

H-Net Reviews

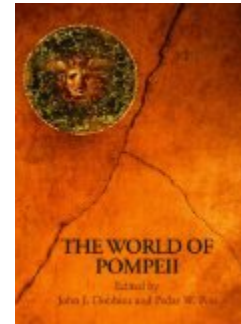
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Joseph Dobbins, Pedar William Foss, eds. *The World of Pompeii*. London: Routledge, 2008. xxxv + 662 pp. \$49.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-47577-8.

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A World at Your Fingertips

People have always been fascinated by the cities that Mt. Vesuvius destroyed in 79 CE. In recent years several international museum exhibits, television documentaries, and a host of books aimed at both a general and a scholarly audience have fed the insatiable appetite for all things Pompeii. Because of this momentum, *The World of Pompeii* could not have come at a better time. In it John J. Dobbins and Pedar W. Foss have gathered thirty-nine essays by some of the most respected voices in the field of Pompeian studies from across the globe in order to create “the book we wished to have on our shelves as the ‘first to consult’” (p. xxviii). Their audience is “scholars (especially Pompeii scholars); college and university teachers; students of archaeology; students enrolled in the ubiquitous courses on Pompeii taught at colleges and universities around the world; and general public interested in learning more about Pompeii” (p. xxvii). What they have created will be, indeed, the first book anyone interested in Pompeii should consult, as Dobbins and Foss have done a fairly good job of getting their many authors to summarize where various aspects of Pompeian studies stand today. This makes it an excellent starting point for any investigation into Pompeii, particularly for the purposes of comparative studies across sites, cultures, and time.

The book is divided into four sections which summarize the current state of Pompeian studies well. “Beginnings” contextualizes the site with chapters on the ancient and modern history of the region (chapters 1-3), the geomorphology of the eruption (chapter 4), and archae-

ological evidence for early Pompeii and its long-term development (chapters 5-9). Chapters in the second section, “The Community,” describe Pompeii’s public architecture (chapters 9, 12, 14, and 15) and infrastructure (chapters 10, 11, and 16), with an excellent additional chapter on public and private religion in and around Pompeii (chapter 13). The greatest number of contributions falls within the section “Housing.” Here chapters give descriptions of the parts of houses and their uses, comparing literary and archaeological evidence (chapters 17-19), art historical accounts of wall and floor decorations (chapters 20-22), and empirical descriptions of housing in various parts of Pompeii, Herculaneum, and in the surrounding countryside (chapters 23-28). The final section, “Society and Economy,” is the most diverse. Chapters 29-31 give succinct summaries of the archaeological evidence for various types of buildings and areas at Pompeii associated with economic activity, while chapter 32 sets this activity into the broader discussion of the ancient urban economic theory. Two chapters provide general descriptions of the lives of various groups that can be identified at Pompeii, including women (chapter 34) and slaves (chapter 35), while the remaining chapters in the section focus on what various types of evidence can tell us about society, including epigraphy (chapter 33), sculpture (chapter 36), tomb architecture and sculpture (chapter 37), and osteology (chapter 38). The section concludes with a primer on the challenges and possibilities of using early published maps and excavation data when studying the evidence from Pompeii (chapter 39). The book also includes a CD-ROM with six maps in a variety of

formats (bmp, jpeg, tiff, pdf, and Microsoft Office document imaging). All six maps are printed in black and white within the book, but the CD-ROM versions allow for color treatments to be added. The maps of Pompeii and Herculaneum are perhaps the most useful as every door is numbered, making it possible to find any address mentioned in the text. One can zoom into a particular building and see its internal wall divisions or zoom out to explore the neighborhood around a building of interest.

While there are many interesting chapters, what is really exciting about the entire project is to see the interaction between authors across chapters as each wrestles with incomplete data and entrenched but sometimes unfounded interpretations. Some authors agree with one another, reinforcing important points such as the fact that Pompeii is not a “city frozen in time,” as looters disturbed much of Pompeii immediately after the eruption, making it difficult to interpret what has been found. Some chapters complement one another nicely; Felix Pirson’s succinct description of the types of shops and workshops at Pompeii (chapter 29) provides more hard data for considering Willem Jongman’s discussion of economic theory (chapter 32). When authors contradict one another, however, things get really interesting and readers may find themselves flipping between chapters, comparing evidence, and trying to decide which idea sounds most plausible. For instance, Roger Ling lays out the case that the “covered theater” at Pompeii was intended as a meeting hall for Roman colonists (p. 120) while Christopher Parslow rejects such an interpretation and discusses the evidence that it was a theater intended for community use (p. 214). Copious endnotes offer the interested reader the opportunity to delve more deeply into the evidence.

The authors of the individual contributions were faced with a challenge in deciding who their audience was, as the audience suggested by the editors is so wide. The result is that some chapters will be of more use to some audiences than others. Pompeianists and experts in related fields will find some of the chapters, such as Jongman’s (chapter 32) on the ancient economy, thought-provoking. Jongman sees most Pompeians living at a subsistence level while a small elite drove a significant market in luxury goods that has blinded modern investigators to the extreme poverty of the majority. Nonetheless, thanks to the high mortality rate and extended familial structures, he also envisions some of the non-elite being adopted into the ranks of the elite and rising rapidly to the top. This chapter will surely cause some lively de-

bate among Pompeianists and Romanists. For those not versed in the primitivist/modernist debate on the ancient economy, such as members of the general public and undergraduates taking a Pompeii course for fun, much in this chapter will be quite opaque. Undergraduates and the general public will find some chapters well written and easily accessible. Michele George quite adroitly combines a great deal of general information on slavery within the Roman Empire derived from literary and legal sources with specific information from Pompeii to give the reader an excellent idea of what we currently believe life was like for slaves (chapter 35). George’s seamless approach between the two sources of information may frustrate advanced students of Pompeii, who will need to study the text and endnotes carefully to figure out which of his statements are derived from information specific to Pompeii and which come from non-Pompeian sources that George assumes can be applied to slave life in the city. Because different authors chose different audiences, no individual member of that audience will find every chapter equally useful.

The greatest strength of this volume is that Dobbins and Foss have recruited some of the top names in the field to represent the many different lines of research on the ancient city. The only lacuna I noticed was in the burgeoning study of streets and movement within Pompeii. Carroll William Westfall’s chapter (chapter 10) on how streets define neighborhoods is the only one in this area. Westfall makes some very good observations about the organization of the city’s space and movement along Pompeii’s streets, but does not place these observations in the wider context of Pompeian street studies. An acknowledgment of the heated debate about the use of space in the city[1] or a reference to the interesting work being done on movement[2] would have been welcomed.

One final, and admittedly minor, complaint deals with images. In J. Clayton Fant’s chapter on marble imitated in paint, figure 22.1 presents two photographs of imitation marble panels which, according to the caption, “use the same design and same palette but scramble the order of the colors” (p. 337). Both photos are in black and white; the colors do not appear scrambled. Since the accompanying CD-ROM reproduces color versions of the black and white maps printed in the volume, it would have been nice if these two photos could have been included as well.

Overall this is an excellent volume and it will be the first one I reach for while conducting my own research

or when looking for useful chapters to assign my undergraduates in the Pompeii course I teach. More importantly, however, this volume presents an excellent snapshot of the state of Pompeian studies. For those interested in Pompeii and Herculaneum directly or in using them for comparative studies, this volume is the place to start. Readers will learn quite quickly what lines of investigation researchers are taking, what possibilities for interpretation the evidence presents, and the very severe limitations of that evidence as a result of both preserva-

tion and methods of excavation.

Notes

[1]. For a summary and bibliography see Damian Robinson, "The Social Texture of Pompeii," in *Sequence and Space in Pompeii*, eds. Sara Bon and Rick Jones (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1997), 135-144.

[2]. A summary can be found in Eric Poehler, "The Circulation of Traffic in Pompeii's Regio V," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 19 (2006): 53-74.

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