

## Furnishing luxury and comfort in the Villa A ('di Poppaea') at Oplontis

### The Villa A ('di Poppaea') at Oplontis

The so-called Villa A ('di Poppaea') at Oplontis is one of the best preserved maritime luxury villas ever discovered at the Vesuvian sites (Fig. 1). Buried under nearly 9m of volcanic ash, lapilli, and pyroclastic flows by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in A.D. 79, the villa was gradually brought to light between 1964 and 1984, when an estimated 60% of the complex, comprising some 98 discrete rooms/spaces, was uncovered.

As part of the 2013 field season of *The Oplontis Project*, and in the context of a wider study of closure systems at Pompeii and the Vesuvian sites, an analysis of the doors and windows at Villa A was carried out. This study involved the examination of finds records, excavation reports, and *in situ* plaster casts obtained from ash impressions left by decayed wooden objects (Fig. 2). The aim of the study was to understand the role played by structural furnishings in the life of the villa, and to reconstruct the forms of these furnishings as far as possible.

### Glass windows in the 'Peacock Room' (oecus (15))

Among the more remarkable discoveries of the first season, it was determined that the plaster cast of a compound window (OPL\_007) in *oecus* (15), the famed 'peacock room,' was mounted with fixed sashes for glass window panes (Figs. 3-6). The rough opening of the aperture was 2.27m long, divided into two smaller windows, each 0.58m (*i.e.* two Roman *pedes*) wide, and separated

by a wooden mullion. Both windows were fitted with exterior mounted bivalve shutters and a fixed sash on the interior for glazed window panes 0.003m thick. The width of the mountings for these panes suggests that they were intended for sheets of blown glass. The narrow muntins that must have separated the glass panes from one another have not survived, but based on comparable glazing units found at other Vesuvian sites, the panes used in OPL\_007 probably measured around 2 x 1½ Roman *pedes* wide – large enough to glaze each window using only four sheets of glass.

The windows of *oecus* (15) are the first glazed view windows to be positively identified from a Campanian maritime villa of the Vesuvian era. Consequently, they have important implications for our understanding of the early adoption of window glass in Roman domestic architecture. It is entirely plausible, for example, that other prominent rooms in the villa were glazed too. And indeed, many of the wide porticoes and grand view windows that characterised *otium* architecture of the mid- to late 1<sup>st</sup> c. A.D. may only have been possible as a result of extensive glazing.



Fig. 1: Painted detail of a peacock from a sanctuary fresco on the east wall of *oecus* (15).



Fig. 2: Partial plaster cast of a wooden anta, on a low plinth at the southwest corner of atrium (5).

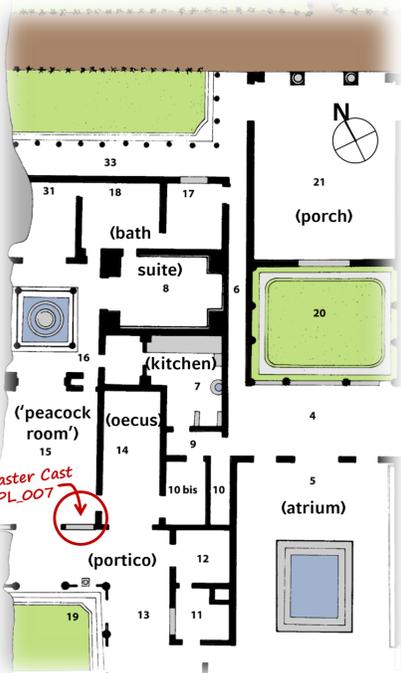


Fig. 3: Map of the partially-excavated western half of the atrium complex of Villa A, showing the location of plaster cast OPL\_007.

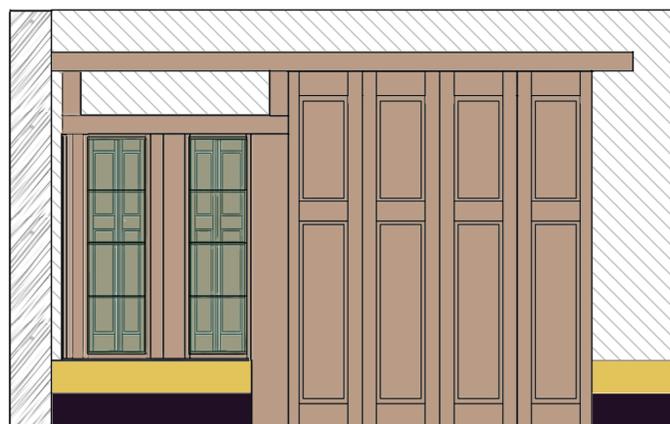


Fig. 4: Restored elevation drawing of the east half of the south wall of *oecus* (15). On the left, two glazed windows with exterior-mounted, bivalve shutters (OPL\_007). On the right, a quadrivalve door between *oecus* (15) and portico (13).

### A carved, wooden scrollwork frieze

Among numerous smaller fragments of plaster casts are the remains of a finely carved, wooden vegetal scrollwork frieze (Fig. 7). The cast measures 1.43m long by 0.20m tall and 0.04m thick, although the original frieze was evidently somewhat longer. It may have served as the head casing to one of the doorways along corridor (81), or alternatively, it may have been related to the decoration of nearby *diaeta* (78), whose walls were panelled in marble and wooden revetment.



Fig. 7: Drawing of plaster cast OPL\_012, a carved, wooden scrollwork frieze.



Fig. 5: Reconstruction drawing of the upper inside corner of window OPL\_007, showing (at left) a fixed sash for the mounting of glass window panes 0.003m thick.



Fig. 6: Plaster cast (OPL\_007) of two shuttered, bivalve windows (left and centre), and the left bifold of a quadrivalve door (right) in the southeast corner of *oecus* (15), the famous 'peacock room'.

