



LEISURE
& LUXURY

IN THE AGE OF NERO

THE VILLAS OF OPLONTIS NEAR POMPEII

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CHAPTER 2

VILLAS ON THE BAY OF NAPLES:
THE ANCIENT SETTING OF OPLONTIS

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ROMAN VILLA LIFE

AN IDEOLOGY OF COUNTRY LIFE

An appealing ideology grew up around Roman country life during the Republican period, one that celebrated the rustic, healthful simplicity of traditional country living, the physical labor of working on one's farm, and the leisure to devote to reflection removed from the pressures and duties of the city.¹ However idealized that vision may have been, it inspired generations of wealthy Romans to repair to their ancestral farms or to acquire new estates in the country, the mountains, or along the seacoast. Such estates served economic as well as sociopolitical needs—land, together with its livestock and agricultural produce, had formed the basis of aristocratic wealth for centuries.

RUSTIC FARMHOUSES AND LUXURIOUS VILLAS

The majority of the estates in the countryside had villas that were rustic farmhouses, but the Elder Cato advised owners to place their farmhouses "in a good situation so that you can live comfortably while in the country, [and] you will like to visit it and will do so oftener." His words suggest that at least by the third century BC rustic villas might include a suite of comfortably appointed rooms for the use of the owner on his or her visits from town.² Over the next two centuries, as Rome expanded and victorious generals gained enormous wealth from their military conquests, ostentatious establishments, modeled in part on the palaces of conquered Hellenistic kings, became the norm for those Romans of the late Republic

who were in the top social, economic, and political tier. During that period, massive villas ostensibly dedicated to a life of *otium* began to spring up throughout Italy.³ Once Pompey had cleared the seas of pirates, the shores of the Bay of Naples and the surrounding Campanian countryside quickly became the preferred vacation retreats for Rome's rich and famous (fig. 2.1).

THE APPEAL OF CAMPANIA

The region of Campania was renowned in antiquity for its extraordinary natural amenities (fig. 2.2). Writing in the first century AD, Pliny the Elder, who owned a villa on the cape of Misenum, waxes poetic in extolling Campania's charms.

In what terms to describe Campania . . . with its blissful and heavenly loveliness, so as to manifest that there is one region where nature has been at work in her joyous mood! And then again all that invigorating healthfulness all the year round, the climate so temperate, the plains so fertile, the hills so sunny, the glades so secure, the groves so shady! Such wealth of various forests, the breezes from so many mountains, the great fertility of its wheat and vines and olives, the glorious fleeces of its sheep, the sturdy necks of its bulls, the many lakes, the rich supply of rivers and springs flowing all over its surface, its many seas and harbors and the bosom of its lands offering on all sides a welcome to commerce, the country itself eagerly running out into the seas as it were to aid mankind. (Plin. *NH* 3.40–41, trans. Rackham 1942, 33)



Fig. 2.1: View of Sorrentine Peninsula from Sorrento. Photo: author.



Fig. 2.2: Map of Bay of Naples region. After Waldstein and Shoobridge 1908. The University of Michigan Regents, Department of the History of Art. Visual Resources Collections.

Fig. 2.3: Baiae, view of the bath and villa complex. Photo: R. V. Schoder, S.J. 1965. The University of Michigan Regents, Department of the History of Art. Visual Resources Collections.



Fig. 2.4: Cape of Misenum, viewed from the Castello di Baia. Photo: author.



Coastal as well as inland villas were designed to take full advantage of the views, the healthful climate, the breezes from the mountains and the sea, the lakes, rivers, woods, and the fertile land that could be exploited for income and for food to supply the table—the very qualities of Campania that Pliny so eagerly praises. Little wonder that villa building in Campania increased exponentially in the late Republic so that by the Augustan era, when Strabo described Campania in book 5.4.8 of his *Geography*, cities, villas, and cultivated estates stretched along the entire rim of the Bay of Naples in what looked to him like one continuous metropolis.⁴

Amid the villas were many other attractions. Baiae at the northwest end of the Bay of Naples was famous for its thermal-mineral baths and for its imperial villas. It was the center of social life along the bay (fig. 2.3). Harbors were also an attraction. Puteoli (mod-

ern Pozzuoli) was Rome's most important commercial harbor until the imperial harbors at Ostia were built, and Misenum further to the northwest served as Rome's first naval base, established there by Augustus. At the time of the eruption of Vesuvius, Pliny the Elder was commander of the fleet at Misenum. It was from his villa that his nephew, the Younger Pliny, witnessed the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79 (fig. 2.4).

FUNCTIONS AND LIFESTYLES OF VILLAS AROUND THE BAY

While villas in this region of Italy (as elsewhere) served as vacation homes for relaxation where one, in theory, could escape from the pressures of city life and senatorial obligation and devote oneself to a life of cultivated leisure, in reality many villas, especially ones we classify as luxury villas, were also arenas for intense social and



Fig. 2.5: View of Villa Jovis and the landscape of Capri. Photo: Lynley J. McAlpine.

political competition. Both literary accounts of owners and their activities and the physical remains of elaborate architecture along with abundant works of art strongly suggest, as one scholar has put it, that such lavish villas were “powerhouses.”⁵ Once owning a villa on the Bay of Naples became *de rigueur* during the late Republic, it was not long before proprietors vied with one another to increase the lavishness of their estates. Competition became even more intense when luminaries like Julius Caesar built villas at Baiae, and even more so in the early Empire, when the emperor Augustus vacationed here in villas he inherited or appropriated from his defeated rivals among the senatorial elite. When Tiberius moved to the island of Capri, the Bay of Naples for a time literally was *the* center of imperial power (fig. 2.5). Successive Julio-Claudian emperors, most famously Nero, and later the Flavian emperors acquired properties in Campania. By the time that Vesuvius erupted in AD 79, emperors and members of their inner circles came to epitomize social life along the shores of the bay. Remarkably, despite the massive destruction of villas in the eruption's path (see fig. 3.3), those villas that lay outside the geographic range of the volcano's surging force survived, and the culture of display that had developed around the lavish lifestyle and political ambitions of villa owners continued to thrive throughout the Imperial period.⁶

HOSPITALITY AND “VILLA CULTURE”

Luxurious villas were designed primarily to meet the needs and social obligations of the proprietor's family, and provision for visitors was prominent among those obligations. The rhythms of life along the shores of the bay included frequent dinner parties as well as the entertaining of visitors for longer stays. It was not uncommon for guests to arrive with their own entourages who needed

to be accommodated, often for several weeks or more. Entertaining went beyond providing food and shelter for guests. Reading in the comfort of day rooms with views into the distance or onto villa grounds, leisurely walks and conversation in formal gardens populated by statues and surrounded by colonnaded passageways ornamented with paintings, hunting in wooded areas on villa grounds, swimming, fishing, boating, exercising, and bathing before dinner were part of daily villa life, whether or not guests were present. A life of *otium* centered on the leisure to pursue one's intellectual as well as physical pleasures.⁷

Most of our literary sources focus on instances of the hospitality offered by elite owners of grand estates, but others help us paint a more varied picture, for they also reveal that the ability of those of lesser means to fulfill obligations of hospitality depended on individual circumstances. According to a well-known story (Cicero *Att.* 13.52.1), Julius Caesar announced that he would arrive at Cicero's modest villa at Cumae with 2,000 retainers to house and feed. Fortunately, a neighbor, Philippus, whose capacious villa had adequate accommodations was able to host the Caesarian horde.

The social status of owners varied over time along with standards of hospitality. We learn from ancient authors that villas often changed hands and, for instance, that a villa originally built by a nobleman could pass to a freedman by purchase or inheritance. Ownership by freedmen appears, in fact, to have become rather common during the early Empire. In his *Satyricon*, written sometime during the reign of Nero (AD 54–68), Petronius famously parodied an elaborate Roman dinner party of the type regularly laid on by wealthy villa owners. At the wildly extravagant banquet he stages at his villa in Puteoli, the fictional host Trimalchio—an obscenely rich but boorish freedman—unwittingly exposes his ignorance of virtually every elite social norm.⁸



Fig. 2.6: Tetradrachm of Poppaea and Nero from the mint at Alexandria. Photo: John R. Clarke.

Status distinctions between owners and visitors were also common. One especially noteworthy example dates from the decades after the eruption. In the period of the emperor Domitian (AD 81–96), the poet Statius (*Silvae* 2.2) wrote a lengthy paean in praise of his patron, Pollius Felix, employing the conceit of a visit to Pollius's maritime villa near Surrentum. The poet describes the lofty villa as he approaches it by sea and encounters its architectural and decorative components during an imaginary tour of the property. Statius's words of praise, though doubtless exaggerated, nonetheless convey a vivid sense of the awe that a person of lower social station might feel when visiting the magnificent dwelling of a social superior. The features of the rocky coastal setting, the breathtaking views, the structural novelties, and the decorative embellishments that Statius chose to note served as a metaphor for the proprietor himself and his visionary prowess.⁹

It is tempting to attach the names of villa owners, mentioned in abundance by ancient authors, to the archaeological ruins of villas on the Bay of Naples. Yet in spite of many such attempts, no villas have been securely identified as having belonged to a known Roman.¹⁰ Even in the case of Villa A at Oplontis, where an address painted on a wine amphora (cat. no. 15) names the family of Poppaea, Nero's second wife, it is impossible to be certain of a connection to Poppaea herself (fig. 2.6).¹¹ In considering the question of the identities of villa owners, however, it is worth bearing in mind that, while most of the owners of Campanian villas named by ancient authors are men, a significant number are women. Roman women could and did acquire property by purchase or inheritance.¹² We have only to recall that Varro addressed the first book of his treatise on agriculture to his young wife, Fundania, who apparently needed advice on how to cultivate the estate she had bought so that it would be profitable (Varro, *Rust.* 1.1).

VILLA A: SETTING, ARCHITECTURE, AND DÉCOR

In comparison with the many villas mentioned in literary sources, relatively few archaeological remains of villa properties have been excavated. Among these Villa A

typifies many of the characteristics of setting, architecture, and décor that we associate with Roman luxury villas and a life of *otium* along the coast—dramatic views of the land and sea, lofty atria, lavishly adorned dining halls, colonnaded courtyards, formal gardens populated by exquisite statues, heated baths, and many other amenities. A brief description of Villa A that highlights elements of its topographical setting, architectural arrangement, and decorative embellishments will establish some essential points of comparison and contrast to other villas in the region.¹³ Chapters 7–14 in this volume discuss the architecture and décor of Villa A in greater detail.

Although Villa A is located slightly inland today, it originally perched on the edge of a bluff approximately 14 meters (46 feet) above the beach, a setting that offered a magnificent panorama of the bay (fig. 2.7). A ramp that led from inside the villa to the beach below gave access to structures along the water's edge.¹⁴ They are perhaps best imagined as they appear idealized in Campanian wall paintings of villas near the sea and harbors, populated by figures shown at leisure or at work (fig. 2.8). When approached by sea, the villa's colonnaded southern façade would have been an integral part of the view toward Vesuvius and the adjacent fertile plains and wooded hills. The landward façade of the villa looked north to Vesuvius, and judging by the villa's orientation on the regional land-division grid, this view would likely have included productive farmland extending toward the volcano's lower slopes.¹⁵ Those approaching the villa from the road would have seen the large north garden dotted with sculptures and bordered by colonnaded porticoes running along this façade of the villa, a vista that also recalls some of the topographical wall paintings.

Inside the villa the Republican period architecture consists of a *domus*-like core with an atrium (5), dining and other reception rooms (14, 15, 23), and bedrooms (11, 12) (see plan). Two enclosed *viridaria* (interior gardens: 16, 20) let light and fresh air into the interior. A kitchen (7), baths (17, 18, 8—later remodeled as an entertainment suite), a *lararium* (household shrine: 27), slave quarters flanking a service courtyard (32, 43, 44), a latrine (48), and a variety of storage rooms accommodated the villa occupants' daily needs. The villa is justly famous for its wall paintings, the earliest of which are among the most splendid examples of the illusionistic Second Style known (see fig. 2.9). Later renovations of and additions to the building are adorned by similarly high quality paintings of the Third and Fourth Styles. Mosaic floor pavements of varying types occur throughout the villa. In its fully developed form, colonnaded porticoes and peristyle courts extended out from the building's core, framing formal gardens. One of these, the east garden, had at its center an immense swimming pool (96) bordered on the east and south by trees and marble sculptures (98, 92). These

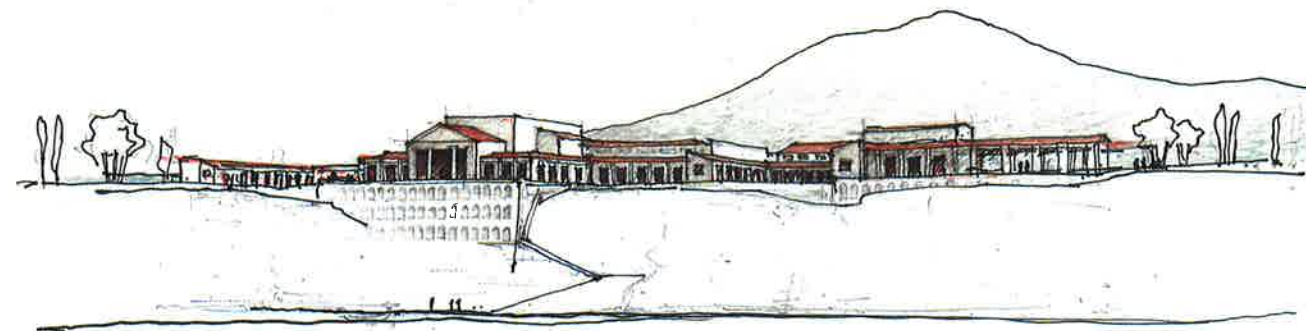


Fig. 2.7: Hypothetical view of the south façade of Villa A (subject to modification with ongoing research). Drawing: Timothy J. Liddell.

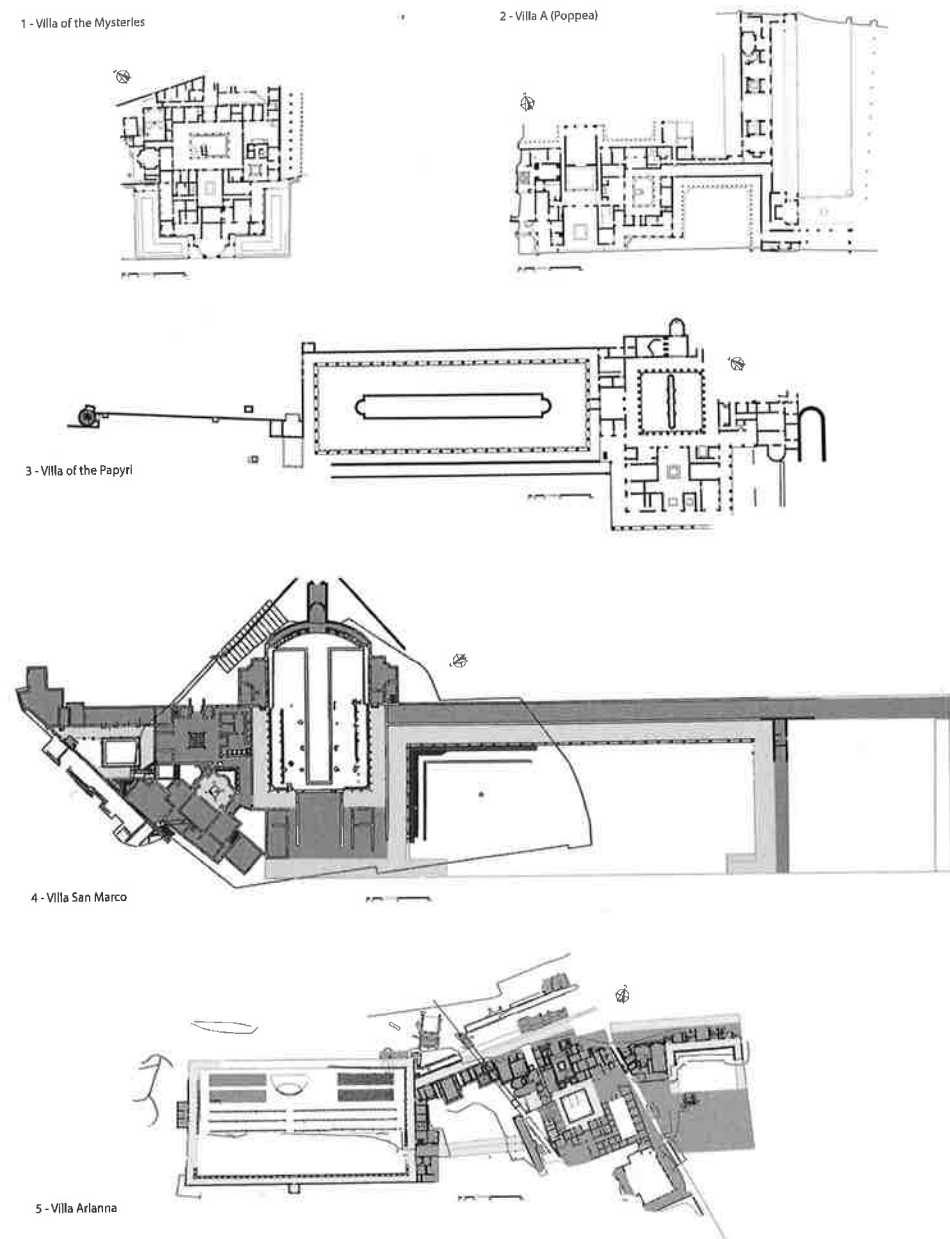


Fig. 2.8: Detail of a wall painting, House of the Menander, Pompeii (I, 10, 4), upper west wall of atrium. Photo: Michael Larvey.



Fig. 2.9: Villa A, Second Style painting from west wall of triclinium 14. Photo: Paul Bardagjy.

Fig. 2.10: Plans to scale of five of the best-known Campanian villas. Composite drawing: Lorene Sterner and Timothy J. Liddell.



sculptures, along with others found elsewhere in the villa, form one of the most extensive collection of statues, busts, and other marble ornaments known from the villas of Campania. The wall of the colonnaded portico (60) along the western side of the garden is painted in a Fourth Style scheme with large white panels punctuated at the center with small still life and landscape vignettes at eye level, some depicting harbors and villas like ones just mentioned. The use of marble columns and capitals within the villa, unusual for villas in this region, marked Villa A as an especially luxurious residence.

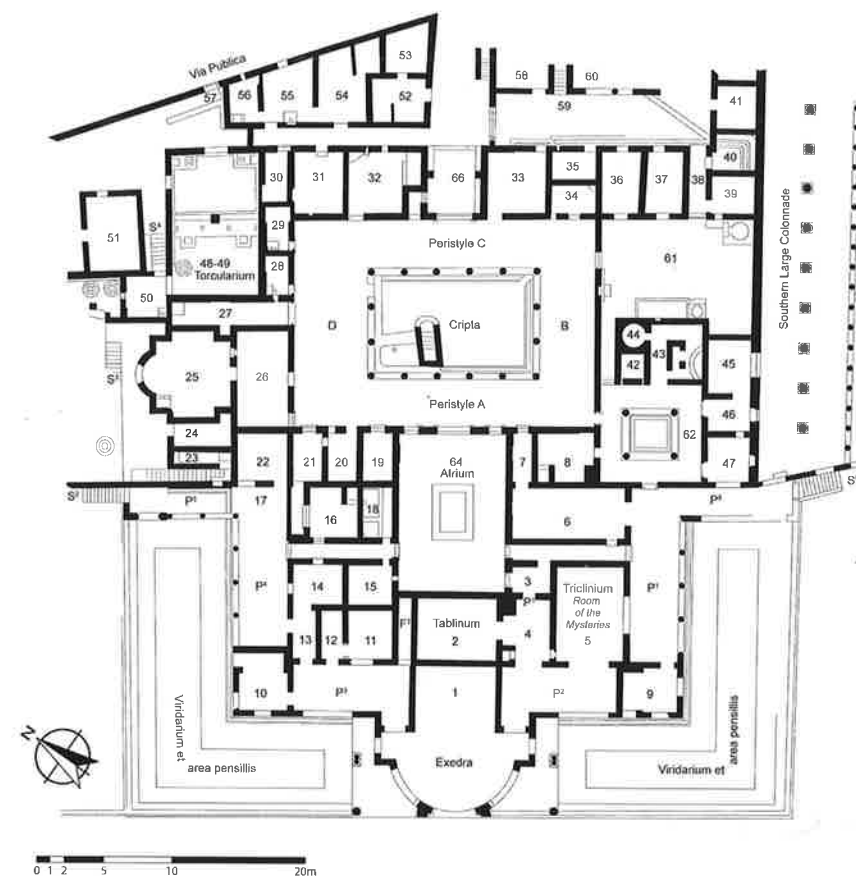
At the southwest corner of the east garden is a cluster of day rooms (66, 78, 79), with strong evidence for a matching suite at the northwest corner. The largest of these had large windows with views of the garden surroundings. Along the west side of the pool, an enfilade of

successive roofed and unroofed spaces, visually connected by large unglazed windows, offered a playfully contrived viewing experience of painted garden imagery within, alternating with open air *viridaria* containing live plants that resembled the painted ones (61, 68, 70, 87). Colonnaded porticoes also bordered the other large garden areas on the south and north (24, 40, 76, 33, 34).

VILLA A AND ITS NEIGHBORS

Maritime villas situated on or near the coast compare most closely with Villa A in setting, architecture, and décor. Several well-known properties lie just a few kilometers from Oplontis. To the east is the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii and, to the northeast, the Villa of Publius Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale. To the north of Oplontis

Fig. 2.11: Villa of the Mysteries, plan of the AD 79 building. Drawing: Lorene Sterner and Timothy J. Liddell.



along the coast is the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum. To the south of Pompeii are the coastal villas at Stabiae, the Villa of San Marco and the Villa Arianna along with several others that are now reburied (fig. 2.10). The villas of Herculaneum and Stabiae are large and well-appointed, but even smaller establishments, like the Villa of the Mysteries and the Villa of Publius Fannius Synistor, offer some striking comparisons and contrasts to Villa A in their siting, architecture, and/or décor. The variations speak to the range of villa owners, who themselves varied in social station, economic means, and—not least—taste. Cicero, for example, was likely not alone in distinguishing between tastefully appointed villas and “insanely” ostentatious ones.¹⁶

POMPEII: THE VILLA OF THE MYSTERIES

At Pompeii, the Villa of the Mysteries is located approximately 400 meters outside the Herculaneum Gate on the northwest side of the city. Discovered in 1909 and fully excavated in 1929–1930, it is not nearly as large as Villa A, nor is it situated directly on the coast, but its topographic elevation and architectural design ensured that it would have commanded excellent views of the sea.¹⁷ The plan of the Villa of the Mysteries conforms unusually well to the pseudo-urban type of villa described by Vitruvius (*De arch.* 6.5.3) in which the

peristyle (colonnaded courtyard) precedes the atrium, reversing the spatial sequence found in typical atrium townhouses of Campania (fig. 2.11). Remnants of this peristyle-atrium sequence survive in the Republican period part of Villa A at Oplontis but refashioned in the Fourth Style period as *viridarium* 20. At the Villa of the Mysteries the peristyle provides access to the productive facilities of the farm, which in this case consisted of vineyards and the space and equipment needed to make wine: a pressing room, storage vats, and a fermentation courtyard or wine cellar on the north side. At Oplontis, scanty remains of a pressing room survive in the eastern part of the villa, suggesting that at least in the later period of its development Villa A had facilities for producing oil or wine. Other utilitarian spaces in the Villa of the Mysteries are comparable to ones found in Villa A. On the south side of the peristyle, a large kitchen connects to the baths, and on the east side of the peristyle smaller rooms may have served as slave quarters, or spaces for storage or other agricultural operations. An apsidal room was added to the north side of the peristyle in the Imperial period. Excavators found a statue that resembles Livia there in 1929–1930, possibly indicating the owner's connection to the wife of Augustus. In contrast to the large sculpture collection at Villa A, it is the only sculpture known to come from this villa.¹⁸



Fig. 2.12: Villa of the Mysteries, cubiculum 16, east alcove. Photo: Michael Larøe.

It is in the living quarters of the villa that we find more to compare with Villa A. A spacious atrium, *oecus* 6, and six *cubicula* (3, 4, 8, 14, 15, 16) boast impressive Second Style architectural wall paintings, many of which are on a par with those of Villa A (fig. 2.12). Some of the mosaic pavements with colorful geometric panels at the center and threshold of the room, and the *scendiletti* in the *cubicula* are also reminiscent of those in Villa A. Strikingly different from Villa A, however, are the Second Style wall paintings, which present a continuous frieze of life-size, mostly female figures encircling the large *triclinium* (5) at the southwest corner of the villa (fig. 2.13), and the smaller related murals in the adjacent *cubiculum* (4). The women on the large frieze engage in ritual activity related to the god of wine, Dionysus/Bacchus, who reclines in the lap of a female companion at the center of the east wall. Whatever the meaning of the imagery, a matter that has been extensively debated, the Bacchic theme was eminently appropriate for the agricultural environment of the wine-producing villa. To date we know of only four other villas in this region that preserve examples of large-scale “megalographic” (statue-like) paintings of human figures.¹⁹ Although much smaller than Villa A and more clearly part of an agriculturally productive establishment, the living spaces of the Villa of the Mysteries were richly ornamented, recalling Cato’s recommendation cited at the beginning of this chapter.

BOSCOREALE: THE VILLA OF P. FANNIUS SYNISTOR
At Boscoreale, the Villa of Publius Fannius Synistor (also known as the Villa of Herennius Florus) was excavated during the late 1890s and early 1900s and is now largely

Fig. 2.13: Villa of the Mysteries, room 5, north wall. Photo: Emma Sachs.



reburied and overgrown, its mural paintings and other valuables scattered among numerous museums in Italy and abroad.²⁰ Although farther from the sea than Villa A and the Villa of the Mysteries, the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor stood three stories tall and would have commanded views of Vesuvius and the surrounding landscape and, in the distance, the sea. Like the Villa of the Mysteries, the villa at Boscoreale incorporated components of the *villa rustica* and *villa urbana*—the productive quarters along with the living quarters. Here, too, the residential areas have much in common with the Republican period portion of Villa A. The decorated spaces in the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor include a large *oecus* (H), a *cubiculum* (M) with antechamber (O), reception room (N), and a number of other rooms (L, I, G, F, D) arrayed around the large frescoed peristyle court (E, fig. 2.14). These living spaces were appointed with splendid Second Style wall paintings comparable in their rich architectural illusionism to those found at Villa A and in the Villa of the Mysteries.²¹ Indeed, the Second Style paintings in Villa A have been attributed to the same painters—the so-called Boscoreale Workshop (see Gee, chapter 8, in this volume). The megalography in the large *oecus* (H) rivals that of the Villa of the Mysteries and, according to some scholars, exceeds it in the quality of its execution (fig. 2.15).²² Given the proximity of these villas to Oplontis, one wonders whether similarly splendid megalographic paintings lie buried in the unexcavated part of Villa A. In any case, these two villas at Pompeii and Boscoreale give us a clear idea of the way in which the owners’ living quarters were adorned. What these paintings might have signified to their owners is a topic discussed in chapter 10 of this volume.

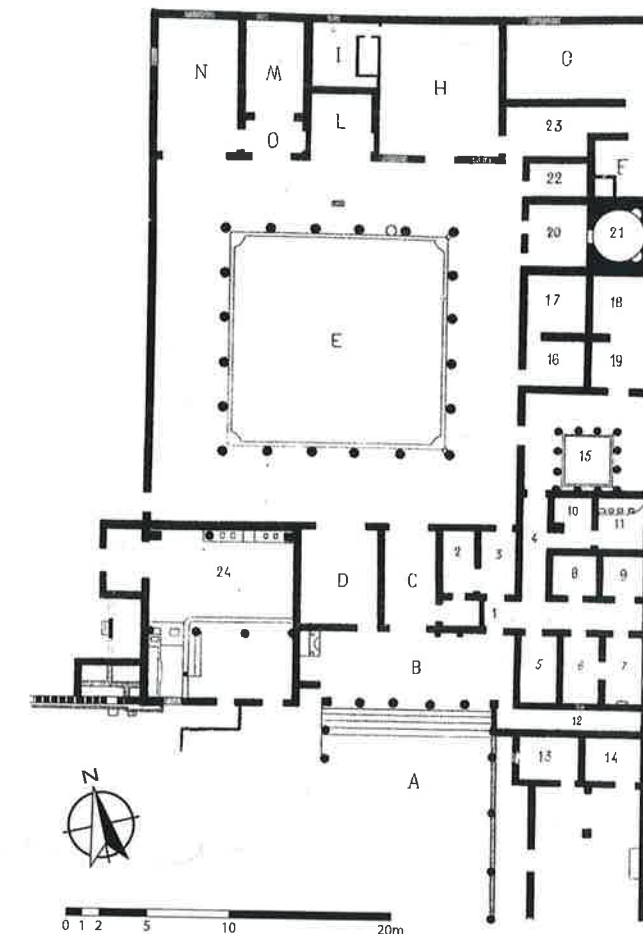


Fig. 2.14: Villa of P. Fannius Synistor, plan. Drawing: Timothy J. Liddell after Barnabei 1901, tav. II.



Fig. 2.15: Villa of P. Fannius Synistor, reconstructed view of Room H. Courtesy of Bettina Bergmann and James Stanton-Abbott.

Fig. 2.16: Villa of the Papyri, view of excavation area. Photo: author.

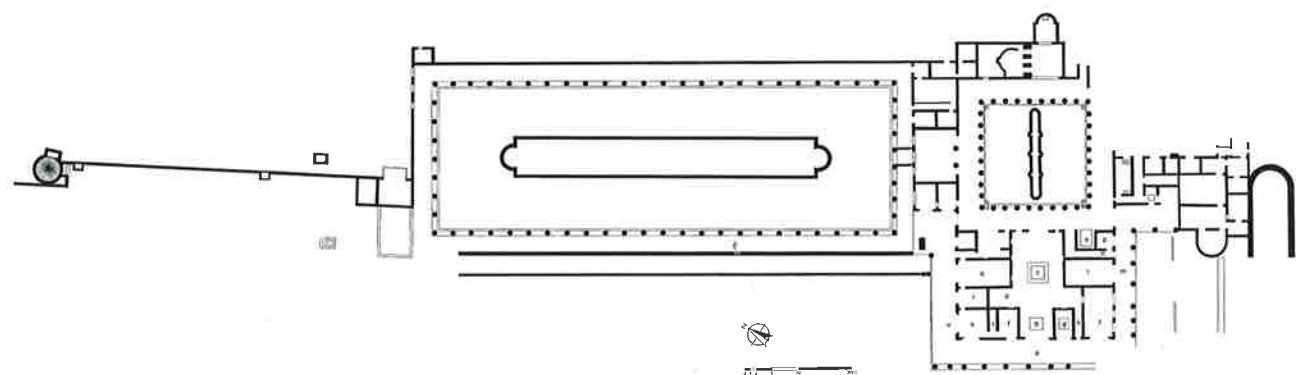


Fig. 2.17: Villa of the Papyri, plan. Drawing: Lorene Sterner and Timothy J. Liddell.

HERCULANEUM: THE VILLA OF THE PAPHRI

The larger villas at Herculaneum and Stabiae compare in siting, size, and décor to Villa A. The Villa of the Papyri, located several kilometers northwest of Oplontis just outside the city wall of Herculaneum, stood elevated above the shore, with commanding views of the bay, much like Villa A (figs. 2.16 and 2.17). Recent excavations have shown that from a height of about 10 meters the villa descended in a series of terraces to the beach below. As at Oplontis, the Villa of the Papyri extended outward from a late Republican core. The atrium and square peristyle adjoined a long rectangular peristyle with a central pool beyond, which was a walkway leading to an elegant circular belvedere with an *opus sectile* pavement.²³ Recent explorations have revealed rooms in two levels of the *basis villae* (foundation platform) below the main level, one with stucco reliefs of piles of arms that perhaps alluded to the peace following a military

victory—symbolism that resonates with that of the wall paintings in the atrium (5) and *triclinium* (14) in Villa A. Further discoveries on the lower levels include a landing place, a seafront terrace with a monumental hall, and a large swimming pool probably belonging to the Augustan or early Julio-Claudian period. These amenities suggest that the shore in front of Villa A may have been similarly outfitted. Two marble sculptures, a statue of Hera and a head of an Amazon, apparently adorned the monumental hall. Baths at the lowest level are also of the Imperial period but may have belonged to the city rather than the villa. Among the recent discoveries at this villa are pieces of wooden furniture covered in ivory panels with relief carvings of Bacchic themes, a tantalizing reminder of the elegant trappings that were once typical of luxury villas of this kind.²⁴ Wall paintings also survive, among them several fragments of a figural megalography (fig. 2.18).²⁵



Fig. 2.18: Villa of the Papyri, room i, view of megalographic painting. Photo: Lynley J. McAlpine.



Fig. 2.19: Villa of the Papyri, sculptural finds, Naples Archaeological Museum. Photo: Emma Sachs.

The Villa of the Papyri takes its modern name from the extensive collection of papyrus scrolls discovered there. Many of the papyri contain the works of the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus of Gadara, who was a teacher of Virgil. He was also a friend and protégé of Lucius Calpurnius Piso Caesonius, who may have been the proprietor of the villa in the Republican period.²⁶ The library provides exceptionally valuable material evidence of the intellectual aspirations that our literary sources attribute to villa owners in this region. By attending lectures and cultural events in the Greek city of Neapolis, wealthy Romans absorbed Greek literature, philosophy, and other forms of cultural expression that inspired

them to recreate in their villas the semblance of a palatial residence and *gymnasium* in Hellenistic style.²⁷ Here one could be fully absorbed in the life of *otium*.

The Villa of the Papyri also boasts an extensive collection of some 87 bronze and marble sculptures, found throughout the villa (fig. 2.19).²⁸ Although far larger in size than the collection of 29 marble sculptures from Villa A, the collection from the Villa of the Papyri is comparable to that of Oplontis in the range of sculptural types represented and in many cases in the quality of workmanship. Attempts to interpret the sculptures from the Villa of the Papyri according to an Epicurean theme complementary to the contents of the library have not been entirely

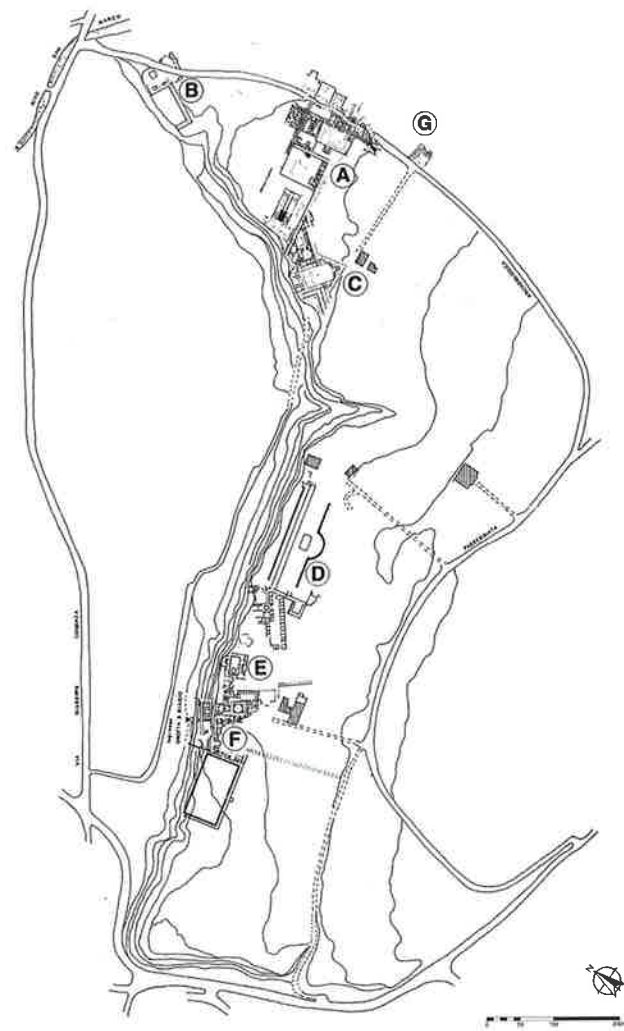


Fig. 2.20: Stabiae, map of villa sites along the rim of the Varano Hill. "C" = Villa San Marco; "F" and "E" = Villa Arianna and the Second Complex. Map: Timothy J. Liddell after Ferrara 2004, fig. 2.

successful. There may have been no overall thematic unity to the collection at all.²⁹ Yet it is not difficult to imagine that many of the Bacchic sculptures in the collection would have inspired thought, and debate, concerning their suitability and meaning in the context of a villa dedicated to the life of *otium*.³⁰ The portraits of Hellenistic kings and of Greek philosophers and other literati could equally have provoked contemplation and discussion of the Roman elite's newly won place in the universe. By furnishing their palatial villas with wall paintings, sculpture collections, and libraries that recalled the dwellings of Hellenistic kings, the wealthiest of the villa owners, the new rulers of the Mediterranean world, could envision themselves as worthy heirs to the legacy of the Greeks.³¹ We can imagine that the owners of Villa A harbored similar thoughts.

STABIAE: THE VILLA OF SAN MARCO AND VILLA ARIANNA

South of the Sarno River at the start of the Sorrentine Peninsula are the villas of ancient Stabiae. This densely built-up zone of the bay boasted thermal springs as well as cow's milk that had exceptionally healthful properties. Indeed, the salubrious amenities of this zone were well known and sought out by the Romans, and it is possible that some of the structures that we identify as villas in this zone were actually *valetudinaria* (health spas) for those seeking relief from various ailments.³²

In the eighteenth century, Bourbon explorers uncovered parts of six villas on the rim of the plateau of the Varano Hill and then reburied them (fig. 2.20).³³ These large establishments, of impressive architectural design, were lavishly adorned with works of art.³⁴ Today only two of the villas on the Varano Hill that were reexcavated are clearly visible, the Villa San Marco and Villa Arianna. Reminiscent of the setting of Villa A, both villas were perched on the edge of a high terraced bluff provided with ramps to the beach below, and they had magnificent views

Fig. 2.21: Villa Arianna, cross section of ramps. Drawing: Timothy J. Liddell after Camardo and Ferrara 2004, 82.

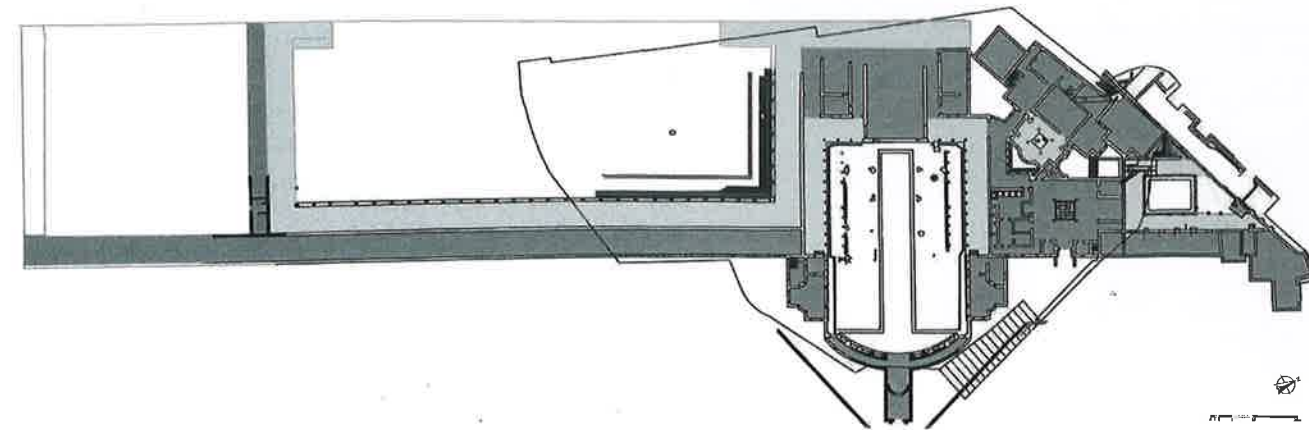
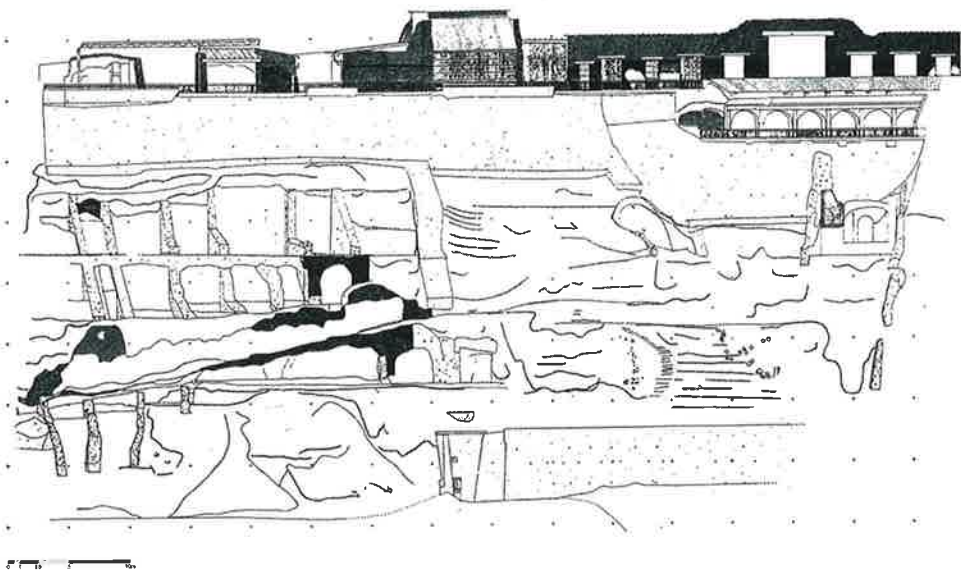


Fig. 2.22: Villa San Marco, plan. Courtesy of Thomas N. Howe. Modified by Timothy J. Liddell.



Fig. 2.23: Villa San Marco, peristyle 15, north wall of portico 20. Photo: author.

extending from Vesuvius to Misenum at the northwest end of the bay (fig. 2.21).³⁵ Here, too, the shoreline below is now more distant as a result of the eruption of AD 79, which also buried all of the Stabian villas. These two villas, among the largest and most splendidly ornamented, compare more closely with Villa A than do any of the other villas around the bay. Like Villa A and the Villa of the Papyri, in the Imperial period both Stabian villas extended outward from their atrium-peristyle cores. The Villa San Marco was furnished in the Imperial period with two peristyles, one with a long pool down the center of the garden, as in the east wing of Villa A at Oplontis and in the rectangular peristyle of the Villa of the Papyri (fig. 2.22). The walls of this peristyle at San Marco were ornamented with scenes of imaginary villas and harbors in rectangles and roundels placed at a comfortable viewing height (fig. 2.23). In this

respect, too, it is similar to the east wing (portico 60) of Villa A. At one end of the peristyle at San Marco is a large *nymphaeum* (fountain structure), once richly adorned with figural scenes in stucco and mosaic (fig. 2.24). A large marble crater found in the pool is similar to a crater from the east garden at Villa A at Oplontis (fig. 2.25). It is tempting to imagine that such a *nymphaeum* lies buried at the north end of the pool at Oplontis.³⁶ The placement of a day room near the *nymphaeum* at San Marco and the overlook at the opposite end of the pool also recall the arrangement of the east wing of Villa A.

The Villa Arianna likewise grew over time and has many architectural components that resemble those of Villa A. This villa also preserves many high quality wall paintings, some of which compare well with those of Villa A. Most of the paintings at the Villa Arianna are in

Fig. 2.24: Villa San Marco, peristyle 15, view of nymphaeum 64/65. Photo: author.



the Fourth Style, but a few are in the early Second Style or are revivals of that style (figs. 2.26 and 2.27).³⁷ Perhaps the most striking feature of the Villa Arianna is a huge garden, framed by colonnaded porticoes (fig. 2.28). The north garden at Oplontis, large sections of which are still buried, would have rivaled it in size and possibly in the variety of its plantings.³⁸

ARCHITECTURE AND LIFESTYLE

Almost every physical component of villas and the activities they both accommodated and framed had the potential for displaying an owner's wealth and power. In the archaeological remains of villas along the coast of the bay, we repeatedly encounter splendid views, impressive atria, multiple entertainment rooms with richly painted walls, day rooms, heated baths, colonnaded courtyards, formal gardens, and many other kinds of spaces meant for owners and their guests—all features that became standard for luxury villas like Villa A at Oplontis.³⁹ Service areas and productive functions could also be deployed for the purposes of exhibiting the owner's wealth while also allowing him or her to turn a profit.⁴⁰ The daily working of villa lands by large numbers of slaves and the processing of the produce, such as wine, oil, or more exotic foods to serve at showy banquets, could form part of the display for one's peers. Elaborate saltwater fish tanks, constructed and maintained at great expense along the seacoast adjacent to villa properties, allowed proprietors to collect and raise exotic species, while lakes, lagoons, and streams on villa properties yielded oysters and other seafood for the table.⁴¹ Dining on the produce of the estate was simply another means of calling the guests' attention to the wealth and resources at the host's command.

Yet in comparing the natural settings, the buildings, gardens, and interior embellishments of a range of the region's villas, it becomes clear that, despite their common features, no two villas are alike. Rather, we be-



Fig. 2.25: Villa San Marco, marble crater in nymphaeum 64/65. Photo: author.

gin to appreciate the creativity of the architects, builders, and artists who designed, constructed, and ornamented these lavish estates. Like the many wall paintings from villas and townhouses in this region that depict a seemingly infinite variety of imaginary maritime villas and other coastal structures, the preserved villas exhibit a variety of compositions constructed of similarly familiar architectural units.⁴² Moreover, one becomes acutely aware of the importance the Romans attached not only to seeing but also to being seen. Display was inherent in villa culture, and it is clearly expressed in the topographical placement and architectural designs as well as in the ornamentation of villas. In seeing and being seen, villa owners at Oplontis and elsewhere engaged in an ongoing visual dialogue with their peers.

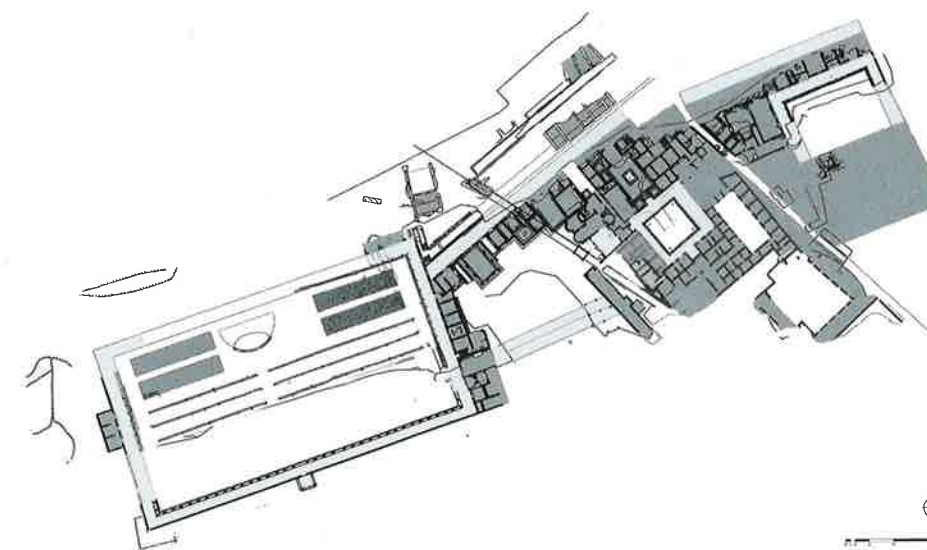


Fig. 2.26: Villa Arianna, plan. Courtesy of Thomas N. Howe. Modified by Timothy J. Liddell.



Fig. 2.27: Villa Arianna, room 3, Fourth Style painting. Photo: Emma Sachs.



Fig. 2.28: Villa Arianna, garden. Photo: Emma Sachs.