CURRENT RESEARCH IN POMPEII: THE NATURE, DOCUMENTATION AND USE OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE*

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The eruption of Mount Vesuvius on the 24th August AD 79 destroyed yet preserved the city of Pompeii. The discovery and ensuing excavation of the city since the 18th century has resulted in the exposure of almost three-quarters of the site. However the remains, once removed from their protective layer of ash and pumice, have been subjected to destructive forces of a different nature. The physical elements of wind, rain, sunlight and vegetation growth, coupled with the impact of millions of tourists who flock to the site, threaten a second demise for the city. Pompeii is one of the richest archaeological sites from the ancient world, as placement on the World Heritage list attests. It provides a unique opportunity to examine aspects of daily life at all levels of society and to study the sequential development of an ancient Roman city. Consequently there is an urgent need to record, document and interpret the exposed ruins before they crumble. This paper discusses current research in the city and identifies the sources and nature of archaeological evidence examined. It documents the manner in which information from this evidence is recorded and considers how the work enhances understanding of life in the ancient city.

In order to understand the aims of archaeological investigation in Pompeii today, it is important to be aware of the changes in attitude and methodology since the city was first uncovered. Initial excavations focussed on the removal of interesting finds and were conducted with scant regard for documentation of the work, resulting in a huge loss of evidence. The haste and carelessness with which these early excavations were conducted is alarming to archaeologists today. Written records of the excavations, if any, were brief and generally consisted of lists of valuable artefacts (Berry [1998] 7). Over time this approach changed as the significance and historical importance of the site became apparent. Fortunately this led to the formulation of research objectives to answer specific questions, rather than haphazard digging without a justifiable purpose. More precise archaeological methods and scientific techniques of analysis were also developed resulting in improved documentation and investigation of the site.

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