

## A Case of Mistaken Identity? The Conflation of Human and Divine in Villa A at Oplontis

The eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE buried not only urban sites such as Pompeii and Herculaneum but also countless rural estates owned by Roman elites. One such site is the so-called “Villa of Poppaea” located in ancient Oplontis. Excavations over the past 50 years, led first by the Soprintendenza of Naples and Pompeii and then by the University of Texas, have uncovered a complex rich in architecture, frescoes, mosaics, and importantly for this paper, sculpture. Below, I argue for the presence of a new line of interrogation for the sculptural and artistic decor of the villa; specifically, that aspects of the artistic repertoire question the changing relationship between the gods and mankind in the first centuries BCE and CE.

With the apotheosis of Julius Caesar in 44BCE, the line between mortal and divinity blurred. Although the imperial family primarily took advantage of divine elevations after death and portraiture with divine characteristics during life, the same desires were present for other elites, if more subtly. While directly portraying oneself as a god was problematic, the Villa of Oplontis shows that there were other ways to associate oneself with the divine. Upon entering the villa, a visitor would quickly come upon the north garden. Here, statue busts of mixed mortal and divine personages were placed in a mythological garden setting. My paper analyzes this spatial environment and the close associations between the statues, offering evidence for the conflation that occurs in a political and religious climate where any elite with enough support can become a god.

The picture is even more complex in the eastern garden, although a similar physical organization may be seen. While divine-human interaction is emphasized, a more conservative interpretation may be present in the story of Atalanta and Hippomenes. Immortality is granted to mortals, but it is not an immortality desired by the couple. The message is enhanced by the

presence of Aphrodite in the villa as well as Hercules, a quintessential representation of how a mortal may become a god and the problems inherent in such an event. Throughout these myths is the repeated trope of the apple, a perfect nexus between the imagined mythological surroundings and the physical environs of the villa garden. Thus nature, sculpture, and art can be seen as intertwined in communicating with the viewer at the Villa at Oplontis.

## Condensed Bibliography

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