

THE RECOVERED *TYMPANUM* OF *CUBICULUM* 11 AT VILLA A (“OF POPPEA”) AT OPLONTIS (TORRE ANNUNZIATA, ITALY): A NEW DOCUMENT FOR THE STUDY OF CITY WALLS

(Taf. CLXXI, Abb. 1–4)

Abstract

Il cubicolo undici della Villa A ad Oplontis contiene una delle poche raffigurazioni di mura civiche romane. Nonostante la notorietà della villa e dei suoi schemi decorativi, l'affresco risulta poco studiato nel corpo di immagini che raffigurano mura cittadine e paesaggi urbani. Queste rappresentazioni forniscono preziosi indizi su come i romani percepivano le città ed il ruolo delle fortificazioni nel loro immaginario. Questo contributo mette a confronto l'esempio di Oplontis con altre più famose rappresentazioni di città, come l'affresco recentemente rinvenuto nel criptoportico sotto le terme di Traiano a Roma. Inoltre l'affresco sembra appartenere ad un più diffuso gruppo di immagini coeve ritrovate nei mosaici pavimentali di Pompei e nei rilievi decorativi inseriti in recinzioni funerarie diffuse in Campania e nel centro Italia.

Oggi l'affresco è molto consumato e sbiadito fino a risultare quasi completamente indecifrabile. Due fotografie in bianco e nero recentemente recuperate, e un disegno realizzato al momento del ritrovamento nel 1967, sono le uniche testimonianze del suo stato originale. Ubicato nel timpano soprastante all'alcova nord dell'ambiente undici, l'affresco raffigura una scena di porto con numerose figure ed edifici. Un muro difensivo, caratterizzato da torri quadrate equidistanti, incornicia la scena. Gli studiosi hanno caratterizzato la scena come un paesaggio nilotico appartenente alla tipologia di scene di porto idilliche che si affermarono nel secondo stile pittorico.

Lo stile maturò in un periodo particolarmente movimentato nella storia romana. Ciò nonostante, l'espansione romana nella penisola italiana risultò, come ha descritto P. ZANKER, nella creazione di un ideale urbano di riflesso alla potenza di Roma. Le rappresentazioni di mura civiche nell'arte romana sembrano associate alla realizzazione di queste simboliche realtà urbane ma possono anche essere collegate, come l'esempio dell'affresco nel cubicolo 11, ad elementi apotropaici connessi alla protezione degli spazi o di edifici nei quali si trovavano.

The *tympanum* of the north alcove in *cubiculum* 11 at Villa A (“of Poppaea”), Torre Annunziata, presents one of the few representations of city walls known from Roman antiquity (see Abb. 1 in J. CLARKE’s article). Today the fresco is nearly illegible due to significant paint losses since its discovery (Abb. 1). As a result, previous publications show discrepant drawings derived from the surviving imagery and sketches made at the time of excavation¹. In 2008, dott.ssa G. STEFANI of the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei rediscovered two black-and-white photographs of the fresco taken shortly after its excavation in 1967 (Abb. 2 and 3). The images reveal lost details and puts to rest some of the discrepancies found in the published drawings. Despite the notoriety of the villa and its decorative ensembles, this fresco remains unstudied within the corpus of images representing city walls and urban landscapes. Past publications have defined the scene in terms of Nilotic landscapes and the idyllic harbour scenes emerging within the Second Style². The image is

¹ The two published drawings are radically different. For example, while J. CLARKE shows a round tower attached to a gate on the far right, A. BARBET prefers to depict an unassociated square building. The recovered photographs, however, validate the accuracy of J. CLARKE’s rendition. Barbet 1985, 60 fig.29; Clarke 1991, 177 fig. 50; Clarke 1996, 92 fig. 12.

² Clarke 1996, 93.

also one of the earliest known Roman painted representations of city walls and, as such, forms a key to our understanding of these structures within Roman visual culture.

The fresco depicts a fortified harbour scene opening up behind two facing piers populated by 15 figures in various attitudes (Abb. 4). The architectural elements dominate much of the composition despite their small size relative to the figures. Three buildings occupy most of the left pier: a low portico, a Doric doorway, and a large round fortified tower. On the right pier a tetrastyle temple nestles behind a large city gate featuring a simple post-and-lintel construction with three merlons above. A faded building, possibly a round tower, stands left of the opening while a square tower rises on the right, creating a curiously asymmetrical gate. In the background a series of towers with interconnecting curtain walls defines the fortified harbour. As if to emphasize their relative distance, the artist uses rather quick brushstrokes to define the walls, resulting in an inconsistent level of detail and a sloppy use of perspective. A brief stretch of curtain wall precedes the first square tower on the left where a rather clumsy juncture between the curtain wall and the tower compromises the realism of the fortification. The artist depicts this and all other towers in three-quarter view to suggest perspectival recession toward the centre of the scene. The next tower marks the end of the fortification as an inlet opens up toward a colonnade in the background. Further towers and a possible faint section of a fortification wall dot the promontories behind the shoreline. Three more towers and adjoining wall curtains similarly define the inlet and extent of the harbour on the right. The junctions between the towers and the curtains in this section of fortification are much more convincing. Nevertheless, the artist shows little concern for correct perspective as the height of the curtain walls on the left is far greater than on the right. Also, the unrealistic size ratio between the fishermen and the architecture, as elsewhere in the composition, further suggests a lack of interest in proportions. The fortifications appear rather monolithic with no indication of their construction technique and there is little consistency in details. For example, the tower marking the right inlet has a single arrowslit as opposed to a minimum of two on the others. The faded state of the fresco makes further evaluation of the details difficult, but the number of merlons/crenellations in the various curtain wall sections seems more consistent.

The period around 50 BC, when the villa owner commissioned the fresco, is a particularly tumultuous one in Roman history. At the turn of the century Rome struggled against the *Cimbri* and *Teutones* in northern Italy and the unrest continued almost unabated into the conflicts of the Social War and the dying Republic. Nevertheless, many cities engaged in fervent building activity throughout the century. In the first decades local magistrates of some twenty Italian cities built or refurbished urban fortifications with the number rising to thirty-five at its close³. Under *Augustus* city walls acquired an almost monumental function within the program of civic renewal at the close of the century sweeping the Italian peninsula⁴. The new towering structures and massive investments related to fortifications translated into city walls appearing in a variety of media including fresco, reliefs, and mosaics.

J. CLARKE describes the scene in *cubiculum* 11 as unusual because of its placement and composition⁵. He identifies a precedent for the architectural and figural types in the Nilotic landscape from Palestrina, and compares the painting at Oplontis to similar Second-Style harbour landscapes in the *atrium* of the Villa of the Mysteries and in the fauces of the Samnite House in Herculaneum. The popularity of such scenes reflects the notion of *otium* in the villa lifestyle developing in the Bay of Naples, where new man-made harbours also served as metaphors for refuge and security⁶.

Simple representations of city walls appear in the early 3rd century BC Esquiline tomb of *Fabius* or *Fannius*⁷ and in the Augustan fresco recovered from the tomb of *Statilius*⁸. In the first example at least one scene shows a simple monolithic wall with merlons representing a city. In the second soldiers build a city wall in

³ Gabba 1972, 108–110; Jouffroy 1986, 25.

⁴ Richmond 1933, 172; Ward-Perkins 1976, 171–175; Zanker 1988, 328; Gros 1992, 218.

⁵ Clarke 1996, 93.

⁶ Bergmann 1991, 49 f.; Clarke 1996, 93.

⁷ The fresco fragment from the tomb of *Fabius* or *Fannius* in Rome depicts city walls in two scenes of the four surviving registers. The image has generated considerable debate on its date, the characters involved, and the commissioner of the tomb. The specifics need not concern us here. Suffice it to say that the fresco dates to the 1st half of the 3rd century BC. Coarelli 1973, 171–176; La Rocca 1984, 31–59; Coarelli 1990, 206–208; Moormann 2001, 101.

⁸ Borda 1958, 4; Sanzi di Mino 1983, 163–164; Brilliant 1984, 30; Cappelli 1998, 51–54; Moormann 2001, 101.

two separate scenes symbolizing the foundation of *Lavinium* and *Alba Longa*⁹. In each image a goddess personifying the city looks upon workers toiling to build her wall. Strikingly, despite the well-attested rituals associated with urban foundations, including that of Rome itself¹⁰, the artist chooses to depict the founding act of the cities with the construction of their defences rather than any other symbolic moment.

Other more complicated renditions of city walls coincide with broader urban images such as the fresco depicting a city in a *cryptoporticus* beneath the Baths of Trajan in Rome¹¹. The fresco illustrates an ideal Roman city complete with characteristic monuments such as temples and theaters. Here the city walls feature prominently as part of the urban ideal¹². The fresco belongs to an evolving tradition of urban images of various types, including the harbour motif (e.g., *viridarium*, House of the Little Fountain; Fall of Icarus, House of *Sacerdos Amandus*), the Avezzano relief, and the fresco of the brawl at the amphitheatre of Pompeii¹³.

The fresco beneath the Baths of Trajan has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Yet, despite the detailed rendition it still resists, perhaps without coincidence, clear identification with a contemporary city¹⁴. Recently, scholars such as D. FAVRO and M. TORELLI discuss the appearance of city walls as part of the emergence of the image of the ideal city and as icons of settlements in Roman art¹⁵. D. FAVRO in particular associates the image beneath Trajan's baths with a broader definition of how municipalities could flourish under the benevolence of Roman hegemony. On a similar note, M. TORELLI connects the image with the tradition of triumphal art where victorious generals depicted their conquests on large painted panels carried in the processions. Finally, E. LA ROCCA also associates the fresco with a cartographic tradition where the depiction actually performed a highly descriptive and symbolic function¹⁶.

Such a vocabulary seems to arise from a broader definition of settlements as Rome consolidated her grip over the Italian peninsula. P. ZANKER describes the changing environment including the installation of colonies, roads, sanctuaries, tombs, and monuments as a reflection of a new ideal establishing order on the landscape. The Avezzano relief in particular, with its depiction of a city and its walls dominating the newly developed landscape, highlights the formation of the new order¹⁷. Such civic representations, therefore, seem to fall within a wider trend of establishing an urban model; the prominence of city walls in these depictions underscores their association with the image of the ideal city in Roman art.

In other media, the theme of city walls also gains popularity in black-and-white mosaics during the 1st century BC. In the region of *Campania*, Pompeii alone holds six known examples at the Villas of Diomedes and *P. Fannius Synistor* and the Houses of the Menander, *M. Caesius Blandus*, the Centenary, and the Boar¹⁸. The depictions range from simple city gate motifs in the House of the *M. Caesius Blandus* to the elaborate wall systems surrounding labyrinths at the Villa of Diomedes. The first five examples are roughly contemporary with the Oplontis fresco¹⁹, suggesting that they form a broader trend within city wall representations. Views on the meaning of these mosaics vary considerably with explanations ranging from mere decorative motifs, to explicit emblems of *romanitas*²⁰, or as reflections of the Minotaur myth. In a more prac-

⁹ R. BRILLIANT places these images within the wider pictorial sequence depicting the mythological foundation of Rome where the images effectively condensed the story into a frieze. Brilliant 1984, 30.

¹⁰ In particular the *sulcus primigenius* ritual, an Etruscan rite adopted by the Romans, involving augurs taking *auspices* and tracing the course of the *pomerium* using a plow pulled by an ox and a bull. The city walls often closely followed this course. Rykwert 1988, 132–138.

¹¹ La Rocca 2000, 57–61.

¹² The fresco depicts an ideal city from a birds' eye perspective. The city walls, rendered in detailed isodomic masonry and equidistant towers, dominate much of the composition and frame the city inside. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the artist gives the towers uniquely associated with the city gates bell-shaped roofs similar to those of the *Statilii* tomb.

¹³ La Rocca 2000, 61–68; Clarke 2003, 152–158.

¹⁴ La Rocca 2001, 123; Favro 2006, 26.

¹⁵ Favro 2006, 26; Torelli 2006, 172 f.

¹⁶ La Rocca 2000, 59; La Rocca 2001, 123.

¹⁷ Zanker 2000, 31.

¹⁸ Ling 2005, 56–58; Iorio 2007, 290.

¹⁹ Iorio 2007, 289 f.

²⁰ Lavagne 1987, 135–143.

tical reevaluation, V. Iorio defines these mosaics as apotropaic metaphors of protection and safety for visitors entering the confines of the house²¹.

Such a protective and boundary-defining concept translates naturally from the primary defensive role of city walls. A series of unique late Republican miniature funerary reliefs, found mostly in *Campania* and central Italy, further elucidates this notion²². The reliefs separately depict the typical monumental city gates and towers, such as those of Torino and Spello, appearing in Italy during the Augustan program of civic renewal²³. Although most examples are now without context, they probably appeared together in tomb enclosures to mimic the city walls that were often located nearby. Such precincts symbolically separated the dead from the living and perhaps signaled the social status of the tomb owners as freedmen strongly identifying with citizenship and the city²⁴.

It seems evident that city walls sustained multivalent roles and meanings in Roman art. Beyond their obvious military character, they defined boundaries between rational and irrational forces, and came to symbolize peace, security, and protection as a projection of Roman power. The Oplontis fresco seems to fit into the peaceful and protective categories expressed in floor mosaics and other harbour scenes. The eye-level perspective and prominence of city walls at Oplontis suggests a similar secondary conceptual element of safeguarding individuals rather than simply reflecting an urban ideal. In this context, a fortified harbour scene seems hardly out of place in the relatively secluded quarters of a *cubiculum* overlooking the sea.

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²¹ Iorio 2007, 289.

²² Hesberg 1992, 63–65.

²³ See Kähler 1942, 1–108.

²⁴ Rebecchi 1978, 153–166; Hesberg 1992, 63.

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Abbildungen

Abb. 1: The *tympalum* of the northern alcove in *cubiculum* 11 in June 2010 (photo adapted from P. BARDAGJY original, Courtesy of the Oplontis Project Archives)

Abb. 2: Recovered photograph of the *cubiculum* 11 *tympalum*, taken during the excavations of 1967 (Courtesy of the Oplontis Project Archives)

Abb. 3: Recovered photograph of the north (left) and east (right) alcoves of *cubiculum* 11, taken during the 1967 excavations (Courtesy of the Oplontis Project Archives)

Abb. 4: Drawing of the *tympalum* in *cubiculum* 11 (Courtesy J. R. CLARKE, Clarke 1991, 177 fig. 50)

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