

Pompeii, Vesuvius and the Bay of Naples

Mark Davies

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Report by Frank O'Connell

A packed Circus House audience for the CAG Monday Evening talk on the *Lost City of Dunwich* was unsettled by the lateness of the Speaker and emerging reports of severe traffic problems at or about the Orwell Bridge caused by the impact of the Atlantic depression producing *Storm Henry*. It became evident that the Speaker, who was travelling from Woodbridge, would be unable to reach Colchester timeously that evening, if at all. However, a "Baldrick" type *cunning plan* was soon hatched and into the breach and into the *Forum*, so to speak, strode Mark Davies armed with a memory stick containing a beautifully crafted illustrated talk on Pompeii and Herculaneum. So, on a bitterly cold night, thanks to Mark, we were able to exchange the warmth of the Mediterranean for the scheduled waters of the North Sea covering Dunwich.

Mark, of course, has a Curatorial knowledge and passion for the Roman world and his CAG audience was very soon beneficiaries of an enlightening narrative and visual guide through the extensive remains of Pompeii and Herculaneum following the devastating eruption of Vesuvius on 24th August 79 AD.

Vesuvius

Mark began by outlining the geological background to Vesuvius which was formed on the site of a previous volcano that had last erupted some 17,000 years ago. Vesuvius sits above, and results from, the activity of the converging Eurasian and African tectonic plates. Its violent impact on human life, as known history, spans a period from the most recent eruption in 1944 back to the 2nd Millenium BC when several Bronze Age settlements were destroyed (the *Avellino eruption*). Mark was able to show us a remarkable photograph of the 1872 Vesuvius eruption.

Pompeii had suffered earthquake damage in AD 63 but the awesome power and scale of the AD 79 eruption was unprecedented and unimaginable for the inhabitants of Pompeii and Herculaneum. This eruption was to last more than 24 hours, tearing apart one third of the mountain side, and blasting ash and magma miles into the sky. It produced intense heat and toxic gases and brought death but, remarkably, not total destruction in its wake. Pompeii was buried in volcanic ash and debris and Herculaneum was cemented over in pyroclastic flows. The eruption also precipitated a tsunami in the Bay of Naples.

Against that epic background, almost 2000 years later, Mark was able to guide us through the excavated sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum revealing the impressive dwellings, civic structures and lifestyles of the inhabitants. We were also to see poignant evidence of many of those inhabitants caught in their final moments.

Pompeii

We started with Pompeii which had a mixed population of wealthy residents, artisans, merchants, traders and local people with up to 40% freemen. A seaside town of leisure and commerce which was christened as the "City of Sin" in Press coverage of the 2013 Exhibition at the British Museum.

The layout of a typical town house went from modest exterior facing the Street through the entrance hall (*vestibulum*) to the *atrium*. This was a light, ventilated space with central *impluvium* (drain pool for collecting rainwater through an open space in the roof). From there onwards to the main reception area (*tablinum*). The *atrium* and *tablinum* were flanked by *alae* (recesses for storage) and *cubiculae* (bedrooms) The final element, visible and accessible from the interior, was the restful garden courtyard area (*hortus*). In wealthier houses, the garden was enhanced by a *peristyle* - a colonnade supporting a roofed portico whose walls were decorated with paintings.

A particular feature at Pompeii was the rented out "fast food" shops and bars occupying the front spaces of some houses. These were sealed off from the rest of the house and provided additional security and privacy. Mark showed us some of these outlets (*thermopolia*) - with their counters and inset terra cotta food containers protected by a counter shrine to the gods of commerce and wine, Dionysus and Mercury. Here too was the popular "lucky snake" image, symbol of eternity and guardian of homes and springs.

Into the public areas next, first the Forum with the major Temples of Jupiter and Apollo, the Basilica (for business and debate), the Baths (one of three such complexes), the Market area (*Macellum*) and the prestigious Building of Eumachia commissioned on behalf of the Town's guild of dyers and launderers (who used urine as a bleaching/cleaning agent). An important public building on the other side of town, was the *Palaestra* (sports centre with swimming pool) which was flanked by the 20,000 seater *Amphitheatre*, one of the earliest of its kind in the Roman world. It was closed by order of the Emperor Nero for some years because of persistent armed conflict between local spectators and those from Nuceria. Apparently, this rivalry was so entrenched that the fighting continued after the stadium closure.

Some of the most memorable buildings covered in Mark's talk were the houses. These provide a privileged insight into the lifestyle enjoyed by the better off residents of Pompeii. We saw the popular *House of Mysteries* with over sixty rooms and extensive wall paintings featuring the strange cult rites of Dionysus. We saw the well preserved *House of the Vetti* owned by two wealthy brothers and we were also shown the fresco painting of the baker Terentius Neo and his wife, which was a major image of the British Museum Exhibition (visited by CAG in 2013). On the less exalted side of Pompeii, we learned of an excavation in 1995 which unearthed the remains of a donkey with dog at its feet, collapsed against a manger, in the front room of a house. In the atrium of this house,

which may have formed part of a "bar" (*thermopolium*) or wine merchant business with the house next door, were Cretan wine amphorae, with one fragment bearing the name of the owner/ merchant Sextus Pompeius Amaranthus. The excavation work here suggested evidence of a structure, sited on the same street alignment, dating back to the 6th Century BC - Greek/Etruscan era.

Whilst we had wandered amazed through Pompeii's history and streets, nothing there had greater impact than the human anguish revealed by perfectly produced body casts of people caught in their final moments, unable to escape the superheated air and choking fumes. Thanks to the inventive technique of injecting plaster into the moulds left by disintegrated bodies in the hardened ash, there was replicated permanently, in grim detail, the facial expressions and body postures of those doomed people. Incredible to think that almost 2000 years later we should be virtual witnesses of those dread moments. This was a sight to be repeated when Mark took us to Herculaneum where the reproduced plaster images of more fleeing people were found in their last place of refuge by the seashore.

Herculaneum

We finished with a tour of Herculaneum and some of the Villas surrounding the Bay of Naples. Herculaneum was buried to a greater depth than Pompeii in avalanches of magma and volcanic slurry which provided a concrete-like protective coating. This has resulted in the preservation of organic material, furniture, carbonised timber and upper flooring of houses which reveal the comfortable lifestyle of Herculaneum's residents. Much of Herculaneum remains unexcavated and there are crucial conservation measures required for what has been recovered to date. Mark told us of a major programme addressing such issues originated by David Packard of *Hewitt Packard* fame. He enthused over the quality of the frescoes at the municipal Hall of the Augustals dedicated to the cult of Augustus, an example of the level of artistry and sophistication enjoyed at Herculaneum and just one of its legacies to be safeguarded for future generations.

Smaller than Pompeii, Herculaneum was mainly residential and prosperous thanks in some measure to the many luxury villas sited nearby around the Bay of Naples. Apparently, the owners of these seaside retreats were so wealthy that modern day Russian oligarchs would only qualify as poorer neighbours! One notable such residence was the Villa San Marco an enormous family home with wonderful frescoes and mosaic work. Finally, there was the Villa di Poppea at Oplontis, another huge home (reputably occupied by the Emperor Nero's second wife) which typified life enjoyed on the grandest scale, again with vivid wall decorations and a central swimming pool (*piscina*).

On this high note, we completed our unexpected journey through the Ancient World and the drama of Vesuvius AD 79.

CAG, *in extremis*, was fortunate to be able to call upon a “super-sub” Speaker in Mark Davies. To have such quality available “on the bench” says everything about what CAG has to offer its members.

Thank you Mark for your passion and learning which you so generously pass on for others to enjoy.