposely removed or left out. Their absence created a square space composed of a beaten earth surface. On the southwestern corner of the space, some of the tiles were damaged and missing in a circular shape. The team left the tile floor in situ and proceeded to excavate the earthen features. The tile floor featured a foundation level about 10 cm deep. The dark digging conditions made the identification of stratigraphy difficult.

Nevertheless, the excavation produced two foundation trenches cut for the southern and eastern walls of the space. Their excavation produced datable fragments, including Dressel 1c shards produced between 125-70 BC. Their presence strongly suggests that the courtyard building dates to the first half of the first century BC at the earliest. The composition of the floor in its earliest phase indicates that the space needed substantial flooring related to its function. The terracotta tiles are apt for heavy duty operations/storage and are impermeable if laid down correctly. The considerable fracturing of the floor suggests that the space may have functioned for animal husbandry, as a stable of sorts. Indeed, the floor featured a slight bulge toward the center and sloped toward the outer edges, which may indicate the need for cleaning the floor easily of animal waste. At the same time, the amphora spike embedded in the floor may have been part of a post for a gate to keep the animals in place. The reason for the missing tiles is more difficult to explain. At first a hypothesis suggested that it might have worked as a buried basin in a press operation. However, the excavation suggests that the basin, if present, must have been above ground. It may then be that the area featured a feeding trough or something similar that workers removed when they built the final floor in the space. Alternatively, the tiles and cocciopesto flooring may have been part of a single phase. Vitruvius describes a floor type similar to ours built using 2-foot flat tiles (*bipedales*) laid next to each other. He carefully notes that they must be separated by a fingers' width and filled with lime to waterproof the floor and prepare it for an upper nucleus rammed in place using beating rods (Vitr. II, 1, 7).

OPB 47

Trench OPB 47 spanned space 20 to meet the thresholds of spaces 12 and 13. Its aim was to ascertain the possible presence of multiple floor phases. Also, the doors of spaces 12 and 13 are next to each other as opposed to those of spaces 2 and 3 on the north side of the peristyle which is otherwise mostly symmetrical in layout. To shed light on these architectural differences OPB 47 ran as a 1.5-meter-wide strip from the base of the peristyle colonnade to the thresholds of spaces 12 and 13. The excavation of the trench ended on a neat pyroclastic layer recovered throughout the unit (*fig.7*). Workers in antiquity had cut through it on the southern and northern sides, seeking a lower pyroclastic layer upon which they built the foundations for the southern wall and the northern colonnade. The southern cut featured a wall foundation composed of concrete and cruma lava reaching about 30 cm. Upon it were the thresholds for spaces 12 and 13 as well as the quoin in limestone brick separating the two rooms. The northern cut



fig.7

featured three blocks laid down perpendicular as sleepers to support the column base above. After building the foundations, workers brought in a homogenous fill about 20 cm thick composed of brown earth that supported a thin layer of terra battuta composing the floor. In the final phase workers cut through the floor to build a drainage channel on the northern side of the unit. The channel, already detected in OPB 2, 3, and 11, ran in a west-east direction from space 20 to the west toward a T-shaped settling tank further east (Thomas *et alii* 2013; Van der Graaff *et alii* 2016). The channel featured a dark muddy deposit about 5 cm thick with a surmounting fill of volcanic ash indicating that it had stopped operating at the time of the eruption with debris filling it here and elsewhere in the complex. Workers laid capstones and a new floor level on top of the channel, making it invisible from the peristyle.

OPB 48

The aim of Trench 48 was to investigate the area outside of space 2 on the north side of the peristyle (*fig.8*). Like OPB 47, the unit stretched about 1.5 wide and covered the width of the peristyle. Here too, the unit ended on a layer of pyroclastic flow from a previous eruption as recovered on the south side of the peristyle. Unlike the area excavated in OPB 47, the unit presented multiple cuts through the pyroclastic deposit. On the north side of the unit, the team recovered a wider and deeper cut that



fig.8

represents a ditch of a foundation cut for a robbed-out wall. It continues in line with a similar feature recovered in trench OPB 22 to the east (Van der Graaff *et alii* 2019). The northern slope of the cut featured a series of wider postholes lining the feature that may represent the remains of a fence lining the feature. To the north were smaller cuts and postholes. This feature, along with the smaller stake holes, did not cut through the floor. Their size suggests the presence of stakes that may relate to earlier agricultural activity. Another foundation trench for the north wall emerged at the very edge of the trench. A modern cut for an electricity line disturbed this context. The largest cut ran through the southern part of the unit and was part of the foundation trench for the colonnade of the peristyle. The foundations featured three sleepers of tuff blocks lying perpendicular to the column base. A concrete matrix with purple cruma stones emerged between the columns to support the stylobate. The foundation techniques were identical to those found in OPB 47 and OPB 1 indicating their contemporaneous construction (Thomas *et alii* 2013). Next to the foundation trench were smaller cuts, the circular structure of which may represent early attempts to dig the well-head present in the stylobate to the west. The center of the unit presented smaller post holes, some too shallow to pierce the pyroclastic layer. Most of these features cut through to the final floor level. In at least one case a posthole cut through the other in a clear superimposition. The function of these post holes remains unknown, but they likely belong to support structures such as scaffolding for operations conducted on this side of the peristyle. Two larger oval cuts functioned in a similar fashion. In all these cases the features also cut into the final floor layer. A striking element of the trench is that the fill layer recovered in trench OPB 47 is entirely absent in trench OPB 48. This indicates that the floor level is lower here than on the south side of the peristyle. As a result of this circumstance any carts crossing into the area of the colonnade would have had greater difficulty in doing so.



fig. 9

OPB 49

The aim of trench OPB 49 was to explore the area outside of room 8 north of the entrance to the peristyle. This space was one of the few areas where previous excavations had not reached bedrock pyroclastic. Our goal was to gain a sense of the stratigraphy here and explore more of the entrance to the site. The excavation ended upon the lower pyroclastic flow recovered elsewhere in the peristyle and most of the trench (*fig. 9*). Unlike the smooth layer recovered further west and south, the pyroclastic level undulated heavily and featured numerous cuts. The foundation of the western wall of room 8 surmounted a layer of concrete laid in a trench that cut through the pyroclastic layer on the eastern side of the trench. The area then revealed a surface associated with the use of the room in this early phase. On the extreme southeast corner of the trench a deep void opened during excavation. Its circular shape and depth suggest that the void was once a well that opened to the peristyle. Presumably, it functioned together with the other two well heads to the west built into the stylobate of the peristyle (Van der Graaff *et alii* 2016; Van der Graaff *et alii* 2019). Unfortunately, the void was too precarious and dangerous to excavate thus limiting its exploration. Workers in antiquity sealed the void in the final phase when the floor level was raised to its current level before the eruption of AD 79. Once again, the depositional sequence



fig.10

was striking. As opposed to the northern and southern colonnades where the evidence for surfaces directly on the pyroclastic, or a single fill brought in, the trench produced evidence for two occupation surfaces. It seems that some areas needed a more conspicuous fill as opposed to others that did not need to be raised to allow for the smooth operation of the structure.

OPB 50

Trench OPB 50 investigated the development of room 30 on the eastern side of the complex. Here rooms 34 (trench OPB 24) and 16 (trench OPB 19) clearly presented evidence of an earlier phase of development. Room 30 thus had the potential to shed more light on the early development of the complex. The unit was a two-by-two-meter sondage placed on the southeastern corner of the room. The excavation ended when it reached a clear surface in the form of a concrete/rubble layer of broken *cocciopesto* just over a meter deep below the surface (*fig. 10*). Unfortunately, we were unable to expand the rest of the unit to this depth because of lack of time. However, this kind of pavement is reminiscent of the foundation of the pool at Villa A (Van der Graaff 2016). The floor lay against the southern and eastern walls of the space suggesting their contemporaneous use. Given its spatial placement on the side of the room the surface may be part of the side of a basin of sorts the edges of which remain buried and unidentified in the room. In the following phase workers filled in the area with about a meter of fill.

The surface on top of this fill was ephemeral, composed of *terra battuta* and a thin layer of lime mortar. Such a surface was also present in OPB 43 and 3 outside of the space as well as in trench OPB 26 in room 14 where it covered a large drain (Thomas *et alii* 2013; Van der Graaff *et alii* 2019; Van der Graaff *et alii* 2023). In the final phase, workers raised the floor once more to the current level and finished it with a thin layer of concrete. At the time of its earlier excavation in 1983, Italian excavators recovered several lamps and *terra sigillata* vessels in the room. The six trenches excavated in the 2023 season each presented evidence of at least two phases of occupation. The rooms around the peristyle fit this pattern with rooms 1 (OPB 46) and 15 (OPB 40) clearly containing distinct utilitarian pavements in brick and tile (Van der Graaff *et alii* 2023). In other rooms this phase includes a *terra battuta* floor level coated with a thin layer of lime mortar. In OPB 3 and OPB 26 the lime floor covered the drainage system, suggesting that in this second phase the system went out of use. Preliminary analysis of the recovered artifacts suggests that the first courtyard structure dates to no earlier than the first half of the first century BCE. The south side of the complex beneath the barrel-vaulted rooms seems to have witnessed a much more dynamic history with various structures demolished over time. The structures seem to relate to industrial activity or farm buildings such as stables or grain warehouses that were part of a wider agricultural activity. Workers probably had to demolish these structures because of bradyseism that affected the area (Van der Graaff *et alii* 2019).

The Frescoes of the Upper Rooms

Concerning the wall paintings, the goal of 2023 season was to gain a better understanding of the painting history and designs for two areas: the upper-story rooms of the two-story townhouses along both sides of the Roman



fig.11



fig.12

street on the north side, and the second-floor apartments resting on the barrel-vaulted spaces of the south side (fig. 11). All of the surviving paintings are Fourth Style. On the northeastern edge of the excavated site, we recorded a section of a surviving Fourth-Style painting on the west side of a north-south wall, consisting of a black field with the upper left corner and sides of a rectangular frame formed by white lines (fig. 12). It belongs to a partially excavated wall in a currently unnumbered space. To the west and along the north side of the Roman road, the team recorded additional details from Room 153. This space is the only excavated housing on the north side divided into two spaces, each of which was painted with a different Fourth-Style decoration against a white ground. The anteroom had a design of vertical red ochre bands and dark pink carpet bands intersecting to form a vertical rectangular frame around the center motif of a swan-with-cord, painted in shades of brown and gray. To the north, the second room had a pattern of

schematic architecture of large orthostates with gray drafting lines and dark pink interior frames topped by a cornice created by stripes of varying widths in black, pink, and yellow ochre (fig. 13). Turning to the row houses to the south of the Roman road, work with archival photos from 1982 allowed for the recovery of a now missing design from the west wall of Room 146. The surviving design shows a rectangular yellow ochre tapestry panel, a green vegetal candelabrum framed by vertical red ochre bands, and a second rectangular frame created by garlands of red tendrils with clusters of small green leaves and buds. Moving east, new information emerged about the details of the two Fourth-Style painting phases in Room 147 (fig. 14). Phase 1 had a design that included a red socle with green and yellow plants resting along in upper edge in the lower zone, regularly-spaced green leafy plant candelabra, and a white ground middle zone divided into rectangular panels of varying sizes by juxtaposed stripes of yellow ochre, purple, and black. The middle zone featured centered panel paintings. There



fig.13



fig.14

is a single surviving landscape painting in the center of the south wall middle zone, originally proposed as a Nilotic scene but more likely a marine landscape, painted in brushy strokes of green and blue. It has several silhouetted figures in porphyry red, including a male in a traveler's cloak and hat and two figures in a boat (*fig. 15*). Traces of a second panel painting survive to the right. The second phase of Fourth-Style painting is simpler. It has a lower zone socle with black lines red "spatter", and a middle zone of large rectangular tapestry style panels delineated by orange-red foliated bands. These panels originally framed central motifs and there is a well-preserved example on the east wall, an agonistic still life painted in shades of pink and gold, and green (*fig. 16*). It shows a lidded gold box on a tall footed stand, with the lid pushed back to reveal an identifiable object and a delicate porphyry red cord looped and draped down the sides. Next to it rests a miniature gold shield and a green palm branch propped against a gold kantharos with scrolled handles. Room 148 to the east also displays two phases of Fourth-Style painting. The single preserved painting from Phase 1 in



fig.15



fig.16



fig.17

Room 148 is worth noting because of the singular subject matter (*fig. 17*). The rear wall image decorated the interior of a lararium niche and shows Hermes, who stands in the central position usually occupied in a lararium by the Genius, flanked by Lares. The right/east interior wall had an image of a silver statue of a female wearing a long garment bordered with a red fringe. This lararium painting was covered by white paint during Phase 2 of the Fourth-Style decoration. Taken together, the two phases observed for the decoration of these upper-story rooms on the north side suggest two phases of ownership in which the second owner picked the walls and repainted Rooms 146, 147, and 148 with simpler designs of similar style as part of an overall refurbishment of the property (Van der Graaff *et alii* 2020). In 2023 the Oplontis Project also continued its study of the decorative program surviving on the upper floor on the southern side of the complex, constructed above the eight barrel-vaulted rooms, most of which were heavily reconstructed after the original excavation. Access to each room was through a door in the center of the south wall, which opened onto the large southern portico. Oplontis Project excavation and geo-prospection offers evidence that this portico bordered the shoreline (Thomas *et alii* 2013; Di Maio 2014; Muntasser, Di Maio 2016; Clarke *et alii* 2021; Van der Graaff 2019; van der Graaf *et alii* 2023). The discovery of 54 skeletons in Room 10, suggests that the occupants sat huddled

here awaiting rescue by boat that never came in a manner akin to the victims recovered in the bathhouses on the shoreline of Herculaneum (Maggi 1985; Van der Graaff, Muslin, forthcoming). The builders of these rooms utilized a combination of opus mixtum, opus quasi-reticulatum, and opus reticulatum. In some rooms the latter two are combined. Quoins in opus vittatum framed the doorways. For most rooms, workers attached a new skin wall in reticulate to preexisting walls at the north, as in room 10, whereas in room 49 at the eastern edge of the portico, the east and west walls attach to an earlier wall in opus incertum. Analysis of the wall painting decorating the rooms constructed above these barrel-vaulted spaces corroborates our hypothesis for a post-earthquake date. This plan highlights the extent of the upper-floor apartments shaded in blue (*fig. 18*). A wall 70 cm thick, highlighted in yellow, separates these upper-floor rooms from the courtyard building. In the earliest excavations of 1973-1974, excavators uncovered three adjacent rooms, 102, 103, and 104, with wall painting in situ. Although there is no photographic documentation, Stefano De Caro described and sketched the scheme of room 103. Regina Gee's reconstruction, based on De Caro's description, indicates that there was a black socle decorated with a spatter pattern of red and yellow dots, perhaps representing granite (*fig. 19*). Similar examples of this spatter technique exist in Fourth-Style schemes in Villa A (Gee 2019a). Pairs of thin white stripes topped with schematic volutes divide the panels of the socle. In the middle zone there were three large vertical panels, with two black panels framing a central red panel. Dividing bands executed in yellow with white vegetal borders continued in line with the vertical dividing elements in the socle. Very little remains of the fresco in rooms 102 and 103, whose walls collapsed. There are large heaps of fresco fragments stored in the area that likely come from this group of rooms. The yellow-ground scheme of room 104 has in large part survived. It is a Fourth-Style scheme that must have been inexpensive since it is

essentially monochrome (*fig. 20*). In place of the carpet bands typical of a Fourth-Style scheme, the patron was content with white and red lines defining edges of faux-marble panels making up a socle, middle zone, and upper zone. In an entry in the excavation diary for December 1976, Stefano De Caro describes the excavation of rooms 116, 135bis, and 150 to the east of 102, 103, and 104. He describes substantial fresco decoration preserved on the north wall of 135bis and on the east and north walls of 150 (for the north wall of 135bis, he describes a fresco with a red socle divided into three panels, with a yellow-ground middle zone (*fig. 21*). He notes a small calyx crater in glass among the decorative elements and the presence of a graffito of a stylized deer. Two photographs document the fresco before it was removed and consolidated in 1984. Our search in the 2023 season for remnants of this fresco revealed that it had been removed from its wall in two pieces. The smaller fragment belongs to the red socle and is

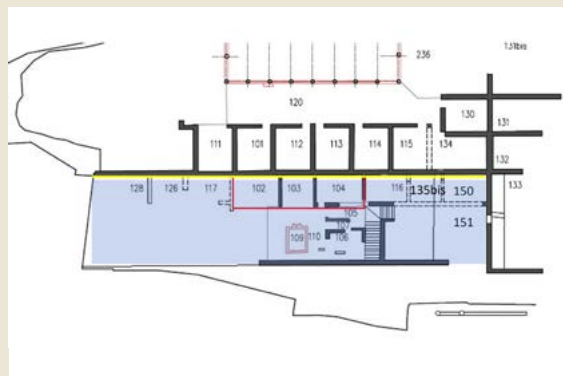


fig. 18

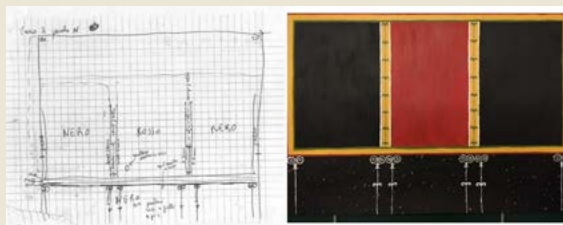


fig. 19



fig.20

currently stored in room 105; it preserves a carpet band to the left and a vegetal element on the right. The larger fragment comes from the yellow middle zone and is currently stored in room 131. Despite its degradation, and the loss of the imagery of the center picture in the middle zone, one can still make out the image of the glass crater described by De Caro at the center of the vertical panel of the middle zone (recorded here in a preliminary sketch). The graffito of a stag and a rudimentary bird are also still visible. We were able to make a rubbing of the graffito (*fig. 22*). De Caro's excavation of room 150 was not brought to completion in the campaign of 1976. A photo by Alix Barbet shows a portion of the east wall before excavations reached the level of the pavement; just half of the dado with colorful chevron pattern and thin staffs with volutes is visible (*fig. 23*). On the basis of her photograph, Barbet created the drawing illustrated here and published it in her 1985 monograph, *Le*



fig.21

peinture murale romaine. She proposed that it was an example of a “schematic Second Style” dating to the middle of the first century BC (Barbet 1985). The fundamental problem is that our excavations and masonry study have proven that the barrel-vaulted rooms and the upper-story rooms that they support were built a century later (Gee 2019b; Gee 2019c). Barbet's identification and dating of the Oplontis B painting relies entirely on visual analysis of analogous, simplified Second-Style decorations. Now, based on our excavations, we can reject Barbet's proposed dating for the fresco of room 150. Furthermore, the use of staffs topped with volutes to divide the socle in both rooms 150 and 103 suggests that the same workshop decorated these rooms during the period of the Fourth Style, probably after AD 62. In 1991 the excavators returned to rooms 150 and 151. They removed the floors of these rooms with the plan (never realized) to reconstruct the barrel vault over room 49. Today, the east-wall fresco is still in situ, but much damaged by water infiltration; remaining fragments of the north wall were removed in 1984, mounted on reinforced concrete supports and stored in room 134 (*fig. 24*).

Ceramics Study

In the 2023 season, as part of the ongoing research and processing of this material that began in 2014, we undertook the inventory and analysis of a large pile of unstudied





fig.22

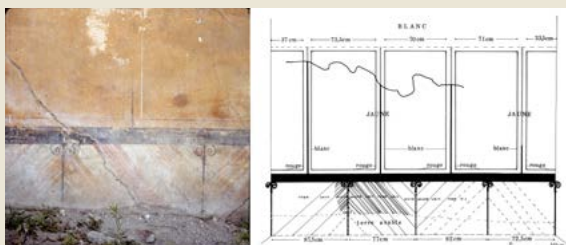


fig.23

ceramics and other materials housed in room 17 that were discovered during the first (and perhaps most difficult) period of excavation of room 1 in February 1975. Several tags/labels embedded in amphora spikes in the pile that confirm this date and location. Excavators removed and documented sherds with tituli picti from the assemblage, entering them into the finds register (Scientific archive PAP, Giornali di scavo 30-32). During the Oplontis Villa B building reconstruction process in the 1990s, Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei conservators attempted to repair the once complete amphorae from this room, a process that achieved a limited success with the restoration of 43 vessels. The remaining sherds were kept in two piles in room 17, the smaller of which we analyzed in 2017 and the much larger one in 2023. We catalogued about 40% of the total larger pile, adding a conservative estimate of 43 more vessels to the existing count of 1,431 amphorae for a new total of 1,474 vessels recovered from Oplontis Villa B (Muslin 2019). Processing the rest of these sherds in subsequent seasons will undoubtedly increase this number. Additionally, there is a significant amount of cookware, tableware, food preparation vessels, tile and brick, fresco fragments, and organic material such as carbonized wood, shell, and animal bones. The excavation date and location indicate that this material and a group of the amphorae came from the upper floor and were in a layer

of lapilli mixed with ceiling beams, plant fibers, and a 10-15 cm deep deposit of sawdust-like organic material that excavators interpreted as being pomace or marc from grape pressing. The daybooks report that workers retrieved a great number of amphorae, but they only mention the Greek *tituli picti* found on sherds from AC1, AC2, and AC3 amphorae. This information led Lagi De Caro to suggest that room 1 was a Grand cru for storing imported vintages that were more expensive and prized than the local Pompeian wines (Lagi De Caro 2015). While our preliminary analysis has shown that there are indeed more imported forms in this room than in the peristyle amphora stacks, there are also the typical amounts of Central Italian, Northern Campanian, and Vesuvian region Dressel 2-4s that make up at least 90% of the total amphora assemblage in Oplontis Villa B. That said, the amphorae in the rooms do show more regional variation. Half-capacity, flat-bottomed Vesuvian Dressel 2-4s were concentrated in lower room 1, along with greater amounts of imports, such as Cilician Pompeii 13s, Cretan AC2As, and AC1s, as well as new forms not previously seen in the peristyle including Baetican Haltern 70s, Dressel 8s, Dressel 28s, and Beltran 2As from the Guadalquivir Valley; Dressel 2-4s from Tarraco, Spain; AC3s from Dermatosa, Crete; Ostia LIXs from Byzacena, Tunisia, and Calabrian Dressel 21-22s. There are also several earlier Dressel 1B rims produced in Northern Campania that the daybooks reference but that were never recorded in the finds register.

The Broader Context of Oplontis B

We are only just beginning to look for comparisons related to the various phases recovered at Oplontis B. The use and layout of the site at the time of the eruption has prompted scholars such as Adele Lagi De Caro to look

at Ostia where the Warehouse of Hortensius built in the Claudian period seems to match the layout of Oplontis B (Lagi De Caro 2015). Indeed, the complex features a large courtyard surrounded by storage spaces and prominent columns built in tuff just like Oplontis. Closer to home, Oplontis B with its surrounding structures of streets and houses has invited comparisons with ancient Stabia where a similar suburban layout of luxury villas and adjacent housing existed (Lagi De Caro 1983). Our own research suggests that Oplontis B looked more toward a suburban context and more specifically a structure uncovered by Gennaro Matrone in 1902 on the coast near Pompeii. The structure featured a large peristyle and similar housing/tabernae as Oplontis B (Oettel 1996; Van der Graaff *et alii* 2020; Emmerson 2020; Osanna, Toniolo 2022). Unfortunately, excavators reburied that building after stripping it of its ornamentation; it remains out of reach. Archaeologists have recovered other similar rustic villas with large peristyles at Proprietà Agnello Marchetti near Pompeii and more recently at Civita Giuliana (Garcia y Garcia 2017; Osanna and Toniolo 2022). As for the earlier phases, the foundation walls remain fragmentary. We cannot assume that the building functioned as a warehouse for its entire lifetime. Nevertheless, we can perhaps postulate that the foundation walls recovered in OPB 15 belonging to phases one and two may have been part of farming-related activities. The shallow piers and cross walls on this foundation likely supported posts that have since vanished. A similar architectural arrangement has emerged for granaries recovered in the area in places such as the Villa of P. Fannius Sinistor, and a rustic villa in the via dei Sepolcri at Gragnano as well as the site of Drei Cane' in northern Italy (Pellegrino 2017). For our third-phase wall running on the southern side of the site, its shallow makeup might suggest another agricultural function. Other agricultural villas in the area, such as the Villa Regina and another in Località Cangiani (Boscoreale), excavated and now reburied,

featured rectangular threshing platforms defined with shallow walls (De Caro 1994; Garcia y Garcia 2017). Finally, the walls on the western side of Oplontis B might relate to earlier *tabernae* that opened toward the west. In terms of the building history of Oplontis B, the reasons for such a rapid succession of phases may relate to the changing function of the building. In turn these changes could be a reflection of political and socio-economic factors associated with upheavals such as the establishment of a colony in nearby Pompeii and the subsequent transition from Republic to Empire. Another reason can be sought in the geological activity in the area. Our geo-prospection surveys have indicated that Oplontis B was likely located along the shore at no more than 3 MASL. The same surveys and further excavation have indicated that the process of Bradyseism heavily affected Oplontis B in the first century AD (Thomas *et alii* 2013; Di Maio 2014; Muntasser, Di Maio 2016; Clarke *et alii* 2021; Van der Graaff 2019; Van der Graaf *et alii* 2023). A lowering of the terrain certainly occurred around the time of the earthquake of AD 62 in an event that likely spurred the construction of the barrel-vaulted rooms and the seawall on the southern side of the site.



fig.24

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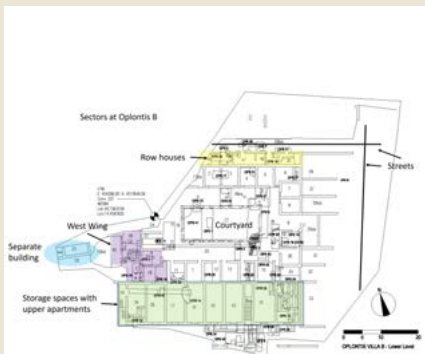


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fig.2



fig.3



fig.4



fig.5



fig.6



fig.7



fig.8



fig.9



fig.10

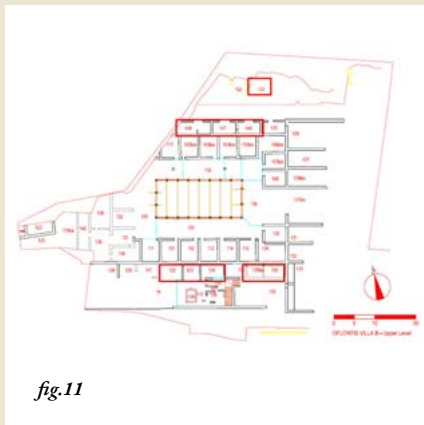


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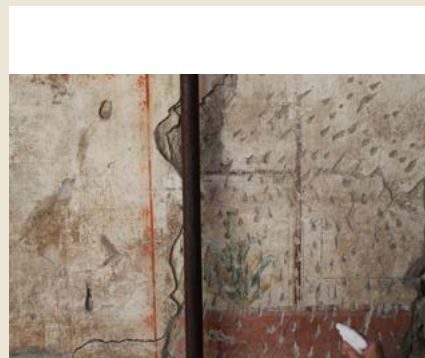


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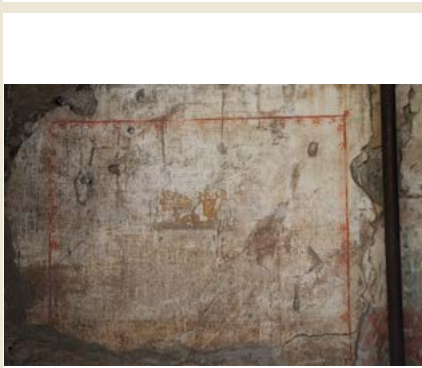


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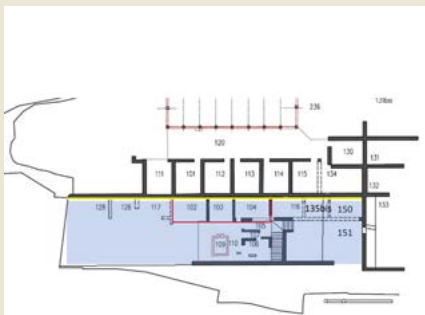


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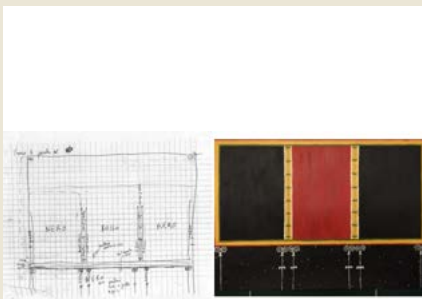


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fig.20



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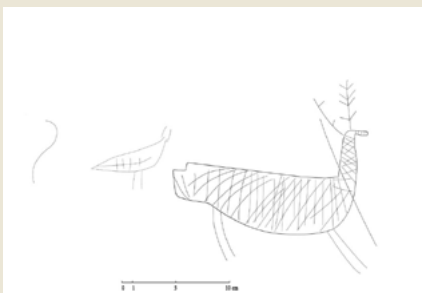
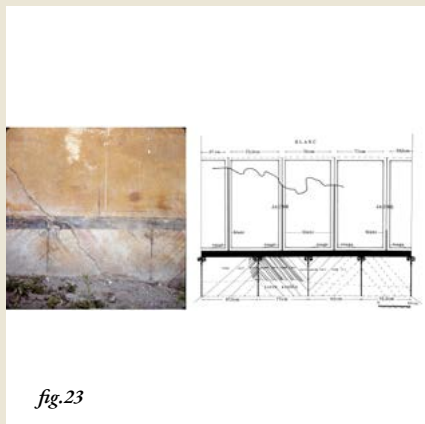


fig.22

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List of figures

Captions:

Fig. 1 - Plan of Oplontis B.

Fig. 2 - Plan with Phases.

Fig. 3 - Trench Locations 2023.

Fig. 4 - Overview Trench OPB 11.

Fig. 5 - Overview Trench OPB 45.

Fig. 6 - Overview Trench OPB 46.

Fig. 7 - Overview Trench OPB 47.

Fig. 8 - Overview Trench OPB 48.

Fig. 9 - Overview Trench OPB 49.

Fig. 10 - Overview Trench OPB 50.

Fig. 11 - Upper level Oplontis B with frescoed rooms highlighted.

Fig. 12 - Fresco unnumbered space west wall.

Fig. 13 - Frescoes in space 153 anteroom (left) and second room (right).

Fig. 14 - Room 147 east wall showing painting phases 1 and 2.

Fig. 15 - Room 147 South wall phase 1 marine landscape with figures on the right.

Fig. 16 - Room 147 south wall phase 2 detail of still life.

Fig. 17 - Room 148 lararium.

Fig. 18 - Oplontis B, south part, spaces supported by ground-floor barrel-vaulted rooms.

Fig. 19 - Reconstruction Fresco room 103 (right) with De Caro's drawing (left).

Fig. 20 - Reconstruction Fresco room 104.

Fig. 21 - Fresco Room 135bis.

Fig. 22 - Graffito Room 135bis.

Fig. 23 - Fresco Room 150 at the time of excavation (left) and Barbet's drawing (right)

Fig. 24 - Fresco Room 150 in situ