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Goddess of the Garden: Evidence of Everyday Life and Worship in the Gardens of Pompeii

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Abstract

Gardens were an integral part of daily living in Pompeii before the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE. Scholars have discovered that family meals and household production were a regular part of the garden experience. While much academic work has been devoted to the garden spaces excavated within the city, there has not been, as of yet, a focused look at the ways religion may have been practiced in the garden. Venus was an important deity to the Romans, but multiple strands of evidence suggests the people of Pompeii had a special relationship with Venus as a nature goddess. This research focusses on the pervasiveness of the Venus cult in the gardens of Pompeii, in addition to exploring the ways religion was practiced in the garden by studying archaeological, textual, and iconographic data gathered from the garden spaces of Pompeii.

1. Body of Paper

Pompeii's unfortunate placement in the shadow of Vesuvius was, at least in part, the reason for its success as a bustling Roman city. The fertile volcanic soil produced crops four times a year, and with the advent of the aqueduct, Pompeians began to experiment with multiple types of gardening. Until the 1st century BCE, plants were grown mostly for food or medicine.¹ This changed with the introduction of the aqueduct during the Augustan period. Citizens were no longer limited to the rainwater that fell into their homes through an open hole in the ceiling called a *compluvium* and the water that collected in a basin below called the *impluvium*, which stored the water in a cistern for later use.² Before the advent of the aqueduct, the *impluvium* would have been the main source of water. Wells were not feasible in the region due to Pompeii's placement on the ledge of Vesuvius. With a plentiful source of water and weather that was hospitable for most of the year, garden space became the center of family life.

The multi-functional nature of garden areas can be seen through archaeological evidence discovered in situ at Pompeii. Dining couches, loom weights, and sculptures of Venus and other deities have been unearthed through excavation, demonstrating the everyday use of garden space, as well as its religious associations. Venus was the tutelary goddess of the city and the most important divinity of gardens.³ These gardens were multifunctional for Roman families, and a place of both physical and spiritual fulfillment. Through archaeological, textual, and iconographic analyses, this paper will examine how gardens were utilized in ancient Rome, but, in particular, this paper examines the relationship between the goddess Venus and the gardens in Pompeii. The research conducted in this paper explores multiple strands of evidence in order to define the Pompeian connection to the cult worship of Venus and how that connection is related to garden spaces. Next, it will concentrate on the methods used by archaeologists to determine what types of evidence have been collected from many seasons of garden excavations. An analysis of iconography and material remains from gardens will demonstrate the ways Pompeians used garden spaces on a daily basis, in addition to exploring how that evidence establishes the ways religion was practiced in the garden.

2. Venus in Pompeii

Religious tradition in ancient Rome was unlike the predominant religions of the modern world in several ways. A brief description of the basic tenets of Roman religion will demonstrate how important religious worship was to Pompeian citizens, and how it was a regular part of daily life during this time. There were numerous gods-local deities in addition to many others brought in from abroad through trading and conquest. An ivory statue of Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of beauty and fertility, was discovered in a house along the Via dell' Abbondanza in Pompeii.⁴ Furthermore, Pompeii had a temple dedicated to the Egyptian deities Isis and Osiris, which demonstrates the range of gods and goddesses that were worshipped in the region.⁵

While individuals in Pompeii worshiped multiple deities in the home, religion was also a community affair and was distinctive to each region. In Pompeii, there was a specific connection to deities relating to nature, such as Diana and Priapus, but Venus was the tutelary divinity of the city.⁶ After Pompeii was conquered by the Roman general Lucius Cornelius Sulla in 89 BCE, he chose Venus as his patron naming the town *Colonia Veneria Cornelia Pompeianorum*.⁷ This demonstrates how the political structure of Pompeii was inextricably linked to religion and worship of Venus, in particular. Other generals consecrated temples in Venus's name, and tried to claim lineage directly from the goddess. Pompey vowed a temple to *Venus Victrix* in 55 BCE, and Caesar, in an oration delivered for his Aunt Julia's funeral, made a familial connection to Venus and the immortal gods.⁸ Venus was honored in Pompeii with a new temple there after the region was conquered by Sulla. Although this was a public display by political leaders naming Venus as the patron deity of the town and ancestral mother of the Romans, Pompeians identified with the temple through their local tradition of veneration of the goddess, and her relationship to nature is seen with the addition of a sacred grove to the temple complex.⁹

Temples are clear symbols of Roman religion, and there were often as many temples as there were gods. In Pompeii there were temples dedicated to multiple gods and goddesses, but the Temple of Venus was an impressive structure that was located on the south-western edge of the city on a high terrace overlooking a valley and would have been instantly visible to anyone arriving to the city from this direction.¹⁰ The temple was first excavated around 1900, but efforts were limited to the temple itself and completely disregarded the courtyard area.¹¹ A research project led by Maureen Carroll from the University of Sheffield, U. K., began in 1998 to examine the courtyard of the Temple of Venus for the existence of a garden or sacred grove, and to look at the role of sacred groves in cult worship.¹²

The sacred grove at the Temple of Venus was landscaped in a sophisticated pattern that closely mimicked the columns and porticoes of the temple structure on three sides of the enclosure. Terracotta containers, which possibly contained plants connected to Venus, such as myrtle and rose, were planted parallel to a water channel alternating with trees to create the mimicking effect of the columns and porticoes of the temple.¹³ The complexity of the sacred grove reveals the extent of the skills of Pompeian gardeners. While little textual evidence of gardeners has survived antiquity, archeological signs of their work have survived at the temple of Venus. Holes were left where wooden stakes were once placed beside the terracotta pots to lend support to leaning trees or bushes. The soil from inside the planting pots was analyzed by Maureen Carroll, leader of the excavation of the temple garden in Pompeii, and discovered that it was fertilized with shells and skeletal remnants of juvenile pigs and fish vertebrae.¹⁴ The earthquake of 62 CE destroyed the temple of Venus and construction was not complete when Vesuvius erupted.¹⁵

Dedications to Venus appear in multiple forms throughout the city. Inscriptions refer to her as *Venus Pompeiana*, *Venus Fisica*, and *Venus Fisica Pompeiana*, and her iconography varies accordingly.¹⁶ When Venus is described in an inscription as *Pompeiana*, she is presented fully dressed, wearing an elaborate diadem and bearing the symbols of Fortuna, an olive branch and boat oar (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: Painting of Venus Pompeiana, Pompeii.

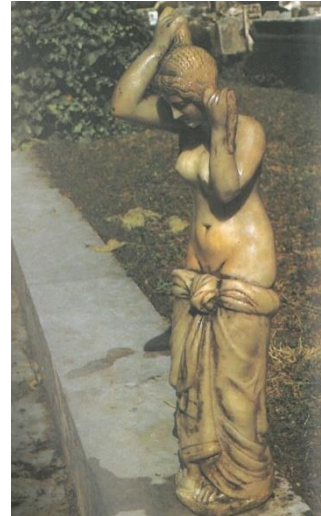


Figure 2: Statuette of Venus Fisica, Pompeii.

Alternatively, Venus is described as *Venus Fisica*, when referencing her importance as a protector of gardens. These statuettes of Venus are nude or partially draped (Fig. 2). There is much debate as to the history of the title of *Venus Fisica*. Mary Beard points out that we do not know for sure the exact root of the title, but it likely dates to the Oscan period of the region.¹⁷ Roy Merle Peterson in the *Cults of Campania* argues that there is a direct link to the Oscan goddess, Herentas, who was likely worshipped in the region, but she too was affected by outside influences.¹⁸ Other scholars, however, argue that the cult of Mefitis, an important deity to the Samnites and Lucanians, was practiced in Pompeii and could explain a connection to the term *Fisica*.¹⁹ Dedications to Venus have been found in a variety of contexts. An inscription discovered on the bowl of a ceramic vase demonstrates the pervasiveness of the Venus cult. The inscription, scrawled onto the vase before it was fired reads: “*Presta mi sinceru (m): sic tea met qu(a)e custodit (h)ortu(m) Venus* (Allow me pure [wine]: then may Venus who guards the garden love you).”²⁰ Inscriptions mentioning Venus in many other contexts are found all over Pompeii. In one inscription a citizen offers good wishes for a lover. “May you, my darling, thrive, and may you have the goodwill of Pompeian Venus.”²¹ In another graffito placed in the margin underneath a picture of gladiators, the author warns any person who would damage his art with the threat of Venus’ anger. “Whoever harms this, may he leave behind an angry Pompeian Venus.”²² Gods and goddesses of different traits were part of the religion of Pompeii at the time of the eruption. However, the Venus cult was an important part of the history of the region and maintained influence after the area was conquered by the Romans. Venus worship occurred in the public and private sphere, and inscriptions to the well-known goddess appear in many forms. She is often described as the goddess of love, but, in Pompeii, Venus is the goddess of the garden.

3. Garden Archaeology

Archaeologists have gleaned valuable information about everyday life in Pompeii by excavating garden spaces and little attention was paid to them until the mid-twentieth century. Excavations occurred with little regard to the scientific method prior to 1860, and only a few excavation reports survive from the period until Wilhelmina Jashemski, an early pioneer of garden archaeology, began excavating in 1957.²³ She was prompted to excavate in Pompeii after a day trip to the ancient city with her husband in 1955. Her timing at Pompeii was serendipitous in that most of the gardens that had been excavated prior to WWII had been damaged by allied bombs during the Second World War. Jashemski was able to gather information from those early excavators, many of whom were then elderly, and who had excavated prior to the gardens being destroyed. Jashemski was able to retrieve many of the excavation findings from before WWII, which were not published, and would have otherwise been lost.

In the beginning, many hot summers were spent clearing the gardens of weeds and painstakingly photographing every garden in Pompeii. This process was necessary to truly determine the everyday garden’s function within the

bustling Roman city. Many gardens in Pompeii were situated within homes and public buildings, rather than being attached to the rear of homes, like many modern day garden plans. By filling empty crevasses in the soil with plaster, Jashemski and her team studied root balls left behind by trees, and discovered that Pompeii had parks filled with trees that offered shade to overheated Roman citizens, as well as large commercial vineyards. Excavations at Pompeii were aided by numerous specialists across multiple disciplines. They not only excavated the gardens, but meticulously catalogued every insect, bird, and small animal that was discovered either painted in a garden fresco scene, or by its physical remains left behind in the carbonized material. Wilhelmina Jashemski's husband, Stanley, aided the excavations by being the primary photographer. In the years of excavations at Pompeii he took over thirty thousand color images, including devising a system to take 'map accurate' images of the gardens from the helm of a hot air balloon.²⁴

4. Plants Associated With Venus

Evidence for a spiritual connection to gardens can be seen through the types of plants discovered in garden paintings. Wilhelmina Jashemski identified individual plants in paintings, and on *lararia* (household shrines where offerings and prayers were made to the gods) throughout her years of work in Pompeii. In multiple paintings she encountered tiny white flowers made by a cluster of tiny dots. Leaves were of little assistance for identification because painters in Pompeii tended to focus on the flower rather than the foliage, and many foliage types were repeated with very little regard to the actual structure.²⁵ Myrtle bushes growing near the site where Jashemski was excavating finally yielded a definitive answer to the species represented in the paintings. Walking past the bushes she discovered the same tiny dots she had witnessed in many paintings were littering the ground around her, and a few days after that, their buds had opened (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: Myrtle in Bloom in Pompeii.



Figure 4: Myrtle Wreath Dotted with White Blossoms, House of the Lovers.

Myrtle was commonly used for wreaths. In several paintings in Pompeii, a painted myrtle wreath frames the image (Fig. 4). Branches of myrtle were also fashioned into wreaths worn at festivals and weddings. The evidence of myrtle was again confirmed at the villa at Torre Annunziata, where an ancient artist painted the myrtle in fruit.²⁶ Myrtle blossoms often covered an entire painting, suggesting that myrtle was pervasive in the garden. Myrtle was a plant specifically associated with Venus. In Greek legend, Myrrha was one Venus's priestesses. Venus transformed her into a tree to protect her from an "ardent suitor."²⁷

5. Enclosures, Design, and Multifunctional Use of Garden Space

During the second century BCE, homes of wealthy citizens started to include a peristyle garden. Before the introduction of the peristyle, Roman houses were situated on an axial plan with three main elements, *atrium*, *tablinum*, and *hortus*. The Italic *hortus*, or garden plot, was an essential part of early Italic houses.²⁸ The *hortus* was situated at the rear of the house, and was as large as space would allow.²⁹ The best example of an Italic *hortus* in

Pompeii was discovered at the House of the Surgeon (2.3.3.),³⁰ so called for the discovery of surgical implements when excavated. The house was built around the beginning of the third century B.C., and is laid out in standard Italic fashion.³¹

A peristyle is essentially an area enclosed by colonnades of columns within a building. The Roman peristyle garden is likely an amalgamation of Hellenistic, Persian, and Etruscan ideas.³² Peristyle gardens were placed in the center of the home. This placement allowed for additional light, and was a place for families to gather. Often low fences, or holes where they would have been located, have been found between the columns of the peristyle. These could have been used for decorative purposes, in addition to protecting plants from being trampled by pets or small children. Evidence for the importance of a well-kept garden is seen in the ways homes were designed to give the visitor a central view to the garden. Some earlier homes had windows cut into walls to allow the garden to be viewed from other rooms.

As the Romans' wealth increased, the more elaborate their gardens became. Statuary, wall paintings, and fountains were added, if funding allowed. In later periods, after the introduction of the aqueduct, the basin of the *impluvium* was sometimes transformed into a miniature peristyle garden.³³ Wealthy Romans experimented with garden design, but even those living in cramped apartment buildings had plants. Textual sources, including Martial, the famous first century CE satirist, describe having window boxes and plants in pots along balconies and window ledges.³⁴

6. Gardens: Function and Ritual

Archaeological evidence in Pompeii indicates that the garden space itself was the center of family life, in both day-to-day living and in worship. The climate of Pompeii is warm for much of the year, and many chose to eat and work in the shade of the garden. During the Republic, Romans sat upright while eating. This style of dining fell out of fashion, and reclining during meals became common amongst the upper classes of Pompeii by the first century BCE.³⁵ Meals were almost always served outdoors when the weather was compatible. Numerous types of *triclinia*, or dining couches, have been excavated at Pompeii. Many were meant to be portable, but others were made of stone and were more permanent. The couches were placed in a U-shape, allowing three diners to recline on each couch for a total of nine diners, which was considered to be the perfect number of guests to invite to a dinner party.³⁶ Entertainment was also a central part of the garden experience, and music was a common accompaniment at dinner parties held in the garden. A single musician playing the lyre would play while dinner guests lounged on the concrete *triclinia* and enjoyed their meal. Textual sources indicate that singing was sometimes part of the entertainment; Jashemski details an account of the banquet of Trimalchio in which singing slaves served dinner.³⁷

Women spent a large amount of time and energy spinning and weaving wool, which was an important part of the economy at that time. Excavations in Pompeii led to the discovery that spinning and weaving was carried out in the garden when loom weights were found *in situ* in every garden Jashemski and her team excavated.³⁸ Penelope M. Allison further explores the nature of home production in her book, *Pompeian Households: An Analysis of the Material Culture*. From her study, she determined that cloth production was prolific inside homes, where a variety of objects related to weaving cloth has been discovered. Weaving equipment was excavated in front rooms and rooms adjacent to the main garden area, which indicates weaving and cloth production was a public activity carried out in the main areas of garden spaces.³⁹ In addition to various types of household production, religious worship was practiced in the garden.

Statues of various sizes of multiple deities have been discovered in the gardens of Pompeii. It is likely that some of the sculptures were purely decorative, but if the object was accompanied by a small incense burner or portable altar, it is probable that the item was associated with worship. In addition, *lararia* and altars discovered in gardens near the *triclinium* indicate that gardens were used as a space for worship. Fragments of a gilded pseudo-alabaster Venus statuette were discovered in a niche in the wall of a *thermopolium* 2. 1. 1. The statuette was an object of worship because it had a small, portable, terra-cotta altar with a conical base and a hole for incense at the top sitting in front of it.⁴⁰ Portable altars do not survive antiquity unless they were made of a durable material. An altar made of stucco was excavated in house 1. 8. 3.⁴¹ The house is small, in comparison to the other houses around it, but still has two garden spaces. The portable altar was discovered in the light well of the home where a small pool had been erected and a garden painting of a snake stretches along the wall above. Jashemski noted that portable pots were probable along the ledge of the pool.⁴² This house also had a small garden in the rear situated in the same manner as the Italic *hortus*.

Evidence of portable altars is important when considering the function of the household garden. Much of the evidence gleaned from early garden excavations, before Jashemski developed a scientific manner of excavating, has been lost -with the exception of written evidence gathered from early archaeologists. We have textual evidence, in

addition to a drawing of a masonry altar discovered in a 1910 excavation at 7. 6. 28. The peristyle garden had ten white columns and the spacing varied according to the entrances to other parts of the home. The rooms of the house were situated as to allow an unimpeded view of the garden. Three circular beds of plantings were found, in addition to two trees. The altar (0.46 x 0.53m.; 0.70m. high) was found at the base of the root cavity of the largest tree.⁴³ The altar was covered with *signinum*, a durable building material made from pieces of ground pottery pieces.⁴⁴ All that survives of the excavation is a drawing of the altar placed in a scene of living vegetation. Jashemski chronicled the account of the excavation in her book, *The Gardens of Pompeii, Volume II*, but the garden no longer survives. It was destroyed by bombing during WW II.

In addition to Venus, there is also some evidence of cultic activity in the garden associated with Diana, as the goddess associated with sacred groves. Sculptures of Diana accompanied with objects of worship have been found in Pompeian gardens. Some scholars argue that Roman gardens in general can be seen as small imitations of Diana's sacred groves.⁴⁵ A marble statue of Diana with an incense burner accompanying it was found in the house of Queen Carolina (8.3.14.)⁴⁶ A grand 1.08 meter archaic sculpture of Diana was discovered in the garden of House 7.6.3, in 1760.⁴⁷ The sculpture had an altar in front of it, so it is considered to be an object of worship. The statue was housed in a sophisticated shrine in the peristyle. The statue survived, but the house it was found in was badly damaged by bombing. Diana is covered in full-length drapery and is wearing a simple sandal. Her hair is mostly stylized, but has a few tendrils of long waves escaping the main coif (Fig. 5).



Figure 5: Archaic Sculpture of

7. Iconography in the Roman Garden

Along the covered walkways of the peristyle, paintings depicted various scenes and included numerous illustrations of plants and animals. In Pompeii, garden paintings were commonly discovered on the back wall of the garden, making the garden appear larger. This allowed a visitor to see the garden and the painting immediately when they entered the house, the intended effect of which was to enlarge the perceived space. Although usually smaller and less ornate, garden paintings have been discovered even in very small homes. Venus is a popular theme of Garden paintings in Pompeii. In the House of Venus Marina (2. 2. 2) an oversized painting of Venus adorns the wall as the central panel of a triptych-style fresco. This particular painting of Venus is the only one like it in Pompeii. She appears to be in motion; riding the wind to shore with the help of two *amorini*. The image is flat, and has few elements other than the figures. Venus is wearing jewelry around her neck, wrist, and both ankles, in addition to a diadem on her head and earrings. Her curly hair is typical of other female figures in Pompeian paintings at the time (Fig. 6).



Figure 6: Painting of Venus in the House of Venus Marina, Pompeii.

While the painting of Venus is remarkable, it is only part of a triptych discovered in the home. The painting fills the garden walls with color and action. Garden scenes on either side of Venus depict different types of birds including, swans, orioles, and white doves, considered to be Venus's favorite, are painted in front of lush vegetation.⁴⁸ The garden scenes are framed by garlands studded with white flecks, which could indicate that they are garlands of myrtle, the plant commonly linked with Venus. In the center of each garland a theater mask hovers overhead. To the left of Venus, a painting of a marble sculpture of Mars stands on a pedestal in a garden scene. Samnites and Romans viewed Mars as the god of agriculture (and war). In addition, Mars iconography often demonstrates how he was considered to be the consort of Venus.⁴⁹ These elements make Mars an appropriate garden deity in Pompeii. His attributes are instantly recognizable in the painting. He is wearing a helmet while holding a shield and a spear. The sculpture is surrounded by birds fluttering about, and a myriad of plant species "growing" alongside the statue (Fig. 7).



Figure 7: Painting of Mars Statue in House of Venus Marina,

The paintings in the house of Venus Marina are richly decorative imaginary scenes that surely brought enjoyment to the owner of this impressive home prior to the eruption of Vesuvius. Special attention was put into the garden of the House of Venus Marina. At the time of the eruption, it was the only part of the house that was completely repaired after the devastating earthquake of 62 CE. Archaeologists found areas of the house that were in various states of repair after the earthquake, but work on the garden area was complete.

Statuettes of Venus as well as painted statuettes found at Pompeii attest to the importance of her cult in the city.⁵⁰ Statuettes were painted in utilitarian gardens, as well as pleasure gardens indicating the reputation of Venus as a guardian of the garden.⁵¹ A grand marble statue of Venus was uncovered in a shrine-like structure in the garden of house 1. 2. 17.⁵² The house is reasonably large and had two gardens, a small one at the rear of the house, and a

larger peristyle off of the atrium. The statue of Venus is 1.04 meters tall and she is partially draped in the same manner as *Venus fisica* (Fig. 8).



Figure 8: Statue of Venus *Fisica*, Pompeii.

Venus is positioned in a contrapposto stance, and has her left arm resting on the top of a statuette. Her hands are open and out revealing her breasts and torso. Careful attention was paid to the niche that housed the statue. The wall behind the statue was painted to look like blue drapery, and the ceiling above had a “shell-like fluting,”⁵³ and the floor of the niche was veneered with marble. Other statues of Venus were placed on pedestals on the visual axis of the garden, and this placing tied the statues to the garden visually because it would have been seen when entering the house. In the house of Venus in Bikini (1.11.6.) a grand marble statue of Venus was discovered on a base in the atrium behind the *impluvium*. The statue was originally painted, but all that remains by way of decoration is traces of red paint on her lips and the gilded gold bikini, and other flourishes of gold. Venus’ arm is resting on a statue of Priapus while Eros looks up at her from her feet, and she crouches to adjust her sandal. Her gold bikini is an ornate decoration that makes this statue of Venus unique.



Figure 9: Statue of Venus in a Gold Bikini, Pompeii.

8. Conclusion

Garden archaeology in Pompeii has revealed innumerable details about the sophisticated ways gardeners cultivated land hundreds of years ago. Through archaeology we have determined that Pompeians lived, worked, and worshipped in the shade of the garden. The worship of Venus in Pompeii was distinctive in the ways she was worshipped both publicly and privately, and there are multiple strands of evidence that suggest she was the preeminent deity of the garden, a trait that she is not well-known for. While Venus is often called the goddess of love, the people of Pompeii worshipped her as the goddess of the garden.

9. References

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 - 22 Ibid, 129.
 - 23 Ibid, viii.
 - 24 Ibid, ix.
 - 25 Jashemski, *Gardens of Pompeii*, 130.
 - 26 Jashemski, *Gardens of Pompeii*, 131.
 - 27 Ryley, 33.
 - 28 Jashemski, *Gardens of Pompeii*, 17.
 - 29 Farrar, 15.
 - 30 Many of the houses in Pompeii acquire their modern naming convention based on an object discovered there, such as the surgical implements found in the House of the Surgeon. The House of Venus Marina is named for the large-scale painting of Venus in the garden area. In addition, houses are sometimes given a name based on who was thought to have lived in the house at the time of the eruption, such as the House of the Vettii. If a common name has not been ascribed to a particular house, they are commonly described by three numbers. The first number is the

region of Pompeii the house is located, the second number is the block number of that region, and the third number corresponds to the individual house.

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