

Zeitschrift: Cahiers d'archéologie romande
Herausgeber: Bibliothèque Historique Vaudoise
Band: 43 (1987)

Artikel: The Australian expedition to Pompeii : contributions to the chronology of the Fourth Pompeian Style
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-835447>

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The Australian Expedition to Pompeii: Contributions to the Chronology of the Fourth Pompeian Style

Jean-Paul DESCOEUDRES

Depuis 1978, une équipe australienne participe au projet «Häuser in Pompeji» mis sur pied en 1975 par V.M. Strocka en collaboration avec la Surintendance des Antiquités de Naples et de Pompéi; il vise à étudier en détail et à rendre compte des maisons fouillées depuis longtemps et jamais publiées.

La contribution australienne apporte une meilleure connaissance de la chronologie du IV^e style pompéien. De la Maison aux Chapiteaux Colorés (VII 4, 31.51), les peintures murales des pièces entourant l'atrium (fig. 1, n° 2), et particulièrement la décoration de la pièce 17, sont à dater de 79 ap. J.-C. (fig. 3 et 4). Les peintures de la Maison voisine de la Chasse Antique (VII 4, 48), à en croire les analyses techniques, stylistiques et iconographiques, ont été exécutées dans un même temps (fig. 5). Un terminus post quem est donné par un sesterce de Vespasien frappé en 71 ap. J.-C. et dont on trouve l'empreinte répétée sur la zone inférieure de la paroi nord de l'atrium (fig. 6, 7, 14-17).

Introduction

Since 1978, an Australian team has been participating in the project «Häuser in Pompeji – Pompeian Houses» which was initiated in 1975 by Prof. V.M. Strocka, then director of the German Archaeological Institute in Berlin, in conjunction with the Soprintendenza Archeologica in Naples and Pompeii.* Its objective is to study and record the architectural features, wall-paintings, mosaics, stucco-decorations and other fittings and fixtures of single houses excavated long ago, but not previously published¹.

The first house with which we were entrusted by the Archaeological Superintendent was the so-called Casa dei Capitelli Colorati, also known as the «House of Ariadne» (VII 4, 31.51)². With over fifty rooms, two peristyles, and a floor area of about 1850 square metres, this is one of Pompeii's largest dwellings (see plan fig. 1 and sections fig. 2). After several recording campaigns, the final publication is now nearing com-

* Also on behalf of the entire «squadra australiana» I should like to express my warmest thanks to the organizers of the Third International Colloquium on Roman Wall-Painting for inviting me to present this report and for generously sharing my travel expenses with The University of Sydney.

For their unfailing help and encouragement I am most grateful to the successive directors of the Soprintendenza Archeologica, Prof. Fausto Zevi, Dr Maria Giuseppina Cerulli Irelli and Prof. Baldassare Conticello, as well as to Dr Stefano de Caro, director of the excavations (until 1985), and to Mr V. Sicignano.

I am also much indebted to Prof. Dr V.M. Strocka, director of the project «Häuser in Pompeji». He invited me in 1977 to participate in this venture and made his experienced staff available during our first campaign in 1978. For helping me to avoid a number of pitfalls and to get through several teething troubles I am most grateful to Dr W. Trillmich.

Last but not least, my thanks go to all the members of the Australian team and especially to Penelope Allison, for many helpful discussions on the paintings of the House of the Hunt and for reading a first draft of this paper.

pletion and is scheduled to appear as fourth volume in the series «Häuser in Pompeji».

House of the Coloured Capitals: some wall-paintings dated to 79 AD

All the wall-paintings in the House of the Coloured Capitals belong to the Fourth Style, and they represent almost every one of its many facets. Some of them seem to be datable on external evidence, thus providing a most welcome fixed point for the history of this last Pompeian decoration system the chronology of which continues to be a subject of debate³. The paintings in question are to be found in the southern part of the house which appears to have suffered extensive damage in the 62 AD earthquake. Indeed, it looks as if the rooms around the atrium (n° 2 on plan fig. 1) had not yet been re-occupied by the time of Pompeii's final destruction. The excavators found hardly any small objects or traces of furniture in this area⁴ which in 79 AD must have looked more like a construction site than a residence. The marble veneering that had once formed the dado in the atrium and the tablinum had not yet been replaced, the east ala (plan fig. 1: n° 8) not yet been re-decorated, and in room 6 the painters had just finished with the upper zone and were about to start work on the middle zone when Mount Vesuvius exploded on 24 August, 79 AD.

¹ See Strocka 1980; Strocka 1981; Strocka 1984 a.

² For other less popular names the house has been given at some time or other, see van der Poel 1983, 279.

³ For a recent and most convenient summary of this debate see Mielsch 1981, 178 ff. 250 f.; cp. also Strocka 1984 b.

⁴ Cp. *Bullettino dell'Istituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica* 1833, 3. 33. 149 and Fiorelli 1862 a, 264-269.

Unfortunately, this precise *terminus* is not much use, for all we know about the decoration of room 6 is that it consisted of «graziosi dipinti in prospettiva, in paesaggi, in candelabri, con ornati a festoni»⁵. It was never recorded and has now faded beyond recognition. The paintings in room 17, on the other hand, are among the best preserved in the house, thanks to a protective roof built shortly after its discovery (figs. 3-4). This room had not yet been completed either in 79 AD; although its decoration had been finished, the floor remained to be laid. It therefore seems more than likely that in this case, too, the wall-decoration dates to the very last days of Pompeii⁶.

The wall-paintings in the House of the Hunt: 71 - 79 AD

In 1983, we succeeded in gaining a further and certainly no less important fixed point for the chronology of the Fourth Style. The study of a second major house, the Casa della Caccia Antica (VII 4, 48)⁷, started in 1980 with an investigation of the architecture. A second campaign in 1983 was devoted to the recording of the paintings in the house.

The wall-paintings, like those of the adjacent House of the Coloured Capitals, all belong to the Fourth Style. According to K. Schefold, the house was decorated in two, or possibly three, phases: first under Nero, then in the early years of Vespasian's reign, and finally in the last years of Pompeii's existence⁸. Unfortunately, neither the analysis of the plaster used throughout the house, carried out by R. Meyer-Graft, nor the stylistic analysis of the paintings by Penelope Allison were able to bear out Schefold's distinction of several decorative phases⁹. In short, Meyer-Graft's examination of the plaster suggests that both the base and the finishing plasters of all extant wall-paintings are most likely to have been produced and applied contemporaneously and by one single workshop. Similarly, the two main painters whose hands Allison has distinguished left their mark throughout the house. This is not the place to discuss either of these analyses; instead, I propose to test their conclusions by briefly looking at the subject-matter of the various paintings in the house, starting from the premise that the existence of a coherent iconographic programme would add considerable strength to the argument that the house's entire decoration was executed at one time (see fig. 5 for the location of the paintings).

⁵ *Bullettino dell'Istituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica* 1833, 33.

⁶ Schefold calls it Neronian but hesitates between a dating to the reign of Nero (1957, 183 (c)) or to the early years of the Flavian period (1962, 125).

⁷ Also known as the House of Daedalus and Pasiphae: see van der Poel 1983, 280.

⁸ Schefold 1957, 180; Schefold 1962, 112, 122, 157-158.

⁹ Both to be published shortly in the volume dealing with the Casa della Caccia Antica in the series Häuser in Pompeji.

The decoration of the *atrium* (nº 2 on plan fig. 5) is poorly preserved (fig. 6), but from the traces extant and from early records it is quite clear that its main elements consisted of four floating figures representing the Seasons. Autumn can still be seen on the western part of the north wall (see fig. 7), while Winter on the west wall seems to have disappeared towards the end of the last century¹⁰. Spring and Summer must have been placed correspondingly on the opposite walls. This disposition of the four *Horae* is not accidental; ancient astrology associated Autumn with the north wind, Winter with the westerly, Summer with the east breeze¹¹. The only deviation in our *atrium* is in respect of Spring. It appears, for obvious reasons, on the north, not on the south wall.

A small mythological *pinax* occupies the centre of each of the white-ground walls in the *cubiculum* nº 14 (see pl. VI, 1-2): Leda and the Swan on the south wall, Danae receiving the Golden Rain on the west wall¹², Aphrodite fishing on the north wall. In her *Programmatic Painting in Pompeii*, M.L. Thompson wonders why the disposition of these paintings does not follow «the rule that two closely related paintings are placed on opposite walls while the third painting, whose subject refers to both the others (the Venus painting in this case), is placed on the rear wall»¹³. A look at the *fourtondi* that appear at the centre of the side-fields of the longitudinal walls provides the answer. They represent the four planets Jupiter, Sol, Mercury and Luna in the order that corresponds to their decreasing distance to the earth (the moon being, of course, closest). The *pinax* with Venus clearly forms part of this cycle, placed as it is between the sun and Mercury. But why represent only five of the seven planets? The explanation is not too hard to find, as the two missing planets, Mars and Saturnus, were considered malevolent by ancient astrologers¹⁴. They were particularly unsuited for the decoration of a bedroom, since Mars was linked to death and murder, Saturnus to infertility. Sensibly, they were replaced by representation of two Zeus'loves, alluding to the two *stelle beneficae*, the benevolent planets Jupiter and Venus.

Venus appears again in the *tablinum* (nº 11 on plan fig. 5), in a way which raises our suspicion that we are dealing with some astrological or cosmological programme to certainty. She is carried by Lucifer, the

¹⁰ Among the visitors who noted its presence are Breton (1855, 304); Helbig (1868, nº 998); Fiorelli (1875, 233) and Mau (Overbeck/Mau 1884, 278).

¹¹ Two anonymous, undated watercolours in the German Archaeological Institute in Rome provide the best record of these two figures (portfolio 32, folder «regio VII», sheet nº 2). They have been published by Hanfmann 1951, II, figs. 95-99. Spring, represented on a third watercolour (DAI Neg. 38.1625), has been mistakenly attributed to this house; it comes from the House of Ganymede (see Helbig 1868, 975).

¹² See Boll/Bezold 1919, 66.

¹³ This panel is now in the National Museum in Naples: inv. 9549 (see e.g. Rizzo 1929, pl. 103, left).

¹⁴ Thompson 1960, 166.

¹⁵ See e.g. Hinks 1939, 50.

morning star, in the left side-field of the east wall (pl. VI, 3), whilst on the opposite west wall (pl. VI, 4) Vesper, the evening star, carries a goddess whom E. Schwinzer convincingly identifies as Luna-Diana¹⁵. The two groups of floating figures thus represent what Thompson calls the «Aphrodisian – Artemisian Antithesis»¹⁶. It occurs in a number of Pompeian rooms and can be found again in *oecus* 18 of our house, with its Artemis/Actaeon and Galatea/Polypheus panels¹⁷. In the *tablinum*, the two goddesses are joined by Dionysus whose presence is alluded to by the two main mythological pictures: Theseus and Ariadne on the east, Daedalus and Pasiphae on the west wall¹⁸. This combination is, as Thompson points out, one of the most common in Pompeian wall-painting¹⁹. What has escaped her notice, however, is that our *tablinum*'s decoration must be added to the list of Pompeian representations of the triad Aphrodite – Artemis – Dionysus. They have been discussed on several occasions by K. Schefold who has emphasized the importance of this triad as an allusion to Isis²⁰. She was widely believed to incorporate both Aphrodite (identified with Bastet), whilst her brother and husband Osiris had long been equated with Dionysus.

There is another feature in the *tablinum* that hitherto has passed unnoticed: the asymmetry of its wide opening to the peristyle (see pl. VI, 5). At first, it might be tempting to dismiss this slight irregularity as accidental, or to attribute it to carelessness. However, looking at the disposition of the columns around the *viridarium* behind the *tablinum* makes one wonder again (see fig. 5). For here too, there is a striking lack of symmetry and regularity, each intercolumniation being of different size (the irregular shape and oblique position of the *viridarium* itself is of no concern here). That the two phenomena are interconnected and that they are not the result of carelessness but, on the contrary, of sophisticated planning becomes clear as soon as one tries to visualize the *tablinum* with a symmetrical opening. The effect, compared with that of the actual arrangement, is as simple as it is illuminating (cp. fig. 8 with fig. 9). Entering the *fauces* of the house, the visitor is offered a striking view (see fig. 8 and pl. VI, 5). Through the narrow, dark corridor and the lighter *atrium*, one perceives, behind the *tablinum*'s large opening, part of the *viridarium*²¹. To

the left, the view is framed by the receding row of the eastern wing's columns which guide the eye into the depth, as do, to the right, the receding walls of the *atrium* and the *tablinum*. A symmetrical opening in the *tablinum*'s rear wall would destroy this carefully composed and well focused picture, either by breaking the frame provided by the peristyle's columns to the left, or – worse – by removing the focal point, the hunting scene, from the view.

The significance of this «Durchblick» onto the hunt painting (pl. VI, 6) begins to dawn on us as soon as we stand inside the *atrium* and discover the representation of the seasons, the planets, and the stars (cp. fig. 10). The goddess to whom the hunt is sacred, Artemis²², is but a manifestation of that divinity whom Apuleius calls the «Mother of the Stars, Creator of the Seasons, Mistress of the Universe»: Isis²³.

Not until we have reached the entrance to the *viridarium* itself, however, is our supposition raised to certainty (cp. fig. 11). Only now are the two large landscape paintings on its west wall revealed to our eyes (figs. 12-13). They are much faded now, but their Egyptianizing features have been noted and commented upon by several scholars²⁴. These features are not the only allusions to Isis. Not less significant is the «contrast of the civilized and the rural» that can be seen «within and between» the peristyle's paintings as Thompson observes, wondering whether this contrast might be intentional²⁵, and apparently unaware of the fact that one of Isis' most celebrated aspects in the Hellenistic and Roman world was that of being the originator of all civilization²⁶. The depiction of the vineyard in the landscape on the left (see fig. 12) is of particular interest in this context. Its uniqueness was noted by M.I. Rostowzew²⁷ and again pointed out by T. Warscher²⁸. Its meaning is made clear by the Isis hymn from Andros in which the invention of viticulture is attributed to Isis herself rather than to her brother and husband Osiris-Dionysus²⁹.

This brief tour through the house leads to the conclusion that all the paintings form a coherent whole. As already indicated by the analyses of their plaster and their style, they must have been created at the same time by one single workshop. Yet, what makes them particularly important within the Fourth Pompeian Style is not their iconographical programme, but the fact that they can be dated with extraordinary precision.

¹⁵ Schwinzer 1979, 42 ff.

²² Cp. e.g. Aymard 1951, 503 ff.

¹⁶ Thompson 1960, 171.

²³ For the Artemis/Actaeon panel see e.g. Schefold 1962, pl. 168, 3; MDAI(R) 88, 1981, pl. 133, 2; the Galatea and Polypheus picture, now in Naples (NM inv. 27687), is splendidly illustrated in Kraus/von Matt 1975, fig. 275.

²⁴ Both panels are in the National Museum in Naples. Theseus and Ariadne: inv. 9048 (illustrated e.g. in Herrmann/Bruckmann 1904 ff. pl. 160, left); Daedalus and Pasiphae: inv. 8979 (e.g. Schefold 1962, pl. 170, 3).

²⁵ Thompson 1960, 90 ff.

²⁶ See e.g. Dawson 1944, 111 no 64.

²⁷ E.g. 1962, 30 ff.

²⁸ Thompson 1960, 198.

²⁹ See e.g. Solmsen 1980, 33 ff.

²⁷ Rostowzew 1911, 95 no 2.

²⁸ Warscher 1937, VII 4, 48 photo no 186.

²⁹ Peek 1930.

In the course of the 1983 campaign, almost to the day 150 years after the house was excavated, a series of more than seventy coin impressions was discovered in the socle zone of the *atrium*'s north wall, up to a height of about 30 cms from the floor level (fig. 14). The painter had just finished his job when someone, presumably a child, discovered that in its lowest part the wall had not yet hardened completely and so found great enjoyment in pressing a coin or two into the wet plaster: sometimes face-in, more often by the edge³⁰. Once the damage had been discovered, the poor urchin must have received bottom marks for this performance with which, unwittingly, he rendered

³⁰ I am grateful to V.M. Strocka for drawing my attention to the coin impressions mentioned by Fiorelli 1862b, 52. Unfortunately, they are of limited interest as the plaster in which they were found is unpainted.

posterity an invaluable service. For one of the probably two coins so innocently played with was, as some of the clearer impressions reveal (see figs. 15-16), a *sestertius* struck under Vespasian's third consulship, i.e. in 71 AD (fig. 17)³¹.

Thus, the decoration in the *atrium* and with it that of the entire house is dated with remarkable precision to the years 71-79 AD.

³¹ Obverse: head of Vespasian, laureate, r.

IM[**P** CAES]. VESPASIAN. [AVG. P M TR. P] P P. COS III

Reverse: Mars, naked but for cloak wrapped around the waist, advancing to the right, holding trophy over left shoulder. SC in field.

Cp. Mattingly/Sydenham 1926, 70 no 447 and Mattingly 1930, 188 no 777, pl. 34,7.

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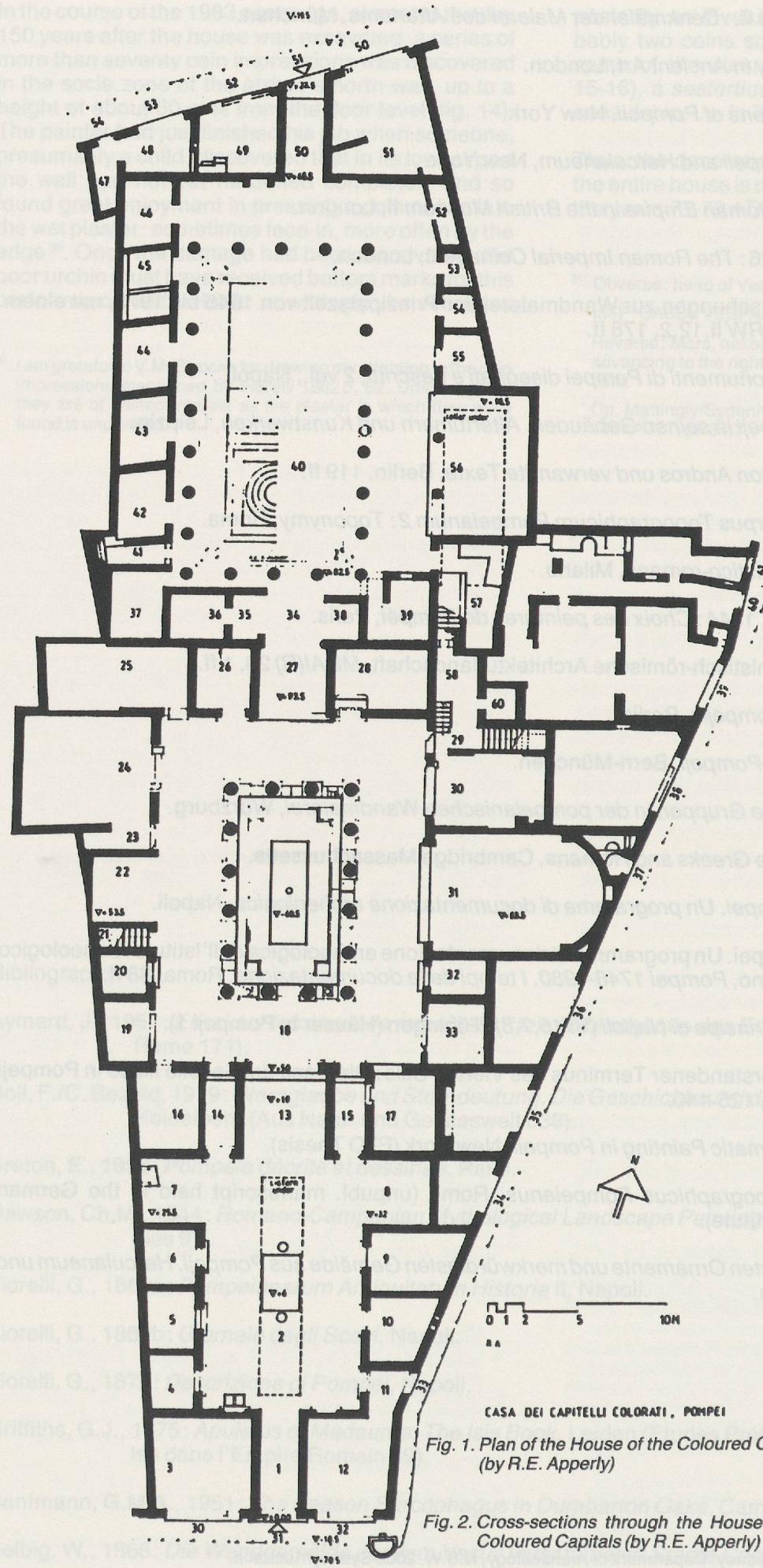


Fig. 1. Plan of the House of the Coloured Capitals
(by R.E. Aupperly)

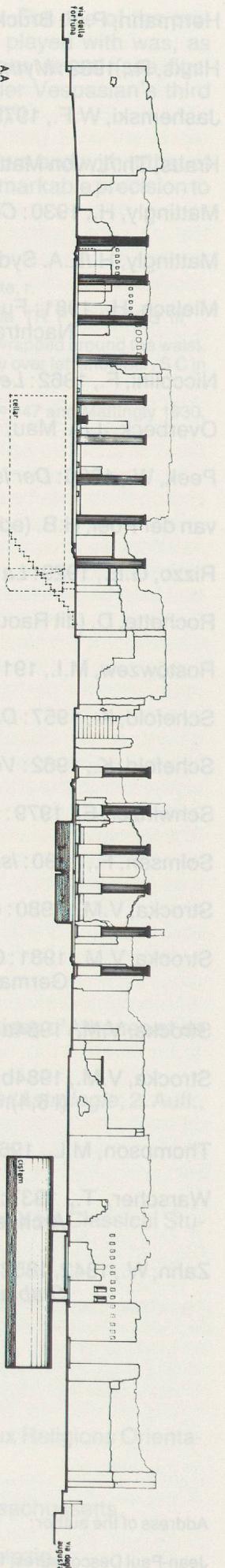


Fig. 2. Cross-sections through the House of the Coloured Capitals (by R.E. Apperly) 



Fig. 3. House of the Coloured Capitals, room 17: south wall (photo P. Grunwald, DAI Berlin)

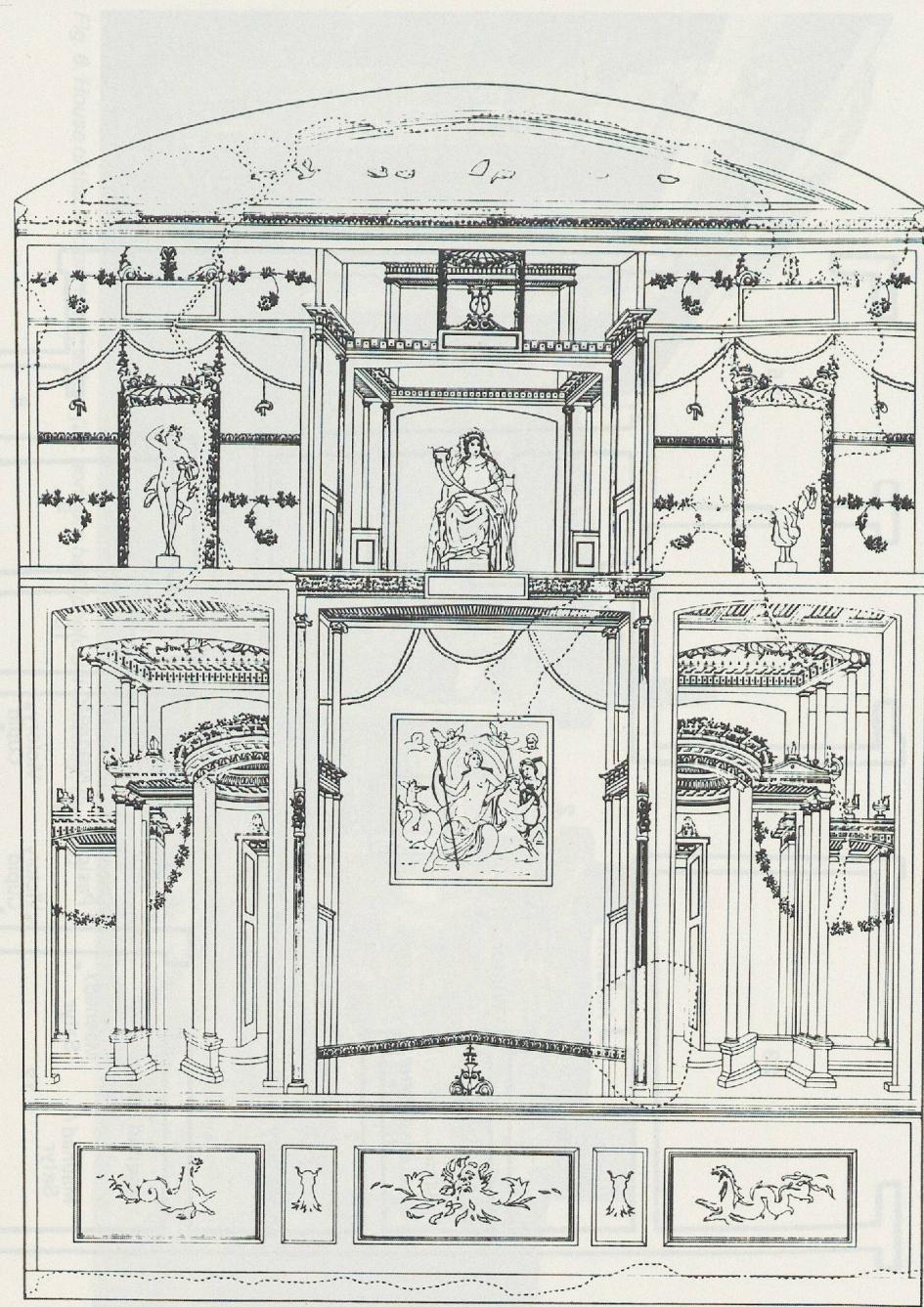


Fig. 4. Same wall as fig. 3: line drawing (by Wendy Kinsella and Judith Sellers)

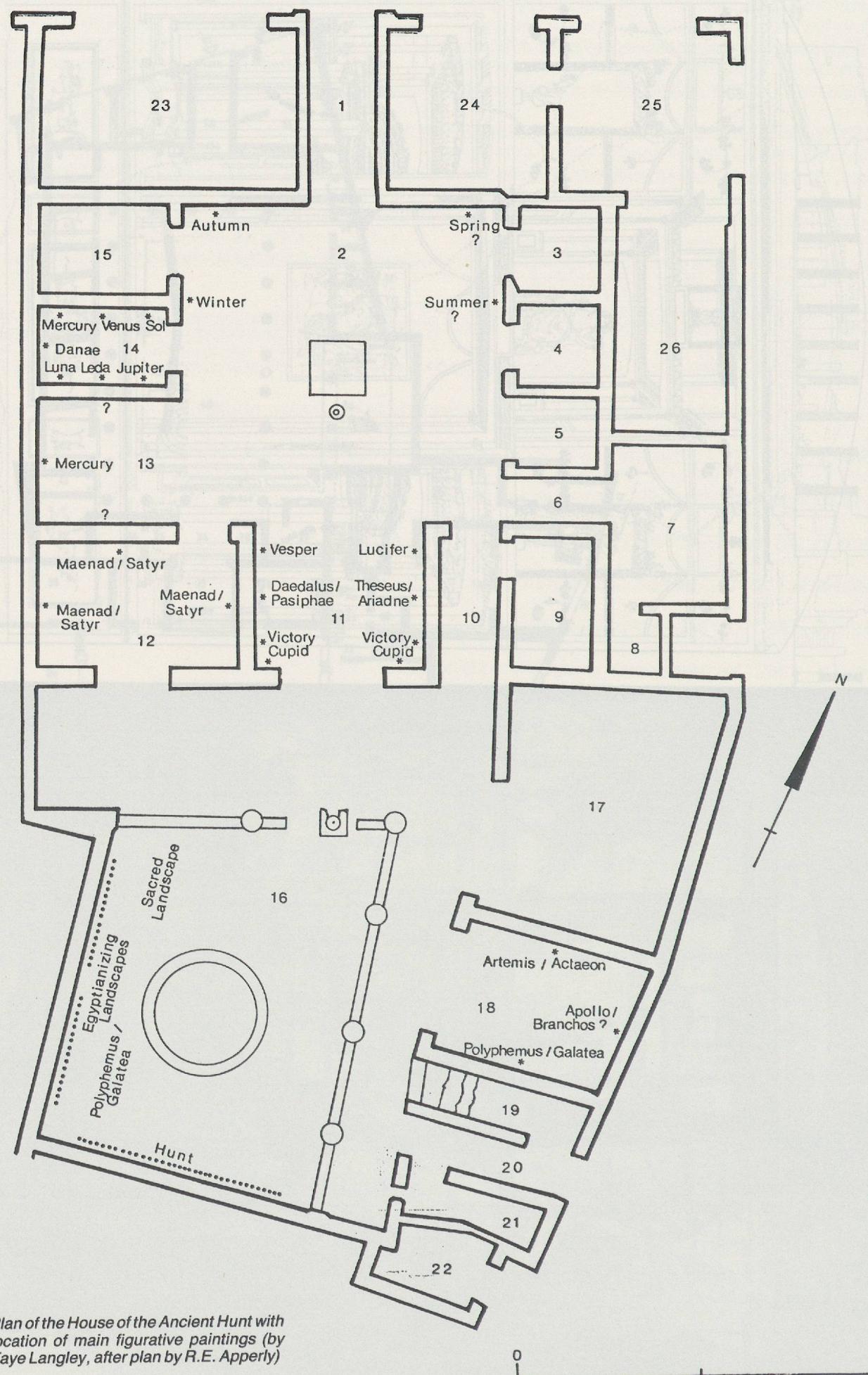


Fig. 5. Plan of the House of the Ancient Hunt with location of main figurative paintings (by Faye Langley, after plan by R.E. Apperly)

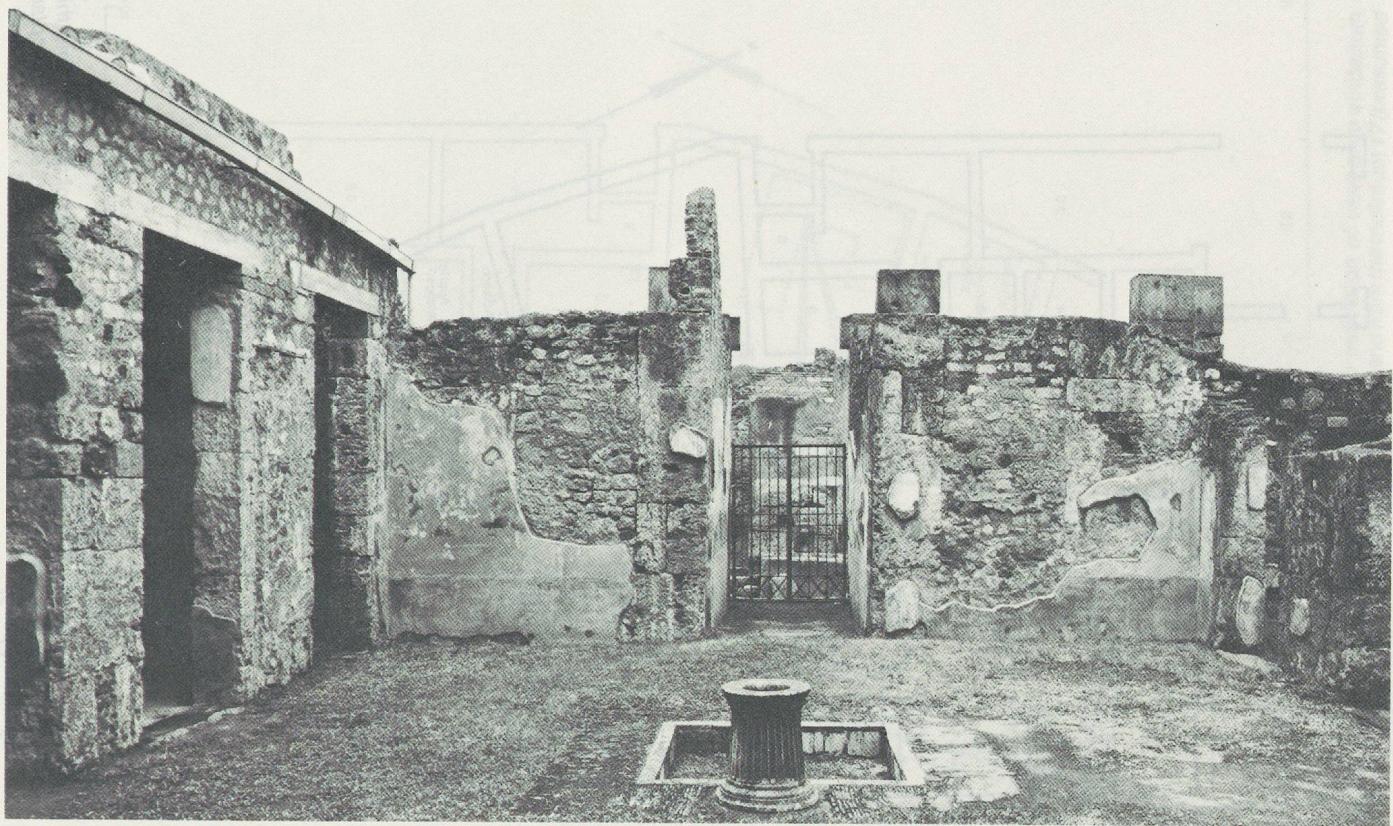


Fig. 6. House of the Ancient Hunt, atrium (2): northern half (photo Jill Crossley, Sydney)

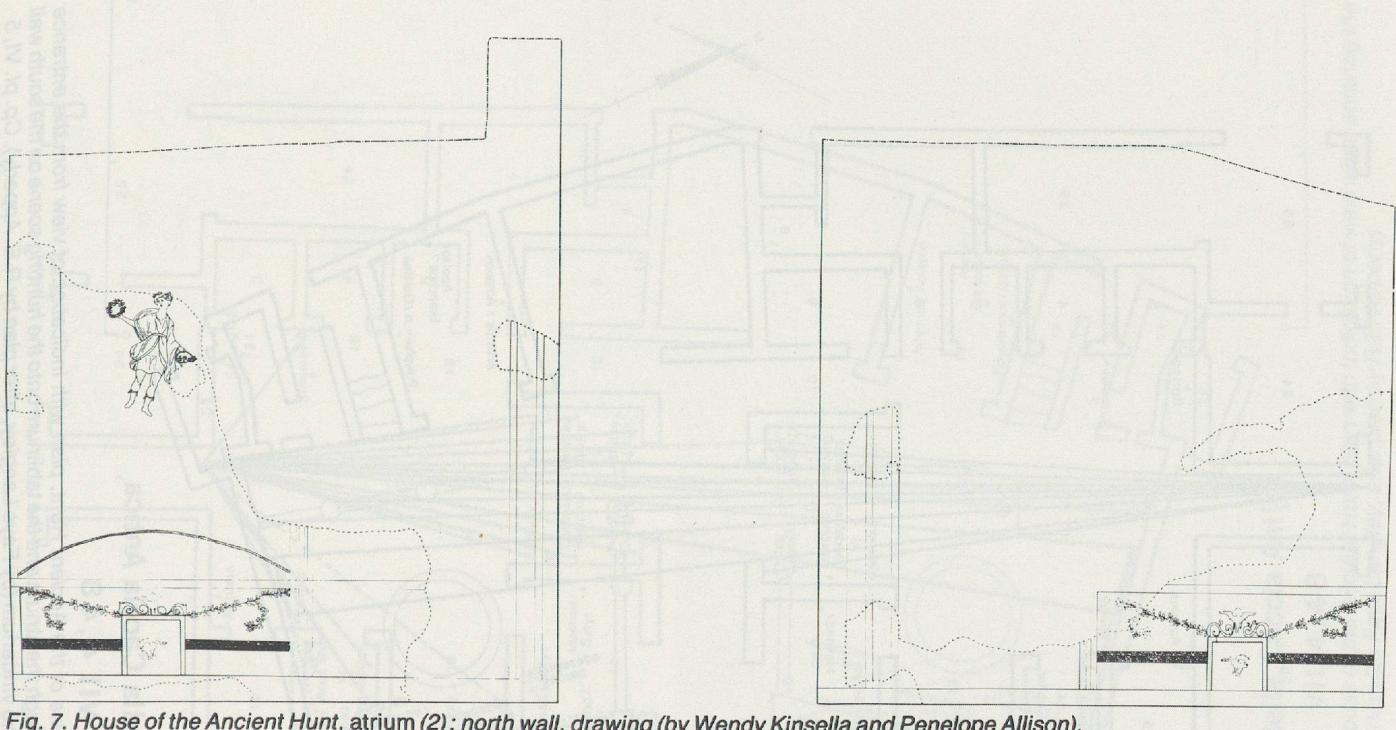


Fig. 7. House of the Ancient Hunt, atrium (2): north wall, drawing (by Wendy Kinsella and Penelope Allison).

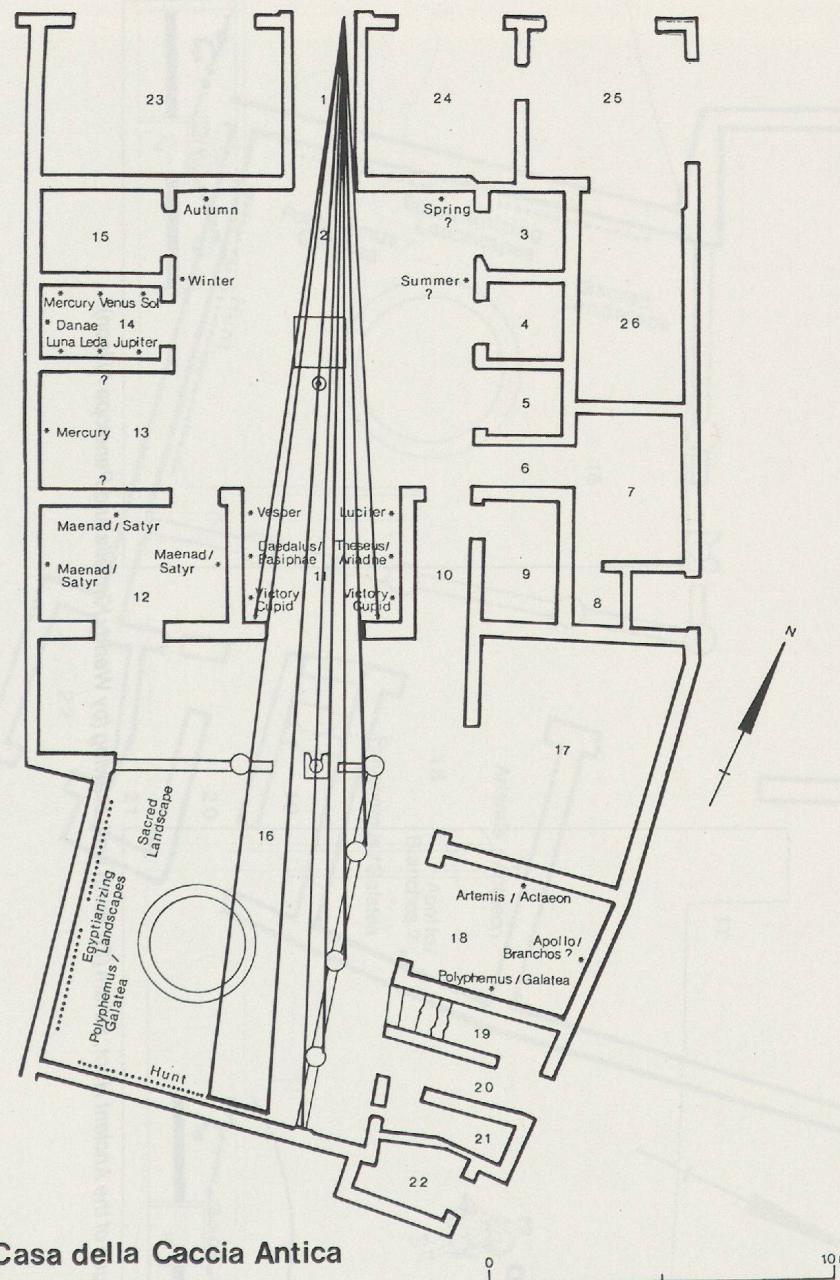


Fig. 8. House of the Ancient Hunt, plan with indication of view from the entrance through the atrium and the tablinum onto the hunting scene on the south wall of the viridarium (by Faye Langley, after plan by R.E. Apperly). Cp. pl. VI, 5

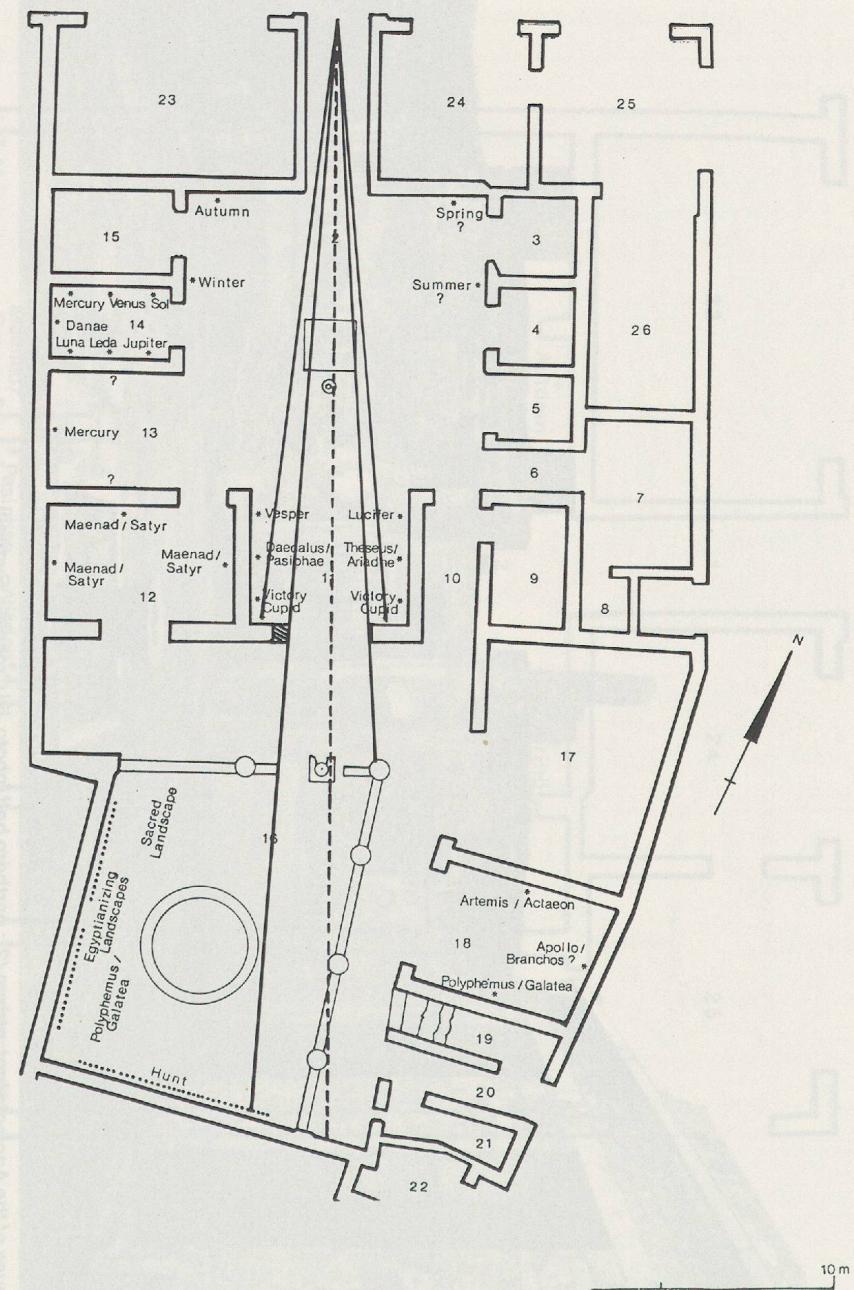


Fig. 9. As fig. 8, but showing effect of symmetrical opening of tablinum onto the viridarium: view onto hunting scene obstructed (by Faye Langley, after plan by R.E. Apperly)

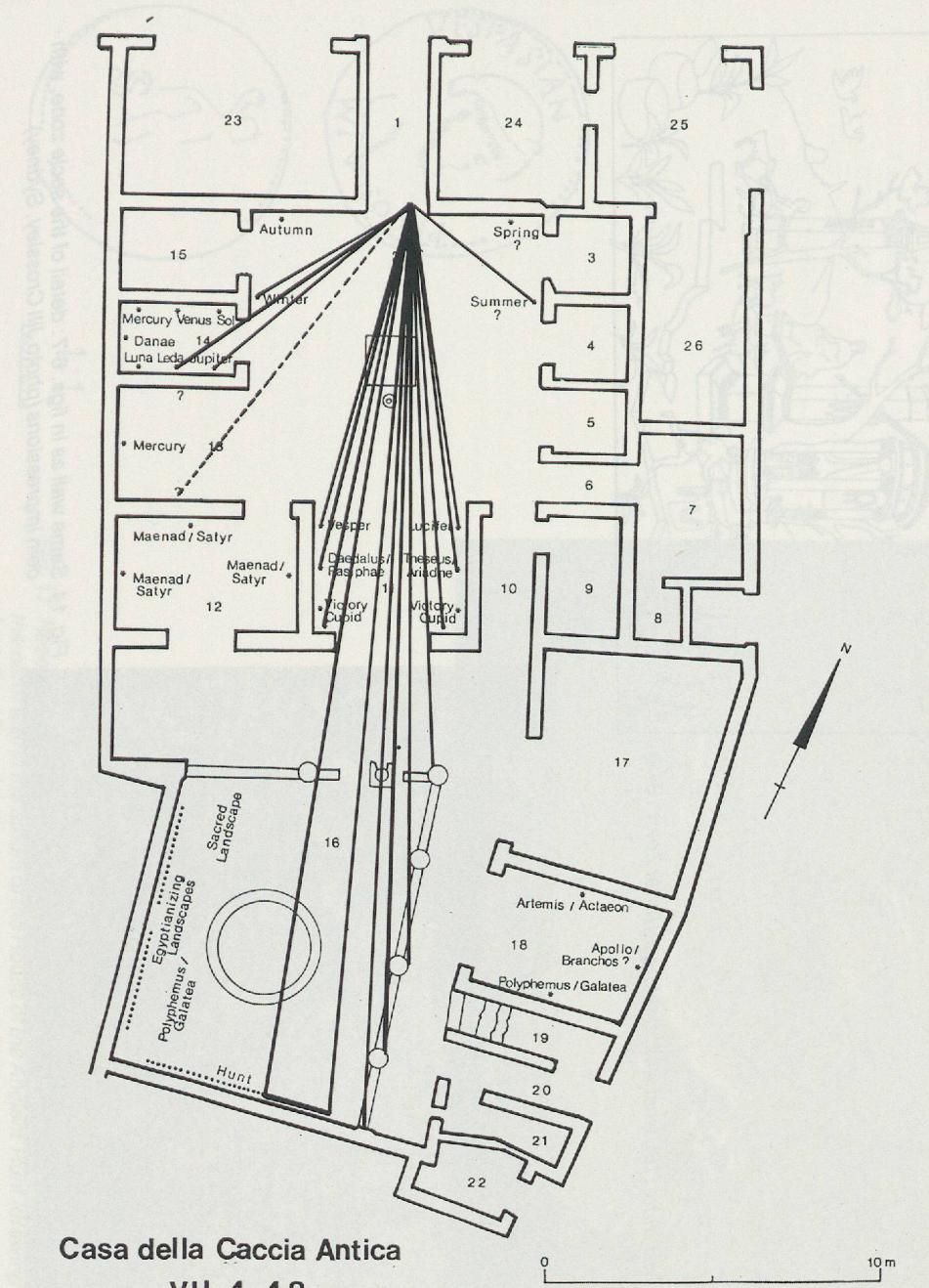


Fig. 10. House of the Ancient Hunt, plan with indication of view when entering the atrium (by Faye Langley, after plan by R.E. Apperly)

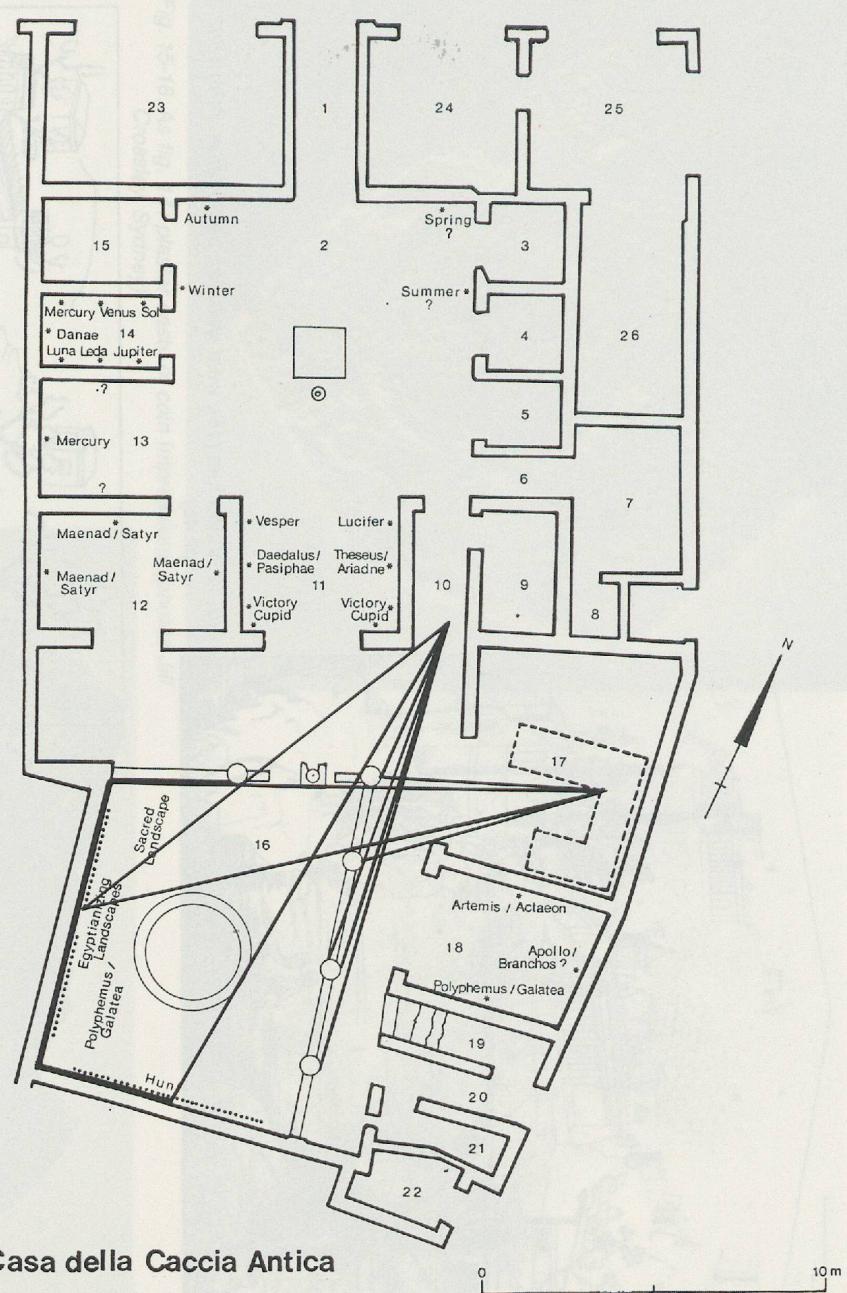


Fig. 11. House of the Ancient Hunt, plan with indication of view onto viridarium paintings from entrance to the peristyle and from the triclinium 17 (presumed location of the locus consularis)

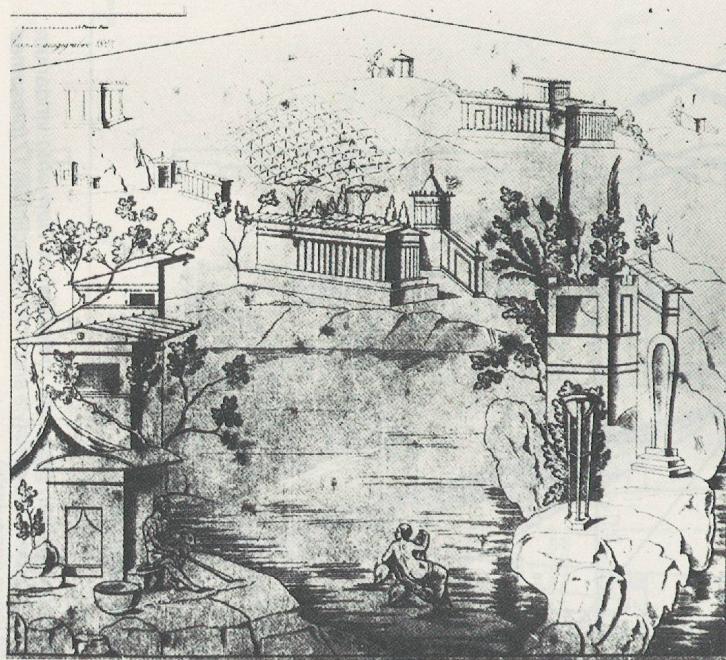


Fig. 12. Viridarium (16), west wall: left panel (after Zahn 1852, pl. 48)

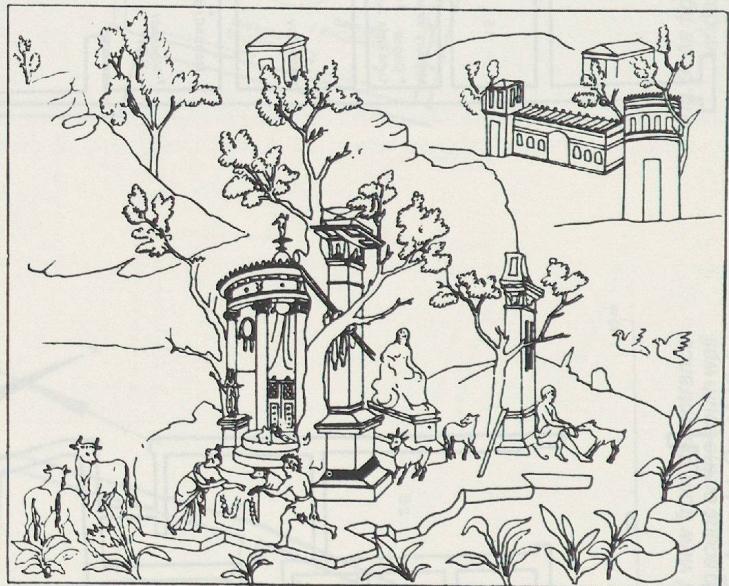


Fig. 13. Viridarium (16), west wall: right panel (after Zahn 1842, pl. 60)



Fig. 14. Same wall as in figs. 6-7: detail of the socle zone, with coin impressions (photo Jill Crossley, Sydney)

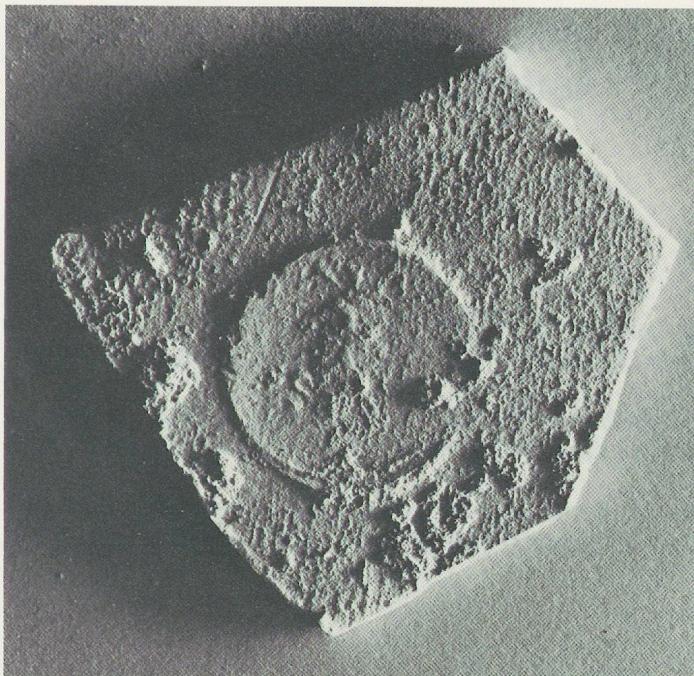
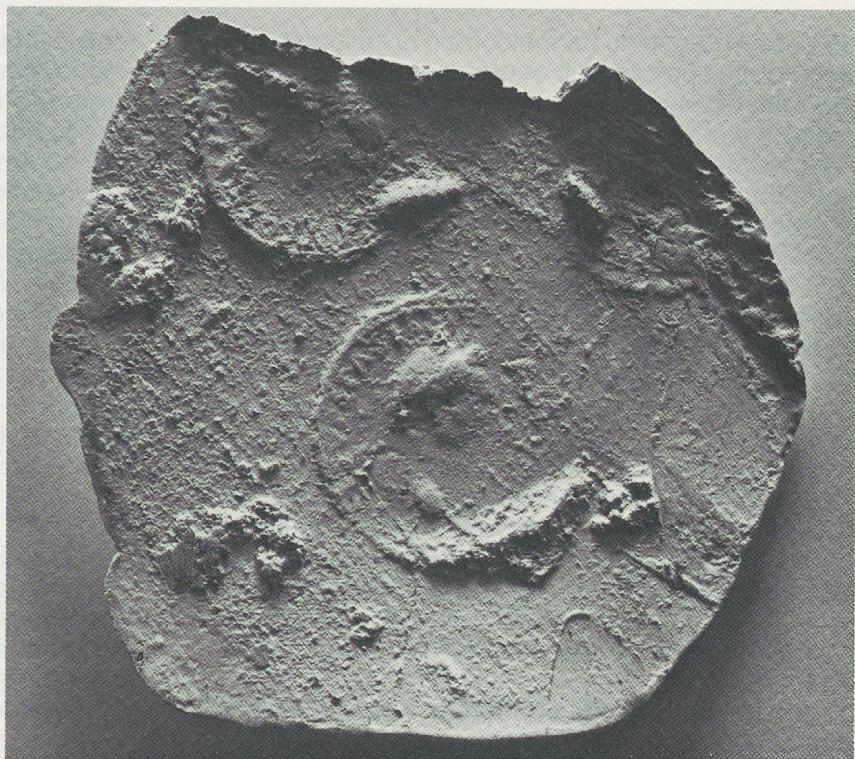


Fig. 15-16. As fig. 14: plaster casts of coin impressions (photos Jill Crossley, Sydney)

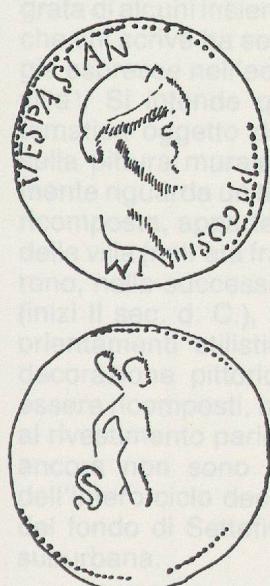
zione di influenze da architetture di altre civiltà.

estre appartenne contribuiti da un gran
modèle les scènes en bois du théâtre romain que
peintures campaniennes (*Oplonis p. ex.*) et avec les
Palaït et sa partie de

Fig. 16.



più antico proposto è l'ipotetico, la cui struttura è
della più grande simmetria, soprattutto le pareti sono
mero speculare nelle due lunghe, in pianta avanzato
si pongono i due pilastri, color rosso chiaro con specie
chiature interne messe in risalto dai giochi di luci
che scandiscono verticalmente la parete in tre zone
questi vanno immaginati in linea con i solidi pilastri
angolari che inquadrono e sostengono la loro struttura,
con molta probabilità coperta da soffitto ondulato
e con un portico che si estende a posteriori ed estende
verso l'alto, verso il centro, verso il centro, e le lesene
sono disposte in modo da formare una colonnata, col-



1:1

Fig. 17. Reconstruction drawing of Vespasianic sestertius impressed in the plaster of
the north wall in the atrium of the House of the Ancient Hunt (drawing by
Jean-Paul Descoeuilles)

