Title: Utilizing the Mosaic of Neptune and Amphitrite to Identify its Patron’s Status
Author: Isabella Jasas-Montinaro
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The House of Neptune and Amphitrite in Herculaneum displays one of the most eloquent and intact mosaics from the ancient world, preserved after the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79 (Figure 1), and is one of, “the best testimonies to the continuity of the art mosaic wall revetment from the Alexandrian and Roman periods to the Christian and Byzantine era”.¹ The House of Neptune and Amphitrite is in the eastern part of the city, and is one of the few houses where the upper level has been preserved.² The mosaic is found on the main floor, in the southeastern corner of the house, in a summer triclinium, depicting the sea god Neptune (otherwise known in the Greek world as Poseidon) standing beside his wife Amphitrite, a sea-goddess.³ The mosaic from the House of Neptune and Amphitrite can inform us about the identity of the patron, based on: 1) the choice of depiction, 2) by looking at the construction details of the mosaic itself, 3) the context surrounding the mosaic, and 4) how the mosaic fits within public and private functions of a Roman house. While past scholarship elaborated on the aesthetic qualities of the mosaic, in order to identify the reason for this specific depiction and identify the status of the patron, I shall consider the importance of the historical context surrounding it. As the mosaic of Neptune and Amphitrite suggests a symbolic meaning to myth and a connection to the sea, the mosaic’s placement in the summer triclinium also indicates that it was consumed within the context of a Roman dinner party, a cena. This context emphasizes the status of the patron, but it also must be understood by its connection to other rooms in the

¹ Isabella Jasas-Montinaro is a graduate of UTM, where she double majored in English and Classical Civilizations. She originally wrote this paper for an independent study, inspired by her grant-sponsored trip to Herculaneum, supervised by Dr. Carrie Fulton in the fall of 2018. Currently, she is in England completing her Master’s in Museum and Gallery Studies, specializing in Nazi looted artwork during the Second World War. Amedeo Maiuri. Herculaneum. Translated by V. Priestley 7th English Edition. (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico Dello Stato, 1977), 44.
² Maiuri, Herculaneum, 43.
house, such as the adjacent *nymphaeum* and the shop, through which the owner can be identified as an elite member of Pompeiiian society, with ties to business.⁴

The main focus of the mosaic is a figural depiction of Neptune and Amphitrite, each shown with attributes allowing the viewer to identify the figures as these deities (Figure 1). The mosaic itself mimics the colourful and detailed Pompeiiian Fourth Style painting.⁵ Both figures pose in a contrapposto stance, and stand separately, not embracing each other. Neptune is shown accordingly with long hair and a beard, holding his trident in his left hand, and his right hand is slightly outstretched; around his shoulders is a blue cloth, while his body is in the nude.⁶ Amphitrite, as a sea-goddess, and the wife of Neptune, leans on some sort of a wall or support, while holding her golden distaff.⁷ While Amphitrite is mostly in the nude, a blue and beige cloth drapes around her thighs and her head, exposing her breasts, and calling attention to her partial nudity (Figure 1). Amphitrite’s golden distaff also draws our attention directly to her, not only by the linear arrangement pulling our eye there, but also through the colour. Recently, the Herculaneum Conservation Project discovered the presence of a golden leaf on the mosaic.⁸ This golden leaf is appropriate, given what we know from other literary sources. For instance, Pindar also notes the existence of Amphitrite’s golden distaff in his Olympian Odes and notes that the golden distaff draws the attention to Amphitrite’s body (Pind. *Ol.* 6).⁹ A distaff is a tool used in spinning flax and wool, and spinning was a common womanly duty.

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⁷ Woodford, *Images of Myths*, 239.
While the focus of the mosaic is on the figures, the boarder and area surrounding the mosaic is also important. As the eye is naturally drawn to the two central figures, behind them is a light beige colour that allows the figures to stand out in darker blue and brown accents. They are enclosed in a house or temple, indicated by the triangular foundation above their heads. A border of light blue, red and yellow surrounds them, which is also decorated with floral patterns and gold, picking up colour present in Neptune’s trident and Amphitrite’s staff.\textsuperscript{10} Outside of the figures, two columns are shown to be flanking the side panels. The columns are Corinthian style, with leaves sprouting from them. While Joseph Deiss suggests that there is a conch shell above the figures,\textsuperscript{11} it in fact seems to be the shape of a fan or scallop, something also associated with depictions of Aphrodite.\textsuperscript{12} The shell itself is rendered in three colours: the first seems to be a turquoise blue, above it is red waves, and at the top a sky-blue colour. Above the shell are more floral and vegetal designs in beige, light blue and red. The highest part of the mosaic is patterned with a scale looking design, similar to fish scales. The overall mosaic has a coloured boarder of green and blue, and finally the last boarder to the mosaic is the physical application of shells, which resemble the scallop shell above the figures of Neptune and Amphitrite. While being aesthetically pleasing, some colours are also expensive to acquire according to Pliny the Elder, and further reflect the elite social status of the owner.\textsuperscript{13}

While mosaics were present in the ancient world, a more common form of household décor was the fresco. For example, the frescoed wall at the first-century BC House of Livia (Figure 2), provides a realistic approach to depicting a garden scene. Scenes of vegetation also


\textsuperscript{11} Deiss, *Herculaneum*, 113.

\textsuperscript{12} See Figures 7-10.

surround the mosaic of Neptune and Amphitrite, albeit less naturalistic in their colours; in the yellow portion of the fresco, you can vaguely see the top of a palm tree, and closer to the mosaic, hints of vegetation peak through (Figure 3). While the fresco at the House of Livia displays a similar style in terms of vegetation and trees and gives a realistic impression to the fresco, (Figure 2), there is a difference in the function of these frescoes. When looking at the fresco from the House of Livia, one is supposed to feel as though they are physically outside. However, the fresco surrounding the mosaic of Neptune and Amphitrite does not give a realistic façade with its use of red and yellow, but instead allows the mosaic of Neptune and Amphitrite to stand out.

When placing the mosaic of Neptune and Amphitrite in the context of the house, we must also look at the possible connections that the mosaic had to the other rooms. Upon entering the house, there is a shop in the front right, which has a separate entrance to that of the house (Figure 4).14 Walking into the house, there are two rooms on the left, followed by the atrium, which opens up in the centre.15 A cubiculum (bedroom) is on the right, and in the south east corner of the house is the tablinium (office), which gives view to the summer triclinium (dining room) and the nymphaeum (shrine to the nymphs), with the entrance to it is on the right.16 The house is small, especially for Herculaneum, and the space was maximized by combining multiple functions in rooms.17 For example, as work rooms and living areas were fluid, women wove in the atrium often.18 Additionally, the summer triclinium can be used for hosting guests, dinner parties or feeling as though you are outdoors when there is no access to a physical garden.

14 Clarke, The Houses of Roman Italy, 251.
15 Clarke, The Houses of Roman Italy, 251.
16 Clarke, The Houses of Roman Italy, 251.
18 Pirson, Shops and Industries, 468.
Although, Simon Ellis indicates that mosaics were usually found in the largest reception room,\(^{19}\) in this house, the mosaic is found in the summer *triclinium* because of its importance to function rather than size. Being social was an important factor of Roman daily life; and thus, the function and decoration of the room was often, but not always, linked.\(^{20}\) For example, the House of Neptune and Amphitrite does not have access to outside, lacking a *portico*, or garden,\(^{21}\) where a normal symposium would be held. Since the layout of the House of Neptune and Amphitrite seems to differ from the description on the summer *triclinium* provided by Vitruvius, the decoration can help home owners and guests feel as if they were outside.\(^{22}\)

One possible interpretation for the purpose of the mosaic of Neptune and Amphitrite being in the summer *triclinium* could be its use as a topic of discussion during a cena. Mosaics were usually on the floor of a *triclinium*, with an *emblemata* (symbol) to focus on.\(^{23}\) By having an *emblemata* on the floor, this would be difficult for guests to look at while reclining and eating, and Ruth Westgate suggests that mosaics on the wall were used to provide a view for the guests reclining.\(^{24}\) The choice and subject of the mosaic was used for intellectual response at a cena, a chance to discuss the fascinating image displayed in front of them, such as the myth and nature of Neptune and Amphitrite in the summer *triclinium* of the house.\(^{25}\)

Within the summer *triclinium*, the mosaic of Neptune and Amphitrite needs to be considered together with the nearby *nymphaeum* (Figure 5), in order to provide further

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\(^{19}\) Ellis, *Roman Housing*, 138.

\(^{20}\) Ellis, *Roman Housing*, 36.

\(^{21}\) Maiuri, *Herculaneum*, 44.


\(^{25}\) Newby, Z. 133.
clarifications to the identity of the owner. The nymphaeum was decorated with many animals and vegetation, and the nymphaeum is bordered with shells and mother-of-pearls.\textsuperscript{26} There is a distinct connection between the pigments and products used in both the nymphaeum and mosaic of Neptune and Amphitrite, such as the dark blues and reds, which may indicate that the same mosaicist created both pieces, or that this is the taste of the patron due to similarity.\textsuperscript{27} The use of flowers and trees on the nymphaeum can help to create the illusion of a peristyle (colonnaded space).\textsuperscript{28} When looking at the mosaic, fresco and the nymphaeum together in the same room, this makes up for the lack of space in the house and helps guests to feel like they are physically outside. Ellis noted that the inclusion of the nymphaeum in the summer triclinium helps to highlight the importance to the ideal reception room.\textsuperscript{29} When understanding that the inclusion of the nymphaeum creates an ideal reception, I infer that the patron’s choice to display a nymphaeum is for the purpose of displaying his wealth and social identity as an elite member of society, as social identity was important and was reflected in the décor of one’s house, which can contribute to an explanation for the mosaic of Neptune and Amphitrite.

The overall decoration of the nymphaeum is important to the House of Neptune and Amphitrite, yet, so is the function. The nymphaeum ran water, which was an extremely important indicator of status, as continuous water running in the house would indicate that the patron was considered to be wealthy.\textsuperscript{30} The continuous water could also suggest a luxurious lifestyle within the house; for those who could afford running water, they did not have to worry about saving it for the necessity of survival. Incorporating an nymphaeum with running water in the house could

\textsuperscript{26} Maiuri, *Herculaneum*, 44; Fig. 9.
\textsuperscript{27} Dunbabin, K. 244.
\textsuperscript{28} McKay, A. 55.
\textsuperscript{29} Ellis, *Roman Housing*, 86.
indicate that the patron wished to showcase his knowledge of myth, since running water would
represent the running water of a natural spring, which was the home of the nymphs. The
hunting scene is another important aspect of this nymphaeum, as the depiction of hunting could
have come from the experience of the patron and his own hunting (Figure 5). With regards to
the mosaic of Neptune and Amphitrite (Figure 1), we could look at the aspect of water in the
same way and focus on the experience of the patron with the gods to attempt to understand why
this depiction was chosen. This could also fall under the religious connection, as Neptune,
Amphitrite, and the nymphs, are all a part of the mythical world of Greek religion. The patron
may also have a connection to water, perhaps either fishing or trade, which is why he chose to
depict the nymphs along with the gods Neptune and Amphitrite.

Apart from the nymphaeum in the summer triclinium, we must look at another part of the
house in order to consider the reason for the depiction of the mosaic, and that is the shop (Figure
4). The shop at the north western corner of the house can help us understand a connection to one
of the owner’s sources of income, such as real estate or tabernae. Most shops in Pompeii and
Herculaneum were rented out, as this would increase the owner’s income. The shop itself has
an ‘L’ shaped counter, exactly like the many tabernae seen in Pompeii, and August Mau
suggests that it was somewhere people could stop in for wine. There is evidence for the
presence of wine in this shop, as Maiuri found amphorae (wine jugs) with wine, and others that
were empty. This evidence can be supported further as there is a list of wine deliveries and

31 Bowe, Roman World, 25.
32 Kaufmann -Heinimann, Annemarie. “Religion in the House”. In A Companion to Roman
33 Clarke, The Houses of Roman Italy, 250; Ellis, Roman Housing, 4; Pirson, Felix. “Shops and Industries”.
469.
34 Clarke, The Houses of Roman Italy, 251; Fig. 8.Author. Seen in Pompeii; Mau, August. Pompeii: Its Life
35 Maiuri, Herculaneum, 43.
their dates still inside the shop on the wall.\textsuperscript{36} Other scholars agree that the shop was a little bar (\textit{caupona}), or snack bar (\textit{popina}), which would agree with Mau’s argument of the shop being used for the function of a place people could stop and drink some wine.\textsuperscript{37}

When looking at the floorplan of the house (Figure 4), it seems to indicate that the mosaic of Neptune and Amphitrite was strategically placed, as the mosaic could be seen by those passing by. The sightline of the house seems to be why the mosaic was placed where it is, not for the benefit of the patron, rather for people from outside looking in. If you look directly from the front door, you will see through the \textit{tablinium}, and be able to look directly at the mosaic of Neptune and Amphitrite.\textsuperscript{38} This could have meant the owner wanted to show off his knowledge of myth or perhaps he was connected to the water gods and was showcasing his elite status. The function of the shop adds to the patrons’ wealth, which in turn can be a reason to his luxurious décor, such as a mosaic as intricate as this. If the community was purchasing items from his shop, this was an opportunity for the mosaic to be seen by those walking past the front door. If the owner ran the shop himself or rented it out to someone else was beside the point; he was able to make money from either situation and use the business as a means to display his wealth and knowledge to the public with this sightline. You cannot see the mosaic from the shop, but most definitely can see it when walking by the door of the house, on the way to and from the shop. The owner, like upper-class Roman elite in general, seemed to enjoy showing off, and so this encouraged the display of private wealth.\textsuperscript{39}

The question of the relation between the shop and the mosaic then provokes a question here of the public versus the private, and how much was really considered private in the Roman

\textsuperscript{36} Deiss, \textit{Herculaneum}, 111.
\textsuperscript{38} Clarke, \textit{The Houses of Roman Italy}, 251.
\textsuperscript{39} Westgate, \textit{Mosaics}, 196.
world. The House of the Wooden Screen (Figure 6) is the only house in both Pompeii and Herculaneum that suggests the patron wanted privacy from everyday Roman life. During the day, doors to Roman houses were kept open, and the function of the screen must have suggested how many people normally looked into houses in the ancient world. The mosaic is placed in the spot where people were most likely to see it; when the doors open, the mosaic is instantly visible through the summer *triclinium*.\(^{40}\) The mosaic would display the wealth of the patron, as grand scenes with mythological depictions would be used in, “the main rooms of rich aristocratic houses”.\(^{41}\) Furthermore, these mythological depictions would also depict *otium* (leisure), and immortalize the words and deeds of the gods and goddesses.\(^{42}\) If the patron was a business man, having a depiction of Neptune and Amphitrite, in a contrapposto pose, could suggest leisure during a *cena*, but also religious piety.

In conclusion, it is important to take a contextual approach to this mosaic to ascertain the reason why this particular scene would have been chosen and ultimately to link it back to the owner’s status. Archaeological evidence, such as the wine amphorae and the overall floorplan, can help us to conclude that the owner may have been involved in trade or certainly, business opportunities.\(^{43}\) Since the social importance of the summer *triclinium* was important to display status and wealth to guests, the mosaic of Neptune and Amphitrite would play a large part in this.\(^{44}\) Mosaics became a popular way of displaying wealth because of their cost, and this reason made them socially desirable.\(^{45}\) Overall, this mosaic can add to our study of the first century CE, Pompeiiian and Herculaneum life because it provides a case study for understanding the identity

\(^{40}\) Zanker, *Public and Private Life*, 10 and 38.  
\(^{41}\) Ellis, *Roman Housing*, 115.  
\(^{42}\) Abed, A. 47.  
\(^{43}\) Maiuri, *Herculaneum*, 43-44.  
\(^{45}\) Ling, *Ancient Mosaics*, 104.
of the patron. With something as small as a mosaic in the House of Neptune and Amphitrite, it makes us rethink how we can overlook the interconnectedness of a Roman home to its décor. It allows us to consider beyond the aesthetic qualities of a mosaic or fresco and instead consider the important social implications.
Bibliography


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Figure 1. Mosaic of Neptune and Amphitrite. ca 1st c. CE. House of Neptune and Amphitrite, Herculaneum, Naples. Photo by author.

Figure 2. Painted Garden, Villa of Livia. ca 1st c. BC. Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome.
Figure 3. Fragmented fresco surrounding the mosaic of Neptune and Amphitrite. Ca. 1st c. CE. House of Neptune and Amphitrite, Naples. Photo by author.

Figure 4. Floorplan from the House of Neptune and Amphitrite, Herculaneum. (Clarke, John. *The Houses of Roman Italy 100 BC- AD 250*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1991. Pg. 251. Figure 153.)
Figure 5. *Nymphaeum* from the House of Neptune and Amphitrite, Herculaneum. ca 1st c. CE.

House of Neptune and Amphitrite, Naples. Photo by author.

Figure 6. Screen from the House of the Wooden Screen, Herculaneum. ca 1st c. CE. House of the Wooden Screen, Naples. Photo by author.
Extra Figures

Figure 7. Poseidon’s Triumph and the Four Seasons. ca 2nd c. CE. The National Bardo Museum, Tunisia.

Figure 8. Triumph of Neptune and Amphitrite. ca early 4th century CE. Louvre Museum, Paris.

Figure 10. Aphrodite of Knidos by Praxiteles. ca 4th c. BC. (Havelock, Christine Mitchell. The Aphrodite of Knidos and her Successors: A Historical Review of the Female Nude in Greek Art. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995. Pg. 9-37.)