

FEATURE ESSAY

Keeping Up Appearances: Jewelry as Female *Insignia* in the Shadow of Vesuvius

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In ancient Rome, social constructs moderated any form of luxurious decoration, personal or otherwise, by linking them to an excessive – and therefore morally questionable – lifestyle. Yet, documented parallels between decoration and identity reveal that only conservative Roman citizens in socio-political centers avoided decorative adornment, whereas others relegated their decorative predilections to more rural locales in order to avoid being labeled ostentatious, vulgar, or extra.¹ In his written histories, Pliny the Elder implies that the women of first-century Rome adorned themselves in gold jewelry to signal personal identity in a manner similar to elite men who wore *insignia*. Consisting of gold rings, bracelets, *fibulae* garment fasteners, and *bullae* necklaces signifying personal or familial military rank, male *insignia* constructed socially recognizable identities and status for the wearer. With a tinge of sarcasm, Pliny compares the golden foot and leg ornaments worn by youthful male attendants at the Roman baths to those worn as *insignia* by women of the merchant class, whose ostentation he ridicules.² By creating jewelry as their own female *insignia* that accented and defined the real estate of their bodies, women communicated their identity and compensated for their inability to access political and military adornments.³ Providing an excellent, intact, example of how Roman women used jewelry is Oplontis, an archaeological site consisting of two buildings on the Bay of Naples in the Campanian region of Italy that suffered in the destructive path of the AD 79 eruption of Vesuvius.⁴ Focusing on one preserved woman, skeleton 27, from the building called Oplontis B, I argue that her worn jewelry can be read not as an extra, arbitrary display of wealth donned for the love of ornamentation, but rather as female *insignia* which conveyed her personal identity as an upper-middle class matron, as supported by the archaeological record.

¹ The Late Republican Period consul, Cato, was one of the most vocal conservatives. His views are echoed by various writers throughout much of Roman history, though their intentions are mostly turned against women's personal adornment during the Imperial Period from the first through third centuries.

² Pliny *NH* 33.12; for an extended explanation on Roman *insignia*, see Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "Luxury and the Consumer Revolution," in *Rome's Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 332-336.

³ Livy, a Roman historian from the Late Republic and Early Empire Periods, uses the term *insignia* to refer to women's cosmetic usage, jewelry, and clothing as equal to men's adornments of rank (Livy 34.7.8-9).

⁴ The two buildings at Oplontis are the elite villa, Oplontis A, and the emporium, Oplontis B. Based on evidence provided by local core sampling that reveals modest buildings and streets nearby, it is suggested the villa and emporium were part of a small village. The existing structures at Oplontis date from about 50 BC and today are located in the town of Torre Annunziata, Italy. For more information on the sites and finds of Oplontis, see Elaine K. Gazda and John R. Clarke, eds., *Leisure & Luxury in the Age of Nero: The Villas of Oplontis Near Pompeii* (Ann Arbor: Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, 2016).

Etymologically, the word luxury comes from the Latin noun *luxus*, alternately *luxuria*, “denot[ing] something overextended, something in excess, and thus indulgence, extravagance, [and] opulence.”⁵ *Luxuria*, in turn, is a derivative of the verb *luctor*, meaning to dislocate or sprain. Denoting a dislocation of resources for indulgent extravagances extending beyond the realm of necessity, *luxuria* is generally considered a pejorative term with feminine connotations relating to personal restraint or morality when used by ancient sources.⁶ As a cultural construction, *luxuria* often appears as the centerpiece to debates on decadence and morality, with conservative Romans decrying luxurious objects or lifestyles as the source of moral decay.⁷ As a social mechanism of hierarchy, the expression of Roman *luxuria* during the era of Imperial expansion was equally driven by the aspirations of a steadily growing merchant class to obtain the appearance of higher status through mimicry of the elite class and anxieties about the ability to visually maintain one’s status by artificially constructing distance from one’s perceived social inferiors. As a signifier of status, then, *luxuria* was not limited to the elite but available to whomever could afford it.

Returning to the site, Oplontis B is the only known building of its type in the Campanian region (fig. 1). A two-story structure with a colonnaded central courtyard, Oplontis B contains archaeological evidence of domestic wares, shipping *amphoræ* used to contain bulk items including wine and olive oil, coinage, and a large strongbox that together suggest a thriving economic industry. When these discoveries are paired with the modest painted decoration found in some of the second-story rooms, it is possible to determine that Oplontis B was a utilitarian space that functioned as a commercial center, or emporium, on the ground level with apartments located upstairs for proximal convenience to the merchandise and activities below.⁸

Along the south side of Oplontis B are eight storage rooms that open out onto a sea-facing portico (fig. 2). Though no longer so because volcanic ash and debris have backfilled the bay, Oplontis B would have been only a few meters from the sea, and ships would have exchanged goods from docks placed beyond the portico. During early excavations of the downstairs, archaeologists found fifty-four skeletons preserved by ash inside one of the sea-facing store rooms—room 10. It is assumed locals congregated here during the eruption to await rescue ships that never came (fig. 3). Scientific testing, density of skeletons, and accompanying preserved items demonstrate that those nearest the sea doors were the most affluent of the group. Although it is unclear whether the more prosperous individuals in room 10 were the owners of Oplontis B, emporium merchants, lived upstairs, or came from the surrounding area, we know that they were not resident elites from the luxury villa (Oplontis A) as it was uninhabited for renovations during the eruption.⁹

⁵ Kenneth Lapatin, “Histories and Contexts,” in *Luxus: The Sumptuous Arts of Greece and Rome* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2015), 1.

⁶ *Luxuria* is gendered feminine and will be used here to discuss women’s use of jewelry, rather than *luxus* which is gendered masculine. Some ancient sources using *luxuria* as a pejorative include Petronius *Satyricon* 66; Cato 6:1-2; Livy 34.

⁷ *Luxuria* debates were a continuation of the social pressures instituted by a series of temporary sumptuary laws in the Republican Period. For a synthesized reading of ancient accounts on the regulating power sumptuary laws held over female adornment, see Ida Mastroianni, “Speeches Pro and Contra Women in Livy 34.1-7: Catonian Legalism and Gendered Debates,” *Latomus* 65, no. 3 (July-September 2006), 590-611.

⁸ For more information on Oplontis B, see Michael Thomas, “Oplontis B and the Wine Industry in the Vesuvian Area,” in *Leisure & Luxury*, 160-165; Jennifer L. Muslin, “Working and Living in Oplontis B: Material Perspectives on Trade and Consumption,” in *Leisure & Luxury*, 166-170.

⁹ The elite villa, Oplontis A, is thought to have been owned by Nero’s second wife, Poppaea, whom he kicked to death in AD 65 while she was pregnant.

When reconstructing identity from the archaeological record, worn items are most relevant since the close object-to-body relationship can disclose significant information about the owner.¹⁰ Consideration of the various cost and quality of worn items found on the affluent female skeletons of Oplontis B suggests women of moderately-high socioeconomic status who wished to convey to others a prosperous social identity. As Courtney Ward has argued in her discussion of the worn and carried objects found with the female skeletons at Oplontis B, “Wealth, age, sex, social status, marital status, occupation, gender identity as well as physical beauty are all attributes of personal identity, which in the Roman period were often created and displayed by means of jewelry.”¹¹ Therefore, by analyzing the jewelry worn by one of the female skeletons, skeleton 27, as a visual reconstruction of the woman’s personal identity, I find the jewelry reveals a purposeful display of female *insignia* donned to instruct observers to acknowledge her elevated social status.

Aged between twenty and twenty-five years old, skeleton 27’s remains were mixed with that of a late-term fetus, skeleton 27A. Heeding Roman socio-cultural expectations, the woman was probably married, allowing us to consider her jewelry as potentially befitting the ideal Roman matron (fig. 4). On her left arm, skeleton 27 wore a gold sheet bracelet embossed with the image of Venus *Pompeiana*, the patron deity and protector of Pompeii, as identified by her attribute of an upturned rudder (figs. 5). The bracelet is unexceptional in quality or worth, and the gold sheet has been rolled to give the illusion of solid casting. Venus *Pompeiana* appears offset by an oval-shaped knurled ridge at the widest point of the bracelet, wearing a diadem and traditional Roman *chiton*, a long, dress-like garment fastened at the shoulders and tied at the waist. In her right hand she holds a branch, olive or myrtle, and in her left is a *thyrsus*—the pine cone tipped staff symbolizing fertility and pleasure in the cult of Dionysus, the god of wine, theatre, and ritual madness or ecstasy. To the right of Venus *Pompeiana* the winged Cupid, her son, holds up a mirror. Combined, the iconography of the bracelet could infer various identities for skeleton 27. However, the bracelet’s potential is limited by its inferior quality, making it most likely either a talismanic item from her past worn to reflect pride in her coastal home near Pompeii, or a locally made item that was easily acquired.¹² Assuming the latter is true, I suggest that the iconography of the *thyrsus* and Venus *Pompeiana* signifies that the wearer was a local woman of fertile age and impending motherhood. When associated with Pompeii’s patron deity, the Dionysian attribute communicates the woman is able to bear a city of children; borrowing the protective quality of Venus *Pompeiana*, the wearer will fiercely protect those children. Both fertility and protection are qualities necessarily demanded of the ideal Roman matron, and the addition of an actual mirror held by a child in the bracelet’s relief signals to observers not to miss these reflected traits.

Around her neck, skeleton 27 wore a *catena*, or body chain consisting of four long segments traditionally worn over the shoulders and under the arms with the ends connecting at bosses positioned at the center chest and back (fig. 6). The careful crafting of her *catena* from delicate gold wire, the precise attachment of chains to the gold bosses, and the fine granulation detail atop each boss indicates its high cost and quality. Frequently represented in domestic decoration, the *catena* is often seen on Venus’s nude body when she is the quintessential goddess of love and beauty in order to highlight her desirable and lust-worthy aspects. When in her matronly iteration of Venus *Genetrix*, the propagator of the elite Roman

¹⁰ Carried items are important as signs of transportable wealth, but as they cannot be proven to belong to the carrier, they speak more for the prosperity of the community in which they are found than for the individual with whom they are found.

¹¹ Ward, “Luxury, Adornment, and Identity: The Skeletons and Jewelry from Oplontis B,” in *Leisure & Luxury*, 171.

¹² Gold sheeting is created through the repeated hammering of a small portion of gold. Embossing is when the gold sheet is gently hammered onto a stamp or mold to reveal an image. These processes make it possible to create objects in multiple at a low cost. For more on gold in the ancient Mediterranean, see Kenneth Lapatin, “Metals,” in *Luxus*, 19-32.

bloodline, the *catena* is removed—occasionally adopted by Cupid—and Venus wears a necklace. In this manner, skeleton 27's possession of the *catena* and its current use as a necklace not only connects her to Venus in the viewer's eye, but is reflective of the goddess's mutability. As the *catena* is of remarkably higher quality and cost than the bracelet skeleton 27 wore, I propose it was a betrothal or wedding gift from her husband who possibly earned his wealth as one of the commercial merchants operating out of Oplontis B, if he was not the owner of the entire emporium complex. In this scenario, the original intention would be to encase his bride in Venus's body chain, symbolizing ardor and sensuality. However, now that she is pregnant with a child who will continue the family's bloodline, the *catena*'s use as a necklace shows the woman's grace and decorum through its association as the necklace attribute of Venus *Genetrix*.

As *insignia*, female jewelry connoted culturally sanctioned virtue and value upon the adorned body, thus alleviating conservative male criticisms about excessive feminine desires and associated anxieties surrounding the corrupting allure of extravagance, or the women who partook in its expression. While skeleton 27 wore jewelry of various cost, quality, and craftsmanship, when compared to ancient sources, I find each piece can be seen in light of female *insignia* where its use functioned to enhance and reflect her personal and social identities. According to Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "luxurious display[s] of wealth added to the appearance of power and raised the stock of reputation, so increasing actual social power" in the appearance hierarchy of Roman society.¹³ Therefore, by her choice of jewelry, skeleton 27 neither fought nor ignored socio-cultural stigmas towards the extravagant nature of *luxuria*. Rather, she displayed a carefully crafted version of self that could communicate her identity within the culturally conditioned parameters of Roman adornment.

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¹³ Wallace-Hadrill, "Luxury and the Consumer Revolution," 333.



Banner: Detail of a skeleton's hand wearing a gold ring, room 10, Oplontis B. (Photo: Soprintendenza Speciale per I Beni Archeologici di Pompei, Ercolano e Stabia. Copyright the Ministero dei Beni Culturali e il Parco Archeologico di Pompeii).



Figure 1. View of interior courtyard showing the two-story colonnade, Oplontis B. (Photo: copyright the Ministero dei Beni Culturali e il Parco Archeologico di Pompeii).



Figure 2. Exterior of sea-facing storage rooms, including room 10, Oplontis B. (Photo: copyright the Ministero dei Beni Culturali e il Parco Archeologico di Pompei).



Figure 3. Skeletons remaining *in situ* near the rear of room 10, Oplontis B. (Photo: copyright the Ministero dei Beni Culturali e il Parco Archeologico di Pompei).



Figure 4. Skeleton 27 *in situ*. Visible are the woman's gold *catena*, gold arm bracelet, and various items she carried, room 10, Oplontis B. (Photo: copyright the Ministero dei Beni Culturali e il Parco Archeologico di Pompei).



Figure 5. Bracelet with relief of Venus *Pompeiana* from the left arm of skeleton 27, room 10, Oplontis B. Gold. Diameter 7.8 cm; bezel: H. 1.9 cm, W. 1.4 cm. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, inv. 73401. (Photo: copyright the Ministero dei Beni Culturali e il Parco Archeologico di Pompei)

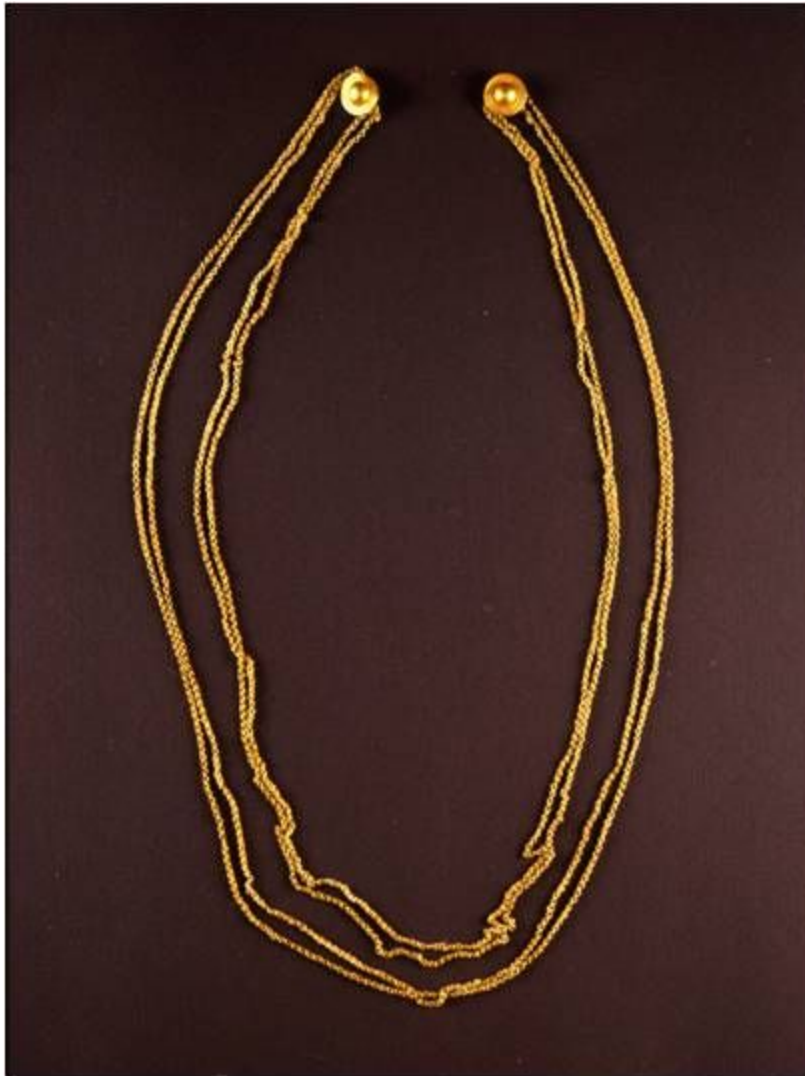


Figure 6. Chain *catena* necklace worn by skeleton 27, room 10, Oplontis B. Gold. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, inv. 73410. (Photo: copyright the Ministero dei Beni Culturali e il Parco Archeologico di Pompei).