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Ivo van der Graaff, Assistant Professor of Art & Art History, COLA travels to Italy

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UNH Global

Ivo van der Graaff

Assistant Professor of Art & Art History, COLA - Italy

In late May and early June, I travelled to Italy to participate in the Oplontis Project in my role as the director of excavations. The project investigates two structures known as Villa A and B buried by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE. Villa A is a UNESCO world heritage site open to visits by the public located in the modern town of Torre Annunziata. In antiquity, it was a luxury villa dedicated to the leisure of the Roman elite. Villa B, located just nearby, was a wine distribution center and a small settlement that remains closed to the public. The two sites were excavated over the course of several decades between the 1960s and early 1990s but they remain virtually unpublished. Our mission is to record and publish the excavated sites.

I have been part of this project since 2006, but it began in 2005 under the direction of John Clarke and Michael Thomas at the University of Texas at Austin. It first focused on the full publication of Villa A that is now nearing completion. The publication has already involved the efforts of 46 scholars who represent disciplines as diverse as chemistry and art history from universities worldwide. As part of this effort, the publications are 'born digital', which means that the project uses digital tools



Jenny Muslin and Lillie Leone working to catalog amphorae in the garden of Oplontis villa A

in order to maximize the amount of information we can publish on the structures. This is a three-pronged approach: open access e-books, an online database, and a fully navigable 3D model of the villas; each of these individual elements will interconnect as a single publication on the web.



(l. to r.) Michael Thomas, Ivo van der Graaff, and Paul Wilkinson stand next to an open trench in the courtyard of Oplontis B

archaeological field techniques to volunteers and university students under the direction of trained professionals. This experience has taught me how to explain the materials to students at UNH. Our goal is to understand the history of the two structures, which we now know spanned roughly 200 years before the eruption of 79 CE. Since modern excavations have tended to focus on uncovering the remains left behind by the eruption of Vesuvius, we still know relatively little of how the area developed in the previous centuries. This past season we recovered clear evidence that the complex at Oplontis B experienced at least five phases of development prior to the eruption. Our work offers an unprecedented window in the development of the Roman Bay of Naples outside of the better-known sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum. This was a particularly critical period of expansion, development, and social turmoil as Rome transitioned from Republic to Empire in the Mediterranean.

Since 2012, we have turned our attention to Villa B. So far, the complex has yielded an exceptional amount of information, including organic finds and about 1400 amphorae used in the transport of wine. Their ongoing study sheds light on ancient trade routes and the economy of Pompeii. The project is also recording a series of small houses in the complex: ordinary living quarters as opposed to the extravagant luxury of the neighboring Villa A.

I direct the excavations component of the project together with Dr. Paul Wilkinson who founded the Kent Archaeological Field School (UK). Through this program, we teach

In addition to my work at Oplontis, I used my time in Italy to do photography and finalize some research for my forthcoming book on the city walls of Pompeii. My work focuses on how the fortifications shaped the image of Pompeii during the 500 years of their existence. In addition to visiting the sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum I also travelled to the burial grounds of the ancient Etruscan town of Cerveteri near Rome. My primary aim was to study the construction techniques used in the famous “tumuli,” Etruscan burial mounds used between the 8th and the 6th centuries BCE. The development of these structures in antiquity sheds new light on the genesis of construction techniques in ancient Italy.



A surviving Tumulus Tomb in the Ancient Burial Grounds of Cerveteri



Boxes of finds recovered from the trenches await cataloging and storage for further study in the next few seasons

Both the continuing work of the project and the ongoing excavations help to develop my teaching and research goals. In the field, I acquire the invaluable skills to understand the development of Roman architecture through first hand exposure to different construction techniques. The same applies to understanding Roman painting, mosaics and other artifacts. It is only by seeing such examples that one can effectively describe and teach them. Through my visits to neighboring sites such as Pompeii and Herculaneum, I have gained a better understanding of these two towns and the Bay of Naples in antiquity. These aspects are an integral part of my book project that looks at the long-term social and urban development of Pompeii throughout its 700-year history. At Oplontis we are scheduled to publish these structures over the next few years. The final volumes will enrich the field of ancient art and architecture by tracing the development of Roman luxury and commercial structures on the ancient Bay of Naples. All told, this trip has allowed me to strengthen my teaching and research goals for the next few years at UNH.

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