

## **Domestic Art versus Domestic Archaeology**

### **A consideration of the types of evidence from Roman Campania**

The inspiration for this paper has come from a series of ideas and issues that have resulted from considering the use of artistic evidence for the designation of room function. This has previously been discussed in numerous studies, but the primary focus that is intended within this paper is to contemplate how various types of archaeological and artistic evidence are used for interpreting the function of domestic space in the Roman World. In order to keep the primary focus upon methods used for the consideration of ancient evidence, the examples used in this discussion have been taken from three residences in Roman Campania (the House of the Faun, the Villas of Fannius Synistor and the Mysteries), which assists in limiting the issue of temporal, contextual and cultural variance. This should allow for a greater focus upon the methodology that is used to reflect upon the way in which ancient art is interpreted. It should be noted that the interpretation of art is inherently subjective, but the primary focus for this paper is upon how ancient art is used as a source of evidence for our understanding of classical cultures.

The primary concern of this paper is to examine how ancient art is interpreted, in order to advocate a holistic approach for the modern scholar. While disciplinary separation and integrity is a common feature of modern academic life, it can sometimes become a hindrance for a complete analysis of an ancient artefact, architectural space or artistic piece. In relation to the analysis of domestic space in Roman Campania, it is common to find the use of very specific methodologies that focus upon one particular ‘type’ of archaeological evidence – such as wall-paintings, mosaics, floor-plans, or loose finds – of which I am just as guilty. The primary reason for this is the complexity of such methodologies, although it should be noted that some studies have considered such a broad range of evidence, with particularly good results (Winsor Leach 2004). All the same, the primary focus here is upon the interpretation of ancient art on a methodological level, which is an exceedingly complex area to consider. Simple methodological limitations cannot be used as a means of validating the interpretation of ancient art where context, media and social significance need to be important factors that affect the production of interpretative results. So while the scope of this paper is limited in its corpus, the basic premise is to consider a wide reaching topical base.

### **The Quandary: Artistic Evidence and its Interpretation**

The number of issues that are involved with the interpretation of an artistic work is immense when considering modern art, let alone the plethora of complications that arise when analysing ancient art (for example of but a few, see Gazda 1991; D’Ambra 1993; Martindale and Thomas 2006). However, the purpose of this paper is not to solve all of these difficulties, but to instead consider the best approach of examining an ancient piece of art or decoration with a Roman domestic context. However, this leads to a pertinent point of consideration: whether Roman mosaics or wall-paintings should be considered as ‘art’ or as ‘decoration’. Opinions about this issue are naturally split within modern scholarship, but for

the present purposes it is not a significant factor. This is because the primary concern is presently upon the approach rather than how an art form (or any ancient artefact for that matter) needs to be approached. All the same, there are two key issues that need to be discussed in relation to this question, such as concerning the respective roles of both the artist and the patron.

One particular issue is the 'artistic' role of the patron – such as the question about how involved was the owner of the residence in the selection of themes or topics within a residence. This of course is almost impossible to determine on a case by case basis, but it would appear likely that an owner would have at least had some input into the style or themes to be represented in their abode. Nevertheless, it must also be accepted that the 'artist' would have clearly had some input into the topics, owing to the availability of materials, the availability of designs, the size of the space, and ideally the context of the residence. Unfortunately it is impossible to determine the exact levels of impact of each artist/patron in each circumstance, but it is at least evident that some decorators did have a set number of themes/designs that were utilised by them for various residences and public structures (Richardson 2000).

Secondly, there are the implications of considering a piece's reception. While there are numerous studies upon the reception of ancient artworks (Martindale and Thomas 2006), the primary consideration here is upon whether it is possible to discern exactly what was meant to be conveyed in a particular piece. Modern studies seem to fall into two categories in order to analyse this aspect: individual reception, and collective reception (Richardson 2000). The individual approach for analysing reception focuses upon a specific work and stereotypically examines it with only passing reference to other pieces. Nevertheless, the question remains about whether an artistic piece should be considered in comparative isolation – this leaves questions surrounding the context in which it was created, which impacts upon how it should ideally be interpreted (especially when considering its general intended audience and placement). The collective approach examines various pieces that possess a similar theme (be they connected by mythological, stylistic or topical features), which aim at presenting the similarities exhibited in the qualities of similar bodies of work. Again, the unfortunate aspect exhibited within this approach is that while the topic under consideration provides a connection, often the temporal, spatial or contextual frameworks are neglected as a consideration.

There is another form of approach that has been used, considering specific wall paintings in a particular type of room. This seems to be an ideal form of analysis because it clearly contextualises the art-work by placing it within its intended placement. It is evident that Roman art-forms were primarily intended for a specific space (Ling 1991, 1), which makes it essential for them to be considered within the context that they were intended to be viewed. While it is impossible to argue that the archaeological framework in which an artwork was placed solely determines the fashion in which it should be interpreted, it must still be an essential factor to be considered by any modern scholar. Therefore, the question remains about how to consider examples of such domestic art from antiquity, which can be approached from a variety of perspectives. Naturally, it could be argued that individualistic,

collective and contextual perspectives are entirely justifiable in their own specific ways, but the ideal process would be to consider a variety of approaches (both within the corpus of artistic works of a certain type and also beyond the collective). Nevertheless, it is important to initially consider some of the various arguments prior to examining the artworks under question from Campania.

### **The Synthesis of these Methodologies**

The primary concern with all of these forms of interpretation is their selective approach: one single style of analysis cannot provide an accurate representation of a particular artwork. While each form of examination can provide insight into the characteristics of individual pieces (or of collective stylistic forms), there are too many factors left absent by focusing too heavily upon a single factor. This can be highlighted by considering each approach in order to establish what it achieves and what it neglects. For example, the 'individualistic' method allows for an in-depth analysis of a specific piece, providing the modern scholar with plenty of scope for the interpretation of the minutiae within a specific piece, which is often then used on a subsidiary comparative level, which is intended to support the conclusions of the presented argument. However, it must be noted that the comparisons are typically only of secondary importance to the overall study, which is problematic because there is little focus upon the contextualisation of the piece itself (either in relation to the wider realm of chosen topic or its placement within a domestic structure in this instance). It is evident that these aspects are of course vital factors that illustrate not only the wider symbolism of the piece, but also ignores the reception of this piece under question.

The 'collective' approach provides a different range of advantages and difficulties in its methodology. One of the main attraction for using this form of analysis is the benefit of comparison. This provides insight into many of the topical and stylistic similarities that existed between a variety of artworks, which of course is useful when considering the wider corpus of Campanian art and its social/religious symbolism. But it does also leave an analysis open to the difficulties of being too general, which could lead to finding connections that may (or may not) have existed in antiquity. This is clearly exhibited in studies where the desire to draw a cultural connection seems to have allowed for too many generalisations about the wider significance of these pieces. Importantly the context in which these pieces needed to be considered in more detail. However, the 'contextual' approach of analysis cannot be viewed as entirely appropriate method either in isolation. While the analysis of a piece's context is vital for its analysis, it cannot be the only factor that can be applied to an examination of artworks – for example, the analysis of all wall-paintings from Pompeian dining rooms in isolation could not be viewed as a comprehensive discussion of much socio-political significance. This not only opens up the difficulties in applying a designated primary function to some types of domestic space (such as dining rooms), but it can lead to some tempting but potentially problematic associations. For example, there is the relationship between art and room function: can the decorations of a room be used as a form of evidence for identifying how it was used? While it must be accepted that the actual existence of wall-paintings within

domestic social spaces is to be expected, the connection between a decorative theme and a room's function is much harder to prove. For example, while it is tempting to argue that a Dionysiac decorative theme within a room could be viewed as the presence of a theatrical function, it can hardly be taken as a definitive representation of its intended use by the owner. If the same principle was applied to gladiatorial scenes in the House of the Gladiator (V,5,3), the intended function would have of course been entirely different. This epitomises one of the difficulties in solely applying context to the interpretation of ancient art.

Nevertheless, it is quite clear that a holistic approach (i.e. by considering all of these various methodologies) is the ideal manner in which to examine such forms of ancient art, such as the approach used by Winsor Leach (2004). None of these methods are able to stand on their own as an accurate representation of particular forms of ancient art. This can be highlighted by considering some previous studies of Campanian art-forms from a domestic sphere, thereby limiting the amount of variation within their general contextual placement for the needs of being succinct. This is not intended to simply deconstruct these approaches, but instead is hoped to clearly establish how the analysis of such pieces need to be taken within a broader context for more telling results. However, it must still be noted that this general approach is by no means limited to domestic art, with the same principles being able to be applied to large-scale public or civic artworks.

### **Some Examples from Campania: The Villa of the Mysteries (Room 5)**

The Villa of the Mysteries is the most well known example of a villa at Pompeii, having been the topic of many discussions, particularly in relation to its fine wall decoration. This villa was built roughly four hundred metres from the Porta Ercolano (Maiuri 1947, 37). The original plan of the structure was square in design, in a similar scheme with its room distribution to a Vitruvian villa (6.5.3) (Fig. 1). The most notable room within modern scholarship is Room 5 (Fig. 2), which has been described as the 'Mysteries room' in many modern studies owing to the nature of the Second Style wall décor. The style and interpretation of these wall paintings has been the subject of much discussion since their discovery (Mudie Cooke 1913, 157-174; Sauron 1998; Hearnshaw 1999, 43-54; Toynbee 1929, 67-113), but for present purposes that the reading of these motifs shall be focused upon methodology. It is enough to comment that the use of red cinnabar for the production of these paintings is a good reflection of the owners' wealth, this medium requiring accurate application techniques for an impressive long-lasting effect (Allroggen Bedel 1984, 132). Also that this room was built in Sarno stone during the first period of habitation and was not altered throughout its development (Maiuri 1947, 59). The fact that this room remained unaltered throughout the use of this building is one reason why modern scholars have speculated about a ritual use for the room. The friezes were probably painted between 55-60 BC (Wilburn 2000, 22). This room functioned as a private *triclinium* and originally overlooked the external terrace on two sides (Bieber 1928, 299). This open aspect provided the room with sunlight and allowed an open view of the surroundings (Bendinelli 1968, 823). This room, at least in the initial phases of the building, would have been an enjoyable room

for dining where the view of the external terrace and underlying garden combined with the cool breeze would have epitomised the ideals of *otium*.

It would seem that this room would have only used by certain residents and visitors of acceptable standing, but this does not necessarily mean that the room would have been as secluded as thought by some (Longfellow 2000). This room would have probably been used for prearranged occasions and only for the leading residents and invited guests, but it does not mean that it was a space used for ‘secret mythological’ occasions either. The placement of the room simply suggests that it would have been used for private dining, thereby accentuating the special nature of the occasion. For the invited guests, being allowed in this area of the *domus* would have been a clear expression of *hospitium* and *amicitia* on the part of the residents (Nichols 2001, 99-100). After all, dining with another person was one of the greatest expressions of friendship (Peachin 2001, 135-6), which was not only mentioned by Cicero (*Fam.* 9.24.3), but also reflected in the lengths undertaken with the décor of the dining rooms.

This illustrates the difficulties with some methods of interpretation if we are trying to gain insight into the importance of this artwork in particular. It is clear that there were religious connotations within the subject dealt with in this piece, and also that it was a truly magnificent fresco placed within a fine private residence. However, this does not support the view that the decoration truly reflects the function of an area, particularly when it is considered that the room was not as private as argued by Longfellow when statistically analysed with the original floor-plan (Fig. 3 – blue is private, red is public reception space). So while it is tempting to try and read the images in complete isolation their archaeological and temporal contexts must be taken into consideration in order to fully grasp the intention of the owners in choosing such evocative imagery for such a dining room.

### **The House of the Faun (Room H)**

The House of the Faun was one of the most elegant and largest residences in Pompeii (Fig. 4). The date of its original construction was around the late Second Century BC, judging from the mortar used in the *atria* and *peristylia* (Carrington 1933, 131). Within this house a row of specialised reception rooms were created, including a large rectangular *exedra* containing the famous Alexander mosaic (Room H) (Zevi 1996, 42-4). This mosaic was probably a copy of a Greek original, which was a means of exhibiting the status and culture of the owner (Cohen 1997, 58, 183). It should be noted that *exedrae* were used primarily for meditation and intellectual pursuits (Dickmann 1997, 122). These *exedrae* were also positioned adjoining porticoes (Varro, *De Rei Rustica*, 3.5.8; Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, 6.7.3; 7.9.2), and Cicero suggests that the *peristyle* was also used for such activities (*Atticus*, 1.18.1). Therefore the position of this fine mosaic appears completely understandable and provide a clear indication of the owners intellectual and cultural pretensions (Dickmann 1997, 127). This room contained grandiose Corinthian capitals with corkscrew volutes at the entrance to the room (Richardson 1988, 125). These rooms flanked onto the *peristyle* and

were orientated towards the garden, but they were probably remodelled after the creation of the second *peristyle* (Fig. 4). The rectangular *exedra* depicted Egyptian animals between the entrance columns, with the mosaic of Alexander towards the middle (Fig. 5).

It has been suggested that the reproduction of Greek art may have served as a moralising message in public contexts (Barringer 1994, 166), but it also portrayed culture and education in a private setting (Hoffmann 1992, 428). The representation of culture/education is clearly evident, but the moral message from this mosaic seems difficult to prove definitively. The mosaics have also been used to see the desire of the owners to exhibit their appreciation of Hellenistic art and to accentuate their cultural and intellectual standing (Westgate 2000, 273). One of the most significant difficulties presented by an isolationist perspective about this piece is the difficulty in viewing it when actually being present in the room – the Alexander mosaic takes up almost all of the space, which would have made it almost impossible to view if furniture was placed within this space (provisions for furniture placement within some reception rooms was relatively common in antiquity). However, this is rarely considered in modern interpretations. However, when this is considered it is evident that the selection of topic was made in antiquity without such considerations, which does suggest that the topic (Alexander) was of primary importance. However, the placement of this mosaic in the context of the entire house, needs to be further considered, such as it being placed between two *peristylia* (that is in itself unusual), which could suggest that Room H may not have been intended to include furniture, but was instead considered as a space to be considered, viewed, or received.

### A Possible Resolution?

As has been noted previously it is easy to argue for either one side or the other: artistic works could be used to represent a variety of topics that could or could not epitomise the general intended function of a domestic space. They could also be taken as individual pieces or as part of a collective part of a ‘type’ corpus, which provides the modern scholar with alternative forms of analysis and possible interpretation. All the same, the question remains as to whether these particular methodologies provide the ancient historian or archaeologist with the optimal interpretation of their symbolism.

The only possible resolution is to argue for the combined use of all of these methodologies: ‘individualistic’, ‘collective’ and ‘contextual’ approaches used in conjunction can provide the optimal means by which ancient art-forms can be interpreted. While the use of merged methods such as these requires a more in-depth form of analysis, it still appears to be the most holistic and informative approach that is essential for any examination of such discursive works. Therefore, it would appear that an ideal resolution would be to initially examine a piece in relation to its context: factoring in where it was discovered, its media, placement and general archaeological context. Following from this, the individualistic approach needs to be applied: the artwork needs to be considered in isolation at this point in order to clarify the style, topic and presentation in relation to the general context of the



artefact. This allows for the individual characteristics of the piece to be considered in relation to the questions of its intended audience and its unique features prior being compared to other works. The collective analysis needs to be applied subsequently, in order to place the piece within a broader topical or stylistic context. This can allow for further comparison (and perspective) to be considered when analysing the piece under question, which should allow for an ideal level of deliberation about the significance of its interpretation.

The present methodological suggestion should allow for an ideal progression of analysis – beginning with placement, individual interpretation and then a comparison with other similar (or dissimilar) examples. All the same, in order to establish the efficacy of this holistic approach, the present study has applied this to another topical wall-painting from a villa in Campania.

### **An Exempla: The Villa of Fannius Synistor (Room H)**

The Villa of Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale (Fig. 6) was located roughly one and a half kilometres from Pompeii. Ownership of this villa has been attributed to P. Fannius Synistor, but it seems that L. Herennius Florus was a more likely candidate (Rostovtzeff 1957, 552, n. 26, no. 16). The plan was that of a large villa built with elegant architecture and a row of staterooms, with fine Second Style wall paintings (Richardson 1988, 176). The villa was built around the middle of the First Century BC (Beyen 1987/8, 17). The theme of the decoration was in harmony with each other, all in an identical Second Style design, indicating that they are datable to the same phase. They have been dated to the period between 43-33 BC (Richardson 1988, 176-8).

The northern side of the *peristyle* contained splendid rooms intended for the leading residents. The noble quarters on the northern side contained a fine rectangular *triclinium* at the western end (Room N), which was connected to another small room (Room M) via a small lobby (Fig. 6). It has been suggested that this small room was a ladies dining room or a bedroom. This room was decorated with *tholoi* and landscape designs in the couch alcove, there being cityscapes in the rest of the room (Williams Lehmann 1953, 82-131; Ling 1997, 365). The rectangular *triclinium* was decorated with columnar architecture, creating a series of vistas. There was a large square banquet hall (Room H), followed by an *exedra* (Room G). Symmetrical windows that viewed onto the *peristyle* bordered the hall, but there were no windows on the external side. This is of interest because the owners were not concerned with acquiring a peripheral view, preferring an internal emphasis onto the *peristyle*. Throughout the rest of this complex the majority of the rooms had large windows to the exterior of the building, but it is of interest to note the absence of this feature within this room in particular. Between the wide doorway and the large internal windows were painted two winged *genii*, seemingly to overlook the entrance (Sauron 1993, 90). The hall was also decorated with life-sized figures against panels of cinnabar, which is a similar megalography to Room 5 at the Villa of the Mysteries (Andreae 1975, 71-92).

Room H measures 8.30 by 7.30 metres and was 3.8 metres high (Müller 1994, 2). It has been conjectured that the figures in the large hall were symbolic representations of Macedonia and Persia/Asia (Fittschen 1975, 93-100) or them being present at a wedding (Robertson 1955, 58-67) (Fig. 7). Life-sized figures such as these were very rare in Roman wall-paintings and these examples have a monumental quality (Smith 1999, 111). What is certain is that this was an impressive dining room (Robertson 1955, 64). It is of interest to note the use of such Macedonian imagery has also been discovered in the House of the Faun (Room H) and House VI, 17, 42 (which depicts the marriage of Alexander to either Roxanna or Stateira) in Pompeii, which could be drawn as being significant (by no more than emphasising the prevalence of Egyptian iconography). From this hall there was a small corridor leading into a well decorated small room (Room G) which had a large window to the exterior (Fig. 6) (Richardson 1988, 179). Owing to the size of this room, its position and the presence of such a large window it is likely that it had a similar function to Rooms 9 and 10 in the Villa of the Mysteries, being used for leisure and for viewing the panorama, as well as private pursuits, such as reading and relaxation. It is pertinent to observe the different viewing focus in both rooms, the banquet hall drawing attention to the central garden in the *peristyle* as a controlled environment, whereas Room G focused upon the natural landscape. The *peristyle* was decorated in Second Style décor and contained a *lararium* in the north-west corner. To the side there was an *andron* on the same axis, which was also decorated in Second Style. This *andron* had a very wide entrance, but the purpose for this room is unable to be determined. From this portico there were also other colonnades that connected *pars urbana* with *pars rustica* (Rossiter 1978, 33).

However, it was the viewing rooms that make this villa interesting. In the majority of the rooms there were large windows towards the exterior. But in the large banquet hall (Room H), which was used for entertaining guests, the viewing focus was to the interior rather than the external landscape. This exhibits a preference to arrange an outlook towards an environment entirely under the control of the proprietor rather than an external view, which was not controllable. This is shown explicitly when compared with the small *exedra* (Room G). It is clear that the villa owner made deliberate decisions about the view from each room and that it was an important consideration in their design and intended effect.

Therefore, having considered the context of the decorations in Room H it is evident that it presents a clear message to its viewers, which may (or may not) be indicative of Hellenistic politics. Judging from the design itself and its specific stylistic details, it is evident that the two female figures could represent Macedonia and Persia/Asia, but the exact definition is impossible to determine without some subjective interpretation. On a collective level, the décor in Room H has been compared to the Alexander mosaic in the House of the Faun (discussed above) and to House VI, 17, 22 at Pompeii, as being a sign of the importance of Hellenistic culture in the region. This residence, otherwise known as the House of Golden Bracelet, was a terrace house in *Insula Occidentalis* at Pompeii. Room 20 included a painting that portrayed the wedding of Alexander to one of his wives (either Roxanna or Stateira), which was presented in conjunction with imagery of Bacchus, Silenus, maenads and a satyr (Richardson 2000, 126) (Fig. 8). This residence was also finely decorated with fountains and



statues, which is indicative of the pleasant character of this *domus*. Therefore it is evident that while there could be some conjectural connection between each of these artworks, they are stylistically different, and quite distinct in the medium in which they were performed. It is also important to note that this residence was located in the outer suburbs of Pompeii, which would make it viewable by a very select audience – this is also exemplified by the spatial data analysis of the villa itself (Fig. 9). In many ways, this epitomises the importance of considering the context in which an artwork was produced, which in turn exemplifies how it needs to be interpreted. It would be nice to provide a more definitive interpretation of this piece, but for the intentions of the present study it is simply enough to note how many factors need to be considered for its analysis.

## Conclusions

The primary consideration of the present study is upon the method by which artworks are analysed. While examining decorative pieces in isolation has its particular advantages, there are many more factors that impact upon how a modern scholar needs to judge its relevance and interpretative benefits. One of the most significant of these is the context in which a piece was placed, which has a definitive impact upon how an artwork was intended to be viewed. The public or private nature of a setting has serious implications upon the possible interpretation of a decorative piece – for example, if the frescoes from Room 5 at the Villa of the Mysteries had been presented within a Pompeian temple or basilica, it would be interpreted in an entirely different fashion (as could the context itself). It is for this reason that the archaeological context is an essential factor that must be considered when examining ancient decorative schemes.

The analysis of artistic pieces on an individualistic basis can also provide insight into specific features of a precise nature, but there are limitations with this method owing to the isolationist perspective in general terms. This form of analysis needs to be clearly integrated within a wider framework, which not only makes the individualistic characteristics much more relevant, but also accentuates the distinctive traits of the piece under question. There are similar limitations with a purely collective approach. This line of attack could not only lead to a broad-brush approach where the distinctive features of each piece is neglected, but it could also lead to an inappropriate collation of pieces, be it according to style, topic or location.

Therefore, the benefits of a holistic interpretative strategy in relation to ancient art thus becomes the most efficient and productive format in which to undertake a study. By considering the widest range of individual features, similar (or dissimilar) aspects and the location in which it was placed it provides the most complete synthesis of factors that contribute to our understanding of particular pieces. While this will provide varied results, and in some cases incomplete results (as shown in the case of Room H in the Villa of Fannius Synistor), the consideration of all these aspects must be undertaken in order to produce the best identification of the symbolism and significance of an artistic piece.

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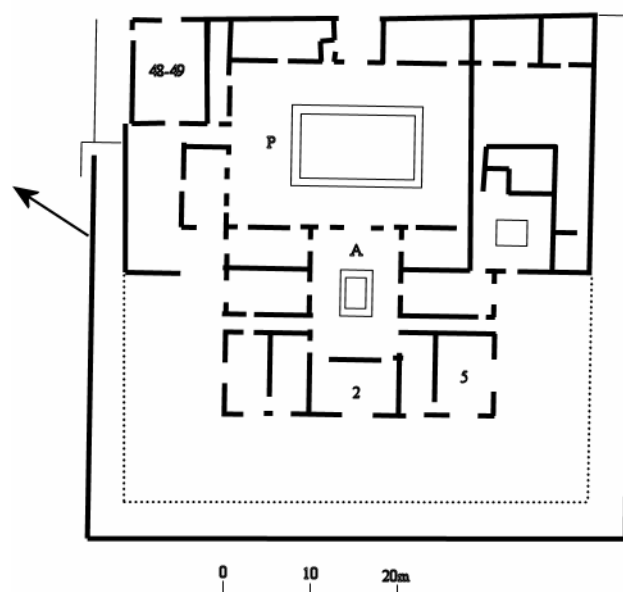
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# Figures



**Figure 1 – The Original Layout of the Villa of the Mysteries**





Figure 2 – The Paintings from Room 5 in the Villa of the Mysteries



Figure 3 – The Public/Private Regions of the Villa of the Mysteries

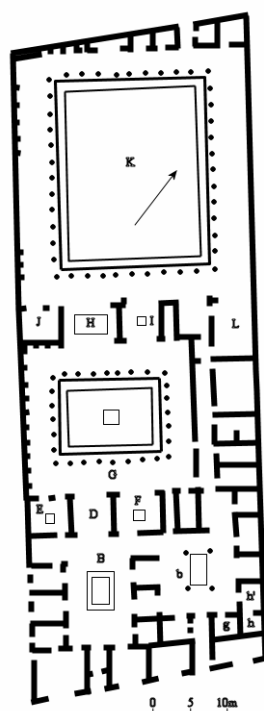


Figure 4 – The Plan of the House of the Faun



Figure 5 – The Alexander Mosaic from the House of the Faun

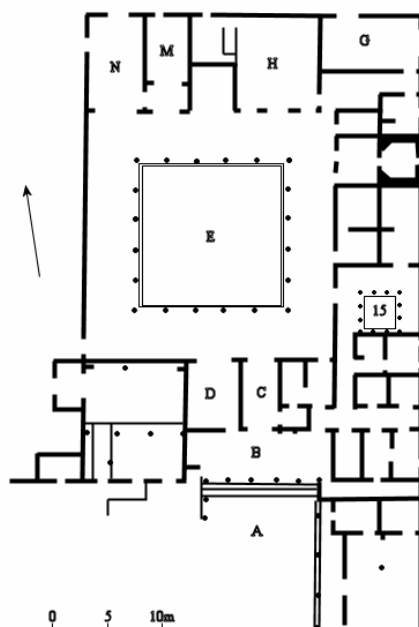


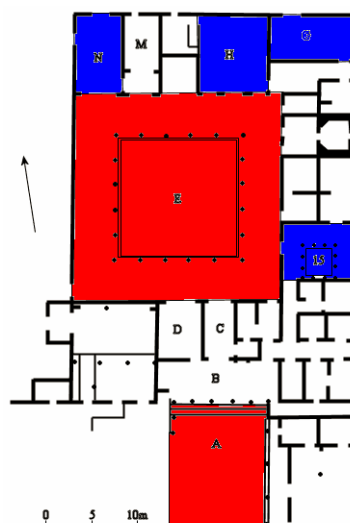
Figure 6 – The Plan of the Villa of Fannius Synistor



Figure 7 – The Paintings from Room H in the Villa of Fannius Synistor



Figure 8 – The Alexander Fresco from the House of the Golden Bracelet



**Figure 9 – The Public/Private Regions of the Villa of Fannius Synistor**

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