

P O M P E I I

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# Excavating a matmaker's workshop at Pompeii I 14, 1/11–14

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## Abstract

The building complex at Pompeii I 14, 1/11–14 has now been the focus of two seasons of subsurface excavation by the Pompeii I.14 Project, a collaboration of Tulane University and the Parco Archeologico di Pompei. Beginning at the floor level of 79 CE, the excavation proceeds through the archaeological deposits below the final city, reconstructing its pre-eruptive history piece by piece. While still in its preliminary phases, the work has begun to reveal the complex development of this area, where discernible human activity dates back to the Italian Bronze Age. The southern side of *Insula* I 14 began to urbanize in the second century BCE but underwent its most intensive growth in the following century. By the first century CE, much of I 14, 1/11–14 was devoted to commerce, and several of its

rooms appear to have functioned as a restaurant that provide elite-style, reclined dining. Shops along the southern façade, however, suggest commercial activities of other types, as do the most distinctive finds from the building thus far: a series of ancient reed mats, preserved in two separate rooms across two late phases of activity, and a large, shallow basin of the type appropriate for the soaking and crushing phases necessary for reed processing. Parts of the building, therefore, appear to have functioned as a matmaker's workshop in the years prior to the eruption, likely part of a larger endeavor that included a previously known reed workshop in the building immediately to the north (I 14, 2). A now lost election notice that had once been painted alongside I 14, 14 preserves the name of one individual involved in this industry: it was sponsored by a woman called *Tegeticula*, 'Little Redd Mat'.



fig.1

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## Introduction

The Pompeii I.14 Project concentrates on the building complex that dominated the southern side of *Insula* I 14 (I 14, 1/11–14; *fig. 1*). This complex was partially cleared of volcanic material in the 1950s and completely exposed in the 1990s (De Simone 1990; De Simone 1992; Nappo 1995). The work revealed a structure with an unusual form that seemed to combine several earlier spaces (D’Anna 2021). Two large shops line the southern façade (Zones A, B), behind which is a series of decorated rooms, appropriately scaled for dining parties of various sizes (Zone A). These overlook a portico and garden, itself featuring a large masonry *triclinium* for reclined dining (Zone C). The functions of suites to the north (Zone D) and east (Zone E) are less immediately clear, but neither replicates standard patterns of domestic space. In its final form, the building appears primarily commercial, suggesting that the decorated rooms and garden served as a restaurant offering elite-style dining (see Ellis, Emmerson, Dicus 2023). Supporting this interpretation, the complex operated along



fig.2

with two neighboring buildings: a shop with a kitchen next door (Zone F), and a large bar on the corner (I 14, 15). While the three had once been interconnected, the doors between them were blocked not long before the eruption of 79 CE.

In the 2022 and 2023 seasons, the team excavated 16 Archaeological Areas across Zones B, C, D, E, and F (*fig. 2*). While the following report is necessarily preliminary, the work is already inviting new understandings of this district of Pompeii. Most notably, Zones D and E have produced evidence for the manufacture and storage of reed mats, suggesting close ties with the matmaker’s workshop at I 14, 2 (Cullin Mingaud 2010).

## Zone B

Located in the southwestern corner of *Insula* I 14, Zone B functioned as a shop with supporting rooms at the time of the eruption. Four Archaeological Areas were excavated here in the 2022 season, from which full stratigraphic sequences were recovered in the shopfront and a ‘back room’ to its east (AA1000, AA4000). This work was supplemented by archaeological cleanings of a related latrine (AA5000) and a narrow section of the *via della Palestra* (AA7000).

The excavation of the shopfront and back room yielded clear and consistent phasing, from the paleosol to modern archaeological interventions of the past century. The earliest discernable activity consisted of the removal of grey ash derived from one of the Ante-Plinian eruptions of Vesuvius, likely to terrace natural slopes in the area and to quarry the yellow pozzolanic ash below (Robinson 2008). In the area of the later shopfront, an early wall had been removed with a robber-trench that was then directly covered by a road of hard-packed grey ash. A large block next to the road seems to have served as a curb. The early road was repaved several times, each with subsurfaces of



broken ceramics topped with compact beaten earth. Below the later back room, a cesspit of this period contained fills dominated by deposits of silty clay and wood ash, possibly the remains of production or construction activities.

Subsequently, the area was subject to large-scale quarrying, likely to provide materials for the construction of the final building. Following the erection of the exterior walls in the later first century BCE, Zone B was part of an open space, possibly a garden. Cesspits and quarry pits continued to be cut within the area, often intersecting one another through subsequent phases. Once the interior walls had been constructed in the late first century BCE, both excavated rooms received multiple phases of pavements, all of which consisted of beaten earth. Below one such pavement was a well-preserved Augustan aureus dated between 13 and 14 CE (*RIC* 12 Augustus 219). The only known example of this exact type from Pompeii, the coin features a laureate *Augustus* on the obverse and a seated female figure holding a scepter and branch on the reverse (*fig. 3*). Its value and sealed context beneath the pavement suggest the possibility of a ritual deposit (Krmnicek 2018).

In their final phases, the elevation of both rooms was raised approximately 50 cm and a new, wide doorway was created along the *via della Palestra*, transforming the space into a shopfront with connecting rooms for storage and service activities.



*fig.3*

## Zone C

Zone C encompasses the garden of Property I.14,1/11–14, which is divided into northern and southern areas by a modern terrace wall. Excavations of 2022 and 2023 explored three Archaeological Areas in the garden: AA3000, AA10000, and AA14000.

The earliest find in the garden was a quarry pit on its southwestern side that predated all standing walls. Only later was the garden itself established, with a partition wall that separated it between two properties. The southern garden pertained to a building on the southern side of the *insula*, while the northern garden was likely part of the property at I 14, 2. A cart path led into the northern garden via a postern gate in its western wall (*fig. 4*). The path was patched and repaved repeatedly in hard packed earth and mortar; parallel bands of damage suggested continuous degradation from wheels. A latrine was constructed in the northwestern corner of the southern garden during the same period. In a subsequent phase, the two areas of the garden were united following the destruction of the partition wall between them. This reconfiguration saw the latrine taken out of use and filled with mixed refuse, including its own superstructure in *opus craticum*. A cistern ran below the southern garden, taking the form of a long, narrow trench roofed with reused amphorae, a type also found in Zone E (D’Anna 2021, pp. 163-164) and Zone F (below; see also Pisapia, Infravallo 2020, p. 233). The cart path remained in use but was repaved in earth and mortar and reoriented to curve sharply towards the south, supported by a sloping fill. After a period of heavy use and repair, the postern gate was closed and the cart path was covered by a thick rubble fill to support a series of garden beds. Although ancient soils had largely been removed from the northern area—both by phases of ancient quarrying and by modern interventions—ephemeral planting beds were recovered in the northeastern corner



of the garden. Additionally, five lapilli-filled postholes and one root cavity of a small plant, perhaps a vine, indicated that the northern area of the garden was at least partially planted at



fig.4

the time of the 79 CE eruption. With the removal of the cart path, the southern garden was defined with a half-peristyle on its eastern and southern sides. This garden was truncated prior to the eruption with the addition of new rooms in Zone B. In its final phase, the masonry triclinium was installed and framed with a pergola, from which plants (likely vines) shaded diners (*fig. 5*). A small altar was aligned with the triclinium's northern arm. The cistern remained in use, accessed via a new head south of the triclinium. Beyond the plants associated with the pergola, the only other plant located in the southern garden was a small tree or bush to the north of the triclinium.

## Zone D

The suite of five rooms facing a small courtyard in the northern area of the building comprises Zone D. During the 2022 season, the team excavated two Archaeological Areas here—



fig.5

AA2000 and AA6000—and undertook archaeological cleanings in AA15000 and AA16000 in 2023. This Zone had been partially excavated under the auspices of the Grande Progetto Pompei in 2017; the Pompeii I.14 Project built from that work to gain further insight, particularly into earlier phases of activity. Indeed, the team recovered Bronze Age sherds from the paleosol beneath the grey ash of Zone D, hinting at early human activity along the route that would eventually become the *via di Porta Nocera*.

In a much later phase, Zone D was used for the large-scale quarrying of volcanic ash, most likely for the construction of Property I 14, 2 in the second century BCE. Also recovered was a ritual deposit of an architectural pappamonte stone and lava stone connected to the same phase of construction. The exterior walls of Zone D were built in the first century BCE, separating the area from property I 14, 2 and joining it with the complex to the south. This work probably was conducted at the same time the gardens were joined with the curved cart path in Zone C. In connection with the large-scale reconstruction of this period, another ritual deposit was made in the center of AA2000, comprising a carbonized oak beam, on top of which were placed food remains



fig.6

including olives, figs, bones of domestic fowl, and a collection of small, round cakes baked with poppyseeds (see Robinson 2002). The entire collection was burned prior to deposition (fig. 6).

The interior walls of Zone D were added gradually through time, with each phase of construction accompanied by a ritual deposit. In the first century CE, a kitchen was installed in Room D-2 (fig. 7). A cesspit, reaching bedrock and containing food waste and many cooking vessels, was located in the southeastern corner of the kitchen. Along the southern wall were two ‘footers’ made of reused brick-tile and compacted earth hardened through



fig.7

heating. Given the finds within the cesspit and the compacted charcoal that constituted much of the room’s pavement measuring some 4 cm in depth at point these ‘footers’ appear to be the only remains of what was once a cooking bench. Finally, an *opus signinum* sluice (1.3 x 1.1 m) was installed in the southwestern corner of the room, sloping towards a drain that ran underneath the southwestern wall and into Room D-3. The sluice was appropriately sized for the cleaning of amphorae, suggesting a commercial, rather than domestic context for this kitchen. Prior to the eruption of Vesuvius, the kitchen was removed from Room D-2. Also in a late phase, a large, shallow basin and connected cistern were added to Room D-6 (fig. 8). As discussed below (see par. “The Reed Mats of I 14, 1/11–14”), the fixtures were appropriate for the preparation stages necessary to produce reed mats of the type found in Zone E.



fig.8



## Zone E

Zone E comprises the suite of rooms and courtyard accessed by entrance I 14, 1. In its final phase, this area appears to have been associated with the neighboring property, I 14, 2 and used for the storage, manufacture, or sale of reed mats. In 2023, the team completed two full stratigraphic excavations here, of AA8000 and AA11000, as well as an archaeological cleaning of AA12000.

The earliest discernible activity in Zone E was characterized by wide-scale quarrying of grey and yellow ash paleosols punctuated by the construction of the building's walls in the later second or first century BCE. The presence of large off-cuts of lava stone within these quarry pits suggests that lava stone bedrock also was quarried in the vicinity.

While the placement of two small rooms to either side of a narrow entrance echoes a common arrangement for domestic spaces at Pompeii, the precise function of these rooms in their earliest phases remains unclear. Both featured 'soak-away' drains made of reused amphorae set upside-down into small pits, one in the northwestern corner of Room E-4 and the other in the southeastern corner of Room E-6. In a later phase in Room E-6, one packed earth surface was topped with a layer of heavily degraded organic remains. Initial examination in the field and in the lab revealed that this material represented an *in situ* reed mat or a series of layered mats (see "The Reed Mats of I 14, 1/11–14," below). Below the mat and within its folds were finds including a hollow worked-bone die, a terracotta lamp with a tondo of Jupiter riding an eagle, two well-preserved coins of *Claudius*, and a coin of *Augustus*.

In the final phase of Room E-6, the packed earth surface and reed mat/s were sealed below an *opus signinum* pavement. To the west, in Room E-7, an archaeological cleaning targeted a second organic layer, which covered the

packed earth pavement of 79 CE. This material had been revealed during earlier clearance of volcanic material and interpreted as a temporary floor of wooden planks (D'Anna 2021, pp. 164-165); testing confirms instead that it represents additional woven reeds, alongside other organic remains. The thickness of the deposit (ca. 6 cm) suggests degraded stacks of reed mats once piled in the room, perhaps prior to sale. Additional laboratory analysis, now underway, promises to reveal more on these unique finds from Zone E.

## Zone F

Situated in the southeastern quadrant of the insula, Zone F consists of the shopfront and adjoining rooms accessed via Entrance I 14, 14. The excavation of Zone F in 2023 included two Archaeological Areas: AA9000 and AA13000. The initial footprint of the building below the final shopfront was smaller than its later iteration, occupying only the area of (later) Room F-6 and the southeastern corner of (later) Room F-1. In the outdoor space to the north was a cesspit, rich with finds including many food remains; the outdoor area also was used for extensive quarrying. In a subsequent phase, the building expanded, incorporating the space of (later) Room F-1 and continuing into Room A-1 to the west. A wide threshold along the *via della Palestra* suggested that the room functioned as a shopfront from this point forward. A subsequent repaving of the space coincided with the construction of a U-shaped cistern on the eastern side of the room, continuing into the area of (later) Room F-6. After the cistern ceased to function as such, it was closed with a fill of mixed debris, and the first walls dividing Rooms F-1 and F-6 were erected. In the outdoor area to the north, a fixture was installed that closely resembles the cistern excavated in AA3000, i.e., a narrow trench lined with masonry walls and roofed by



reused amphorae (*fig. 9*). In this case, however, the masonry walls were unfinished and the fixture was never lined with hydraulic plaster. While it appears to have been constructed to serve as a cistern, it was used instead as a cesspit and was filled with sewage at the time of the eruption. In the period following the earthquake of 62/3 CE, the space was transformed by the construction of new walls that provided its final form. The presence of living spaces upstairs was indicated by a downpipe to an additional cesspit filled with kitchen waste and mixed refuse, including a valuable alabaster perfume bottle. The final discernible activity here consisted of mortaring closed the doorways that had once led between this building and its neighbors to the east and west.



*fig. 9*

## Conclusion

Two seasons of excavation at Pompeii I, 14 1/11–14 have produced extensive evidence for the chronological development and use of this complex. Most essentially, the work has indicated a previously unknown function for the central building: at the time of the eruption, parts of Zones E and D were devoted to the manufacture and/or storage of reed mats and possibly other reed products. This

work might have been conducted alongside commercial dining in Zones A and C, and perhaps elsewhere in the property as well. Whether these enterprises were conducted concurrently or alternatively—for example, on a seasonal schedule or even in entirely separate phases—is a question the team continues to pursue. Notably, matmaking suggests a close relationship between the building complex and its neighbor at I 14, 2, characterized since volcanic clearance projects in the 1990s as the workshop of a matmaker (Cullin Mingaud 2010).

## The Reed Mats of I 14, 1/11–14

The final *opus signinum* surface of Room E-6 had been founded on a layer of sandy grey earth mortar, above a leveling fill of fist-sized stones of Sarno limestone mixed with a small amount of soil. The stones were themselves fixed in another layer of the same sandy mortar. This unusual construction process sealed the remains below. Indeed, underneath the lower layer of mortar, stretching across the entire room, excavations of 2023 revealed a beaten earth surface topped by a thin, friable, varying red to brown and black deposit that resembled highly decayed woody material (*fig. 10*). Microscopic examination showed this to be the remains of plants belonging to the *Poaceae* family, most likely reeds (*Phragmites australis*), which would have been readily available in the swamps south of Pompeii (Nicosia *et alii* 2019; Vignola *et alii* 2022). The material was laminated with at least three layers present, arranged at right angles to each other. Immediately above the organic deposit, the bottom face of the lower mortar layer preserved molds of stems crisscrossed in a herringbone pattern at the center of the room and in linear bands along the edges, indicating a woven mat or mats (*fig. 11*). Microscopic examination showed that the molds resulted from a thin layer of calcium carbonate deposited on



fig.10

the exterior of the stems via the overlying mortar. The organic deposit, likewise, had been infiltrated by a white material, possibly calcium silicate or silicon dioxide. Just below the modern topsoil in the neighboring Room E-7, excavators uncovered a similar layer of organic material that resembled degraded wood (fig. 12). Preliminary analysis suggests that this material varies throughout. At the center of the room the deposit was c. 6 cm thick and consisted of what were apparently several layers of woven mats again most likely made of reeds lying above bundles of sorted but unwoven stems. Below these layers were unsorted stems, possibly loosely scattered or dropped over the packed earth pavement of 79 CE. Along the northern and western walls were wooden boards that could represent shelving, or possibly floor looms. Samples of all organic materials, along with those recovered from Room E-6, are currently undergoing testing including soil micromorphology analysis, XRF analysis, high-power microscopy, and microscopic dissection at the archaeological laboratories of Oxford University, University of Reading, and the Parco Archeologico di

Pompeii. The ongoing work promises to reveal far more information on these unique finds, not least to indicate how they were preserved. Such survival is most unexpected at Pompeii; organics typically preserve over long periods only in permanently waterlogged contexts, which create an anoxic environment hostile to decay. While fragments of carbonized reed mats have been recovered elsewhere in the city, including from Property I 14, 2 (Cullin Mingaud 2010, 2.10), the mats from Rooms E-6 and E-7 were preserved via some other process and in far greater quantities.

These finds from I 14, 1/11–14 invite a new way of interpreting a common Pompeian feature. The mat/s in Room E-6 might have been installed while reconstructing the space, but the logic of that function is difficult to reconstruct, since there would be no reason to protect the earlier packed earth pavement—about to be supplanted by finer *opus signinum*—from drips of plaster or paint, nor would the mat/s serve any structural purpose below the final floor. More likely, the mats were used with the packed earth pavement as a type of rug to provide additional comfort in a room devoted to domestic and/or light industrial purposes. Packed earth pavements are ubiquitous at



fig.11

Pompeii and other Roman sites, particularly in ‘service’ areas and non-elite or non-public spaces. If reed mats regularly topped such pavements, the rooms to which they belonged would have been both cleaner and more comfortable than the earth alone implies. The deposit, therefore, provides insight into how Pompeians used such spaces, insight that is especially relevant to understanding the lifestyles of lower-status and enslaved residents. This use of mats likewise would carry implications for archaeological taphonomy. If earth pavements had been covered with mats, the common interpretation that finds could be ‘trampled’ in, thus dating the pavement or providing evidence for use of a space, becomes particularly untenable (see also Ellis 2017). Sealed below mats, finds within beaten earth surfaces become more clearly associated with construction of the space, imported along with soil and mixed debris to create the pavements themselves.

In the Roman literary sources, reed mats (Latin *teges*, diminutive *tegeticula*) are associated exclusively with low-status individuals, including beggars, sex workers, and rural laborers. The agronomists remark on the utility of reeds and mats for a variety of jobs (Col. *RR* XII, 52, 8; Var. *RR* I, 22, 1), including sheep-shearing (Var. *RR* XII, 52, 8), and advocate for the cultivation of reeds on every farm (Cat. *Ag.* 6). In Martial’s *Epigrams* and Juvenal’s *Satires*, the apparent ubiquity and cheapness of the reed mat is metonymous for poverty (Juv. *Sat.* 5: *nulla crepido uacat? nusquam pons et tegetis pars | dimidia breuior?* “Is there no beggar’s pitch vacant? No archway or lesser half of a mat somewhere?” See also Mart. *Epig.* 9,92, 11,32 and 11,56; Juv. *Sat.* 9). Also apparent in the literary sources is a connection to sex work (Juv. *Sat.* 6; Mart. *Epig.* 6,39); one is tempted to imagine the stone beds of Pompeii’s brothel once covered in similar mats.

As Columella and Varro note (Col. *RR* I, 6, 21; Varr. *RR* I, 13, 3), it was necessary to process reeds prior to weaving by soaking them in

large, purpose-built basins and crushing their culms, making the reeds more pliable. While appropriately-sized basins have been recovered in Roman rural contexts, only one contained materials a bundle of willows that securely indicated this type of activity (Cullin Mingaud 2010, 2.38, n.6). A single reed-working basin is known from an urban context, at Pompeii I 14, 2. This property has been identified as a matmaker’s workshop, given the presence of a soaking basin and large piles of carbonized reeds found within the building (Collin Mingaud 2010). We argue that Property I 14, 1/11–14, immediately south of I 14, 2, preserves another example in the open courtyard of Zone D, only the second recovered from an urban context in the Roman world. The dimensions of the basin (3 x 2 m) are similar to the two known examples, and the mats in Zone E provide strong evidence for this use. The neighboring properties, therefore, appear to have been connected by the manufacture of reed products; the structures also shared hydraulic infrastructure used to collect the significant amounts of water necessary for reed processing. On the eastern doorjamb of entrance I 14, 14, on the southern façade of the insula, an electoral *programmata* was posted sometime prior to the eruption. It read, “*Tegeticula* asks you to vote for *Rufus* as *Duovir*” (CIL IV 10929). The name *Tegeticula*, ‘Little Reed Mat’, appears nowhere else in Latin onomastics, indicating its likely origin as a name given to an enslaved woman (see Solin 1996). Similar examples of slave names related to handicrafts, especially textile work, have been noted (Solin 1996, p. 166 and pp. 539-540). The collocation of the intensive processing and production of reed mats (*teges*, *tegeticula*) in the southern half of Insula I 14 and the appearance of an enslaved or freedwoman named *Tegeticula* in this same area is provocative; might *Tegeticula* have been an enslaved producer of reed mats, who was later freed and subsequently managed the business? Such a hypothesis could further reveal the contours of social mobility of the



enslaved and of women at Pompeii in the years prior to Vesuvius' eruption. It also suggests a municipal environment in which a freedwoman (and entrepreneur?) possessed enough political and social capital among her neighbors to lend her name to the campaign to elect *Rufus*.



fig.12

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# Collection of images



fig.1



fig.2

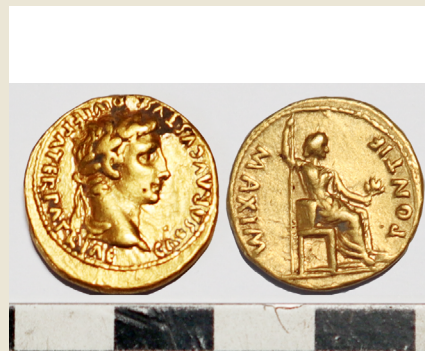


fig.3



fig.4

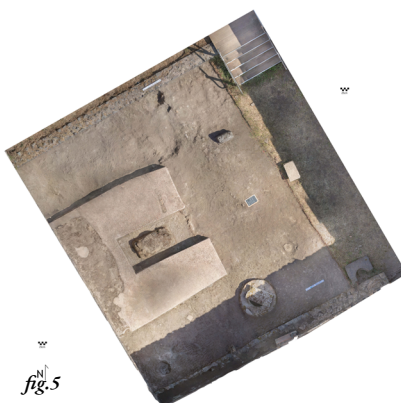


fig.5



fig.6



fig.7



fig.8



fig.9



# Collection of images



*fig.10*



*fig.11*



*fig.12*

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