

New Excavations at VIII.7.1-15, Pompeii: A brief synthesis of results from the 2005 season

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In July and August of 2005, the Pompeii Archaeological Research Project: *Porta Stabia* (PARP:PS) completed its first season of excavations at VIII.7.1-15, Pompeii. PARP:PS is a collaborative project under the direction of Steven Ellis (University of Michigan) and Gary Devore (Stanford University). The project has planned a total of six seasons of excavations with the aim of understanding the structural and occupational history of the *insula*, from its earliest origins through to 79 CE. With a program of selective excavation, structural analysis, and geophysical survey, PARP:PS aims to produce a complete archaeological analysis and assessment of the shops, workshops, inns, and houses at VIII.7.1-15 (figs. 1-2). We are particularly interested in the development of the structural and spatial relationship between public and private space in the Roman city.

Previously, little archaeological research had been carried out in this area. The buildings were first cleared in the 1870s¹. Further removal of the volcanic debris occurred in the early 20th century². More recently, some general cleaning and conservation work on the standing architecture was carried out in the early 1980s. No stratigraphic excavation or systematic study of the architectural and spatial arrangement had been made before the 2005 PARP:PS season.

The Directors selected for excavation what appeared to be three areas of distinct function (defined on the general basis of their structural arrangement): a retail space (Trench 3000); a dining area (Trench 2000); and an industrial area (Trench 1000). A fourth area around the *Porta Stabia* was also cleaned and recorded (Trench 4000; fig. 2). The choice of these areas enabled the Project to develop an initial and broad understanding of the entire *insula*, which up to that point had been entirely hidden by decades of dense vegetation growth, and to consider other potential areas of focus for future seasons.

This brief synthesis outlines the activities conducted by our Project in its first season and anticipates a more detailed journal publication of a season report. We believe it is vitally important for archaeologists to disseminate seasonal results through several media in a timely and regular manner.



Fig. 1. Overview of VIII.7.1-15 with the Via Stabiana



Fig. 2. Location of trenches in the 2005 season

¹ MAU 1875: 125-128; 163-170.

² SPANO 1910: 263-268.

Trench 3000

A large trench was opened in the front room (Room a) of VIII.7.9-10 (figs. 3-4). This trench occupied the southern half of the room and extended from the threshold to the southern doorway leading to the rear rooms of the property. Investigations were later extended in two small window trenches toward the northern wall of the room. Our motivation in opening Trench 3000 in this location was to pursue an overall understanding of the spatial arrangement of the *insula* in our first season. Confusion had always surrounded the number of street-side doorways into this particular property – and therefore of the entire *insula* – since some published plans show this retail front as having two separate entrances, while others have it with just a single entrance. Additionally, the location of this trench would help us to determine the property division between this shop-front at 9-10 with its neighbours to the north at 11-15, and those to the south at 7-8. Lastly, our aims included the recovery of the topographic and geological sequence of this part of the city. Outcrops of lava are visible today in the immediate vicinity directly opposite property 9-10, for example, at I.2.6, and along the perpendicular street between *insulae* I.1 and I.2. Any discovery of the same prehistoric flow of lava in VIII.7.1-15 would allow us to begin charting the entire developmental sequence of this corner of the city, from the first urban use of the land, through to the latest activities that led up to the 79 CE destruction. The same prehistoric flow of lava was indeed found within Trench 3000 and its discovery is of considerable significance to both our understanding of the natural topography of the area, and our identification of the earliest cultural sequences built atop it.

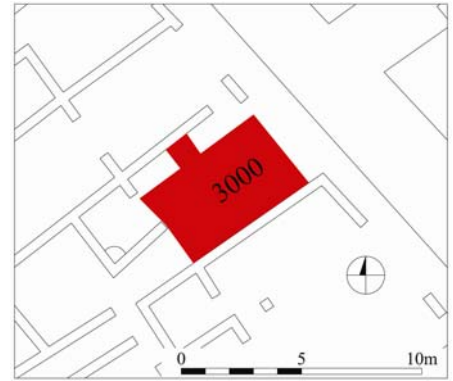


Fig. 3. Location of Trench 3000



Fig. 4. The shop at VIII.7.9-10, prior to investigations



Fig. 5. Circular tank feature at right

The earliest urban features included two tank-like structures, each built directly onto, and in parts into, the natural deposit of lava. One of these tanks, circular in shape and located in the centre of the room, was characterised by a wide mouth with hydraulic plaster lining a masonry structure (fig. 5). The other tank was rectangular and located along the inside of the front threshold to the property (fig. 6). It was equally constructed with masonry rubble and lined with hydraulic plaster. At the end of their effective operation, each tank was filled with rubble, and the floor level raised for the following phase of activities (incorporating the same sequence of rubble fill as with the tanks).

The uppermost levels of Trench 3000 were very ephemeral and largely destroyed by modern vegetation, as the latest ancient layers were only 20 cm below the modern surface. Additionally, the very nature of these levels made them less likely to survive since they were simple beaten earth surfaces and fills that were either disturbed by the earliest excavators, or damaged by modern vegetation. In spite of these problems, some features survived in part. For example, a drain running from the south-west doorway toward the threshold and out to the street was associated with the final phase of activities in this room (fig. 7). The outflow of this drain was blocked, although it was not possible to determine exactly when the drain went out of use. Our clearance of the threshold area proved fruitful to our understanding of the later phases, revealing two distinct doorways. A wide retail entrance dominated the northern side of the façade, and a small entrance at the southern side probably gave access to a staircase to an upper floor (fig. 6). We may now say with certainty that 15 doorways opened onto the various properties under investigation in this *insula*.

Future seasons will add to the developing interpretation of this area of the *insula*. At this early stage, we remain curious as to why so few phases of changing activity can be detected in this area. Our investigations will also seek to provide dating information for the partition wall that defines the southern limits of this property and possibly a larger



Fig. 6 Large rectangular tank inside the threshold. Note the two separate entrances to the property: a wide retail opening together with a narrower entrance (at top of photo) to a possible flight of stairs

complex of shops (connected with this one) to the north. The drain that cut through the room will be of considerable importance in future seasons, as its discovery in adjacent areas – particularly to the west – will help to link any phases of activity over a broader area of the property and *insula*, as well as help to define sequences of associated architectural construction. Of great interest is the doorway to the west of Trench 3000 that punctures the southern partition wall of the property to give access toward the dining areas associated with Trench 2000. The excavation of this area will provide the necessary information to link the activities and spaces between Trenches 3000 and 2000.

Trench 2000

Trench 2000 covered much of the dining and food preparation areas in the rear of property 9-10 (figs. 8 and 12). PARP:PS excavated this area with the hope of delineating the *triclinium* and its associated features, already known to us from the few surviving archival images of the *insula*, and to measure the extent of the modern damage to these structures. The general location of these features was indicated on the SAP AutoCAD plan, and from a series of three photographs held in the photographic archive of the SAP. Another aim was to recognise the structural and spatial relationship between the back-ends of these properties with the construction of the large *quadriporticus* to the west.

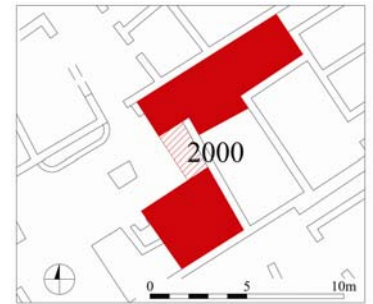


Fig. 7. Location of Trench 2000

The removal of the modern and humus layers revealed a *triclinium* in a very poor state of preservation (figs. 9-10). None of its decorative treatment (visible in the archival photos) survived, and much of the eastern arm of the structure had fallen into a cistern that had collapsed below, during or shortly after the 79 CE eruption). The creation of the modern toilet facilities in the *quadriporticus* had caused further severe damage to this area with the associated cesspit and an overflow pit destroying all of the deposits associated with the remainder of this space. The extent of this damage inhibited the results of excavations around the *triclinium*.

Nevertheless, some preliminary observations may be made about two apparent phases. Much less is known of the earlier phases of activity in Trench 2000, largely because the areas of excavation were so heavily destroyed by the creation of the modern cesspit. We were able to identify just a single earlier phase. The collapsed cistern under the *triclinium* had been cut into the natural volcanic soils. The digging of the large trench for the creation of the modern cesspit had also destroyed much of the remains of a tank against the north wall of the trench (fig. 11). This tank was at least earlier than the latest phases associated with the *triclinium*, and might have related to the ancient cistern. The natural sequence of volcanic soils into which the cistern was cut were redeposited, possibly to level the terrain, and it is onto this surface that the *triclinium* would later be constructed.



Fig. 8. Drain cutting west to east through the room

The *triclinium*, a series of water collection and storage features, and a food preparation area characterise the latest phase in Trench 2000. The walls of the *triclinium* were of simple rubblework construction, and built directly over a beaten earth surface. The outside face of the structure was built first, and the interior core of rubble added before the entire *triclinium* was faced with decorative plaster. Only the eastern half of the *triclinium* was uncovered in Trench 2000, along with the eastern part of the table that filled the interior U-shaped space. The rectangular table or



Fig. 9. Triclinium and cooking area prior to excavation



Fig. 10. Eastern half of triclinium in ruinous condition

storage facility that once occupied the centre of the room, as illustrated in the photographic archive, is today entirely lost (fig. 12).

A small semi-circular basin projected from the north wall, opposite the *triclinium* (fig. 13). The basin was also of the final phase, and collected water from a spout that protruded from the wall. A lip of decorative plaster projected above the spout, in which two iron nails remain visible. These nails perhaps supported some type of decorative feature, and it is easy to imagine, for example, a theatrical mask hanging over the spout so that water poured through its open mouth and into the basin. The basin was not equipped with any form of drainage in its bottom, but instead it is likely that it operated as a settling tank and that overflow drained from its upper level directly along the north wall in an eastward direction and through the *in situ* pipe in the low partition wall. This pipe fed another small basin, which itself gave onto the mouth of a very well preserved cistern (fig. 14). Given the frequent seismic activity at Pompeii, it is very rare to find a completely intact cistern in such excellent condition. Its size (approximately 2m deep, 1.5m wide, and 7m long) indicates that a considerable supply of water was held here and that some provision was made to keep the water fresh with a series of settling tanks. Indeed the cistern appears to have had, at some stage, a second entrance for water cut into its southern end, although it was blocked in antiquity. Repairs had been carried out on the cistern in antiquity with smears and patches of lime mortar applied over several cracks (fig. 15).

A food preparation area and cooking hearth were located further to the east of the cistern, along with a waste disposal chute (fig. 16). However, given the time expended by our team on the *triclinium* area during the early weeks of the campaign, these features await investigation in future seasons.



Fig. 11. Only the north wall of the tank survives



Fig. 12. Masonry table to the north of the triclinium. This feature is totally destroyed (After Stefani 2005: 102)



Fig. 13. Semi-circular basin at left of image, with small settling tank at far right



Fig. 14. Cistern head with kitchen facilities behind



Fig. 15. Southern end of the cistern. Note the patching on the wall at left



Fig. 16. Cooking feature with waste facility at rear

Trench 1000

At the south-eastern corner of the *insula*, at entrance 1, PARP:PS carried out excavations in a large open area (figs. 17-18). The goal was to explore the foundations of the long, southernmost property wall of the *insula*, to investigate the developmental sequence of the space, and to examine and record several industrial features that were visible at the surface level.

Although many plans of this part of the city show what appears to be an open doorway or window in this southern property wall, we found there was no indication of such an aperture, and this is probably an often repeated error or misrepresentation of the doorway that once led from the *Via Stabiana* to the fortifications of the city wall. Modern disturbances and vegetation prevented us from securing a solid date for the construction of this important wall, the southern boundary of the *insula*, but its western section will be investigated next season and an undisturbed section of the wall's foundation can probably be recovered.

Three tanks and a *dolium* base were found installed against the northern wall of the front room of this property (fig. 19). Several previous plans of the area had not recorded this evidence of ancient industrial activity, so we carried out careful documentation and controlled excavation. It was not possible to discern what industrial activity had actually taken place here, since the tanks and *dolium* base were very close to the modern surface and heavily damaged by modern vegetation and neglect, but samples of some hydraulic plaster still in situ will be analysed to see if any chemical residue can be recovered.

Several phases of the area's developmental sequence were defined. The earliest was glimpsed only with the remains of a small stone wall with hard-packed earthen foundations (fig. 20). It ran diagonally from north-west to south-east, but was completely disassociated from any other features in the area, as well as the latest alignment of the *Via Stabiana* and the general layout of the *insula*.

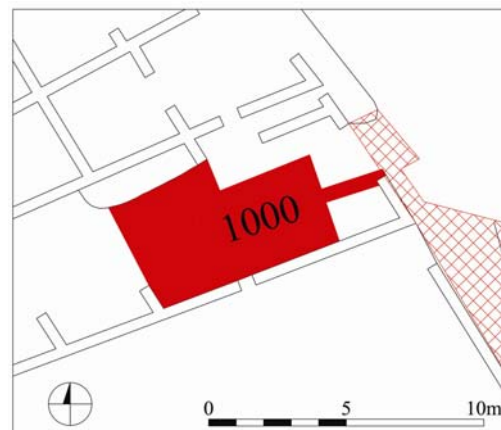


Fig. 17. Location of Trench 1000

Fig. 18. The southern property wall

This hard-packed earthen foundation was cut from above to install the large property wall delineating the southernmost border of *insula* VIII.7. It may have been at this time that the layout of the *insula* was oriented in this way, since there were no visible intervening developments between the earliest features found in this area and this long property wall. Pits dug from later levels obscured the exact relationships between this wall and the foundation, but the *insula*'s construction seems to date from this period.

With the construction of this southern property wall, several small rooms were built along the *Via Stabiana* immediately inside the *Porta Stabia* (fig. 21). The actual function of these rooms was not clear, but they probably only had simple earthen floors.

The small rooms were eventually knocked down, creating one large open space. The earthen floor level and threshold into the area were raised, and a ramp made of large lava stones was installed in the front of the property (fig. 22). This was probably the arrangement of the area at the time of the 79 CE eruption. This also seems to have been the time when the tanks and *dolium* base were installed, and industrial activity was carried out. August Mau³ originally identified this area as a stable accessible by horse and cart, with the tanks as water troughs. While the ramp undoubtedly enabled wheeled traffic to enter, the tanks do not look anything like water troughs visible elsewhere in the city. In addition, the tanks were built onto small elevated ramps, which would have made it difficult for any four-legged pack animal to manoeuvre close enough for a drink. These tanks were more

likely involved in the storing or mixing of liquids used in some industrial process. Stone counters at the rear of the property will be investigated in subsequent seasons to help clarify this picture of industrial activity.

³ MAU 1875: 126.



Fig. 19. The industrial tanks



Fig. 20. Hard-packed earthen foundations

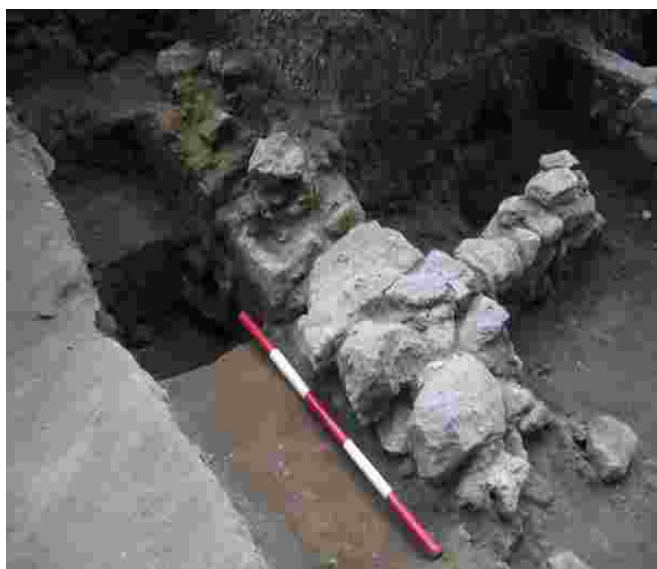


Fig. 21. Dividing walls for the small rooms



Fig. 22. Earthen surface of the large open space of Trench 1000

Trench 4000

To our knowledge a detailed plan of the features immediately inside the *Porta Stabia* had never been completed, so we cleared modern debris and accumulated sediment from a roughly triangular area near the gate (figs. 23-24). This cleaning and some small stratigraphic exploration enabled us to discern what appears to be two distinct phases in this area. The earliest had a public fountain in operation alongside of the *Via Stabiana* and next to the city fortifications while this entire area was originally completely open to the west (fig. 25). The fortifications (and an assumed rampart) were thus accessible from inside the city.

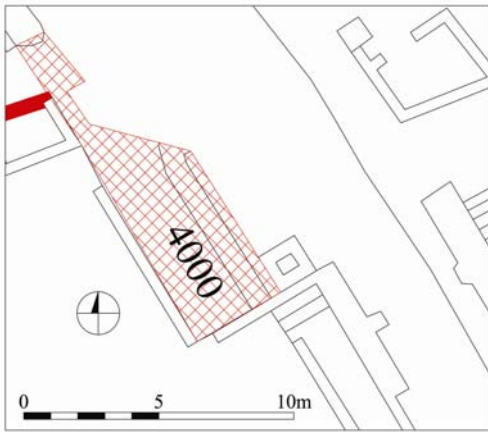


Fig. 23. Location of Trench 4000

Many stones seem to have been disturbed around the base of the fountain, allowing a glimpse at the construction of the *Via Stabiana*. This disturbance, which is probably modern, uncovered a small section of lead pipe that seems to have once emerged from under the paving stones of the street and led to the back of the fountain to supply it with water. The pipe was cut, and the length which fed the fountain removed; this might have occurred when this area was first cleared of volcanic debris in the 19th century. Investigations are too preliminary at this stage to say anything definitive about the construction of the *Via Stabiana* itself, but the cleaning has identified a promising area where deep excavation in future years can unlock the full urban sequence of this important road inside the city and its relationship with a major gate.

The fountain seems to have been accessible from three of its four sides in this first phase (fig. 26). Deep wear patterns on the top of the fountain walls suggest that those wishing to fill vessels with water from the fountain's mouth could lean over the northern, eastern, and western walls, and many people doing so over a prolonged period (with the additional

factor of the water) produced the wearing visible at the top of the stones (fig. 27). This ubiquitous activity, visible at virtually every fountain in Pompeii, here became a valuable piece of phasing information.

On the other side of the *Via Stabiana*, a small access road ran behind the rampart separating it from the properties to the north. It is quite possible that the same was true behind the fountain. This would mean that the *opus incertum* wall currently in place was not there in this early phase, and that the properties of *insula* VIII.7 terminated at the long wall bordering Trench 1000.

When the *incertum* wall (much altered and reconstructed in modern times) was eventually built between the fortification wall and Trench 1000, it restricted access to the fountain from the back. This wall was probably built to close off this small triangular plot of land and keep pedestrian traffic from the top of a large drain that was installed above ground level to the west of the fountain. This drain passed through the city's fortification wall and discharged its contents outside of the city. Since this is the lowest point of the plateau on which Pompeii is built, the drain must have been an attempt to regulate the enormous amount of waste and water washing down the *Via Stabiana*. A heavy rainstorm this season brought this need home to us, as the road became an impromptu river of silt and mud (fig. 28). The stones of the lower section of the *Via Stabiana* are much disturbed, and a modern steel and concrete ramp has been set down at the southern end of the *insula*, but the rainstorm showed how effective the Roman arrangements were in draining water from the southwest corner of the *Porta Stabia* out of the city without clogging the gate.

The drain was constructed of large upright stones of Sarno limestone set closely together to provide the drain's walls (fig. 29). These were once covered with plaster, the remains of which were still visible on the drain's smooth stone base. A continuous arched covering of lava stones once extended along the entire length of the exposed drain in this area, although only a small section of this survives today. Because of disturbance, it was not clear this year how water and waste were fed into the channel. Wall stones at the north end of the drain had been removed and paving stones were overturned, possibly in modern times. One small flight of stairs made of the same volcanic lava stones as the *Via Stabiana* led into the drain channel at its junction with the street, but the absence of water wear on the stones, and the general disturbed character of that section did not confirm that this was part of the drainage system, or if it was possibly an earlier course of the street paving seen in this disturbed area. A more detailed stratigraphic exploration of the sidewalks here and along the length of the *insula* in future years may provide more answers about the drains sequence and how it was associated with both the public *Via Stabiana* and the private properties of VIII.7.



Fig. 24. The triangular area of trench 4000 inside the *Porta Stabia*



Fig. 25. The fountain from the front



Fig. 26. The fountain from the side showing wear patterns



Fig. 27. Detail photo of wear on the rear wall of the fountain

A small doorway was built in the *incertum* wall to allow access to the road behind the fortification wall and rampart (blocked up in modern times to provide stability for the modern steel and concrete ramp). Further evidence for the phasing of this area was the fact that the northern side of this doorway showed that its threshold was cut into the already existing brick wall to the south of the doorway to Trench 1000. The southern side, however, showed no such accommodation, and therefore the *incertum* wall was apparently built with this fortification doorway planned in its construction.

The deep wear on the western wall of the fountain, mentioned earlier, suggests not only that the fountain and the drain belong to two distinct phases, but that a significant period of time separates them in order for the wearing to occur. The absence of any significantly deeper wear on the remaining two accessible sides of the fountain may possibly suggest that the drain belonged to the latest years of Pompeii's life before the eruption.

Future seasons will investigate in more detail the construction of the *Via Stabiana*, the operation of the drain at its northern end, its outflow on the outside of the fortification wall (with an environmental study of its accumulated deposits and waste), and how the *Porta Stabia* factors into this preliminary phasing of this area.



Fig. 28. The rainstorm, with water directed toward the drain



Fig. 29. Detail of drain arrangement

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