

herculaneum archaeology

the newsletter of the Friends of Herculaneum Society - Issue 15 Winter 2012



The Fourth Herculaneum Congress - A report by Robert Fowler and by our younger members, Iona Hampson and Robert Crystal

- **The Last Days of Pompeii: Decadence, Apocalypse, Resurrection. An exhibition at the J.Paul Getty Museum**

- **Early notice of the British Museum exhibition 'Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum (28 March - 29 September 2013)**

- **Studies of the pre-Roman phase of Herculaneum: *status quaestionis*** - Dr Simona Formosa

- **News from Herculaneum: Packard Foundation Investment**

Meander pattern mosaic on the floor of the tepidarium of the women's bath house, Herculaneum, June 2012

Fourth Herculaneum Congress - June 2012

report by
Robert Fowler



1. Friends on the steps of the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

The Friends, some 40 strong, gathered once again in Ercolano on 22 June for the now traditional biennial meeting. For some old hands it has acquired the character of a reunion, but it was also very nice to see a goodly number of first-time attenders. Most stayed, as before, in the Miglio d'Oro hotel, a splendid and perfectly located facility; reports of the service—sometimes quite good, other times bafflingly unavailable—seemed on balance to indicate a marginal improvement over 2010. We formed the conclusion that their main business was in weddings, baptisms and the like rather than in the continuous occupation of bedrooms (ergo, minimal staff before the bulk of us arrived). At any rate, during the main part of the congress things went smoothly enough, and the chef well deserved diners' plaudits. Those staying in B&Bs brought back enthusiastic reports about the charms of the historic buildings in which they were guests. Ercolano itself, I thought, wore a brighter face than hitherto. Along the Golden Mile the pavements have been newly laid and separated from the carriageway by bollards; the exterior of some houses has been repaired and cleaned; even the cars looked newer. Perhaps some of the tourist money is finally finding its way into the pockets of Ercolanesi.

Friday morning some energetic Friends, organised by the energetic Peter Spital, made an unscheduled visit to Oplontis.



3. Part of the Villa at Oplontis



2. Robert Fowler (r) with Christian Biggi (c) introducing Domenico Camardo who gave the talk on the Telephus Roof Project

Official events got under way Friday at 2:00 in the seminar room at the new site entrance to the Scavi; an excellent room for the purpose, which would have been even better had the secret to the air conditioning been discovered. This sweltering moment apart, the weather did smile on us; perhaps a touch too hot, but not as hot as it could have been. Domenico Camardo, the archaeologist responsible, along with Mario Notomista and Brigitta Casieri presented the results of recent work on the House of Telephus, in particular on the carbonised roof timbers and coffered ceiling panels discovered not long ago. The construction was quite ingenious: a specially-designed block at the apex of each trestle worked in the same manner as a coping stone, with a cantilever effect strengthening the whole assembly. Many elements of the decoration both of the ceiling and of the room itself have been clarified by the researches of the past two years.



After the presentation we proceeded to the site itself, by way of the ancient shoreline where the casts of victims' skeletons are now on display.



6. Skeleton casts in the bathhouses

Our guide here was Sophie Canteneur; at the House of Telephus itself, Christian Biggi of the Centro Ercolano explained the work in detail. Richard Janko was especially pleased to discover inlaid in the floor a type of green volcanic stone known as lapis lacedaemonius, found only in Lacedaemon (Sparta) and, oddly, Labrador; he had made its acquaintance years before during his own time as an archaeologist.



7. Christian Biggi expounding on the roof and floor of the House of Telephus



4, 5. The roof pieces uncovered (l) and (r) one of the cleaned roof panels (Sosandra/HCP)

There were a few minutes then for free exploration of the site; many of us here got our first view of the decumanus superior freed from its scaffolding and wraps, and the improvement is truly spectacular. One sees as it has not been possible to do before the splendid house along the east side, now dubbed 'House of the Two Portals'.



8. decumanus superior with the arch leading to the forum in the background

At 6:00 we gathered at the Villa Maiuri for a formal welcome, and presentations from two of the PhD students whose work the Friends support financially. Simona Formola of the University of Naples (Suor Orsola Benincasa) spoke about the early, pre-Roman phases of Herculaneum, and her pioneering research relating the ancient topography to the town planning (see elsewhere in this Newsletter). Mariacristina Fimiani of the University of Naples (Federico II) spoke about the project to put complete information online about all the books at Herculaneum. We were very pleased to be able to welcome Francesca Longo Auricchio, professor of Greek at UoN (Federico II) and director of the Centro internazionale per lo studio dei papiri ercolanesi (CISPE), and her colleague Gianluca Del Mastro, as well as Domenico Esposito of the Soprintendenza, who directed the conservation work of the Villa of the Papyri. After the talks we enjoyed a splendid buffet under a soft evening sky.



9. *Members enjoying the Banquet at the Villa Maiuri(l)*



10. *Robert Fowler, Mariacristna Fimiani and Simona Formola (r)*

The following morning everyone gathered early at the site entrance for a visit to the Villa of the Papyri with Christian Biggi, followed by time to explore the main site. Here your correspondent admits to skipping the Villa in order to have more time for the other bit; shame on him, especially as he learned later that you all got to see inside the bathhouse. I am suitably chastened and jealous, and can say no more about that part of the itinerary. But I can say that the site during that first hour was blissfully cool, deserted, and beguiling.



11, 12. *The exterior (l) and interior (r) of the private Bathhouse in the vicinity of the Villa dei Papyri*

At 11:15 sharp—well, notionally anyway—we boarded a coach bound for cooler climes up the mountain. First stop was the Vesuvius Meteorological Observatory, opened in 1845 and the oldest such observatory in the world. The tour was somewhat curtailed by our own late arrival, the late arrival of the guide, and the need to proceed betimes to lunch, but we were nevertheless able to study some fascinating pieces of historic equipment, and learn about the ongoing, extremely close monitoring of Vesuvius. We were assured that modern science would be able to predict with certainty, on the basis of first signs, exactly when the next eruption would occur, and that evacuation of the region could then proceed according to plan. Both statements seemed optimistic to me, particularly the second. But I did form the view, on the basis of what I saw there, that Ercolano stands every unfortunate chance of being demolished all over again in the next major eruption (long overdue), which makes me even more anxious to finish the excavation of the Villa of the Papyri and other accessible parts of the ancient town before it is too late. And to hope that I am wrong about the chances of successful evacuation.



14. *The Vesuvius Meteorological Observatory*



13. *Bob Fowler eulogising about the cena at Fiume di Pietra*

We arrived at the Fiume di Pietra restaurant (the River of Stone, the river having been created by the 1944 eruption and visible alongside the premises) only twenty minutes late at 1:50, and suitably hungry. This was a return visit to Paola's establishment, where high expectations were not disappointed: a wonderful, seemingly unending cena in pleasant, shady surroundings; hugely restorative. It was 4:00 before we finished the coffee. Just as well, then, that the ascent to the cone of Vesuvius took much less time than we had been led to believe. Fifteen hardy souls made the climb (well, maybe not that hardy; you could drive most of the way, and the last 30 minutes offered only a few challenging stretches. The soft volcanic powder underfoot was the more difficult part, like walking in deep crunchy sand.) The remainder of the party returned to Ercolano either for a siesta or to take in the virtual museum and/or the palace at Portici.



15. *Dirk Obbink circumnavigating the cone of Vesuvius*



16. *Peter Spital surveying the Bay of Naples from Vesuvius*

Everyone then gathered again in the evening at Tubba Catubba for dinner; another return visit, equally delightful. (Tubba Catubba, by the way, is a traditional Neapolitan dance, not unlike the tarantella.) Fortunately the hotel, for those staying there, was only a few paces away; a welcome concession given that we had eaten three times more than was right for any one day.



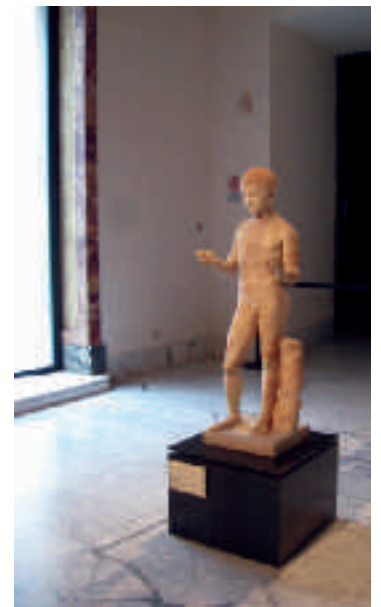
17. *The trams that conveyed us to Naples*

Sunday at 8:30 in the traffic circle behind the Miglio d'Oro we boarded two quaint, touristy trams with big sight-seeing windows. In these we rattled along to Naples (especially the one without upholstered seats). We arrived at the Museo Nazionale at 9:00, where after a group photo on the steps we joined our guide Giorgio Leone. Knowledgeable and genial, he took us through the key galleries relating to Herculaneum, and in particular managed to get us into the gallery with the finds from the Villa of the Papyri—the statues, marbles and bronzes, papyri and Piaggio's unrolling machine. This involved a staff member leaving his post at the ticket office and taking a risk with his job: even though we were allowed only five minutes, this was a real highlight of the visit. We had not been aware that the room was closed; one expects these surprises in Italian museums, but with recent cutbacks it's happening more frequently.

We had learned only the day before the congress that the Museo del Tesoro di San Gennaro, next to the Duomo, actually closed at 2:00, even though its website says it is open until 5:00 on Sundays. This meant that both the Tesoro and the Duomo would now have to be fitted in before lunch. Some of us stayed behind to have more time in the Museo; the fleet of foot strode ahead to see the crypt and the Roman ruins under the cathedral and then the Tesoro; the remainder adopted a more sedate, flâneur sort of pace to the Tesoro alone. It turned out, however, that access to the Roman ruins had been closed for two years! Not even the Centro Ercolano knew. The treasury of St Gennaro (Naples' patron saint) was an exhibition of 700 years of dedications, with many curiosities and stunning works in silver and gold.



18. *The dome of the Baptistery at the Duomo in Naples. The mosaics date from the 4th century AD*



19, 20, 21. *Friends at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (I) and in the Villa of Papyri Room at the museum*



22, 23, 24, 25.
 (Clockwise from top l) Piazzale San Gaetano, part of the underground complex used as an air raid shelter, squeezing through a narrow passage, the array of candles to help light the way



Friends were left to their own devices for lunch, which most of us found in the region of the Piazzale San Gaetano, the site of the final event of the weekend. If you Google 'Underground Naples' you will turn up several addresses in the city. The reason is that, since Greek times, the Neapolitans have dug down to the water table and created a network of underground cisterns, using the excavated stone to construct their houses (or, as one website puts it in a fine example of Engliano—as I call Italian translated into English with the aid of a dictionary, but little exposure to the actual language: 'Naples, the only one in the world, was built with building material from its bowels'). This network can be entered at various points throughout the city; hence the multiple addresses. Our excellent guide took us down forty metres below the surface for a most entertaining scramble through the subterranean labyrinth. Some of the caverns were quite spacious, and were used as air raid shelters during the war. In one of them was shown footage of the 1944 eruption of Vesuvius and of people clearing the scarcely credible amount of ash deposited on the city. For one stretch of the tour, the passage was exceedingly narrow, barely accommodating one person at a time; to add to the spooky effect, electric lighting was not provided and we each carried a candle before us. Those with claustrophobic tendencies exercised discretion and stayed behind until the rest of the group completed the round trip of this section. A stranger crocodile there never was.

Upon emerging to the light of day, we went round the corner to a house beneath which remains of the Roman theatre, where Nero performed, had not long ago been discovered. Here the layers of archaeological history were clearly visible from antiquity to the present day.

Most Friends proceeded back to Ercolano, though some went straight to the airport for the trip home. This being the night of the Italy-England match it was a good one for lying low but oddly in Ercolano there was little fuss; contrast the alarming pandemonium in Naples six years ago the night Italy won the quarter-final en route to its eventual World Cup triumph. Some members stayed on for a day or two more, including the undersigned who with Judy Fowler, Joy and John Bittzell spent an unforgettable day in Paestum. The ground now reconnoitred, it seems more than likely that this could be a part of a future Naples Congress.

Thus concluded the fourth of the series, to what seemed general satisfaction—though as always there are ways we could improve and we welcome all suggestions. Alla prossima, until the next time.

could manage it after our delicious lunch by the Fiume di Pietra. Our final day was spent in Naples where we had a tour of the National Archaeological Museum, the Duomo, and an amazing underground tour of a Greek Aqueduct by candle-light and a fascinating trip to a Roman theatre situated under the houses of Naples. The high-light for me was the brief time we spent in the room at the museum containing some of the treasures of Herculaneum including the beautiful marble statue of Athena and some of the beautiful bronze statues including the dancers and the famous Olympic athletes. I had my first glimpse of one of the papyri unrolled which was incredible. Alas, though, no sign of that illusive Herculaneum piglet! Perhaps next time...

Iona Hampson

Age 17

The Marist Senior School, Ascot

And now from our younger correspondents ...



26. Iona Hampson

In June this year I attended the fourth Herculaneum Conference in Ercolano. I had visited Herculaneum during last year but had not attended this event before. Therefore, I didn't know what to expect. The whole region of Campania is full of Ancient History and since I was studying Classics in year 12 at school, it was a wonderful excuse to attend the conference and visit more that the area had to offer. On our first day we had a little time to spare so we hopped on a train to visit the Villa at Oplontis. The wall frescoes were amazingly detailed with delicate birds, flowers and mythical characters adorning its grand rooms.

There was also an Olympic-sized swimming pool in the garden! After an update from the Herculaneum Conservation Project team, we were able to visit the boat on the site which was amazingly preserved. There was also the opportunity to visit the house of Telephus that had an impressive triclinium. I think the owner of the house would be pleased to know that after 2000 years his residence still impresses its visitors! Additionally, we saw inside the boat houses which contain copies of the numerous skeletons of the inhabitants who sheltered there during the volcanic eruption. It is hoped that the original remains will be on display at Herculaneum once they can be "re-housed" in suitable conditions. Then in the evening there was a reception with some presentations at Villa Maiuri in the evening. The reception was a really good opportunity to meet everyone and get to know people with a shared interest and enthusiasm for Herculaneum. Everyone was really friendly and happy to share their knowledge and experience with me. The next day we returned to the excavations to visit the House of the Papyri which remains closed to the general public. We heard from our guide some of the difficulties encountered in trying to preserve this area of the site which is below sea level, and also some of the more complex issues locally relating to the Conservation project. A visit to the observatory and a hike to the cone of Vesuvius were on the agenda the next day for those who



27. Robert Crystal

I had a terrific time at the Friends of Herculaneum conference, and really enjoyed observing Herculaneum's remarkably well-preserved architecture and art, particularly the Villa of the Papyri. I also wanted to share some thoughts on a very special opportunity I had afterward. A few of the other conference attendees and I were able to visit the National Library in Naples for a personal tour by Professor Janko of the lab where he and others interpret the papyri recovered from Herculaneum. The lab contained numerous rolls

of carbonized papyrus, which resembled little more than burnt logs, showing the difficult job researchers face in slowly and carefully interpreting the texts. The papyri are photographed under ultraviolet light to reveal the ink, and Professor Janko then faces the very difficult task of reading them despite damage caused to the text by age and the effect of being unrolled. In addition to the papyri, the lab showcased the machines used by the Bourbons to unroll them, as well as many who helped rediscover and interpret them. The visit made clear the amount of effort required to uncover important ancient texts that, without dedicated individuals like Professor Janko, would almost certainly be lost. Visiting Italy and attending the Friends of Herculaneum conference made the Latin I have been studying more real to me, and has inspired me to learn more about classics and philosophy.

Robert Crystal,

Age 15,

The Collegiate

School,

New York City.

28. A passage of the Roman theatre now found underground in Naples



Notice of Two Exhibitions



29. *Herculaneum, 23 August AD 79* by Louis-Hector Leroux. 1881. Oil on canvas

The Last Days of Pompeii: Decadence, Apocalypse, Resurrection

Herculaneum, Pompeii, and the other Campanian cities destroyed and paradoxically preserved by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79 are usually considered the places where we can best and most directly experience the daily lives of ancient Romans. Rather than presenting these sites as windows on the past, this international loan exhibition explores them as a modern obsession. Over the three hundred years since their discovery in the early 1700s, the Vesuvian sites have functioned as shifting mirrors of the present, inspiring foremost artists—from Piranesi, Fragonard, Ingres, and Alma-Tadema to Duchamp, Dalí, Rothko, and Warhol—to engage with contemporary concerns in diverse media.

The Getty Villa, Los Angeles, September 12, 2012 – January 7, 2013

The Cleveland Museum of Art, February 24 - May 19, 2013

The Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, June 13 - September 8, 2013

Early Notice: In conjunction with the upcoming British Museum exhibition

'Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum (28 March - 29 September 2013)

Friends will be delighted to know that a special event will be co-sponsored by the Society and the Museum, featuring a public talk with Andrew Wallace-Hadrill of the Herculaneum Conservation Project and Domenico Esposito of the Superintendency (Dr Esposito was the main archaeologist working on the recent project at the Villa of the Papyri). There will be a reception to follow. This will be a great event in itself, as well as an opportunity to publicise the work of the Society. The date has yet to be set but we will of course let you know as soon as it is.

Visit the British Museum website to see the press release for the exhibition and to pre-order tickets.

*Studies on the pre-Roman phases of Herculaneum:
status quaestionis
Dr Simona Formola
University of Naples (Suor Orsola Benincasa)*



30. Herculaneum: Overview from the suburban area

The study starts from the observation that very little is known about the site of Herculaneum before the coming of the Romans. Studies since the end of the eighteenth century have focused primarily on the impact that the discovery of the site has had on the collective understanding, on the history of the Bourbon excavations, on the collection of drawings and unpublished documents, on the excavation diaries, on the discovery of the Villa of the Papyri and the precious rolls found in it, and on the results obtained from the great era of open-air excavations conducted by Maiuri between 1927 and 1958.

In recent times scholars have started studying the history of house-building, sometimes focusing on the problem of the urban plan of the city considered to be Hippodamian, that is to say perfectly regular, and dated on the basis of the limited information handed down to us between the VIth and IVth centuries BC (for example Strabo, who knows the sequence on the site of Osci, Etruscans, Samnites and Pelasgians); sometimes on the metrological aspect relating to property subdivisions, especially by the Dutch school which, starting from the size of the Oscan foot, tried to recreate the plan of some of the houses; sometimes on the building techniques used.

Most previous studies have used a selection of reference samples, without considering the total number of dwellings or accurately analyzing the surviving remains in general, including the walls. Many of these are problematic to interpret because of extensive, often invasive restoration, which makes it difficult to identify the oldest nucleus. Our information is incomplete about macroscopic aspects of Herculaneum town planning, such as the unequal size of the insulae; the anomalous trend of the decumanus maximus; why some houses are developed in an east-west direction, and others north-south; why in some cases it seems that a central axis cut the insulae longitudinally into two halves, while in others this is not so; and why some houses have anomalous development in successive phases. The brief analysis outlined here aims to frame the status quaestionis and urges us to go beyond the forma urbis

as crystallized by the eruption, questioning the foundations of existing elements.



31. Samnite House.
First Style



32. Samnite House.
Caenaculum



33. Opus
incertum and
tuff piers

Samnite elements at Herculaneum

The research aims to track all the elements relating to the pre-Roman phase of the site, until Herculaneum became a Municipium in 89 BC. First, it conducts a census of each element of sufficient antiquity discernible on the site: construction technique in opus incertum; tuff piers in doorways; First Style wall painting; cocchiopesto with small white stones arranged in meanders, lozenges, regular dots, swastikas; an impluvium made of tuff or cocchiopesto; tufa columns in situ, or incorporated into newer structures; tall doorways or portals inside the housing, of the Samnite type; thresholds of tufa or travertine; Hellenistic-style architectures, such as the presence of a caenaculum in the atrium of some houses, and accommodation for ramps and terraces of the suburban sacred area; Oscan inscriptions; occupation of one or more original lots; stratigraphic tests that have revealed pre-Roman structures or pottery. This has led to the realization that not only has a complete review of all these materials never been done before, but in most cases the given contexts were unknown or inaccurate.



34, 35. Pottery from Casa dell'Albergo

Next, a survey was carried out of the history of all modern excavations from the 70s of last century until today, before which there was of course no awareness of the matters under study or their implications. Some 60 stratigraphic surveys were examined, and revealed a somewhat unexpected result: though all levels of the site were investigated, and some retain material from the late fourth or early third century BC, no stratum can be dated further back than the middle of the second century BC. Consequently a consistent chronological frame of reference can be created for the whole site, in which there is no structure older than opus incertum, and black painted pottery dating for most part to the second century BC (fragments of IV-III century BC being residual). The visible site, with pre-Roman traces only in the oldest house plans and in the urban design, cannot be assigned a date any older than that.

The close relationship between the town-planning and the topography of the plateau is perhaps the most interesting aspect of the present study because it shows how, already during the Samnite period, planning always had to confront the steep slope of the promontory, a greatly limiting factor, which caused not a few anomalies in the distribution of houses and gardens on the lots. The sudden differences in altitude imposed heavy restrictions on building, and have as a corollary the fact that the decorative strategies adopted in certain rooms differ from the usual standard applied to the houses of traditional plan.



36. View of the decline of cardo V to the marina

Latest News from Herculaneum

The most exciting thing we heard on the ground during our recent visit was that the Packard Foundation proposes to invest \$100M in Herculaneum over the coming decade, having already spent a reported \$20M on the conservation project. The main focus will be a much-expanded and improved museum, overhauling the current unused structure. If this can be done it will be wonderful news. A good museum (like the one at Paestum) would enormously enhance the visitor's experience. Hundreds of finds currently in storage could finally be put on display. A museum would also be a huge first step in the larger development of the area. The ultimate plan involves improved links with the historic parts of the modern town, thus creating a comprehensive tourist itinerary.

Previous efforts to launch the museum have foundered, but given the track record of the Packard Foundation to date there are strong grounds for optimism this time. The proposal is still at the discussion stage with the Soprintendenza and the Comune of Ercolano, but the seriousness of intentions may be measured by Packard's appointment to this project of Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, who will demit his office as Master of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, next summer.

The week before our visit, on 13 June, *Il Mattino* reported David Packard's visit to Ercolano, where he attended a ceremony at which the former mayor, Nino Daniele, received honorary citizenship of the town. (Dr Packard received this honour himself when Signore Daniele was in office.) The article briefly mentioned his 'new dream' of a museum. Their words, not his, apparently (direct quotations spoke only of 'my idea'); but on 11 June, the *Corriere del mezzogiorno* of Naples also used the expression. Except that according to them, the 'dream' was... to bring the Villa of the Papyri to light! That would be very nice too. In the meantime, work on the ancient shoreline continues. The plan is to link the Villa and the main site by a tunnel, greatly easing access—also a great improvement. The future looks good for Herculaneum.

From the desk of Sarah Court at the Herculaneum Centre:



37. Careful conservation of the Neptune and Athrodite mosaic

The Neptune and Anfitrite mosaic is undergoing conservation at the moment but the public can watch the work in progress if they visit from now to November.

Also the Boat Exhibit (usually closed due to lack of custodians) will be open for the month of October.

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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.

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