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POMPEII (1998-). FROM *INSULA* TO NEIGHBOURHOOD*

Antonella Coralini

Engaged in the region around Vesuvius for more than a quarter of a century, today, by means of the Vesuviana Programme (1997-), the University of Bologna is developing interdisciplinary research projects at Pompeii since 1998, in close cooperation with the Parco Archeologico di Pompei (formerly, Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei) and other institutions. Following the pilot project, case study the city-block of the so-called Casa del Centenario (IX 8), from 2019 the same insula-based approach is applied to another city-block, I 17, selected because of its position in the urban layout and its potential for the study of public-private relations in a Samnite-Roman city. Among its main research topics, the household archaeology has been integrated by the garden, water, and road ones. Final aim, investigate a lived neighbourhood over the long term.

The Vesuviana Programme in Pompeii

The Alma Mater's commitment to Pompeii, and to other archaeological sites around Vesuvius, has deep roots: as team research projects, it has been a solid reality since the late 1990s, by means of the 'Pompeii. Insula del Centenario IX 8' (1998-), in agreement with the then Autonomous Superintendency (Coralini, Scagliarini 2004). Such as pilot project, which programmatically combined research and training needs with the ones in heritage conservation and management¹, through insula-based approach, has been developing methods, strategies and practices applied

successfully to other sites and regions also². At the end of the long season in which Insula IX 8 was training workshop for hundreds of students (1998-2017)³, the project adopted a new scale intervention (from *insula* to neighbourhood), expanded the area of interest (extended in 2017 to insulae IX 5 and IX 9) and updated the name: "Pompeii 1998". Elements of continuity in its evolution, the pillars of the working method: entangled approach to research and education, conservation and communication; interdisciplinary strategy; old excavations and *archival archaeology* as key-activities (Coralini 2020). As of 2019, the training site in Pompeii became Insula I 17, in the south-eastern quarter of the ancient city, by means of a excavation concession (Coralini 2022, 2024) (figs. 1-2).

* Scientific direction: Antonella Coralini (2005-); Daniela Scagliarini (1998-2014); Sara Santoro (1998-2005). Sector managers: Nicola Santopuoli, survey and diagnostics for conservation (1998-2007, 2022-); Maria Letizia Carra, archaeobotanical investigations (2023-); Angela Bosco, decorations, finds from old and new excavations (2021-). Collaborators for excavation and documentation: Girolamo Ferdinando De Simone (2019); Mario Grimaldi (2021), Catello Imperatore (2022).

¹ Among the first outcomes of that early attention to the current Third Mission, the itinerant exhibition (*L'Alma Mater a Pompei*) that in the years 2000-2002 travelled from Bologna to Pompeii, passing through Rome, hosted by the Archaeological Institute of Rome, and Terni, and the dossier "Guidelines for the restoration project"

delivered already in 2002 to the Superintendency (Coralini 2017b: 14).

² In the Vesuvian region, in Herculaneum and the surrounding area, by the projects *DHER. Domus. Herculaneensis Rationes* (2005-) and Villa Sora (2015-2023) (Coralini 2017a, 2021). From 2020, also in Tunisia: in this volume, the paper dedicated to research projects on *Tuburbo Maius* and *Hadrumentum*.

³ After Custodi, Sciortino 2006; Santoro 2007 and Coralini 2017b: 12-13 on the last three books.



Fig. 1. Pompeii. Areas investigated by the Pompeii-1998- project (A. Bosco, 2024).



Fig. 2. Pompeii, I 17. Excavations in progress (1958): the portico “a archi girati”, east side (Parco Archeologico di Pompei).

Pompeii I 17 (2019-): stories of boundaries and streets, water and gardens

More than one reason led to the choice of the new case study: its position in the ancient urban grid, in an area at present little investigated, albeit very important for understanding the genesis and evolution of the city (De Caro 1992; Giglio 2024); the block's unusual shape, which until a few years ago was an *unicum* in Pompeii; the presence of one among the rarest architectural solutions in Pompeii, the arched portico (fig. 3); and last but not least, its being (like insula IX 8) both the product of an interrupted excavation and a context essen-



Fig. 3. Pompeii, I 17. Excavations in progress (1958): the hortus pictus, on the north wall of the portico a archi girati (Parco Archeologico di Pompei).

tially unpublished. Beyond the records in *Pompeii. Pitture e Mosaici* (PPM I.2, 1990: 1024-1059), its presence in the literature is limited to that of single parts in works on transversal themes, such as *lararia*, gardens (real and painted), peristyles and water management⁴. The only exception is the small green space of the pseudo-peristyle decorated by

⁴ For *lararia*, Froehlich 1991: 264, L37, Taf. 9; for gardens, Ciarallo, Giordano 2012: 430-431 n. 117; for *horti picti*, Salvadori 2017: 178, P16; for peristyles, Simelius 2022: 128; for water management, Dessales 2013: 162-163, 171, 283.



Fig. 4. Pompeii, I 17. The unearthed part: in evidence, stratigraphic investigations in 2019-2024.

the hortus pictus of the House of the Arches (I 17, 4), subject of an in-depth study by W.F. Jashemski in the 1970s (1993: 66 n. 115).

2019: material evidence on site

The part of the *insula* brought to light in the years 1958-1959, Soprintendente Amedeo Maiuri, consists of four building units, mainly residential, among which only the smallest one (I 17, 3), in the north-east corner, has been fully explored. Many remains of walls in *opus quadratum* and *opus africanum*, both still in situ and re-used in ancient times, testifies to the presence of important buildings in this area already in the Archaic period. Blocked doorways and new openings for passageways, demolished walls, and other built *ex nihilo*: there are many traces of renovation (both achieved and not), and just as many markers of changes in ownership and. At the south-eastern end of the city-block, the perimeter walls draw a quadrangular space, creating a sort of small square at the level of a crossroad.

From 79 onwards

After 79 A.D. and until 1958, the *insula* and its surroundings had not rested in peace under

the volcanic deposit. Between 1592 and 1605, the Sarno Canal had also crossed this area east-westwards (following, as claimed by D. Morano – 1882: 144-149 – the route of an ‘Oscan aqueduct?’) (Rispoli, Paone 2011: 127). Large and irregular holes in walls testify to the passage of exploration (and robbery) tunnels at a time that cannot be defined but, in any case, well before 1958. Excavations of the late 1950s concentrated on the northern front, along Via di Castricio, and the eastern one, along the street and, due to its architectural and decorative peculiarities (the “*archi girati*” portico and its garden painting), in the *Casa degli Archi* (I 17, 4) (fig. 4). A very few finds were recovered: oil lamps, above all, as well as metal fittings and tools (including an iron pickaxe), from the *Casa degli Archi*; a dozen clay antefixes in the form of theatrical masks, from unit I 17, 3.

The post-excavation phase was no less intense. In 1975, W.F. Jashemski (1993: 66 n. 115) investigated the open area in the pseudo-peristyle in the *Casa degli Archi*, successfully searching for the ancient garden (Ciarallo, Giordani 2012: 430-431 n. 117). Between 1988 and 1989 cleaning and rearrangement work led to new discoveries in unit I 17, 1, including a large iron grate attributed to the *compluvium* (Sodo 1989: 241-243). In 1991 a sink-

hole opened into the south-eastern sector, right at the anomaly in the city-block shape, revealing a ‘vasta e profonda cavità sotterranea’ (Varone 1991-1992: 202-203). In the early 2000s, probably for the archaeological report of the restoration project, two small excavations were carried out along the eastern boundary wall, within rooms 3 and 4 of the *Casa degli Archi*⁵. In 2018, this portion of Pompeii’s site was rich in many interesting clues, waiting to be put in relation to each other, to reconstruct the biography of the insula and its context.

From 2019: acta et agenda

Such an undertaking was in many ways a challenge: few data, and almost all not produced by detailed studies. It was therefore necessary to start again from the beginning, although, unfortunately, not exactly from scratch: previous excavations had indeed provided evidence, but also prejudiced further investigations, as well as maintenance and restoration work had made non-reversible changes to the physical remains. As usual for Pompeii and other sites around Vesuvius (and, more generally, for all historical archaeological sites), archival archaeology and archaeology of restoration played a decisive role (Coralini 2017b, 2020). On that basis, key areas were identified, and a programme for stratigraphic investigations was outlined, to be recalibrated year by year according to the site management. From 2019 to 2024, nine essays were carried out within and outside the insula, following two *filas rouges*, waterworks and boundaries (Coralini 2022, 2024) (Fig. 1). Despite the difficulties known to anyone who has worked in Pompeii – where there is no way to escaping the experience of excavating the excavated – results were not lacking: in the small garden of the pseudo-peristyle already investigated by Jashemski traces of the collapse of the vault of the cistern in antiquity were identified, as well as remains of a vegetable garden in the adjoining room (10) to the north; nature of the anomaly at the south-east corner was confirmed; the situation of the eastern boundary wall was investigated, reopening the previous essays’ trenches and thus re-examining the razed walls (2022-2023, rooms 3 and 4), which in addition to other data led us to hypothesise an



Fig. 5. Pompeii, I 17, 4. Casa degli Archi, room 3, trench F: on the east side, along the boundary wall of the insula, the demolished and razed wall (Vesuviana Programme, Pompeii Project -, F. Filippov, 2023).

advancement of the city-block front at the expense of the street (Coralini 2024: 119-121) (fig. 5). Year after year, the street to the east became the main object of interest.

Some questions were answered, others were opened by the results of the activities carried out. In 2018, investigating relationships public-private, as materialised in waterworks and in boundaries between buildings and between city-blocks and roads, was the project’s focus. In 2024, the boundaries topic between private properties and public space is confirmed as the most promising. Pushing us to continue in that direction.

Public and private

Until a few years ago, the shape insula I 17 of could rightly be regarded as ‘assolutamente sui generis’ (Varone 1991-1992: 202). The new stratigraphic investigations in *Regio V* have brought to light a similar situation: at the Vicolo dei Balconi and Vicolo delle Nozze d’Argento’ crossroad a sort of small square housing a fountain, a cistern and a piezometric tower (Comegna, Corbino, Mar-

⁵ Although the Archaeological Report does not explicit mention, several clues make it likely that the two interventions are related to it.

tellone 2021: 134 fig. 1). In our case, the silence of the 1958-1959 excavation reports and visual documentation had already been partly compensated for by a fortuitous, and for us fortunate, event (Varone 1991-1992: 202-203). In 1990, a large sinkhole at that location and the consequent inspection – albeit partial and in emergency – revealed a “vasta e profonda cavità sotterranea”, perhaps a “collettore di acque”, that is a water storage, and a well above it, complete with a reed mat covering: the latter, according to A. Varone, evidently placed over the pit’s mouth before obliteration, to avoid a long and laborious filling operation (ibid.: 202). Such an accidental discovery of two important hydraulic artefacts (a well and, probably, a cistern) in the open space outside the *insula* clarified the reasons for the anomaly in the city-block’s shape, conditioned by the need to respect an area equipped with infrastructures and services of collective interest. Not the same for its chronology, nor the artefacts biography: was that public space pre-existing the definition of the block, or was it the result of the same urban development? Was the well non-functioning and obliterated as early as 79, and thus covered by a reed mat, as proposed? Or, instead, was it provisionally protected by a reed mat because it was still in use in 79? The first stratigraphic investigation (2021), although it has confirmed the nature of this area as a space never built, unfortunately did not provide any answers to such questions (Coralini 2022: 189). The discovery in undisturbed levels of a lead fistula south to north oriented and placed after the Tiberius’ era recommends investigating the entire small square.

Kitchen and leisure gardens

Until 2022, the only known garden in ‘our’ block was the one identified in the pseudo-peristyle of the *Casa degli Archi* by Jashemski in 1975. The ways of that investigation leaves open a no secondary question, as to chronology of its topiary arrangement: was the garden in use in 79 AD, and contemporary with the *hortus pictus* on the north wall of the pseudo-peristyle? Or did it belong to an earlier phase of the building complex’ life? Such a question, taken into consideration from the beginning, was re-proposed by the results of the stratigraphic investigation in room (10) to the north (2022). In addition to confirming the nature of the space in 79 – an open and unbuilt area – the excavation yielded root cavities of medium-size plants, traceable to the last phase of use, and a ritual ditch (Coralini 2024: 116 fig. 9, 117 fig. 13, 119). According to our current working hypoth-



Fig. 6. Pompeii I 17, the street to the east. (Vesuviana Programme, Pompeii Project 1998-, C. Imperatore, 2022).

esis, the *Casa degli Archi* had in 79 two neighboring green spaces, both still cultivated: one, ornamental, in the small pseudo-peristyle; the other, larger and productive, behind the *hortus pictus* wall. To further investigate that scenario, through stratigraphic excavation in the still unearthened part in room 10, and to the north, in building unit I 17, 3, is among the priorities of the coming years.

Biography of a peristyle

Thanks to renewed interest in peristyles in Roman domestic architecture, the pseudo-peristyle of the *Casa degli Archi* (I 17, 4) has also recently experienced some success in the literature (Simelius 2022: 128). As a result, not only its rarity at Pompeii has been confirmed, but moreover our case can be studied in the framework a much better-defined context. Investigating it in detail, to clarify the sequence of actions that produced the current state, is among our priorities. Even a preliminary examination reveals that the 79’s layout – with only two porticos and a false portico – had been preceded

by a true peristyle, restructured more than once and finally resized as part of a more general renovation. To better understand the stages of this process, stratigraphic investigations in the two porticos and in the rooms south of the current entrance are on the agenda for the coming years.

Streets and sidewalks

Much has been written on the traffic system in Pompeii by E.E. Poehler (2017), at the same time that N. Raposo Gutierrez (2018) was tackling the issue of the public spaces delimitation, while C. Saliou (1999) had already dedicated an illuminating essay to the Pompeian sidewalks. The state of the art is ready for developing the investigation of an urban component that is among the least considered at Pompeii: the street, in its physical evidence, from the first trace to the last floor. Although there is no lack of contributions on specific cases, in the context of projects focused on other issues⁶, the archaeology of the street is in Pompeii a largely unexplored research path. Our journey in that direction, which began with a plugged door in the insula's eastern boundary at room 10 and a paved ramp at that (2021), continued with sidewalks different in execution technique, quality and chronology (2022-2024), boundary markers (2022, 2024) (fig. 6), rubble dumps (2023) and evacuation conduits from adjacent buildings (2024). In that complex palimpsest, investigating the making of the street is the absolute priority for the coming years.

Through the back streets

In our interpretation of archaeology of the street, focus will continue to be on the back streets, often left to the self-management of individuals: the ones where abuses against private property or public space were more frequent, and where rubble and waste could more easily accumulate on the carriageway and sidewalks. At the time, perhaps, realms of neglect; for us, mines of evidence on the lived and shared spaces of a community over time.

Institutions involved

Archaeological Park of Pompeii (I).

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⁶ Among the most recent, see the paper presenting the results of new excavations in the Regio V's 'cuneo'.

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