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RECONSTRUCTING THE MISSING ELEMENTS OF THE SECOND-STYLE PROGRAM AT OPLONTIS, VILLA A

(Taf. XXIV–XXVI, Abb. 1–11)

Abstract

Un archivio fotografico finora sconosciuto, insieme a un gruppo di grandi frammenti di affreschi immagazzinati da più di quarant'anni, ci permettono di ricostruire accuratamente alcune decorazioni di II stile della Villa A. Fino al 2008, quando l'archivio del prof. A. DE FRANCISCIS è venuto alla luce, non c'era nessun documento fotografico anteriore al 1970. Ormai, la decorazione del timpano dell'alcova nord del cubicolo 11, insieme con il capitello e il fregio di armi del triclinio 14, la volta a crociera del *oecus* 23, sono andati persi. Le fotografie ritrovate ci mostrano lo stato degli affreschi al momento della loro scoperta nell'arco degli anni 1966–67. Dopo la ricostruzione del muro occidentale dell'atrio si sono trovati molti frammenti che venivano dalla decorazione dell'atrio. Sfortunatamente i restauratori non hanno mai integrato questi frammenti nella parete che è attualmente visibile. In questo luogo si presenterà ricostruzioni degli ambienti 5, 14, 3 23, a base dei nuovi archivi ed usando, fra l'altro, le tecniche di ricostruzione rese possibili grazie al PhotoShop e Illustrator.

The Oplontis Project, a collaboration between the University of Texas at Austin and the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei, has as its goal the publication of Villa A at Torre Annunziata (for a plan of Oplontis, Villa A see Abb. 1). A major part of our work has been the cataloguing of existing decorative elements and the search for archival documents that shed light on the treatment of these elements during the course of the excavations. As it currently exists, the Villa is a product of a rapid and sometimes inaccurate reconstruction project aimed at making the Villa into a tourist site.

In this paper I examine the Second Style rooms both as they exist and as they can be restored through study of archival photographs and fragments found at the time of excavation. Some of these fragments were lost; others were transferred to cement backing but never integrated into the walls of the Villa. Our initial search in the archives revealed that there was no documentation, either in photographs or day books, for the western core of the villa, comprising the famous and beautiful Second Style paintings and the equally beautiful Third Style bath (therefore see R. GEE'S fig. 4 in this volume). The seven "lost years" between 1964 and 1971 are extremely important for understanding the foundation of the villa around 50 BC and the additions made to it around the year 1. In 1971 documentation increases dramatically; it includes photographs, plans, and excavation day books that document the excavations to the east, ending around 1980 with the excavation of the pool and the rooms around it.

In July 2008 new evidence for the "lost years" surfaced with the discovery of the papers left by A. DE FRANCISCIS, the original excavator of Villa A. Among A. DE FRANCISCIS' notes and correspondence were three small packets of photographs. Two of the packets, dated July–August 1966, contained a total of 18 colour transparencies. A group of 30 black-and-white photographs carried the date of 1967.

The colour transparencies seem to have all been shot in the bright sun in the morning, since the photographer had his back to the sun and shot the excavated upper portions of three walls: the west walls of *atrium* 5, vestibule 4, and the garden room, or *viridarium*, 20 (Abb. 2). The background of the photo shows a car parked on top of room 15, and a roof over rooms 11 and 12. A rude wooden gate and a broken-down wall separate the excavation area from the modern street and the walls of the munitions factory that still sits on top of the unexcavated western part of the villa.

Looking closely at the section of the standing north wall of *atrium* 5, we see the top of a moulded vertical element, and then a section of wall propped up by a long pole. The vertical moulded element is the top of a cast made in the hollow left by the wooden door; excavators had poured plaster or cement into the hollow left by the tall door which separated the *atrium* from vestibule 4. A second photograph from this group of colour transparencies shows this same door-cast, taken from its north side; in this view we can see the moulding of the upper part of the door and the door-jamb that took up the depth of the door reveal¹. We can see, still in place, similar casts of the doors in the *atrium* of the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii. Unfortunately, the excavators, or perhaps the contractors responsible for reconstructing this wall, lost this cast. Today only modern reinforced concrete beams appear at this point in the structure.

A second unusual feature of the Villa appears at the midpoint of the right side of the photograph, where we see the top of the west wall of *viridarium* 20. The architrave is actually slightly wedge-shaped, gaining width to the south, perhaps in relation to the sloping floors of corridors 3 and 6. Fortunately this feature is still preserved, although the painted figural frieze is nearly illegible today. A photograph of this feature, taken head on, clearly shows this anomaly, and documents the subjects of the three, white-ground rectangular friezes. The central rectangle shows animals, including a deer, on a brown ground line with foliage; the two lateral rectangles were marine scenes, with hippocamps and dolphins swimming towards the central panel².

Unfortunately the photographer did not photograph any other walls. However, he or she did produce some beautiful details of the exposed upper west wall of the *atrium*. These photographs register details of colour and form that have been lost in the forty-five years that they have been exposed to the elements. Further analysis provides important information about the steps taken to restore the villa with a modern roof that approximated the ancient structure. If we compare the image from 1966 with a photograph taken in June 2009, we see that a substantial part of the existing wall has been reconstructed in fake ancient masonry to support the modern impluviate roof (Abb. 3). What is more, two fragments not present in 1966 have been added to the modern reconstruction. These fragments are part of a rather sad story. They are the only two orphans that ever made it into the restoration of the west wall.

What do I mean by “orphans?” By 1968, when the excavations reached the level of the pavement of *atrium* 5, many more fragments of wall painting came to light. Detached from the walls by the eruption, few of these fragments found their way into the final reconstruction of the *atrium*. Most of them were consolidated using the system in vigour at the time. Placed face-down on a table, restorers reinforced their backs with galvanized steel wire and cement. These fragments ended up in a shockingly haphazard storage area carved out of rooms 28, 29, and 35. In a three-year effort, the Oplontis Project has put these rooms and the fragments in order, cleaning, photographing, and assigning them inventory numbers.

One of our architects, T. LIDDELL, has worked with the puzzle presented by the *atrium* fragments. Using Photoshop and Illustrator, he was able to place a number of the orphaned fragments into a plausible scheme that fits with the architectural perspectives of the standing wall (Abb. 4). These fragments cap two architectural features. To the far right, at the northernmost portion of the west wall, we see a pilaster folded into the corner of the wall. Such folded piers or pilasters are an invariable feature of early and mature Second Style schemes, where they have the function of anchoring the composition of fictive architectural members to the real architecture of the room by appearing to support the uppermost horizontal architectural feature of the composition, usually a fictive architrave or cornice just beneath the ceiling³. T. LIDDELL found that a large fragment with a capital crowning a fragmentary pilaster was of the same size as the existing shaft of the folded corner pilaster. He therefore placed it on top of this pilaster (Abb. 5). At the lower left edge of this same fragment is the corner of an architrave with a snake protome; further above is the right handle of a tall vessel, probably a bronze *hydria*. These decorative motifs are important for T. LIDDELL’s reconstruction, for they also appear on several other fragments that make up a substantial architrave supported by Ionic capitals. Underneath the architrave a coffered ceiling in perspective is visible. This structure would have been supported by now-missing Ionic columns that sat on top of the Doric colonnade in perspective that appears to recede toward the right-hand door. The Doric colonnade itself is well-preserved. We see four columns with

¹ Archivio Fotografico della Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei. A. DE FRANCISCIS ago 1966 dia 9403.

² Archivio Fotografico della Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei. A. DE FRANCISCIS ago 1966 dia 9393.

³ Scagliarini 1974–1976, 9. 23; Clarke 1991, 43.

three Macedonian shields placed between them. At the top right of the architrave the base of a column is clearly visible. Since the only column-capital among the *atrium* fragments is Ionic, T. LIDDELL hypothesized an Ionic upper order. His reconstruction is deliberately quite conservative, and for this reason only some of our orphaned fragments have found a home.

A full, intelligently-imaginative reconstruction of the decoration, recently completed by another team member, M. BLAZEBY of the King's Visualisation Lab, King's College London, takes T. LIDDELL's Ionic architrave and elaborates an upper story (Abb. 6). M. BLAZEBY proposes a deep *aedicula* projecting out over the Doric colonnade to the right, with a *ressaut* supported by an Ionic column projecting out to the left of the right-hand door. Twin *aediculae*, narrower and shallower than the right-hand one, correspond to the tall lower-story *aediculae*, each framing an incense-burner. Finally, twin Ionic *ressauts* stand atop the ornate bossed columns decorated with diamond patterns that flank the central door.

Although many of the elements are purely conjectural, both reconstructions have important ramifications for the history of the Second Style. First and foremost, this two-story elevation makes the *atrium* at Oplontis extremely high, taller than the comparable Second-Style *atrium*, that of the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii. As D. ESPOSITO has recently argued, the *atrium* of the Villa of the Mysteries was constructed shortly after Sulla reduced Pompeii to a colony⁴. It is an example of the early Second Style of about 80 BC. Stylistically the *atrium* at Oplontis dates to the mature Second Style, around 50 BC. It is clear that the *atrium* of the Villa of the Mysteries employs a very different decorative scheme from that of the *atrium* at Oplontis. It consists of a socle, faux-marble orthostates, and landscapes above. If anything, the two orders of the *atrium* at Oplontis remind us of the First Style scheme of the Samnite House at Herculaneum, where of course the decoration was not trompe l'œil but rather a stucco recreation of real architecture, including the amazing loggia in the upper story (Abb. 7). This loggia gives us an idea of what the Ionic order at Oplontis wished to evoke: a tall hall befitting the palace of a Hellenistic potentate⁵.

The few archival photographs documenting excavations to the west of the *atrium* reveal rather shocking losses due to the drastic upheaval associated with the eruption, and perhaps the haste and lack of skill on the part of the reconstruction crew (Abb. 8). The photograph shows the wall between rooms 14 and 15 overturned, the result of a violent collapse that created the long diagonal fissure that runs through the east wall of 15 and the west wall of 14. We can see the standing part of the east wall of room 15, with the tragic mask and the head of the famous peacock sitting on a trompe l'œil ledge.

The greatest losses during the work of re-erecting the wall were to the painting of the west wall of *triclinium* 14, where the conservators lost the left-hand (southern) medallion with a bearded man's head as well as nearly all of the capital of the great pilaster that demarcates, along with the mosaic band on the floor, the circulation space from the space for the dining couches (Abb. 9, Abb. 10). We see the exquisite capital consisting of heraldic griffins, and part of a marble ashlar to the left. The archival photograph also documents a quite legible frieze made up of shields and weapons, framed by a thin stucco cornice on the bottom and a heftier one on top. There are, to be sure, scant remains of the frieze farther in place to the north (right), but today they are nearly illegible. The archival photograph adds significant evidence to the well-known frieze of arms forming the frames for paintings on wood decorating the Villa of the Mysteries.

Since the paper by I. VAN DER GRAAFF in this volume explores another Second-Style painting documented by a photograph in the A. DE FRANCISCIS archive, that of the *tympanum* of *cubiculum* 11, I will pass to my final Second Style discovery, in room 23, famous for its beautifully-preserved perspectives deriving from the ancient stage and its equally-fine representations of bowls of fruit and birds. It is square in plan and has a large door looking to the east with a smaller one opening to the south and the sea. The archival photographs clearly show that a vault covered room 23. All of the evidence for this original vault was lost in the reconstruction, so that now a viewer sees fragments of the entablature, defined by battered stucco mouldings, with a flat reinforced concrete ceiling. It is however clear that the north wall supported a semicircular *tympanum* with a heavy stucco moulding (Abb. 11). The curve of the *tympanum* on the north wall is visible behind the ladder. Looking closely at the juncture of this north wall with the still-unexcavated west wall, the springing of a second *tympanum* is visible. A cross-vault covered room 23; its square plan provides the ideal configura-

⁴ Esposito 2007, 441–465.

⁵ Clarke 1991, 47–49.

tion for the construction of a cross vault. A contemporary parallel is *cubiculum* k of the House of Ceres at Pompeii⁶. Although a tiny room by comparison, the decorators created the illusion of a colonnaded pavilion to support the suspended cross-vault that covered this room, like the suspended cross-vaulted ceiling that covered room 23.

Comparison of the dimensions of the five Second Style rooms with those of the Villa of *P. Fannius Synistor* at Boscoreale reveals the ability of wall-painters to enlarge and diminish decorative schemes to fit rooms of different size. The best evidence for such scaling is the famous sketch found underneath the fresco layer on the east wall of *atrium* 5; it documents the process of working out the architectural perspectives decorating *triclinium* 14 and is the subject of an essay in course of publication⁷.

As the study of the orphaned fragments continues, it is clear that, like the rooms of the Second Style we have considered, modern reconstructions of the rooms of the Third and Fourth Styles at Oplontis were rarely complete. Many fragments never found a place in the reconstructed walls. Fragments that fill out the Third Style decorative schemes of rooms 17, 25 and 30 have emerged from the storage areas as well as significant sections of the Fourth Style decorations of corridor 46. A large number of pieces belonging to a ceiling, indicated by the impressions of reed laths on their reverse sides, may belong to the lost Fourth Style ceiling of *porticus* 60, famous for its elaborate white-ground paintings in the manner of *oecus* 7 of the House of the Centenary⁸. Using the techniques of digital modelling that have proven successful in the reconstruction of *atrium* 5, we hope to put more pieces of this puzzle in place. We are rebuilding and conserving more walls and ceiling in virtual form than the old-fashioned techniques of physical reconstruction could ever have done. Thanks to these new technologies we will be able to experience and study more fully the important decorative systems of the Villa A at Torre Annunziata.

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Abbildungen

- Abb. 1: Plan of Oplontis, Villa A
 Abb. 2: View of 5, 4 and 20 looking northwest. Archivio Fotografico della Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei. A. DE FRANCISCIS, August 1966, dia 9392
 Abb. 3: *Atrium* 5, west wall as reconstructed. Photo P. BARDAGIY
 Abb. 4: *Atrium* 5, west wall. Reconstruction by T. LIDDELL
 Abb. 5: *Atrium* 5, west wall, upper zone, north part. Reconstruction by T. LIDDELL, detail
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 Abb. 7: Herculaneum, The Samnite House (V, 1). Plan and elevation. Drawing by R. OLIVA
 Abb. 8: Excavation photo showing walls of 15 and 14 intermixed. Archivio Fotografico della Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei. A. DE FRANCISCIS 1967, 942

⁶ De Vos 1976, 37–75; De Vos 1990, 172–229.

⁷ Clarke forthcoming.

⁸ Esposito 2009, 115 f. pl. 48.

Abb. 9: *Triclinium* 14, actual state. Photo P. BARDAGJY

Abb. 10: *Triclinium* 14, west wall, upper part, left. Lost capital and frieze with representation of arms. Archivio Fotografico della Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei. A. DE FRANCISCIS 1967, 936

Abb. 11: *Oecus* 23, west and north walls during excavation. Archivio Fotografico della Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei. A. DE FRANCISCIS 1967, 945

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