

herculaneum archaeology

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The Villa of Papyri, June 2010

Recent works in the area of the Villa of Papyri

dott.ssa Maria Paola Guidobaldi, Director of Excavations in Ercolano



This is the text of the talk dott.ssa Guidobaldi gave members of the Society on a visit to the Villa in June 2010

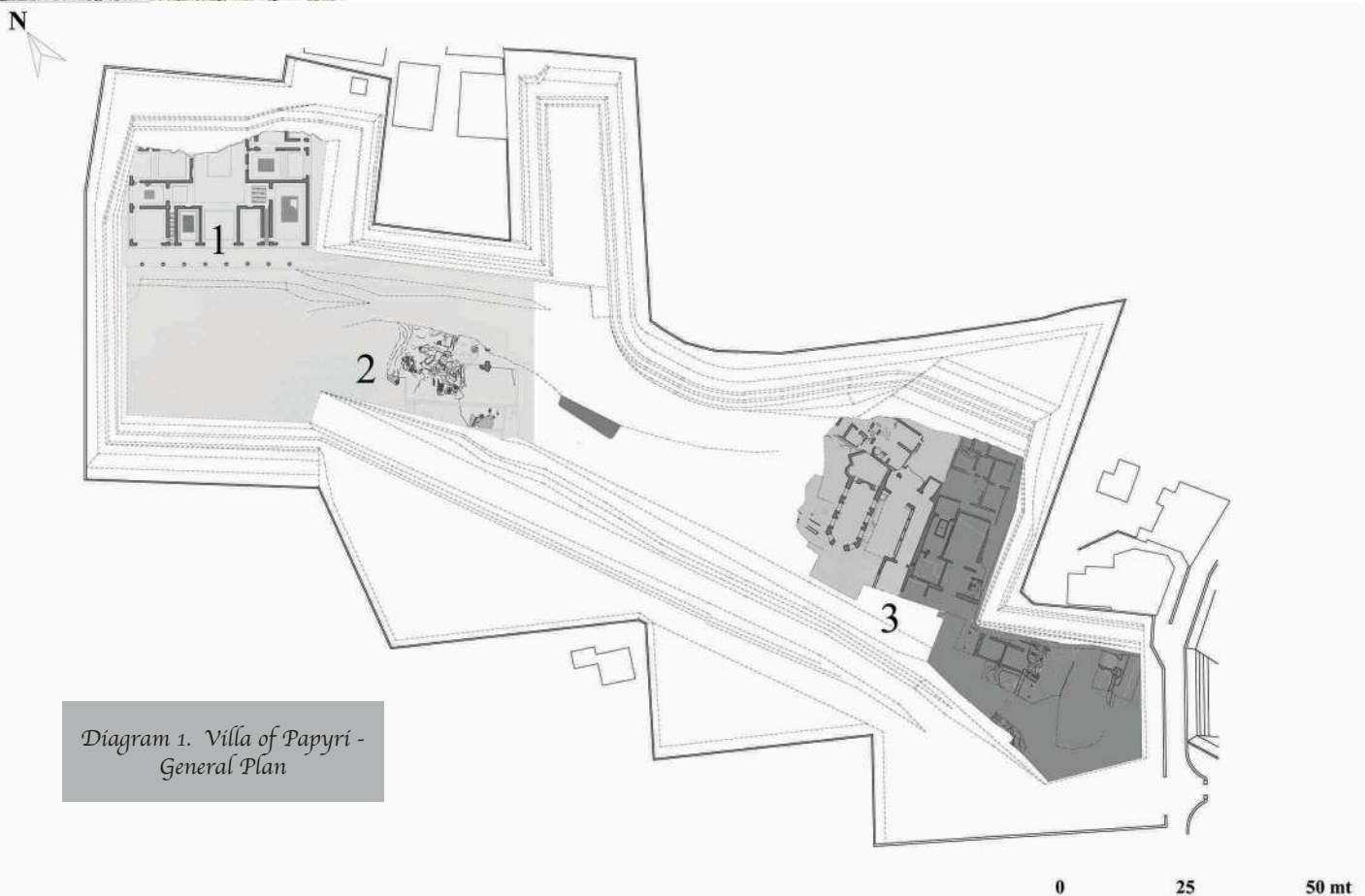


Diagram 1. Villa of Papyri - General Plan

In 1986 there was a “return” to the Villa of the Papyri down the Veneruso shaft which had been used for the original explorations. On the basis of the results obtained, a project was prepared by the Ministry of Culture called “Restoration, re-use and enhancement of the archaeological area of Herculaneum”, and the works were carried out by a temporary association of companies. This meant that during the years 1996 to 1998 open-air excavations were finally carried out in the Villa of the Papyri area and the so-called north-western insula. For the sake of brevity, today I will refer to this work as the Infratecna Excavations.

The excavated area, which is conventionally called the “New Excavations” is about 14,000 m² and lies in the heart of the modern city of Ercolano. The perimeter of this new archaeological area follows the artificial edges of the land that it was possible to expropriate. For this reason, the

archaeological structures that were uncovered are only portions of much larger monumental complexes that extend beneath the modern city. It is therefore very difficult to understand their architectural and functional relationships, and to guarantee their conservation. This new area contains: 1) the atrium area of the Villa of the Papyri, which had already been explored in the seventeenth century, and the facade of the basis villae, uncovered for the first time by the Infratecna Excavations; 2) the so-called Lower Terrace, with a collapsed monumental structure; and 3) a part of another insula of the city, the so-called north-western insula, which includes a bath building and a residential building.

This new area was officially handed over to the Archaeological Superintendency of Pompeii on 3 August 1999 in the conditions in which it had been left by Infratecna. Both the excavations and the organisation of the site were

left unfinished. During 2000-2007 the Superintendency carried out a range of works to return the site to more dignified conditions.

Finally, in July 2007 new works began for the excavation, conservation and enhancement of the area. These were carried out by the Superintendency and financed by the European Community within its Regional Operative Programme for the Campania Region. These works were completed in autumn 2008 and I am pleased to be able to share some of the most important results. The main aim of these works, particularly those relating to actual archaeological excavation, was therefore to determine where it was most urgent to improve the general management of the area, to attempt to make the archaeological structures understandable, and to ensure that future planning for managing and restoring the site would be organised in the best possible way for its current form and dimensions. The previous works had been left so incomplete that it was in fact impossible to manage the site effectively.

The recent works have been carried out in the following areas [see Diagram 1] 1) the atrium area and the first lower level of the Villa of the Papyri; 2) the so-called Lower Terrace with the monumental structure standing near the sea; 3) the bath complex with piscina calida and the residential building of the north-western insula. I will give some results of the works in the first area.

1) WORK IN THE ATRIUM AREA [see Diagram 2]

Work in this area has mainly concerned the restoration of the wall paintings and mosaics. In addition, a collapse of wall plaster in the south-east corner of room (g) was excavated, which had been left in situ by the previous excavators. The patience of the conservators has allowed a large part of the central and upper area of the south wall to be reconstructed.

The corridor (h). We removed the Bourbon-period wall which blocked the andron or corridor (h) which had not been previously excavated: you can see the mosaic floor of white tesserae with coloured inserts.

The previous protective shelter was supported on cement bases which stood on the villa's mosaic floor. These have been removed and replaced with a structure more suitable for the conservation of such valuable architecture and decorative features.

The Bourbon tunnels had been reopened but not cleared out during the 1986 exploration and the Infratecna Excavations. This clearing work has been carried out and we were therefore able to document the mosaics and the structures visible within them. Unfortunately, the tunnels cannot be made accessible to the public for obvious health and safety reasons.

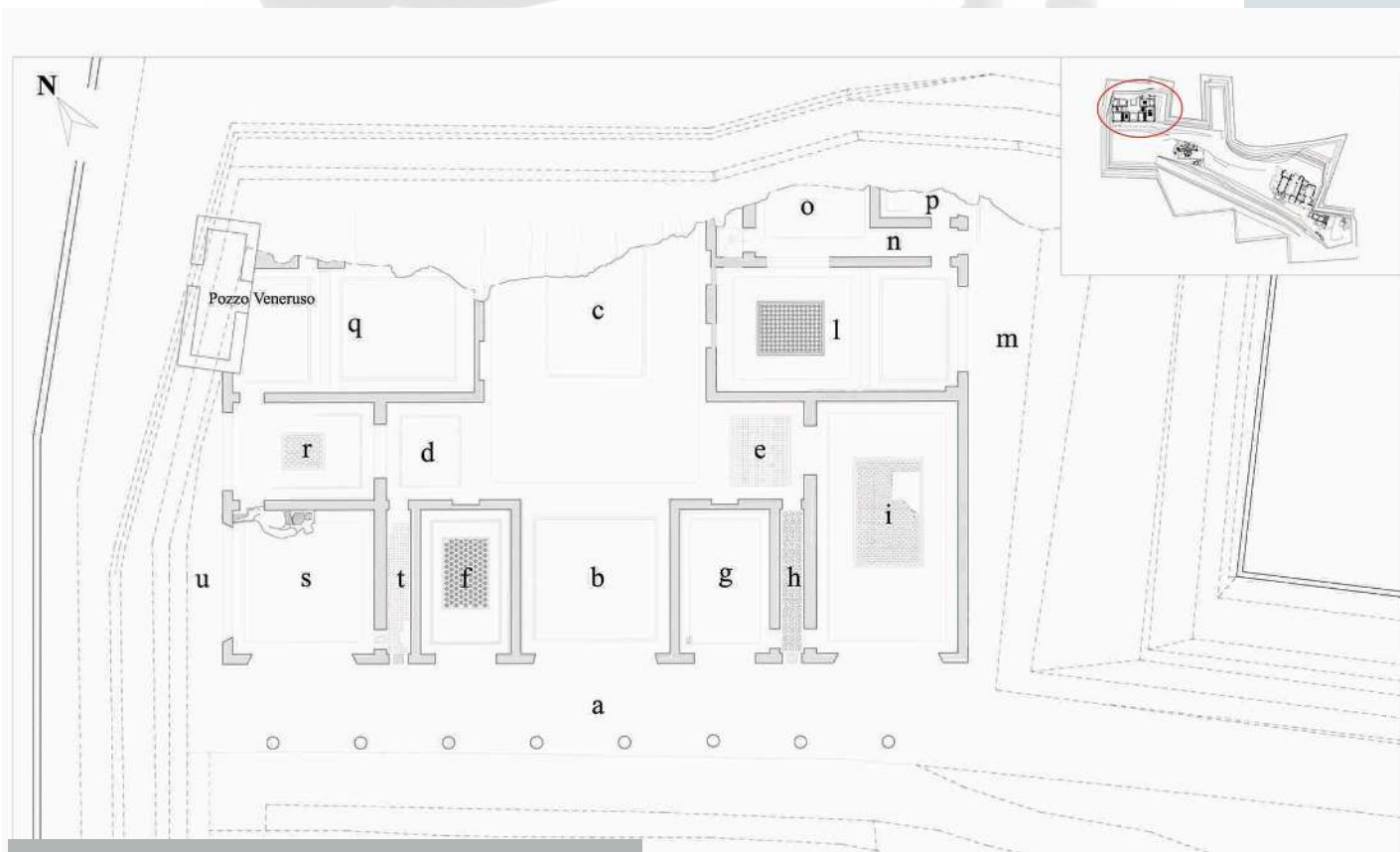


Diagram 2. Villa of Papyri - Plan of the Atrium



Metal walkway above the original floor level at the Villa of Papyri

2) WORKS ON THE FIRST LOWER LEVEL OF THE VILLA

The Infratecna Excavations had exposed the sea-front façade of the Villa of the Papyri, with its large rectangular windows with small circular windows or oculi above them. The furthest window to the north had been used as an entry point into the room beyond, which was emptied for a width of about two metres, but the Infratecna Excavations had not dug down below the level of the window sill. These excavations had been limited to exposing small sections of the ceiling (decorated with vine branches and small images of marine animals and cupids) and the east wall of the room, where there was evidence of an opening surrounded by a carbonized wooden architrave. The north wall had not been completely uncovered from the volcanic material, and another opening to the next room was found. The wall paintings of the limited area of the east wall that had been uncovered were dated to the Claudian period (AD 41 to 54). The painting was apparently on a red background (I will explain later my use of the word “apparently”), and from a stylistic point of view it seemed to have been created in the transition from the third to fourth styles, with thyrsi, garlands and musical instruments, such as the drum and pan pipes.

Our work has always aimed at guaranteeing good conditions for increased academic knowledge and conservation. In this case our plan was to excavate the room, for the time being staying at the level of the windowsill but continuing south to the second window. This would show whether this space was actually a room or if it was instead a windowed cryptoporticus, of the type that can be seen on the lower level of the urban villa of Marcus Fabius Rufus at Pompeii.

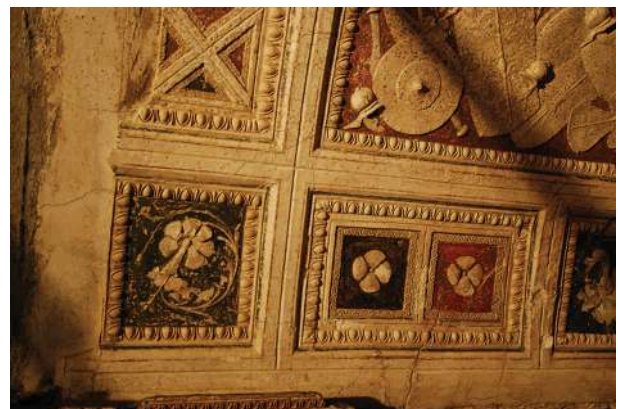
The excavation of this room was carried out from the top to the bottom and therefore began at the ceiling. It was very complex and was carried out with great skill and sensitivity by the conservators and archaeologists. The stucco work on the barrel vault had detached from the ceiling in many places and was supported by the volcanic material that had filled the room: for this reason, in order to excavate the volcanic material, the conservators had to first re-attach the stuccoes to the ceiling, centimetre by centimetre.

We now know with certainty that it was not a cryptoporticus

on the first lower level of the villa, but instead a series of six rooms (in fact from the oculi it has been possible to make out the high partition walls: room II from the north has a flat ceiling; while rooms IV and V are vaulted).

The excavated room I is rectangular (3.80 x 7.30 m) and is divided into an anteroom and the actual room. The room was lit by the large rectangular window from where the excavations had begun and an oculus above it which even had a partially conserved wooden shutter. There are two windows in the east wall, while there is a door at the extreme west of the north wall. On the west wall there is archaeological evidence of a blocked window. The room's ceiling decoration is complex and ornate. The northern end of the anteroom is in fact covered by a groin vault created during the transition between the third and fourth styles, while the south end of the actual room is covered by a barrel vault decorated in second style stuccoes.

The wall paintings in this room were attributed to a transitional phase between the third and fourth styles on the basis of the small sections uncovered by the Infratecna Excavations on the east wall of what we now know to be the anteroom. When the entire room was excavated, a complex layering of decorative phases was revealed that can be placed between the second half of the first century BC and AD 79. In fact the stuccoed ceiling of the actual room belongs to the first decorative phase of the villa. This coffered ceiling has blue, red and sky blue panels: the square panels contain acanthus flowers; while the rectangular ones contain rosettes enclosed in square or diamond metopes.



*Stuccoed flower motifs
Photo: Peter Spital*

The most attractive feature is a pair of rectangular panels (only the panel on the eastern side of the vault is conserved) containing a frieze of weapons in white stucco on a red background. The decoration seems created by hand without the use of moulds.



*Stuccoed frieze of weapons
Photo: Peter Spital*

The closest parallels are the weapons friezes painted on the walls of the atrium of the Villa of the Mysteries, and in particular the frieze of cubiculum (q) in the House of Valerius Rufus at Pompeii, originally connected to the House of the Cryptoporticus. In the cryptoporticus itself a ceiling survives with a multicoloured coffered stucco vault with oval shields and sicae in the centre of the panels. Isolated weapons motifs can also be seen in the stucco panels in the library and other rooms of the House of Augustus on the Palatine. From a stylistic point of view the stucco weapons frieze in this room of the villa, as in all the second style decorations on the piano nobile, can be placed in phase 2a of the second style according to Beyen's classification and can therefore be dated to between 40 and 25 BC.

The second style wall paintings of the same phase as the stucco ceiling has not survived. The room was in fact redecorated during the Claudian period and therefore belongs to the final phase of the third style (Bastet de Vos's phase 2b or Ehrhardt's transitional phase: AD 35-45); parallels for the general scheme can be found in the House of M. Lucretius Fronto in Pompeii, the House of the Tuscan Colonnade in Herculaneum and Villa Pisanella at Boscoreale.

The decorative scheme includes a black lower section (just visible even if not excavated down to floor level) and a central area with yellow panels (five on the long sides and three on the short sides). In the south-east corner of the room you can see that the background colour of the panels in the central area was not originally red, as it had seemed on the basis of the east wall alone, but instead yellow. It had turned red with the great heat of the volcanic material that had filled the room; as already frequently seen in the Vesuvian area, the high temperature has in fact caused the yellow colour to transform into red through a process of dehydration. At the centre of each panel there are small figurative scenes, including a villa. The panels are separated by richly decorated narrow black sections. Above the panels there are: a brown fillet, a white strip decorated with a line of hanging flowers, alternating with stylized calyx

kraters, a vermillion red band, a moulded stucco cornice, a purple frieze with palmettes within heart-shaped volutes alternating with lotus flowers and finally a white stucco cornice decorated with a kyma reversa with leaf and dart motif and dentils.

On the south wall of the room and the east wall of the anteroom the white lunette decoration is preserved. The lunette is decorated with a pair of crossed thysi from which hangs a rhyton, a tambourine and a purple cloth that hangs in three broad swaths; in the middle are painted flying Cupids.

The decoration of the vaulted ceiling in the anteroom is contemporary with the transitional third style decoration on the walls of the room. Only the far east end is preserved. The main colours are white, red and Egyptian blue. At the time of the eruption this room was in the process of being redecorated and the works were incomplete. There are many indications of this. The stuccoes on the west end of the actual room's ceiling, where they were restoring the second style stuccoes to their original form, are still largely left unfinished. The indications of a painter at work on the day of the eruption are even clearer in the wall decorations: on the east wall there is moving evidence of an unfinished brush stroke. The remarkable carbonized wooden remains may be a small scaffold used by the painter. On the west wall a panel is ready, but not yet filled in by the pictor imaginarius. At the time of the AD 79 eruption then, restoration works were under way in room I on the first lower level of the basis villae, probably because due to earthquake damage that preceded the eruption.

In conclusion, most of our new results from the excavations are related to the first lower level of the basis villae and the Lower Terrace with its monumental structure. Their layout, even though still incomplete compared to the original structures, now appears significantly different from what was inferred from the Infratecna Excavations.

As we have seen, new and important information has emerged about the decorative phases and therefore, also about the use of the villa. Its initial construction phase in the second style has been placed by Domenico Esposito in the third quarter of the first century BC, which sits well with Valeria Moesch's proposed chronology for the villa's most conspicuous sculpture collection.

With what can be seen uncovered today, the villa seems even more monumental and complex, with at least three floors of residential - not service - spaces, with a large monumental pavilion that ended in a large rectangular pool giving straight onto the beach via a small flight of steps that progressively blurred into the natural rock.

Sottoposti and Sovrapposti: Fragments created in unrolling Herculaneum papyri

Jeff Fish, Associate Professor of Classics, Baylor University

The heat and force of the volcanic material that coursed through the Villa of the Papyri and buried everything in its path left papyrus rolls in such a carbonized and contorted state that there was no possibility of finding the leading edge of the rolls without some invasive procedure. In the most primitive of these procedures, the roll was cut into two halves, each presenting in its concave half text that could be copied down and scraped away to present yet another layer. This method was superseded by a much less destructive method developed by Antonio Piaggio, an expert from the Vatican Library who first set to work on the scrolls in 1754. The outer portion would be cut away and set aside to be dismantled later, or simply thrown out. The inner portion would be unrolled by a meticulous process that required months of work. Each aspect of this story hitherto described could be a story in itself. Here my focus is one particular problem that occurred during the unrolling process, namely that the layers would frequently adhere incorrectly, creating complications for future editors of the papyri (see fig. A). As a result, a reader of the papyri is often confronted with fragments of text that were originally situated either prior to the material surrounding them (sottoposti), or subsequent to the material surrounding them (sovrapposti).



Figure A

One might imagine that these fragments are merely an annoyance to editors, like holes would be in a page of a modern book. On the contrary, they can often be placed (virtually, not physically) in their original locations. The force of the molten mud during the eruption often flattened the scrolls, creating creases in them from which the circumference of the roll can be determined. In figure B, the circumference, the length of two folds in the papyrus, is delineated by the orange curly bracket.



Figure B

In finding the folds to measure the circumference, the digital images which which have recently transformed the work of editors of Herculaneum texts in clarifying letters which are obscure even to a microscope are usually less helpful than manually measuring the folds of the papyrus with digital calipers, since the images are calibrated to enhance the visibility of ink, not layers of papyrus. Indeed, often the different layers of the papyrus are invisible in the images and can be made out only with autopsy. But if the circumference can one way or the other be discerned, the results can be remarkably productive. Sovrapposti which are located one layer higher than the papyrus than the material surrounding them belong towards the end of the roll by the measurement of one circumference, like those illustrated in figure A; sottoposti one layer lower belong one circumference earlier. In figure B, a passage of Philodemus' On the Good King According to Homer col. 36 (Dorandi), the letters circled are all sottoposti and were thus originally located the length of one circumference towards the beginning of the scroll. Placing the fragments back this length reveals a Homeric citation, Odyssey 9.275-6:

οὐ γὰρ Ἰνδάλαιπεο Διὸς ἀγχιόγου ἀλέγρουκτιν
 οἰκίῃ Ἑσθῆν ἡμικέρην, ἔπει ἢ πάλῃ φέρτεροί εἰμεν

‘for the Cyclopes are not heedful of aegis bearing Zeus nor the other gods, since we are far better’.

The Neapolitan artisans who unrolled the scrolls and copied the letters they saw in the papyrus into pencil drawings (disegni) understood the dynamics of these misplaced fragments, for they were of course often aware when the layers of the roll were not separating correctly. Sometimes they would draw sovrapposti in the margins of the columns where they originally belonged, and then scrape off the same sovrapposti in order to reveal the text underneath, which they could subsequently draw. Scholars trying to produce reliable texts of the papyri would then integrate the fragments into the body of the pencil drawing. In figure C, from another passage of On the Good King (col. 38 Dorandi), one can observe the how the letters of the fragment in the left margin have been crudely drawn in their original location.

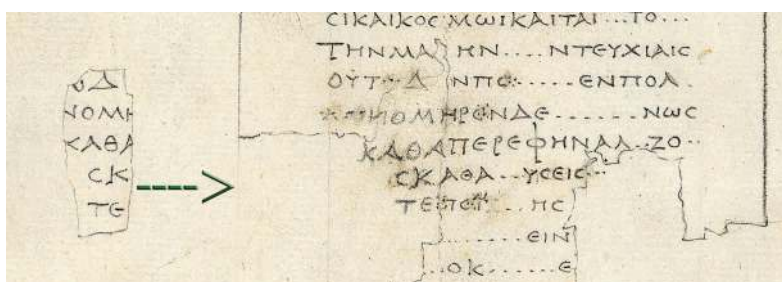


Figure C

OTHER NEWS

Annual General Meeting Some thirty Friends attended the Annual General Meeting on 16 October in St. John's College, Oxford, where before a superb lecture by Dr Janet DeLaine entitled 'Ad summas tegulas: high-rise living in imperial Rome', members had a chance to reflect on the past and future of the Society. As we enter the seventh year of our existence we have good reason to be proud of our record in promoting public awareness of Herculaneum, and supporting education and research on the site. Through our events, newsletters, scholarly publications and website we have reached a wide audience and become an established presence on the international scene. The American Friends of Herculaneum will be launched next year and will work with the UK society in pursuit of our common aims. Our bursaries to students and scholars have provided direct and much appreciated support to front-line research and conservation. Our next aim must be to grow the amount of that support, and we will therefore be putting resources into a fundraising and membership campaign in the New Year. A revised website will shortly be launched, with a new look and features for both the general public and members. Watch this space!

Following a suggestion from Carol Ann Scott at the AGM an exciting spring meeting is in view (it will still just be spring): a visit to the Museum of London and the associated London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre on 18 June. Details are still being worked out but in the meantime do put the date in your diary. We will have a bespoke programme, involving among other things a guided tour of the remains of the amphitheatre, a hands-on session with archaeological materials, skeletons of ancient Londoners, a recently found hoard of bronze vessels not yet on display, time to roam the Museum galleries, and an introduction to the LAARC and all that it does with the largest archaeological archive in Europe. I hope to see as many of you there as possible.

Robert Fowler for the Trustees

Schools Competition 2011 We recently announced our 2nd Schools Competition. There are three age categories:

11-13 Class entry: Create a Roman holiday brochure for the town

14-16 My top three finds at Herculaneum and what I would like to find at Herculaneum and why?

16-18 To dig or not to dig at Herculaneum. Discuss

PRIZES in each category: 1st prize: £30, 2nd prize: £20, 3rd prize £10 Entries will be judged on ability, creativity and/or historical accuracy. Closing Date: 31 January 2011. Schools need to be members of the Society in order for pupils to enter. Please get in touch if you know of any schools that may be interested so that I can send them a poster.

Krystyna Cech

For more information about the Society, or if you have any comments, suggestions or ideas for articles for the next edition of Herculaneum Archaeology, please feel free to contact the editor.

We hope you have enjoyed this edition, and thank you for your interest.

Dirk Obbink - Editor

Krystyna Cech - Production Editor

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