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Presenting Pompeii: Reconciling Relationships between Configuration and Conservation

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PRESENTING POMPEII: RECONCILING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CONFIGURATION AND CONVERSATION

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I always had an idea that you went down into Pompeii with torches, by the way of damp, dark stairways, just as you do in silver mines, and traversed gloomy tunnels with lava overhead and something on either hand like dilapidated prisons gouged out of the solid earth, that faintly resembled houses. But you do nothing of the kind. Fully one half of the buried city, perhaps, is completely exhumed and thrown open freely to the lights of day; and there stand the long rows of solidly-built brick houses (roofless) just as they stood eighteen hundred years ago, hot with the flaming sun; ...and there are bake-shops, temples, the halls of justice, the baths, the theatres – all clean-scraped and neat, suggesting nothing of the nature of the silver mine away down in the bowels of the earth. The broken pillars lying about, the doorless doorways and the crumbled tops of the wilderness of walls, were wonderfully suggestive of the “burnt district” in one of our cities, and if there had been any charred timbers, shattered windows, heaps of debris, and general blackness and smokiness about the place, the resemblance would have been perfect. But no...its streets are cleaner a hundred times than ever a Pompeiian saw them in her prime.

– Mark Twain, *Innocents Abroad*

HERITAGE MANAGEMENT: CONFLICT AND CONSENSUS

Mark Twain’s idealized testimonial in his travelogue *Innocents Abroad* is not a revolutionary phenomenon. Pompeii has long been considered a city with breathtaking preservation, but the extent of preservation has been a recent source of controversy. The city continues to crumble with hoards of visitors, and the shortcomings of conservation efforts are taking their toll on the city. Recent collapses have revived disputes over the management, organization and conservation of Pompeii. The disjointed relationship between the presentation of Pompeii and its preservation was evident just after the opening of the city to the public over 150 years ago, and are at the root of the problems with configuration and conservation today.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Pompeii is located in the Bay of Naples, which was a densely populated area in antiquity and remains so today. Though it gained global recognition as the region affected by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE, the city had a lengthy chronology preceding the volcanic eruption. Etruscans founded Pompeii in the late seventh century BCE (Ling 2005: 34).

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The Samnites later came to Pompeii and ruled from the fifth century BCE to the third century BCE, when the Romans conquered the region (ibid: 35). The Samnites were responsible for many of the monumental building projects in the city, such as temples; they also built many villas, such as the House of the Faun and the House of Sallust. It was not until the conquest of the city by Roman general L. Cornelius Sulla in 89 BCE that large civic structures such as the amphitheater, theater and aqueduct were constructed (Jashemski 2002: 7). Pompeii experienced its first earthquake in 62 CE – a sign that Vesuvius was becoming an active volcano. The effects of its awakening were evident in antiquity: Seneca pointed out that at the time of the earthquake, hundreds of sheep died on the slopes of Vesuvius, likely due to the emission of volcanic gasses (Sigurdsson 2002: 35). It is unknown to what extent (if any) the Pompeiians understood these warning signs, but it is unlikely that they were completely unaware, as it is documented that some people successfully left the city prior to the eruption (Pliny *Letters* 6.16, 6.20).

It is often thought that after the volcanic eruption in 79 CE Pompeii remained lifeless and ignored until it was “rediscovered” in the nineteenth century. Yet, this perception is incorrect. The Roman emperor Titus implemented a relief program immediately following the eruption of 79 CE to help rebuild the area and salvage material from the ruins (Ling 2005: 155). Archaeological evidence confirms that there were Roman “excavations” as a part of salvage efforts (Wallace-Hadrill 2011: 44). The dating of tunnels and buildings suggest that the infrastructure of Pompeii was improved until the fourth century (Ling 2005: 156). Pompeii then fell to neglect until the sixteenth century, when a canal was built directly through the city (Wallace-Hadrill 2011: 44-45).

MAKING MODERN POMPEII

Prior to Pompeii’s “rediscovery,” the public’s understanding of life in the Ancient Roman Empire had been heavily based on archaeological artifacts and independent ruins rather than entire cities. Since the unearthing of Pompeii over 250 years ago, the relationship between tourism and conservation at Vesuvian sites has been inversely proportional. Tracing the excavations and restorative efforts shows that as tourism has increased, conservation efforts have decreased.

King Charles of Bourbon (of Spain) funded the first excavations of Pompeii in a hurried and unscientific manner. The king’s primary goal was to enhance the image of the newly developed and expanded Bourbon territory rather than to further the public’s understanding of human history. For this reason, these excavations left the buildings exposed and open to visitors. Many frescoes and mosaics were left *in situ* to be appreciated by visitors (Wallace-Hadrill 2011: 156).¹ Such decisions had effects on not

¹ Many artifacts, however, were removed and added to royal collections of Portici and Naples (UNESCO 2012: 17).

only the site but continue to affect those who visit the site today. These decisions are also the earliest foundations for many of the current conservation problems. King Charles' excavations exposed the buildings and houses to the elements, triggering the process of erosion. Exposed frescoes also began to fade shortly after being unearthed. The faded frescoes were "freshened" for visitors by throwing water on them and applying varnished to "protect" them (ibid: 70).

Giuseppe Fiorelli became the director of the Vesuvian sites in 1863, and devised the "postal system" to facilitate easy navigation of Pompeii. This divided the city into nine *regio* (regions), which were then divided into *insula* (blocks) and each doorway received a numerical address (Ling 2005: 164). Houses and other properties were named based on the artifacts or paintings found inside.

Fiorelli is renowned for displaying plaster casts of humans, which have since become synonymous with the public image of Pompeii (Ling 2005: 165). The era of Fiorelli also marked the beginning of mass tourism at Pompeii. The first guidebooks were published and a railway opened just outside the city gates, granting thousands of tourists easier access (Berry 2007: 53).

Amedeo Maiuri became the director in 1924 and did little to alter the trajectory towards destruction at Pompeii, despite increased funding, state support, and a greatly expanded workforce. Maiuri left frescoes, mosaics and artifacts on display for the public *in situ* and restored excavated buildings to their original style; however, many of his restorations were inaccurate. This was due to his desire to weave a specific narrative in the city, so he disregarded archaeological evidence and relocated artifacts to displays far from where they were found (Wallace-Hadrill 2011: 74-80).

Management priorities changed after World War II. The conservation and maintenance problems were mounting, excavations finally slowed, and conservation seemed to become a more important priority. This change happened concurrently with the shift to smaller ministries in the Italian government under a centralized system in the 1980s.²

Pompeii, Herculaneum and the Villas at Oplontis became UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 1997, which further enhanced their international importance. UNESCO recognized that there were several problems warranting immediate action at the time, such as staffing shortages, the inadequacy in training and qualifications of the staff, and the lack of a management plan (UNESCO 1998; UNESCO 2012: 9).

² *Il Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali* (The Ministry of Culture and the Environment) currently controls cultural heritage, and it is managed by the *Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici de Napoli e Pompei* (Special Superintendency of the Cultural Heritage of Naples and Pompeii). The *Soprintendenza* officially manages the archaeological sites of Pompeii, Herculaneum, and the surrounding Villas of Oplontis (SANP), all located in the bay of Naples.

FINDINGS OF UNESCO

The UNESCO report on the mission to Pompeii and the greater archaeological area took place after the collapse of the *Schola Armaturarum* (School of Gladiators). The heaviest rain in 80 years prompted the collapse of the entire structure in November 2010. The report noted that the adjacent building had waterlogging and was weakened during a World War II bombing, and highlighted the gradual deterioration of wall paintings, mosaics and other decorative features. Though the report acknowledged that some deterioration was inevitable, deterioration was largely due to lack of routine maintenance and excessive moisture throughout the city. Plant growth also harmed buildings. In addition, the lack of custodians negated the access that should have been increased for visitors. Consequently, visitors did not get the opportunity to see many of these disappearing features, while non-urgent projects, such as the theater restoration, were taking the forefront of the management strategies and conservation efforts (UNESCO 2012: 3).

The mission also addressed the instability of the institutional framework. There have been several states of emergencies and three successive superintendents since 2010.³ UNESCO's analysis of the site's configuration revealed that there were over 900 staff for the entire Superintendency, over half of which dealt with Pompeii alone. All staff members were employed by the state and had job security until retirement. The inflexibility of the staff organization made it near impossible to restructure the existing staff to meet gaps in skills or shortages. The day-to-day supervision of the site was in the hands of the site custodians. Usually about 23 were on duty, and the technical office staff inspected their sector of the site on a regular basis. The site employed very few maintenance staff; in addition, contractors carried out most of the maintenance work. The superintendent initiated major projects, and thus decided which projects were the highest priority (UNESCO 2012: 9-11).⁴

UNESCO went on to formally list their perceived threats to Pompeii. Firstly, perhaps unsurprisingly, a primary threat was the lack of management effectiveness and institutional stability, which is accompanied by a lack of resources – both human and

³ It is important to note that the report was written in 2012, but the investigation itself was in 2011. Thus, there had been three changes in superintendents in less than two years.

⁴ The organization of Herculaneum was slightly different because David W. Packard (of the Packard Humanities Institute), together with Pietro Giovanni Guzzo of the Superintendency, launched a private initiative to benefit the public in 2001. This initiative, named the Herculaneum Conservation Project (HCP) greatly helped to conserve and enhance the site for the public. UNESCO has found this to be unquestionably successful in improving the state of conservation and establishing new methods for maintenance and conservation (UNESCO 2012: 12-13). However, no such partnership or initiative existed for the much larger and more complex site of Pompeii, where UNESCO identified several issues and threats.

financial. The causes of the deterioration and collapse of the *Schola Armaturarum* in particular were investigated extensively. The findings were that the location of the monument itself played a role in its collapse: the location marked the limit of the excavation backed up against higher land. The increased elevation of the land behind the house was present in antiquity and resulted in a thick layer of ash and lapilli deposited upon the gladiator school during the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE. Continuous rainfall waterlogged the ground in the last week of October and beginning of November in 2010, thus giving it plasticity and fluidity and also putting increased pressure on the ancient masonry. The stress of this pressure, in addition to the poor state of repair and mediocre quality of restoration works, contributed to the collapse (UNESCO 2012: 14-16).⁵

Other factors in site deterioration were the ordinary processes of decay that accompany any excavated and exposed site, and aggressors such as water, UV light, and vegetation. Water has primarily impacted buildings that were unroofed (until the collapse of the *Schola Armaturarum*), and UV rays contributed to the fading process in paintings and inscriptions. The unchecked growth of vegetation has led to the masking of structures and breaches of their walls through the growth of roots (UNESCO 2012: 17-21). These factors, however, were still overshadowed by the erosions that resulted from tourists and the shortcomings of surveillance at Pompeii.

Pompeii sees about 10,000 visitors a day in the summer, and 2.3 million visitors annually. The foot traffic of millions erodes the pavement of the city, and inadequate surveillance and supervision of tourists allows thousands to explore structures and walk on surfaces in need of conservation, such as delicate mosaics in houses. Backpacks and tourists rubbing against walls and paintings in the narrow *fauces* (entrance hallway) to houses have contributed to erosion. Even restorative structures have not been granted significant surveillance. The lintels and doors of many houses are threatening to collapse, and disintegrating concrete has exposed restored iron rods (UNESCO 2012: 22-25).

The mention of restorations necessitates an analysis of current preservation techniques at Pompeii. UNESCO found that it is current practice to install treated timber lintels that match up with original ones if a lintel is threatening to collapse, but steel beams and reinforced concrete beams are also used. The mission asserted that it would be preferable to conceal the presence of such materials by wood casing or paint because the intrusion of modern material detracts from the image of ancient Pompeii that should be presented. The report stated that the difficulty is “both stability and durability of the architecture must be ensured without compromising the perceptive morphology of this

⁵ The *Schola Armaturarum* was first excavated in 1915 under Vittorio Spinazzola, who was responsible for restoring masonry and he installed a roof to protect this site. The roof was damaged in World War II bombings by Germans, and to ensure long-term protection, they used reinforced concrete for lintels and roof beams. This results in an inaccurate portrayal of the building facilitated by inaccurate means and materials.

heritage” (UNESCO 2012: 24-25). UNESCO also highlighted the presence of several inappropriate structures, such as an aluminum structure that was built in region 1 (the main forum) to protect the plaster moldings of Pompeians. The building resembles an industrial building and disrupts the image of an ancient city. The mission was hopeful that this structure and the equipment storage building to its south are temporary (UNESCO 2012: 27).

UNESCO RECOMMENDATION

The recommendations of the mission were divided into three categories: immediate measures, measures to maintain and enhance the skills base, and measures to improve management of the site. First, the mission recommended that the Superintendency immediately deal with the maintenance backlog and restore the buildings at risk. The mission asserted that creating an effective drainage system would decrease decay and help prevent any further aquatic disasters. The next recommendation encouraged that all contractors be assessed for conservation skills before they are hired. Additional suggestions included determining how many technical staff are required to eradicate the backlog (and to provide this number of staff as soon as possible), and providing sufficient custody staff so that more buildings can be open and improve visitors’ understanding of the site. The mission also thought that developing a new management plan and maintaining institutional stability would help improve management and allow the Superintendency to focus on conservation.

Though the majority of the report detailed the shortcomings of the configuration and conservation of the site, the conclusion of the mission emphasized that, given the overall size and scale, much of Pompeii is in good or reasonable condition. The report praised the “high authenticity” of individual structures in the urban fabric (according to the International Council on Monuments and Sites), and pointed out that any ruin is vulnerable because it is maintained in a condition that is “totally unnatural,” and some degree of decay is inevitable (UNESCO 2012: 36-42).

ANALYSIS OF UNESCO FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The UNESCO mission’s report is inconsistent, as the bulk of the text is devoted to exploring management and conservation issues and closed with several recommendations, but not before it commended the authenticity of the site. Though the recommendations were sound and accurately traced the source of many problems at the site to the management and configuration of power within the Superintendency, they were not as aggressive as they could have been to ensure adequate measures for conservation and preservation. Employee organization and policy at Pompeii is a quandary, and the lifetime security of jobs within the Superintendency enables the

employees to put in low levels of effort. Revision of current employment policies would yield positive benefits for Pompeii; if the Superintendency worked not only to determine how many technical staff are required to eradicate the backlog but also worked to hire new staff with the proper qualifications and skills, they would be able to better conserve the site.

There are 1435 buildings in Pompeii, and on the average day, tourists can typically walk through 15 restored buildings, five of which are houses (UNESCO 2012: 32). The mission's suggestion for more custodians and increased access for tourists to buildings is self-contradictory because the harmful effects of mass tourism on the site (i.e. the erosion of walls and paintings from the brushes of clothing and backpacks; the erosion of mosaics and pavement from the tread of tourists). This recommendation needs a qualifier so that unchecked access is not granted to spaces in which such access could be extremely detrimental. An increase in the number of custodians would be beneficial to tourists, for example, if the custodians supervised more regions in the winter so that the site is more accessible, as the limited access presents a distorted image of life in Pompeii to tourists. An additional shortcoming of the mission's report is that the discussion was largely in relation to the collapse of the *Schola Armaturarum* alone and the scope did not extend beyond conservation problems, related restorations, and site management.

ISSUES IGNORED BY UNESCO

There was a large lacuna in the mission's report: though it touched briefly on restoration and authenticity issues, it did not explore the relation of sustainability and identity to these concepts. There is a lack of holism in the narrative that is woven at Pompeii, which makes it nearly impossible to achieve a cohesive narrative in its current state. The mission pointed out that the most frequently adopted visitor itineraries led to a focus on the restoration of the richest houses (UNESCO 2012: 38). Consequently, this means that there is an inequality in restoration efforts across the site and thus, inconsistency in conservation methods, misconceptions about authenticity amongst the public, and finally, a disjointed perception of the site.

The perception of the city is further unauthenticated by the presence of structures that were not present in antiquity (such as the storehouses mentioned above). The mission failed to address the construction of the *Autogrill* (an Italian convenience store chain), built directly atop ruins. The *Autogrill* is perhaps the most unauthentic structure within the entire city, yet the report does not mention it and there is a lack of scholarship investigating its location and what may be underneath.

Restoration issues go beyond the question of materials, such as whether to use reinforced concrete beams or steel beams. There are several problems with the method of restoration of the forum in particular because restoration projects at Pompeii neglected to

examine the evidence of the post-earthquake building program at Pompeii after 62 CE. Details that have often been perceived as evidence of depressed economic conditions in the city, especially in the forum, are in fact signs of a work-in-progress and rebuilding program. Dobbins (1994) cited the *Eumachia* building as an example of a building that was rebuilt to join the façade with the adjacent sanctuary. This contributed to a unity of design in the forum while maintaining the basic form, but the façades and decorative programs in the Sanctuary of the Genius of Augustus and the *Eumachia* building were markedly different in antiquity. The strategic placement of marble slabs within both buildings in Pompeii today suggests to the public that both buildings would have been revetted with marble. Dobbins (1994) revealed that the sanctuary had many phases, and by the time of eruption, the entire building had been primed for a plaster coating (661-88). The didactics at Pompeii also emphasize that the sanctuary is “Augustan,” but they fail to contextualize what this means, as the building evokes the Augustan ethos in a religious sense but does not use exclusively Augustan building techniques (Dobbins, 1994: 689).

Though Pompeii is a world heritage site, the report does not discuss the heritage of the site and its relation to the local population. Heritage has become a commodity on display to the public, but the concepts of heritage and identity themselves are entirely excluded from the report. Further investigation could help discern the underlying reasons (if any) for the continued struggle of the Italians to manage their own heritage. Is there animosity towards tourism because of the fascination and “otherizing” attitude that tourists often bring? Do Italians connect with this vestige of their past?

The report also ignores local impact and sustainability. What is the effect of mass tourism on the local community? Are the demands of tourism destroying other local archaeological remains and resources? Such an effect is possible at any site that is open for heritage tourism. Further investigation could help answer the questions above in regards to heritage, identity and sustainability, which could lead to better conservation of the site. It is disappointing that there is little evidence of the investigative efforts to explore the sentiments of locals, with the exception of the recent “stakeholder’s meeting” (to be discussed later).

ARCHAEOLOGY VS. TOURISM: METHODOLOGY AND VISITORS’ VALUES

The unique circumstances of preservation at Pompeii sparked an archaeological methodology debate in the 1980s that cautioned archaeologists against using their preexisting expectations to analyze a site, and recommended seriously considering formation processes when making behavioral inferences (Binford 1981; Schiffer 1985). Pompeii is often viewed outside of this framework, named the “Pompeii premise,” because Pompeii is perceived as preserved at a moment in time. Those who assert this

premise neglect to realize that remains of the chronology preceding the volcanic eruption are visible in parts of the site, such as the triangular Samnite forum from the second century BCE. Therefore, Pompeii should be analyzed with just as much attention to context and formational processes that allow for behavioral inferences, which would help to inform the public not only of the tangible heritage, but the intangible as well.

As discussed above, such a small percentage of buildings are accessible to the public on a daily basis, which makes it easy to question why the site is open to the public at all – is it prudent to invest in restoration and to open such a small portion of Pompeii for visitors? Studies have shown that for many, the answer is yes. The desire for exploration and imagination is at the heart of what the average visitor wants to learn when they visit Pompeii; some studies have also shown that people most want to see the past “come to life” when they visit museums and heritage sites (Packer 2008: 34). Even Mark Twain wondered not only how the city looked, but also what the people did and how they lived (Twain 1868: 259-66). Beard (2009) points out that since the late nineteenth century, Pompeii has become a city of the living; human forms in plaster evoke not only the tragedy of destruction but also lives interrupted. Walking on streets and stepping in cart’s ruts captures imaginations. Re-envisioning life at Pompeii, or any ancient site, deals with a trade-off between what remains, how the remains are presented, and one’s own historical projections (3). These findings suggest that emphasizing didactics throughout the site and recreating tangible objects could help inform the intangible for visitors, which could then create a more complete picture of life at Pompeii in tandem with the extant remains. The complexity of interpretation, however, brings to the forefront the fundamental question of how the public perceives this site: is Pompeii an archaeological site, or a heritage tourism attraction?

THE FUTURE OF POMPEII

If there is to be a future of Pompeii, UNESCO’s suggestions for improved management configuration and increased conservation efforts should be followed. The first ever stakeholder’s meeting was held last year (Menegazzi 2012). This shows promise for an increased level of attention granted to the site; such meetings would allow for continued, regular discussions of issues. In February 2013, the European Union gave €41.8 million of the EU Regional Funds to Pompeii to increase the use of technology to conserve the ruins that have been damaged within the past few years. The funds will also help to consolidate the structures of the site, starting with the “high risk” areas; to build a water canal and drainage system; to implement restoration work with the a program for preservation; and finally, to improve the training of the staff of SANP to ensure better conservation efforts (European Commission 2013).

The efforts since the UNESCO report are reassuring, but will require diligence and continued action. These recommendations, if followed, will no doubt lead to improvements in the quality of both configuration and conservation at Pompeii. But this paper has attempted to show that reformations to the configuration of management and conservation methods should not be restricted to the mission's findings alone. The issues of not only conservation, organization, environmental and natural aggressors, but also authenticity, identity, sustainability, intangible heritage and the relationship with the locals should be a part of the reform in the management of Pompeii. The problems of theft, poor management and presentation are also at the heart of the perception of Pompeii as a tourist attraction rather than a piece of history. To increase appreciation and respect for Pompeii among locals and tourists, there should be a clear vision for the presentation of the city that tries to reconcile the presentation of archaeology and heritage. Further, a deeper analysis of visitor movement, behaviors and desires could help to utilize the site more effectively and result in accessibility changes that could in turn increase the level of preservation. Finally, the trend of heightened awareness of conservation should continue to be a matter of import for not only Italy, but the European Union and the world, as visitors come from across the globe to visit the site, and the enforcement of regulations could better preserve Pompeii for future visitors. It is only when, not if, the relationship between presentation, configuration and conservation continues to be discussed and incorporated into a holistic management strategy that the preservation of Pompeii can be both long term and sustainable.

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