
Reviewed by Eric M. Moormann, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen (e.moormann@let.ru.nl)

This book presents a kaleidoscopic view of ancient Pompeii and its representations in literature and arts. It aims at a greater audience than the scientific world, being written in a fluent style, without notes, and not entering into complicated academic discussions. There is no general bibliography, but a succinct list of references and references to quoted sources is added to each of the thirteen chapters. A series of colour plates shows a good selection of old and new recollections of Pompeii.

The first chapter provides a rather simplistic history of Pompeii, from its foundation in unknown decades of the late seventh or early sixth century BC. By ‘simplistic’ I mean that author sketches the old and cliché images of a prosperous and gay town found in the traditional textbooks and guides, with rich inhabitants, no serious problems or flaws and a prosperity enhanced by agriculture. Some inhabitants of Pompeii are singled out and characterized as if the author knew them personally, e.g. the famous banking Vettii brothers, who are compared with Trimalchio (pp. 20-21). With these highly suggestive miniature portraits she follows the trends of fiction authors she discusses later. A brief paragraph is dedicated to the suggestion that the eruption took place on November 24 instead of August 24 (p. 41), an old suggestion which is nowadays being taken up by various scholars.

The oldest excavations (until 1792) are adequately described and illustrated with some well-chosen quotations from travelers and scholars of those days. A special chapter is devoted to the French occupation, caused by the Napoleonic wars. It lasted from 1792 (General Championnet) until the assassination of Joachim Murat in 1815. As has been made clear in previous publications, Murat and his wife, Napoleon’s sister Caroline, actively promoted the excavations and encouraged the leader Michele Arditi to adopt more scientific criteria. In this period the outline of the city walls was unearthed, so that a better understanding of the design and function of the town, with city gates, streets and dimensions, could be gained. The theft of works of arts from Naples destined for the Musée Napoléon was more or less zero, which was a great improvement in comparison to the ransacking of museums in other parts of Italy, like the Vatican collections. A later French intervention – the brief reign over the Archaeological Museum by the writer Alexandre Dumas – is highlighted in a later chapter. Local interest in Pompeii diminished when the Bourbon king Ferdinand returned to Naples. The finances were curtailed, the expropriation of the archaeological fields, as propagated by Arditi, stopped. Robert-Boissier rightly concludes about this era (p. 93): “Les découvertes pompéiennes sont encore à la croisée de la science et du spectacle.”

Nevertheless, the foundation of the *Instituto di Corrispondenza* in 1829 began an era of international and professional research that would become the German Archaeological Institute some fifty years later. The number of scientific books and articles, especially by
foreign scholars, increased. The author mainly mentions Italian and French studies like the fundamental works of the architect François Mazois. Scholars from abroad got access to the excavations and the museum collections and started research projects. In Italian eyes, Pompeii became a symbol of the new state and functioned to stimulate the process of unification (Chapter V). The paramount figure Giuseppe Fiorelli had already come to the fore despite his young age. He would be the leader of all Pompeian research after the foundation of Italy in 1860 and is the protagonist of Chapter VI.

Twentieth Century research also gets a critical assessment. Some scholars like Antonio Sogliano, Vittorio Spinazzola and Amedeo Maiuri are singled out. Deserved interest is paid to the latest developments, especially the shortage of funding for the restoration and conservation of the monuments, including the negative image Pompeii is getting in the press on the basis of collapsing walls and even entire monuments like the Caserma dei Gladiatori. The 1997 assessment of the excavations as a UNESCO Heritage monument has little positive impact. From her specialization as a student of cultural heritage, the author gives acute observations about these matters. However, she also notes positive projects such as the photographic mapping of Pompeii (still lacking the area extra muros) and the openness of the scientific debate.

The second part of the book (Chapters IX-XII) is devoted to reception history, namely the town of Pompeii as a virtual lieu de mémoire. She presents and summarizes some well-known literary works by Bulwer-Lytton, Nerval, Gautier, Jensen and Harris. The tension between the present and the past is concretized by the meeting of modern visitors and old Pompeians. Even the scientifically recherché novel by Robert Harris is a highly personal approach to the past. I am not sure whether Jensen’s Gradiva was immediately popular, as Robert-Boissier suggests (p. 195), since its fame is founded on the analysis made by Freud.

The arts are especially highlighted by Nineteenth Century examples like Gérôme and Alma-Tadema. They inserted images of excavated objects and wall decorations into their scènes de vie in order to create a new Greco-Roman world which was as false as contemporary paintings that lacked the painstakingly precisely rendered Pompeian objects. The pastiches these artists made had never existed and were their own intellectual creations. The paintings convey the same image as the Maison pompéienne built for a cousin of the emperor Napoleon III and destroyed in the early twentieth century. A similar ambience must have imbued Alma Tadema’s London residence. These and other artists re-invented antiquity, albeit an antique society similar to upper-class Paris or London of those days.

The phenomenon of fascination with ruins gets a place in this discourse. I do not agree with the author when she argues that there were many ruin evocations of Pompeii in the eighteenth century (pp. 210-211). Images of the remains were rare due to the government’s prohibition on making drawings or at least limiting them to buildings and street views (e.g. Hamilton, Saint-Non). Painters recorded the landscape rather than the buildings since, I believe, these were not as impressive as the temples of Paestum or the Colosseum in Rome. Piranesi created only a fantasy, but this work was edited as late as 1804 (pp. 210-211). This changed in the nineteenth century, with day and night cityscapes, working excavators, picnics in Pompeian houses and the like, painted by Italian artists for tourists. The ruins also inspired architects to construct Pompeian houses. Von Gärtner and Von Klenze in Bavaria and Hittorff in Paris used ancient architecture to erect monuments for their own regimes and the utterly non-grandiose Pompeii apparently served well for this purpose (p. 243 on Hittorff). When
Robert-Boissier speaks about the Getty Villa in Malibu, she is much more critical, noting the high degree of kitsch in this building.

The chapter on film and tableaux vivants made spectacular by artificial fires, the so-called pyrodrams, does not add much to our knowledge, since it treats well-known instances of Pompeii reception. There are some fine analyses, like that of Rossellini’s Viaggio in Italia in which the excavation at Pompeii – with the real Maiuri acting as the leader of the excavations! – are a dig into the psyche of the protagonists who find themselves, as it were, unearthed and new. Also very imaginative is the analysis of the film Pink Floyd at Pompeii which shows a happy relationship between music, texts of the songs and Pompeii as a place of Death and Destiny.

In the final chapter XIII, the author focuses on the Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum and the decipherment of the papyri. This exercise is necessary to connect the story of Pompeii with that of her five ‘forgotten sisters’, namely the towns, villages and villas around Vesuvius destroyed in AD 79.

It is a charming end of this book that wants to show the multi-faceted face of Pompeii. Notwithstanding the archaeological complexity, the Vesuvian urban family will keep us interested in her destiny and will invite artists and scholars to recreate her reality and her fantasy. Robert-Boissier has sure succeeded in writing an attractive book even though her choices are mostly middle-of-the-road, following the ordinary path.

Notes:

2. I would have liked some more ideas of the author who clearly is very familiar with this topic which is dealt with now only briefly and without many illustrations.
3. When I wrote this review a new collection of studies on this topic came out: S. Hales/J. Paul (eds.), Pompeii in the Public Imagination from its Discovery to Today, Oxford 2011.