

## Pompeii in the Public Imagination, from Rediscovery to Today

**Review Number:**

1284

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 12 July, 2012

**Editor:**

Shelley Hales

Joanna Paul

**ISBN:**

9780199569366

**Date of Publication:**

2011

**Price:**

£80.00

**Pages:**

440pp.

**Publisher:**

Oxford University Press

**Place of Publication:**

Oxford

**Reviewer:**

Eugene Dwyer

No one would deny that Pompeii, the city destroyed by the forces of nature – as when, in the words of the poet Leopardi, ‘an overripe tomato falls on an anthill’ – has attained the status of an archetype, outpacing even Atlantis (whose story must now be explained to the unfamiliar in terms of the fate of Pompeii). Upon their rediscovery in the second quarter of the 18th century, Pompeii and Herculaneum became the objects of an important dispute between ‘owner’, the king of Naples, and ‘users’, classically educated travelers from the north. This was an uneven contest which the travelers won easily, though the king and his successors attempted and in part succeeded in shaping the narrative in important ways: through acquisition and appropriation of property as patrimony, and management of the archaeological sites (‘scavi di Pompei’, etc.). The visitors, for their part, mostly antiquarians and ‘virtuosi’ to begin with, morphed into poets, librettists, novelists, diarists, painters, professional archaeologists, psychologists, and other curiosity seekers, and ranged in social status from lowly vagabonds to heads of state. *Pompeii in the Public Imagination*, edited by Shelley Hales and Joanna Paul, can serve as a casebook to illustrate many of the important intermediaries in the making of this archetype.

The 25 individually-authored chapters in this collection began mostly as papers delivered at a conference, *Ruins and Reconstructions: Pompeii in the Popular Imagination*, organized by the editors at the University of Bristol in 2007. In their use of the term ‘public imagination’, Hales and Paul have sought to express the plurality of meanings attached to Pompeii by the public, from the moment of discovery to the present. They have attempted to distinguish their approach from those works that have concerned themselves with archaeology and art history in a narrower sense. Only recently has a global image of Pompeii begun to emerge, struggling against diverse, mainly national images; French, English, German, Spanish, and Italian.

The chronological distribution of the essays gives the appearance of diversity to this collection, but persistent inter-textuality in the respective languages is strikingly apparent. Though the 18th-century travelers are best considered as an international group, those who came later are more exclusively nationalist: French authors read French literature; English read English; no one reads Italian except the Italians. (What do the Japanese read? The Chinese?) The present effort to trace the course of Pompeii's growing reception is very promising, as it opens the way for future collections. Even such undiversified cultures as pre-Civil War America, as examined here by Margaret Malamud, can show themes of universal appeal in Pompeii's reception, namely, the apocalyptic theme that runs through so many of the essays. Is it a coincidence that Rome was obsessed with the inevitability of universal cataclysm at the time of Pompeii's destruction? Was the terrible fate of the Vesuvian cities the vengeance of God angered over the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans? Is it beyond credibility that men might believe so for want of a scientific understanding of the workings of volcanoes? As the new millennium has hardly brought any relief from popular worries about the End Time, there is a virtual guarantee of Pompeii's survival as archetype of cataclysm. This should reassure the present Italian government that Pompeii is worth investing in.

On the side of the 'owners', Jeremy Hartnett's essay on Vittorio Spinazzola, the excavator of the beautiful shop-lined street known as the Via dell'Abbondanza, shows the important role played by the director of excavations in shaping a generation's experience of the archaeological site, a theme that is also dealt with by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill in his epilogue on Herculaneum (especially Francesco La Vega's 18th-century excavations there and in Pompeii). Wallace-Hadrill throws some well-aimed barbs in passing at Giuseppe Fiorelli, the director of the Pompeian excavations 1860–75, who is justly credited in many of the essays for his role in creating the modern tourist site of Pompeii and playing guiding spirit. (He might not have been as good as he seems.) The part played by museums in presenting the objects from Pompeii and derivative works occupies five essays. Shelley Hales, one of the editors of the collection, considers the charged issue of the display of dead bodies at Pompeii in the context of 19th-century cemeteries. She has taken on a theme seldom seen in scholarly literature on Pompeii, but one that must have been of great interest to many in the 19th century: spiritualism. Mme. Blavatsky's first encounters with Isis came about via Pompeii. A number of essays in this collection treat phantom apparitions in fiction and painting and may be read in connection with this one. (In fact, many of the essays are mutually interdependent, bespeaking a lively parent conference.) Two essays on the pornographic collection of the Naples Museum – Kate Fisher and Rebecca Langlands on the 'censorship myth' and Sarah Levin-Richardson on the museological experience of visitors to Pompeii's 'brothel' and the museum's notorious 'secret cabinet' – present the issue of displaying sexually charged objects from different perspectives. Though both essays consider the works in the collection as erotica, noting that definitions of 'erotica' varied over the course of the years, neither essay raises the issue of phallica – as good luck charms and the like – in the Neapolitan context (which would be relevant to 'the public imagination'). Jon Seydl's essay on Pompeiana in old Philadelphia notes the popularity of the *Pompeian Museum*, a set of 34 peephole exhibits apparently much loved by the public at the turn of the last century (*that* century) and moved to the basement of the city's art museum when a more elitist taste had become *de rigueur*. Kenneth Lapatin's essay on Jean Paul Getty uses much newly available material to illuminate the life and collecting habits of one of the 20th century's most enthusiastic and influential Pompeianists. Getty's obsession with Herculaneum (less with Pompeii) is evidently due to his identification with Julius Caesar, whose father-in-law Calpurnius Piso may have owned a villa there, subsequently the model for Getty's museum-villa in Malibu. This is the stuff that dreams are made of.

Novelists and painters are clearly revealed in this collection to be the 'antennae of the age'. Among the 'users', richly represented here, are to be found the visitors, often artists, writers, and other sensitive souls who descended on the site in pursuit of phantoms, but sometimes, like Wilhelm Zahn, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, or Roberto Rossellini, prepared to lay siege.

Essays on Pompeian opinion makers who belong to the 18th century by birth or by the date of their visit form a coherent group illustrating an international set of aristocrats familiar with classical literature and art, writing and painting for an audience of their own kind. Constanze Baum's essay on William Beckford reveals the young Englishman writing in the 'Sturm und Drang' style fashionable in Germany and France at

the time of his visit in 1780. Victoria C. Gardner Coates discusses three of Angelica Kauffmann's history paintings with three antique Neapolitan subjects, including *Pliny the Younger and His Mother at Misenum, 79 AD* (1785), the three works constituting 'a sort of scholarly, neoclassical postcard from Kauffmann back to the [Royal] Academy' (p. 57). Barbara Witucki, writing on Mme. De Staël's *Corinne, ou Italie* (1807), shows how Pompeii served as a kind of descent to the underworld for the increasingly isolated characters in Staël's novel, which resonates so powerfully with Vergil's *Aeneid*. Reference to contemporary Italian (viz. Napoleonic) politics would have been interesting here. Thorsten Fitzon's writing on Pompeii's most famous visitor, alerts us to the fact that Pompeii's reception is inextricably wound up in Goethe's reception. Did Goethe visit Pompeii twice, as the standard text of *Italian Journey* would have it, or just once? Apparently, just once. Did Goethe even manage to *see* the paintings removed from Pompeii and Herculaneum? Fitzon believes there is room for doubt. One of Goethe's most favorable impressions while touring the site was the Tomb of Mamia, with its semi-circular stone bench from which one gained a picturesque view of the Bay of Naples: 'a magnificent place, worthy of the splendid idea' (p. 16). Through an irony of which Goethe was probably unaware, that very bench (which weary visitors can still enjoy) had been removed and taken to the royal Herculaneum museum, and only a short time before his visit returned to its original location in Pompeii as one of the first visitor-friendly gestures of the royal patron. If the account of his visit in 1787 was not published until 30 years after it took place (1816), how and why did Goethe modify his impressions? A dozen years later (1827–30) he pronounced what were to be his last words on Pompeian painting, based on coloured impressions by W. Zahn and W. Ternite. Despite such mediated experience, Goethe's approval 'made it possible to appreciate the special quality of these works of art without measuring them against the ideal of classical art' (p. 33). At the risk of infinite regress, dare we ask what is meant here by 'classical art'?

With the end of Napoleon's power on the continent, travelers descended upon Pompeii in an economy version of the earlier Grand Tour. The French themselves were among the most enthusiastic visitors. Genevieve Lively writes on Théophile Gautier's *Arria Marcella* (1852), which dealt with a young man, Octavien, and his fetishist obsession with the volcanic impression of a young woman's bosom that he had seen in the Naples Museum. (It really existed at one time.) Gautier's tale marks the first appearance of the femme fatale Arria Marcella, who had perished in the cellar of the Villa of Diomedes unearthed in 1773. Briefly visible at Pompeii *in situ*, it was taken for its safety to the Royal Museum at Portici, and eventually (c. 1825) to the Naples Museum, where it enjoyed the status of one of the most renowned fetishes of the 19th century. Its place in Pompeii – since fetishes never die – was apparently taken by a stain on the wall, recorded and transformed by the painter Théodore Chassériau in his oil painting of the *Tepidarium* at Pompeii (1853). This is the argument of Sarah Betzer, bolstered by her comparison of Chassériau's annotated drawing of the stained wall with his painting of the women's bath dominated by a single, striking figure *à demi-nue*: the very image of Arria Marcella.

The Englishman Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) rates two essays. Stephen Harrison demonstrates the role played by the antiquarian Sir William Gell in reconstructing the novel's domestic interiors, and Meilee D. Bridges explores the author's effort to recreate 'necromantic pathos' (p. 92) by filling the city's buildings with ancient souls. Much of the novel's appeal derived from the description, drawn from life, of the domestic spaces in which the characters moved, including the recently excavated 'House of the Tragic Poet,' which gave Bulwer-Lytton material for the character of his hero the Athenian Glaucus. (Of those authors who deal with Bulwer-Lytton in this collection, only Shelley Hales considers his formidable reputation as an occultist.) The arc of English literature is nicely completed by the editors' interview of Robert Harris in response to his well-researched and gripping novel, *Pompeii* (2003), no less indebted to real archaeological sites than its 19th-century predecessor. Particularly enlightening is Harris's explanation of how he had the idea that the first signs of Pompeii's fate could be detected in the failure of infrastructure noted on the other side of the Bay of Naples.

Since Pompeii's fate as preview of the end of the world (and decadent humanity's responsibility for God's vengeance) is the chief reason for the city's popularity in the 19th century, it stood to reason that some virtuous persons, namely Christians (some awaiting execution in the amphitheatre) would escape the volcano's fury. Eric M. Moormann discusses five novelists (French, German, and English) who wrote

edifying fiction, mainly for a young audience during the third quarter of the 19th century. As in Bulwer-Lytton's novel, where the regenerate young Athenians escape destruction, leaving the decadent Romans to perish, many of the Christians who appeared in these novels escape the volcano. There is most definitely a theme here.

One of a kind is Daniel Orrells' essay on Freudian archaeology. The example of Pompeii was of great help to the father of psychoanalysis, and Orrells argues well that this metaphor was no mere diversion for Freud as he sought to explain the *Aetiology of Hysteria* (1896). Neither was Freud's long essay of 1907 on Jensen's *Gradiva* (1903), another novel of fetishist obsession with a long dead woman of Pompeii. Orrells goes to great length in his explanation of Freud's lapidary conclusion to an archaeological analogy in the earlier work: *Saxa loquuntur!* ('The stones speak!'). While this may have bewildered some men of science at the time, it is preaching to the converted among archaeologists. When Orrells turns his attention to Derrida's analysis of Jensen's hero's predicament in *Archive Fever* (1996) he is able to speculate on why we dig: 'we wish that the archive and the archive of that event might be one and the same thing' (p. 198). We dig in order to fill a void.

This theme was explored in another medium by Roberto Rossellini in his 1953 film *Journey to Italy* (*Viaggio in Italia*), the subject of Matthew Fox's provocative essay. In this notoriously inscrutable film script, a visit to Pompeii to witness the unearthing of the bodies of two joined lovers has a profound effect on an English couple who have been experiencing their own difficulties. The unforgettable scene, as archaeologists remove the ashes from the lovers' bodies cast in plaster, works on the actors and the audience like a visit to the underworld did in earlier literature. Although the resurrection scene has been staged by the archaeologists (notorious for this sort of behavior at Pompeii) and the filmmaker by reburying genuine casts that had been previously excavated, the emergence of body forms and faces carries archetypal significance.

In her essay on Pompeii in the modern consciousness, Joanna Paul discusses the poet Primo Levi's comparison of a girl-child of Pompeii with Anne Frank and an anonymous victim of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima ('only a shadow printed on the wall by the light of a thousand suns' p. 341) – the latter grimly paralleled in this volume by Chassériau's painted vision in the cellar of the Villa of Diomedes. Paul further discusses Pompeii as archetype for cities destroyed by bombing in the Second World War and the remarkably timed eruption in March 1944 of Europe's most dangerous volcano.

Because Pompeii offers the most complete vision of life in the ancient world, it makes the perfect introduction to the experience based introduction to Latin that comprises the first part of the Cambridge Latin Course as told by the editors in a separate chapter. The same quality appealed to Bulwer-Lytton in *The Last Days of Pompeii* and to Robert Harris in his novel, *Pompeii*. Like both of these works, the Cambridge Latin Course has had massive appeal, selling 'around 4 million books' (p. 357) to pupils in the English speaking world and the Netherlands since its introduction in 1971. The family saga of Caecilius, which centers on a real house in Pompeii, has now animated specific neighborhoods of the excavations for a large number of visitors that continues to increase from year to year, assuring the continuing creative tension in popular imagination between Pompeii as reality ('as it really was') and Pompeii as construct or simulacrum.

As the serious damage inflicted on the city by seasonal rains and inadequate maintenance in recent years has made clear, Pompeii is constantly changing, usually for the worse. Nevertheless, some discoveries are made from year to year, often adding some new dimension to the site. The modern visitor may feel gratified to see some of the same sights (and sites) as Beckford, Goethe, Chassériau, and Bergman did, but much of what these illustrious visitors experienced in their time has now vanished, only to be experienced or resurrected in their surviving art works and recollections. For just that reason, the archaeological site of Pompeii is virtually indistinguishable from its simulacra – from its reception. There is no moral to be drawn from recognizing this double existence: it is a gift of post-modernity that we can profit from. The editors of *Pompeii in the Public Imagination* have given us a stimulating and provocative collection of essays in interpretation of this ruin that changes from year to year, yet always remains the same.

**Other reviews:**

World Archaeology

<http://www.world-archaeology.com/books/book-review-pompeii-in-the-public-imagination-from-its-rediscovery-to-today-3/> [2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1284>

**Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/24516>

[2] <http://www.world-archaeology.com/books/book-review-pompeii-in-the-public-imagination-from-its-rediscovery-to-today-3/>