

Murecine (Pompeii): Architecture, Décor and Aesthetics of a *statio negotiatorum* from the Early Imperial Period

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The building known as Edificio A dei Triclinii or Hospitium Sulpicii was discovered at about 600 meters south of Pompeii's Stabian Gate in modern Murecine (o Moregine),¹ an area once corresponding to the lagoon harbour on the Sarno River mouth.² It was excavated for the first time in 1959 during the construction of the Napoli-Salerno motorway between Castellammare and Angri and again from 1999 to 2000 on the occasion of the expansion of the motorway. The two-storey Julio-Claudian building (now reburied) comprised a porticus triplex with some seven triclinia (only A-B-C fully explored) lavishly decorated with marble and superb IV-Style frescoes (AD 62–68) opening on a viridarium with a euripus; a huge kitchen; a bath complex under construction; a dock onto the river with stunning visual perspectives over the riverine landscape and *Stabiae's* bay (fig. 1). Textual evidence there retrieved revealed that from at least AD 62 the Sulpicii, wealthy bankers and traders originally from *Puteoli* involved in financial business throughout the Mediterranean, were the owners.³ Moreover, it emerged that in AD 79 the building was undergoing renovation with the addition of the bath complex to be decorated with imported 'Greco Scritto' marble (some 160 ready-to-use slabs were stacked in the kitchen). Since its discovery, scholars have variously interpreted the building's function, chronology and its fresco cycles (representing Apollo and the Muses, Apollo and Dionysus, Helen and the Dioscuri) coming to divergent,

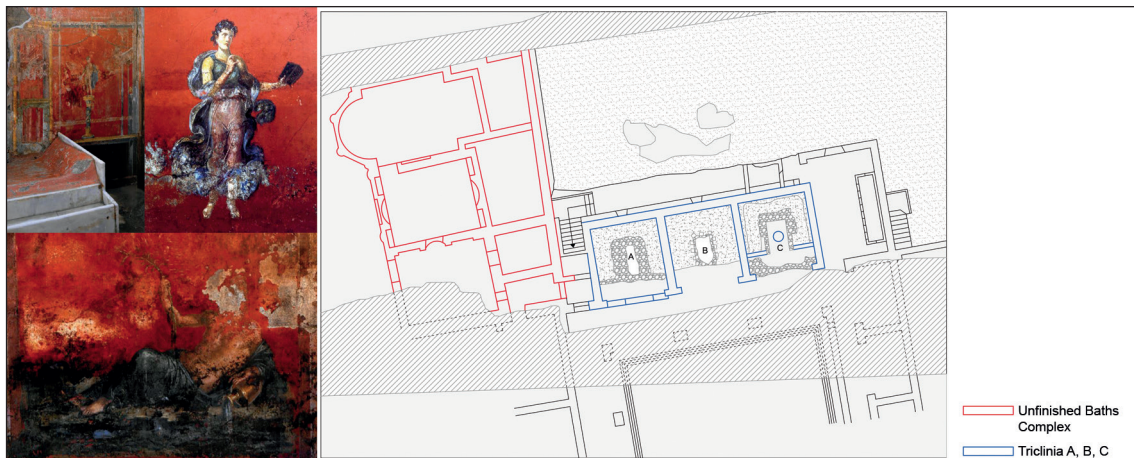


Fig. 1: Left: details of one of the triclinia ('C') and painted decoration: a Muse (triclinium 'A') and the personification of the Sarno river (triclinium 'C'); right: plan of the excavated portion of the Murecine complex.

often mutually exclusive conclusions.⁴ The layout and location exclude the hypothesis of a private building: this finely-decorated complex, unparalleled within its urbanscape, certainly was a high standard public structure at the core of an intense production and distribution network between the river, Pompeii and its neighbouring sites (the *pagus maritimus*). The evidence provided by the excavated portion alone strongly points in the direction of a “5-star” *hospitium* or *statio negotiatorum* for a high-ranking clientele, such as commercial agents.⁵ The several facilities, waterworks and fine decoration contributed to the general aesthetic design, which ought to be proportional to function and clientele (fig. 2). Reference to the economic role and significance of the building in the trading business within the riverine landscape can be found in the choice of the painted imagery, which had a deep semiotic value: the personification of the Sarno River as a symbol of wealth; Mercury, the patron of commerce; the Dioscuri, the protectors of sailing and sailors, but also symbols of the *equites* and Augustales;⁶ Apollo and the Muses to emphasise the fineness of the setting; Dionysius and the Maenads, symbolic allusions to the role of wine as central to business interaction and conviviality but also to the region’s prosperous trade. The presence of a suburban sanctuary dedicated to Dionysus on the opposite river bank, in modern Sant’Abbondio, further testifies to the local cult and the importance of wine and viticulture. The frescoes were made by the renowned Vettii workshop known from many Pompeian public buildings and private elite houses.⁷ The site, with its views, architecture and décor, which would have stimulated visitors’ sensorial perceptions, must have represented an ideal stage to shape, induce and encourage social and business-oriented interaction. Recently excavated urban and suburban production and trade sites across the ager Vesuvianus in fact show that, despite the devastating AD 62 earthquake, the local economy, particularly wine production, thrived with an unprecedented vigour.⁸ It can be thus plausibly argued that the building’s significant decorative programme, substantiated by the choice of the finest painters first and costly imported ‘Greco Scritto’ marble (quite a novelty in the early Flavian period) to further aestheticize it, was driven by its wealthy owners’ will to affirm and re-launch the building’s prestige in a booming economic climate.

Notes

¹ De Simone – Nappo 2000.

² Scarano Ussani 2005.

³ Camodeca 2005.

⁴ Torelli 2005; Mastroberto 2003; Nappo 2008.

⁵ Ruiz de Arbulo-Bayona 2017.

⁶ Torelli – Marroni 2016.

⁷ Esposito 2017.

⁸ Guzzo – Guidobaldi 2008.

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Fig. 1: Left: after De Simone – Nappo 2000, 37 figs. 84. 192 with modifications; right: after De Simone – Nappo 2000, 35 fig. 1 with modifications.

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