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The Oplontis Project 2012-13: A Report of Excavations at Oplontis B[1]

Michael L Thomas - Ivo van der Graaff - and Paul Wilkinson

The Oplontis Project has been studying Oplontis B since the summer of 2012. As with its work in Villa A, the study of Villa B includes excavation below the 79 CE levels. During the 2012 and 2013 campaigns, the project excavated a total of 8 trenches. These focused on the central courtyard, a sewer system in the SW corner of the central courtyard (OPB3 and 8), rooms to the west of the courtyard (OPB4), a street and town houses to north of the courtyard building (OPB5 and 7), and the portico on the south side of that building (OPB6). The 2012 and 2013 campaigns revealed some significant information hidden below the 79 CE levels at Oplontis B. Excavation documented at least three distinct pavement levels in the courtyard area, and the addition of a drainage system. At the north side of the site, these campaigns also identified a reconfiguration of the ground-floor rooms and a repaving of the street. Although the pending study of the material culture associated with Oplontis B should provide a more precise chronological narrative, these initial results suggest that the complex was part of a wider settlement built before the construction of neighboring Villa A.

During the summer of 2012, the Oplontis Project began a comprehensive study of the site of Oplontis Villa B in Torre Annunziata, Italy. Sponsored by the Center for the Study of Ancient Italy at the University of Texas at Austin, the project has been involved with archaeological research of the Oplontine area since 2005[2], when it began its work on a collaborative study of Villa A at Oplontis[3]. Based on the success of that work, the *Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Napoli e Pompei* has granted the Oplontis Project full permission to research and publish Villa B.

The complex known as Villa B remains largely unpublished, and to many, unknown[4]. The site centers on a two-storey courtyard building that features storage rooms opening onto the ground level and living quarters on the second floor (fig. 1). To the south lie the remains of a portico lined with barrel-vaulted storage rooms which probably faced the sea. The northern side includes a narrow street lined with townhouses. A corridor defines the western edge of the courtyard complex. Next to it, the top corner of a partially excavated two story building in *opus latericium* sticks out through the eruption debris. Its bricked-up windows in *opus reticulatum* suggest multiple phases of use and perhaps partial abandonment before the eruption. The site remains largely unexcavated to the east, but coring sondages conducted by geologist Giovanni Di Maio suggest the presence of a road running in a north-south direction. These combined elements suggest that the building known as Villa B was once part of a much larger complex in the area.

[1] The authors would like to thank *Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Napoli e Pompei*, particularly Teresa Elena Cinquantaquattro, Grete Stefani, and Lorenzo Fergola. We would also like to thank the entire staff at both Oplontis sites, especially former *assistente* Frederico Staiano and the current *assistente* Pasquale Tarasca. Finally we owe a great debt to the members of the Oplontis Project, including co-director John Clarke, Nayla Muntasser, Jess Galloway, Jenny Muslin, Gretel Rodriguez, Giovanni Di Maio, Vincenzo Marasco, Erin Anderson, Zoe Schofield, Rita Scognamilgio, Hallie Bewer, Arjun Reddy, and the talented excavators of the Kent Archaeological Field School team.

[2] For reports of work at Villa A see THOMAS and CLARKE 2007, THOMAS and CLARKE 2009, and THOMAS and CLARKE 2011.

[3] The study of Villa A will be published in four volumes in the Humanities eBook Series of the American Council of Learned Societies; volume 1 on the Ancient Setting and Modern Rediscovery is scheduled to appear in early 2014.

[4] Villa B was originally constructed at the end of the second century B.C.E., as evidenced by the use of Nocera tufa columns typical of that period. For a bibliography of the site see http://oplontisproject.org/bibliography/

Fig. 1. Plan of Oplontis B with 2012 and 2013 Trenches.

Though located very near a luxurious and sprawling pleasure villa, Oplontis B is strikingly different in what it preserves, and from its remains we can also surmise that it had a very different function from its opulent neighbor. Whereas Villa A is clearly a luxury villa designed for *otium*, or leisure, Oplontis B was a site focused on commerce, most likely a distribution center for wine[5]. Its spaces - sparse and utilitarian - are meant not for leisure but for *negotium*, or industry. Beyond the unique physical structure of Oplontis B, perhaps the most significant aspect of this site is the fact that it preserves unparalleled material for new study in several underrepresented areas, including human remains, foodstuffs, coins, jewelry, and transport vessels.

It is our hope that through careful and systematic work at Villa B we can bring to light the significance of this unique site on the Bay of Naples. Following the research design of the study of Villa A, the work of the Oplontis Project at Oplontis B will include a full documentation of the physical remains and materials from the original excavations carried out in the 1970s and 1980s. The project will combine analysis of the original data with results from its own excavations and research. Current work includes analysis of pre-79 CE stratigraphy as well as a general clean-up and documentation of the site. This report summarizes the archaeological fieldwork carried out at Oplontis B during campaigns in 2012 and 2013, which included geophysical prospection and the excavation of eight trenches in four different areas of the site (see fig. 1)[6].

[5] MALANDRINO 1977, 85 was the first to note the relationship of the complex to the wine trade.
[6] The Oplontis B complex, at least during its last phase, seems to have been functioned as an import and export center, primarily dealing with wine. This was recently presented at the AIA annual meetings and we be followed by a published report. See THOMAS 2013.

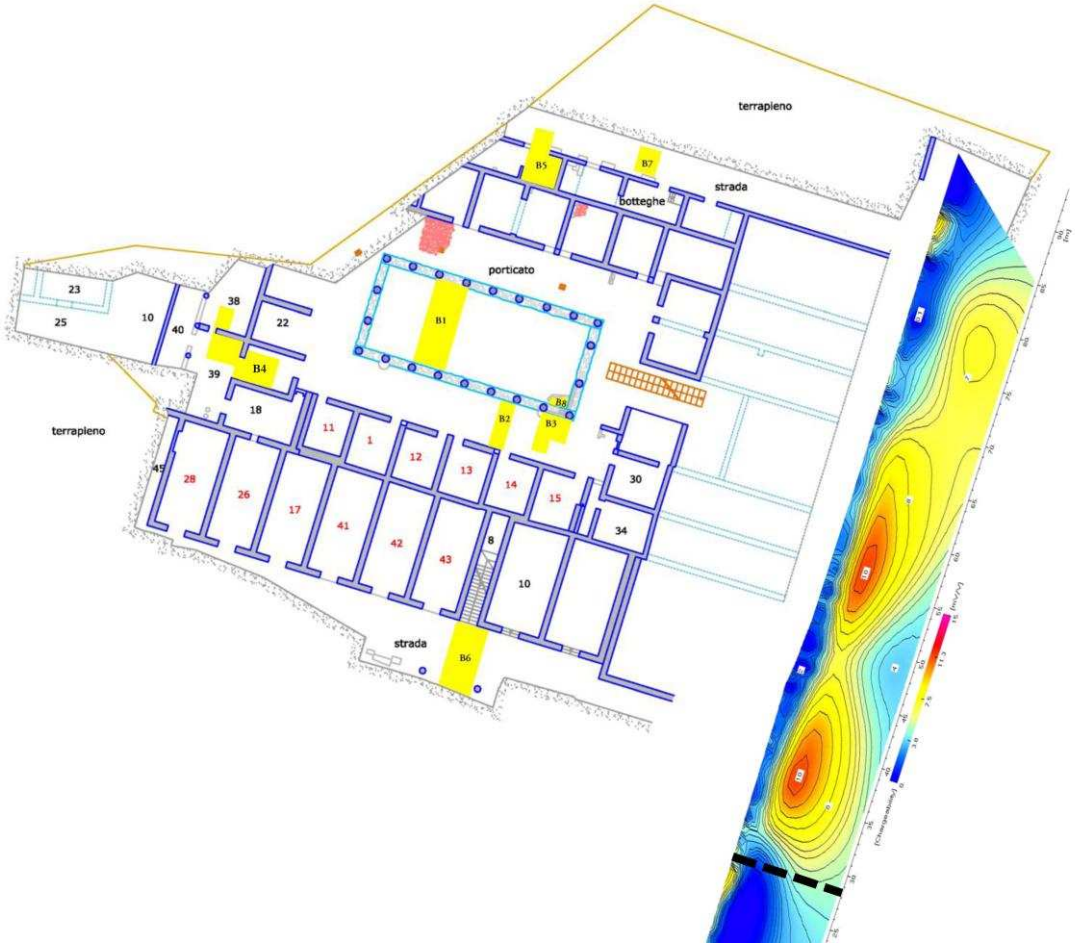

Fig. 2. Plan showing enhanced resistivity results. The dotted black line indicates a strong change in chargeability, possibly an indication of beach sediment.

Geophysical Prospection: 2012

The Oplontis Project commissioned a geophysical survey by the Italian company Geoastier S.R.L. in order to provide a pre-excavation assessment of several areas of Oplontis. Utilizing ground-penetrating radar, the Geoastier team discovered a series of anomalies in rooms 1, 3, 4, 6, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 30. These variances in the data may represent earlier structures, cisterns, or drainage works. Although each of these anomalies will need further investigation before they are fully understood, it is possible that some of these features predate the Roman era.

The Geoastier team also carried out an electro-resistivity survey in peristyle 27, portico 44, and the unexcavated area on the eastern side of the complex. The survey consisted of a single line of sensors laid out along the length of each area. The survey line in peristyle 27 ran east-west across the middle of the peristyle. The results showed an area with somewhat higher level of ground moisture than the surrounding area, and layering that suggested the presence of a cistern. Trench OPB1, sited directly above the anomaly, revealed that it represents a succession of Bronze Age occupation levels buried by successive eruptions of Vesuvius.

The resistivity line laid in space 44 also ran east-west to cover the length of the area. The results suggested the presence of an earlier floor some 50 cm below the current level and two anomalies on the east and west sides of the space. The features registered as areas containing different soils and a higher moisture content. The western anomaly may represent a modern cistern, as original Italian excavation notebooks report interventions that included digging a drainage *pozzo* in the area in front of rooms 42 and 43. Trench OPB6 (see below) investigated the eastern feature and the suggested floor level. What we had believed was an earlier buried floor level actually represents the original pavement of 79 CE. In fact it seems that most of the eastern side of space 44 remains unexcavated. The steps leading down into the various storage spaces opening onto the area should therefore be considered a modern erroneous reconstruction. In antiquity the interior and exterior ground levels were the same, which allowed for an easier movement of goods in and out of the storage spaces. Another north-south resistivity line investigated the eastern side of the complex (fig. 2). As opposed to the other surveys which explored pre-79 CE levels, this area is

Fig. 3. View of Trench OPB 1 from the north.

almost completely unexcavated. The survey suggests the presence of further collapsed and buried buildings including a possible second story. A lower chargeability on the southern length of the resistivity line points to a drastic change in the geological composition of the area, which may confirm the presence of the ancient coastline; these results mirror those of Di Maio[7].

The Central Courtyard (OPB1): 2012

We located Trench OPB1 in the courtyard area of Oplontis B (fig. 3). The goal of the trench was to document the stratigraphy in the courtyard, and examine the building's chronology and function. The unit stretched the entire width of the courtyard, from the southern colonnade foundation to that of the northern. Excavation quickly reached the original pavement of the courtyard. This pavement consisted of basalt boulders with the spaces between filled with large broken amphora sherds. These were mainly of the Dressel 2-4 type in predominantly Vesuvian-area fabric, a type consistent with the majority of amphorae discovered by the original excavators. A layer of concrete topped the basalt-amphora sublayer to create a relatively smooth and durable surface. The pavement rested on a pyroclastic flow datable to the last Bronze Age eruption of Vesuvius. Beneath that layer, excavation documented a sequence of alternating paleosols and eruption strata, datable to the period between 1500 and 1000 BCE. Two paleosols were of particular interest (fig. 4). The first, also datable between 1500 and 1000 BCE, preserved a distinct diamond pattern of plow marks, cut by cart, and/or sled ruts along with pottery sherds and scattered remnants of mud brick. The second and lower stratum was sealed by a layer that may belong to the Avellino eruption of circa 1600 to 1500 BCE.[8] This lower paleosol contained a higher incidence of burnt mud brick, pottery, and faint plow marks, suggesting the presence of a settlement nearby. Both strata point to sustained Bronze-Age activity in the Oplontis B area.

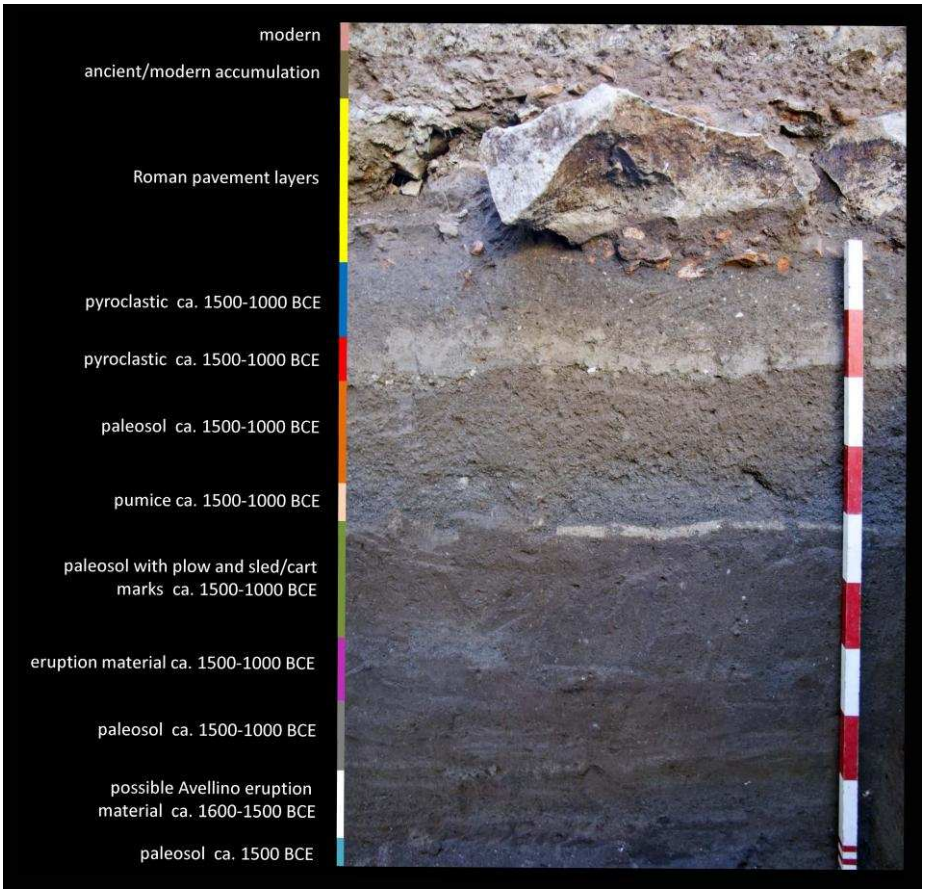

Fig. 4. Trench OPB 1 detail of east profile with stratigraphic identification.

[7] DI MAIO, Forthcoming.
[8] We thank geologist Giovanni Di Maio for dating the eruption sequence for us; he will publish the sequence in more detail as part of our Oplontis B publication.

Fig. 5. Trench OPB 1 with detail of colonnade foundations.

The north and south ends of the trench, revealed interesting details of the colonnade's construction (fig. 5). Here the foundations consist of a thick tufa stereobate which sits atop perpendicularly positioned foundation blocks spaced to coincide with the joins between the blocks of the sterobate. A section of foundation in *opus incertum* supports the center join. The entire assemblage rests on the same pyroclastic stratum supporting the courtyard pavement. On the southern edge of the peristyle the foundation trench fill for the colonnade contained several sherds of Campana A Black Gloss ceramic. Its broad range of production includes the entire 2nd Century BCE, a timeframe consistent with our preliminary estimates for the courtyard building.

Fig. 6. View of Trench OPB 2 from the north.

The Southwest Corner of the Peristyle (OPB2, OPB3, and OPB8): 2012-2013

OPB2 was the second trench excavated in 2012 (fig. 6). Its primary goal was to document the interior foundations of the courtyard colonnade and to verify the stratigraphy of the area. This unit spanned exactly half an intercolumniation and the breadth of the internal peristyle. Excavation quickly uncovered the 79CE floor level of beaten earth and cement, and discovered a drain that ran just below the pavement level. The stratigraphic profile clearly shows that this water conduit cut the foundation trench for the peristyle colonnade, further confirming that it was the last construction event in the unit.

The conduit walls consist of an *opus incertum* rubble fabric. A series of rectangular tufa capping-stones, mortared with cement, seal off the internal channel. The capping stones were easily removable, suggesting that the builders' intention was to provide access to the internal channel for

Fig. 7. View of Trench OPB 3 from the east .

Fig. 8. View of Trench OPB 8 from the south.

maintenance. Inside the channel, two distinct strata completely filled the void. The top stratum was a grey ash matrix that represented fill from the 79 eruption. The second lower deposition was a brown, clay-like matrix containing the occasional sherd, including a small fragment of stamped Arretine ware; this lower stratum represents the sludge and detritus from pre-eruption use. Levels taken within the channel indicate that it was draining west to east.

The excavated foundations on the inside of the portico revealed a similar sequence of large square tufa stones beneath the column pads, and *opus incertum* supporting the stereobate. Like the foundation trench on the exterior, it only partially cut into the earlier pyroclastic layer below, suggesting that engineers actively sought out this level for its inherent stability.

In 2013 our study of this area continued with the excavation of OPB3 and OPB8, both in the southwest corner of the courtyard. OPB3 revealed a T-shaped sewage system that centered on a settling tank (fig. 7). The entire system cut through two previous floor levels, pointing to at least three phases to this part of the courtyard. The continuation of the drain uncovered in OPB2 entered the tank from the west, carrying water from an unknown source. Another channel entered the tank from the area excavated as OPB8 to the north, originating in what was originally thought to have been a latrine located at the southwest corner of the courtyard. A drain exited the tank toward the south, carrying waste water out to sea, perhaps connecting in the process to a large vaulted drain - excavated in OPB6 - that ran beneath space 44.

The excavation of OPB8 was essentially an effort to clean off debris to document the semi-enclosed area at the southwest corner of the exterior courtyard (fig. 8). Though the design of this area - with an open drain that runs diagonally from the east to the south side - certainly suggests that it may have functioned as a latrine, there are

Fig. 9. View of Trench OPB 4 from the west, with possible water conduit in the foreground.

Fig. 10. View of Trench OPB 6 from the north. The lighter T-shaped mark in the pavement at the center of the trench is the sewer system.

clues that point to other possible uses[9]. Importantly, the channel and seating area one would expect for a latrine of this size are missing.

The fact that many of the villa's amphorae found during the original excavation had been stacked for drying, tells us they were being washed. It may be that the features found in OPB 8 area were part of this process. The drain exiting to the south, and the settling tank into which that drain emptied, each contained a layer of fine silt-like grey Vesusvian ash resting on a layer of large broken amphora fragments. Conversely, the drain which flowed into the tank from the west in OPB 2 had no amphorae fragments. This detail implies that all of the fragments were introduced into the drain from the so-called latrine area, suggesting that this space could have functioned as an area to wash amphorae, or at the least, was near enough to the amphora-washing station that broken fragments ended up in the drains.

The Western Rooms (OPB4): 2013

This unit explored 38, 39, 21, and 18, a series of spaces - both exterior and interior - to the west of the courtyard. Room 21 revealed a heavily worn *opus signinum* floor with a pit cut into it that contained several large fragments of marble, including a piece with an inscribed "V". Room 39 preserved the remainder of a beaten earth floor that had been disrupted in either antiquity, or possibly during modern excavation (fig. 9). Most significant was the discovery of what appeared to be a shallow foundation wall oriented east to west, possibly associated with an earlier phase. After the discovery of the complex drainage systems found in OPB2 and 3, it more likely represents a drainage conduit that ran under the floor, toward the system to the east.

The South Portico: OPB6

This unit set out to investigate anomalies discovered by the 2012 geoprospection. The trench revealed that a large part of this south portico remains unexcavated and still preserves roughly 50 cm of untouched Vesuvian debris (fig. 10). Modern intrusions have complicated the stratigraphy, but enough of it survives to discern a largely intact beaten earth pavement that served as the original Roman floor level. The recovery of numerous Neronian and Flavian coins points to a continued economic use of the area right up to the eruption of Vesuvius. Unfortunately the modern retaining wall at the edge of the site and its foundations have obliterated any Roman context to the south,

[9] Of note was the discovery of a shallow channel that drained water from the exterior courtyard into this drain.

Fig. 11. Detail of Trench OPB 5 from the west.

Fig. 13. View of Trench OPB 7 from the north .

hindering further assessment of what was beyond this portico. Of note were the remains of a column capital belonging to the southern colonnade still *in situ* from its collapse during the eruption. Excavation also revealed a large T-shaped intersection of drains that likely registered as one of the anomalies recorded by the geoprospection team. The position of this sewer system suggests that it may have connected to the one that exits OPB3. The sewer awaits further excavation but an initial examination of the southern section of the drain discovered that it was barrel-vaulted.

The Street North of the Courtyard Building (OPB5 and OPB7): 2013

Though excavated in the 1980s, there is little documentation from the original excavation pertaining to the northern section of the site. The excavators discovered a street running east to west, and lined on both sides with simple townhouses. These houses consist of ground-floor rooms with the foundations for staircases that accessed single upstairs rooms. The primary goal of unit OPB5 was to clean up one of these townhouses. The trench focused on the ground-floor room, the exterior doorway, and a section of the street. It was clear that certain parts of the room had been excavated down to the 79 level and had since filled up with sediment washed down from above. Yet other areas did preserve a lapilli layer, suggesting that the original excavators had not entirely reached the Roman floor level. A simple beaten-earth pavement characterized the floor, leading up to the landing of the small stairway on the southeast corner of the room. The northeast corner of the room contained the remnants of a latrine (fig. 11). Between the landing for the stairs and the latrine, a single step led up to an area with pan-tile floor, perhaps a washing area. A small drain hole in the floor, just to the west of this area, connects to the latrine drain in the southeast corner of the room. Excavation of the latrine drain, still filled with *lapilli*, revealed that it ran to the northeast, toward the street.

Trench OPB7 excavated a section of the street to the east of OPB5 (fig. 12). This trench identified two distinct pavement episodes. The earlier phase consisted of beaten earth combined with rough concrete. The cart ruts were clearly visible in the center with a possible small drainage conduit opening to the south. An *acciottolato* pavement of beaten earth and pebbles covered it in a second phase. These two street levels probably correspond to separate phases of the buildings along the road. The first phase, which had Nocera Tufa jambs and wide doors characteristic of workshops, probably belong to the second century BCE[10]. The second level corresponds with the narrowing of the doors using additional masonry when these ground-floor rooms were converted to simple domestic spaces.

[10] While visiting Villa B in 2013, Steven Ellis suggested that these wider doors indicate that these ground floor rooms originally functioned as workshops. We thank him for this suggestion.

Conclusions

The 2012 and 2013 campaigns revealed some significant information hidden below the 79 CE levels at Oplontis B. Excavation documented at least three distinct pavement levels in the courtyard area, and the late addition of a sophisticated water drainage system. At the north side of the site, these campaigns also identified a reconfiguration of the ground-floor rooms and a repaving of the street. These conclusions suggest that the buildings experienced significant refurbishments and upgrades that may reflect changes in function and production associated with wider socio-economic developments along the Bay of Naples. Although the pending study of the material culture associated with Oplontis B should provide a more precise chronological narrative, these initial results suggest that the complex was part of a wider settlement built before the construction of neighboring Villa A. These campaigns reminded us how much is often lost from the original excavation records of sites such as Oplontis B, and how important simply cleaning up along an excavated area can be. Although our remaining seasons will continue with limited excavation, much of the focus will shift to managing, documenting, and publishing the material culture and architecture uncovered by the site's original excavators.

Michael L Thomas
University of Texas at Austin
E-mail: mlthomas@mail.utexas.edu

Ivo van der Graaff
University of Texas at Austin
E-mail: info@swatarchaeology.co.uk

Paul Wilkinson
Swale and Thames, UK
E-mail: info@swatarchaeology.co.uk

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