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Review Article: New Books on Pompeii

- John J. Dobbins and Pedar W. Foss (eds.), *The World of Pompeii*. London, Routledge, 2007. Pp. xlii & 662. 234 illustrations, 4 maps, 3 tables, with CD-ROM of digital maps. £135 hardback; £29.99 paperback. ISBN: 978-0-415-47577-8 (Pbk)
- W. Mary Beard, *Pompeii: The Life of a Roman Town*. London, Profile Books Ltd, 2008. Pp. vii & 416. 113 illustrations, 21 figures, 23 colour-plates. £25. ISBN: 13-978-1861975164

Reviewed by David J. Newsome
University of Birmingham

Miraculous but true! Will future generations believe,
when crops and these now deserted places once more thrive again,
that cities and people are buried below...
(Statius, *Silvae* 4.4.80-83)

The World of Pompeii

Mira fides! Miraculous but true, indeed, as the long anticipated *The World of Pompeii* finally emerged from a decade of gestation. The aim was to produce a volume that synthesised current knowledge about the city into a single work, the first such overview since August Mau's seminal *Pompeji in Leben und Kunst*. Mau's work appeared in 1900, with an English version in 1907.¹ The timing is fitting, somehow. 100 years on, Anglophone *Pompeianisti* have a new first point of reference, though the editors are keen to stress that their work is not intended to be '*the new Mau*' (p. xxvii).

The scale of *The World of Pompeii* highlights the advances in the fields of archaeology and Pompeii studies in particular. No longer is comprehensive knowledge of this city at the command of one individual, but a whole team of specialist experts is assembled in order to maintain authority across nearly 700

¹ Mau, A. 1907.

pages.² The result is not a single narrative history of Pompeii, but a book that deals with the elements; if not quite fragmented scholarship then at least specialised to a degree that cohesion is tricky. In many ways, this should be welcomed. The collection of papers by different scholars often leads to contradictory statements and interpretations within the same volume (compare De Caro pp. 73-81 with Dobbins pp. 150-183 on the Sanctuary of Apollo). The result is a much more realistic representation of contemporary scholarship. As the editors state, 'in many ways, this volume is as much an introduction to Pompeian studies as a study of Pompeii' (p. xxvii). The choice of contributors is unsurprising. Experts are always likely to be familiar to those who study the discipline, but there is a sense that those who know Pompeian archaeology already will be able to second-guess the arguments before reading the papers. This is perhaps a drawback of having a book written by 'the usual suspects', but one cannot complain at the impressive team assembled, even if it makes the content largely predictable.

Such is the scale and range of this book that this review does not engage with the details of individual papers but reviews the volume as a whole. For the table of contents, the reader is referred to the companion website.³ The title, *The World of Pompeii*, hints at one of the main aims of the volume. This is intended not as a book about Pompeii alone, but its whole regional context, including the other notable cities and sites in the Vesuvian territory: Herculaneum, Oplontis, Stabiae, Boscoreale and Nuceria (Pompeii's famous rival in the riots of AD 59). As such, it moves out from the city walls into the surrounding fields of Campania and the Bay of Naples. Or at least, it suggests it might. In reality, Pompeii overwhelmingly dominates, as it was always going to do given the balance of scholarship.⁴ Guzzo (pp. 3-8) introduces key sites and developments around the Sarno and the Bay of Naples, and Sigurdsson's (pp. 43-62) discussion of the environmental context of the volcano is very much regional, but thereafter one must wait until Dickmann on the residences in Herculaneum (pp. 421-434) and Moormann on *villae* in the Vesuvian region (pp. 435-456) before we

² The most accessible books on the city in recent years, which cover the fundamentals of Pompeian society, are Cooley and Cooley 2004, Ling 2005 and the lavishly illustrated Berry 2007.

³ <http://homepage.mac.com/pfoss/Pompeii/WorldOfPompeii>.

⁴ Herculaneum is beginning to emerge from the shadow of its more famous neighbour thanks to the influence and funding of the British School at Rome's Herculaneum Conservation Project (HCP). Volume 8.4 (2007) of the journal *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites* is entirely devoted to the aims of the HCP.

have sustained engagement outside Pompeii. Despite the popularity of relating cultural developments in Pompeii to the *zeitgeist* in Rome, the capital city is relatively absent from the volume, occurring frequently in the index but rarely in detailed discussions within the main text. This may reflect a noble design to free Pompeii from any overbearing influence from (the elite of) the capital city, and thus grant Pompeii and the Campanian region some historical autonomy. But this is, after all, the 'World' of Pompeii, and, for better or worse in our own way of studying and teaching the Roman city, Rome dominated that world.

The volume is divided into four parts: 'Beginnings' (8 papers, pp. 3-118); 'The Community' (8 papers, pp. 119-268); 'Housing' (12 papers, pp. 269-456); 'Society and Economy' (11 papers, pp. 457-626). Naturally, there is a certain amount of overlap in content. Part I deals with the founding and development of the city, as well as its rediscovery. Part II examines the development of public spaces and amenities: the forum, the temples, the baths, the theatres, etc. Dobbins' own *Pompeii Forum Project* at the University of Virginia has had a large impact on the way we read the development of the public landscape of the city, and it is pleasing to see that work synthesised here (pp. 150-183). However, critics remain. It might concern the wider academic community that this section favours this model of urban development without allowing room for the alternatives to express themselves, other than as footnote references (for example, K. Wallat's detailed but less well known investigation of the east side of the forum). This may give the impression of a false consensus to the novice reader.

Part III highlights a field of Pompeian studies that has been extremely vigorous in recent decades – domestic space. V.M. Strocka's initiative, the *Häuser in Pompeji* series, deserves much credit for this surge of interest. Here he contributes a paper on the development of painting and the four Pompeian Styles (pp. 302-322). This part of the volume nicely balances itself between art historical (e.g. Strocka; Clarke; Fant) and archaeological approaches (e.g. Allison; Berry; Jones and Robinson). Part IV covers all other aspects of life in this busy city (shops, inns, brothels) as well as death (tombs, the victims of the eruption). This final section focuses on the people of Pompeii rather than artefacts (although it is the remains of those people that are now one of Pompeii's most prized exhibits), with papers on women and slaves. The

balance between originality and overview is a difficult one to perfect in a volume of this kind. The editors thank their authors (p. xxix) for adding new theories at the same time as synthesising the existing knowledge, but the balance tips further toward overview than originality in the vast majority of papers. This is not necessarily a bad thing and it certainly aids in the usefulness of the volume in university reading lists, but it will surely limit the volume's influence on new interpretations of existing evidence.

As stated above, the volume comes a century after Mau's *magnus opus*. However, had the publication advanced as smoothly as its editors had hoped (p. xxvii), there would be no such 'centenary' feel. As it is, numerous delays brought about by the scale of the work and the difficulties in having almost 40 academics working to a timescale mean that *The World of Pompeii* arrived at this anniversary by accident rather than design. However, one of the drawbacks of the volume (*flaw* would be too strong a word in the grand scheme of its contribution to scholarship) is that the lengthy publication process has left many papers outdated, either in easily corrected out-of-date bibliographies or in the more serious case of lacking engagement with new archaeological and art historical evidence and approaches. A case in point is the Porta di Capua on the north of the city, commonly reproduced on plans between Porta del Vesuvio and Porta di Nola. Its existence had only ever been hypothetical. Recent excavations have demonstrated that this 'gate' did not exist – 'non c'è la porta'!⁵ Still, here it is in the maps (see pp. xxxiv-xxxvi) and lingering in Chiaramonte Treré's paper on the city walls and gates (pp. 140-149).⁶ This is more than a trivial addition to the body of evidence; the absence of an assumed gate entirely alters models of infrastructure in this part of the city and demands a reconsideration of Pompeii's relationship with its regional context, particularly with Capua itself. Did it matter that there was no direct road from Pompeii? Was the lack of any direct route (and so, its gate) simply due to the practical concern that Vesuvius lies smack-bang in the middle of these two cities, thereby making the easiest route one via Naples or Nola? A detailed consideration of the network of roads through Campania, and of

⁵ The arguments for and against Porta di Capua are covered in Satoshi 2004.

⁶ See p. 143 – '*recent excavations...have not identified traces of the gate*'. Her reference is to the preliminary work of the mid-1990s. The Japanese project ran from 1993 up to 2002.

Pompeii's significance within a wider spatial territory, would be welcome. But, in the present volume, the '*World*' of Pompeii remains disappointingly insular.

One cannot help but feel that the impact and excitement of the publication of *The World of Pompeii* is tempered by issues of immediate relevance, given the extended period of delay. Across the 39 papers, most bibliographies end with entries in 2002 or 2003 (the latest appear to be a handful of references from 2006). In Dobbins' own paper on the development of the forum, there is no reference to his 2005 paper that in many ways repeats and in some ways expands upon the text that is presented in the volume.⁷ Where bibliographies are reasonably up-to-date, the result is achieved normally through additional references inserted into the footnotes, rather than through a detailed discussion in the main text.⁸ This gives the book an imbalance, as new theories and evidence are not routinely brought to bear on the issues under discussion but are, in many ways, detached addenda.⁹ Naturally, the editors hope that the reader does not dwell on the delays but admires the result, however belated (p. xxvii).

The CD that accompanies the volume is a wonderful addition and adds much value to the already reasonable cover price. Presented in various formats for maximum compatibility (.PDF, .TIF, .bmp, .jpg), are digitised versions (with additions and corrections) of the *Corpus Topographicum Pompeianum* maps, based on CAD maps provided by the Soprintendenze. Here the reader has at their disposal high quality maps of the Bay of Naples, several of Pompeii and one of Herculaneum. A useful addition is a colour-coded map showing the progress of excavations, from the digging of Domenico Fontano's Sarno canal in 1599 up to the present day. The CD is a rare innovation in the publishing of archaeological sites, and the editors believe the maps will be a major research and teaching tool. They are surely correct. Previously, getting hold of the CAD maps meant a letter to the Soprintendenza and an unpredictable delay. The quick alternative was to use Eschbach's valuable but out-

⁷ Dobbins, J.J. and L.F. Ball 2005.

⁸ Most revealing (and damning) is Pirson, p. 471, f. 1 – '*This article represents the state of research in 1998 when it was first submitted for publication. Since then, several important contributions have been made on the topic and are cited in the footnotes, but generally not referred to in the text.*

⁹ See for example in Dobbins' paper, pp. 181-182, f. 84. Dobbins' reconstructions of the Sanctuary of Apollo have been challenged (e.g. Martelli 2002). Dobbins states, '*a detailed response will appear elsewhere*'. This volume, the most important work on the city in years, is arguably the place where that response *should* appear.

of-date and inconvenient plan.¹⁰ The maps from *The World of Pompeii* are entirely preferable.

The overall message is one of excitement and relief, with some slight restraint. This book is a major contribution and the papers within it will form the starting points for countless essays in the coming years. Indeed, one suspects that a negative impact might be that the bibliographies of undergraduate essays will now be based solely on the papers from this volume. Teachers must guard against this. As a comprehensive introduction, this book is second to none. The editors must be congratulated for their tenacity and, whilst delayed, it is a testament to their efforts that the volume has appeared at all. The hardback price of £135 restricted the volume to a handful of copies per departmental library, so the quick issuing of a paperback version is extremely welcome. The new paperback price of £29.99 is astonishing value. I would urge any student on Pompeii or Roman City courses to buy a copy. A century on, however, Mau's work remains a must-have.

Pompeii: The Life of a Roman Town

Mary Beard's *Pompeii: The Life of a Roman Town* follows in the same vein as previous works that have been so successful in the popular, rather than scholarly, market.¹¹ This is Beard's second highly-publicised book in the last twelve months. Whereas *The Roman Triumph* (2007) was the culmination of a long-period of well-known research, her work on Pompeii is more of a surprise. Beard is not known as a *Pompeianista* and her academic CV boasts no publications on this city until now. Might this be a cause for concern? Not at all. If anyone were to write a popular book full of vivid imagination but still informed by sound scholarship, Beard is well-disposed to take the reins, and if any city invites such a book surely it is Pompeii. The book is written with the (divisive) irreverence for which she is famous: a visit to Pompeii, she writes, 'almost never disappoints' (p. 314), subtly revealing the reality that visiting (not to mention working at) this most overcrowded site can indeed disappoint sometimes. Anyone who has fought in vain with crowds to see inside the cramped *Lupanare*, – 'a rather grim place' in Beard's estimation (p. 240) – or found

¹⁰ Eschebach 1970.

¹¹ See for example Butterworth & Laurence 2005.

their favourite *domus* locked, as inaccessible as if it were still buried, can testify to that.

Beard's work has a refreshing flavour of caution and downright pessimism with some of the archaeological and philological assertions that underpin popular 'knowledge' about Pompeii. Here we find respectful criticism of the eighteenth-century antiquarian tradition (p. 45), or of Amedeo Maiuri's important but, as she notes with cynicism, 'incentivised' excavations (p. 33).¹² Beard judges Pompeian archaeology for all its fallacies which will, sure enough, be debunked or elaborated upon by future generations. It might be fitting that a 'classicist' wrote this book. An 'archaeologist' might be too reluctant to admit to many of the questionable hypotheses that Pompeii presents, particularly to the public market.

Beard maintains that the perception of Pompeii as representing the 'normal' and the 'everyday' of Roman urban life are illusory – this is a city in flight, not one frozen in time. Nevertheless, the 'everyday' frames the book. Chapter 1 introduces the city and its historical development. Chapter 2 covers 'street life' and issues of traffic systems and pavement use and includes welcome reproductions of the 'public life' paintings from the *Praedia Iulia Felix*.¹³ Chapters 3 and 4 cover houses and decoration, before chapter 5 moves on to commercial enterprises. Chapter 6 is an accessible overview of the political system in Pompeii, usefully synthesising and simplifying the many conflicting hypotheses in this tricky area from Della Corte, to Mouritsen, to Franklin. Consensus is hard to find, and Beard speeds a path through the problematic *programmata* into some successful characters from Pompeii's life, most obviously Marcus Holconius Rufus – 'the most powerful Pompeian we know' (p. 206) – whose statue dresses him up triumphantly; a local variant of the Augustus of Prima Porta.

The influence of Rome on Pompeii is discussed in some detail, and is perhaps best exemplified by the paintings of Aeneas and Romulus that decorated the façade of a fullery on the Via dell'Abbondanza. Here, as Beard notes (pp. 51-52), the paintings were copies of the statues that stood on the façade of the Building of Eumachia in

¹² Maiuri offered bonuses to his workforce when they excavated archaic finds where he hoped they would be, in accordance with his theories of urban development – '*an archaeological tactic that usually produces results*' (p. 33).

¹³ Previously, the most accessible discussion of the paintings was Nappo (1989).

the forum. These were in turn copies of the statuary group in the Forum of Augustus. Therefore, these relatively crude wall paintings present us with the best evidence for the decorative scheme of an imperial monument in the capital city. There is a nice incongruity that one of the most famous monuments in Roman imperial architecture is understood from grubby copies of copies; the contexts could hardly be further apart. 'Here the little town of Pompeii has the last laugh' (p. 52). The mighty statues have been lost, while the pigment survived. Beard delights in this kind of irony.

Chapters 7 and 8 cover themes of pleasure and entertainment, with Beard defending her view on 'The Pompeii Brothel Problem' (p. 233) that there was only one – at the junction of Vico del Lupanare and Vicolo del Balcone Pensile.¹⁴ This is often called 'The Purpose-Built Brothel' in an attempt to distinguish it as a specific space for prostitution, designed as such, rather than the *ad hoc* rooms around the baths and taverns that were no doubt put to this use. Beard's lone-brothel hypothesis is contrary to the varying estimates that have grown out of the work of La Torre, Laurence, Wallace-Hadrill and recently McGinn, where the number has been variously placed in the mid-30s (pp. 236-239).¹⁵ As Beard notes, the issue is one of interpreting the remains according to our expectations, and 'there are all kinds of traps for the archaeologist here' (p. 237). Her estimate of only one brothel, however, is surely tipping the scales too far in the other direction. A sensible response to over-estimates is not to under-estimate. This reviewer also finds her comment that erotic art (alone) has been used as evidence of prostitution – thereby rendering a room near the kitchen in the House of the Vettii as a brothel – a little unfair to scholars who, whilst adopting some dubious criteria, are generally more discerning than that (p. 236).

Chapter 9 examines religious syncretism in Pompeii, discussing the variety of temples and the copious evidence for non-Italic, non-Roman cults, in the public and private sphere, as well as challenging the debate over to what extent the Imperial Cult was a dominant force in Pompeian society. She openly voices her total lack of faith in the idea that the forum of AD 79 was an Imperial Cult showpiece: 'Happily, there is hardly a shred of evidence for any of it' (p. 301). One can picture the faces of

¹⁴ See Varone 2005 for the most recent examination of these issues.

¹⁵ See La Torre 1988; Laurence 2007; McGinn 2002; Wallace-Hadrill 1995.

some of the more senior Pompeii scholars as they read such swift and total rejections of their carefully constructed hypotheses.

This is perhaps the most important theme throughout Beard's book. It may be an overview, but it raises legitimate doubts about assumptions in the archaeological and historical narratives. At times she is overly condescending and her rejections can border on arrogant dismissal (almost playing a role that has been cultivated for her by the *TLS* – is she now *expected* to be 'wickedly-subversive?'), but her cynicism is usually well-founded. The book is a useful one for scholarship, as it asks the kind of questions archaeologists often fail to ask themselves. It will be interesting to see what some of the established statesmen of Pompeian archaeology make of this work, and it is interesting to review it alongside *The World of Pompeii* which, in synthesising existing scholarship, perpetuates many of Beard's contentions.

The text is reassuringly up-to-date, boasting several entries from 2008: there is no Porta di Capua here. More reassuring still is the degree to which recent publications have been recognisably considered and incorporated into the main text.¹⁶ Beard's 'Further Reading' is the most relevant and accessible to appear at the back of such a 'general' book. Undergraduates take note: you could do worse than start your Pompeii course by reading this section (pp. 317-335) as a crash-course on current research (minding out for one or two typos and inaccurate entries). If the book itself is not suitable for use in university seminar rooms (owing to a lack of proper referencing), the further reading should at least be consulted. As a point of comparison, there is no general bibliography in the self-consciously scholarly *The World of Pompeii*.

For whom is this book written? Students of Pompeii will enjoy it. The visitor to Pompeii is clearly in mind (pp. 314-316) and this book will be expected to go to the top of bestsellers in the popular market on classical archaeology. The hardback version is perhaps unnecessarily bulky, so much so that one would not carry it around the site. However, one would not be surprised if, in a few years, one could

¹⁶ See for example, Poehler 2006 on the traffic system (discussed at pp. 65-70). Other recent books have not been so up-to-date. Van Tilburg 2007 appeared after Poehler's research but failed to include it. As a result, much of his discussion was based on Tsujimura 1991 and commented on the lack of treatment of a subject that had, in fact, been discussed recently in considerable depth.

spot paperback copies on the Circumvesuviana trains as tourists take last minute history lessons and prepare themselves to debunk the popular yarns spun by the tour guides, who care little for historical accuracy. Beard was not known as a *Pompeianista* and the book is perhaps a little too much a summary discussion to grant her that title. But it is an important book in reviewing the common stories and 'explanations' from *Pompeianisti*. That this manifesto of scepticism is aimed squarely at the popular market is, in the long run, the most welcome aspect of this book. A new generation of students might start their studies already aware of the problems that this most studied of site presents, both in terms of evidence and interpretation. Whether they are quite so cynical or 'subversive' is for them to decide, but it is good that the seeds of doubt have been sown. With *The World of Pompeii* synthesising an enormous amount of evidence and with *Pompeii: The Life of a Roman Town* casting doubt over how we have interpreted that evidence, this city will again be exposed to some of the most obvious, and therefore the most necessary, questions.

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