

herculaneum archaeology

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The Ninth Congress

25 -29 September 2024

Bob Fowler

Chairman of Trustees

Herculaneum Congress (ninth!) began on a chaotic note, as violent weather across Europe disrupted both incoming flights and airport pick-up arrangements. Ever resourceful, the Friends nonetheless found their way to Ercolano without too many delays. Welcoming drink in hand, we contemplated the pounding of the rain on the marquee roof, wondering if any remission would permit a dash over the garden to hear the introductory talk by yours truly. Finally, a brief let-up saw the Friends swarm across the lawn to reach the pavilion only slightly damp. Fortunately, this deluge was the end of nature's convulsion, and the weather throughout the rest of the congress was close to ideal.



Prof. Fowler (left) and Dr. Sirano at the beginning of the site visit on Thursday

Thursday morning we were honoured to be met at the site by the Direttore himself, Dr Francesco Sirano, who escorted us down to the ancient shoreline and explained the work that had recently been completed there. The beach is now fully accessible, and reconstructed to look as it did in 79 AD, with black volcanic sand. This is one of many improvements Dr Sirano has wrought; his tenure has been transformative. The creation of the independent Parco, in control of its own resources, provided the necessary turbo-charge. Among the developments has been the replacement of the brick 'Berlin Wall', as the locals called it, between the Via Mare and the site, with a transparent fence, and the completion of a piazza and promenade along the southeast side between site and town. These changes exemplify a general policy of bringing modern and an-

cient communities closer together, involving all interested parties in the planning. Via Mare is no longer a dingy locus of drug dealing, but a bright and airy access point for the scavi; a new B&B has already opened up. Ultimately one hopes to see such walkabouts incorporating the Villa of the Papyri, and connecting with the fabulous new extension planned to the northwest between the existing site and the sea, which will include a new visitor centre, exhibition space, storage space, laboratory, offices, a new entrance and car park. The works will be funded by a wonderful \$50 million donation from the Packard Humanities Institute, which has also funded the Herculaneum Conservation Project (HCP) since its inception in 2001. Further excavation to the south towards the existing car park is also foreseen. All of this is expected to increase visitor numbers from the existing, impressive 600,000 per annum to 800,000, which is both maximum and optimum in terms of sustainability and profitability.



The ancient shoreline with the so-called boat houses (*funici*)



Congress attendees on the ancient shoreline



(From left to right) Augusto Neri, Bob Fowler, Roberto Melfi

Fiorenza Piccolo and Ottavia Semerari of the HCP took over from Dr Sirano and escorted us to our next destination, explaining en route some of the work HCP is doing on wood preservation. Many carbonized remains are in need of improved protection; Maiuri's original measures, which have lasted nearly a century, were exemplary for the time, but now need replacement. This is a project the Friends could well consider supporting. At the top of the site we split into two groups, one to visit the House of the Tuscan Colonnade, and the other to visit the (so-called) Custodian's Room in the (so-called) Shrine of the Augustales, and then switch. In reality, the "Shrine" was probably the Curia (council house), and the poor man caught in his bed by the eruption has been dubbed the "custodian" simply because of the location of his chamber inside one of the entrances. We do not know who or what he was, but it was he whose brain was vitrified by the eruption (see *Herculaneum Archaeology*, Issue 25). The restoration and new presentation of this room, closed for many years, and the scientific research on the skeleton is now ongoing, have been made possible by the Friends' donations. Disappointingly we could not enter the room, which was totally filled with equipment and workers, but we were lucky to have the archaeologist in charge, Dr Marina Caso, explain the project.

The House of the Tuscan Colonnade is a fascinating structure, with an odd layout, fine decoration and a most surprising peristyle hidden in the rear. Dr Ciri Buono, chief archaeologist, explained the house and its intricate restoration in detail. This was another building still closed to the public, but opened by special permission to the Friends.

Friends then had free time to explore the site on their own and consume their packed lunches before being shuttled back to the Villa Signorini for talks and a sumptuous buffet, now a traditional fixture in the programme. For the first presentation we were honoured to have Prof. Antonio Neri of the National Institute of Geophysics and Vulcanology, Pisa, one of the world's foremost volcanologists. His topic was the crisis in the Campi Flegrei, where seismic activity is increasing

exponentially and threatening an eruption that could dwarf that of Vesuvius. This truly alarming prospect is of the utmost concern to everyone, given the millions of people who live in the region. Prof. Neri's extensive collaboration with civil authorities on risk assessment and crisis management enabled him also to outline possible eruption scenarios and responses. Our second speaker was Friends scholarship holder Roberto Melfi, who is a PhD candidate at the Scuola Normale Superiore Meridionale di Napoli. He presented some of his research on the economic, social and political relations between Crete and Campania, focusing this evening on Herculaneum, and in particular on the wine trade (see elsewhere in this Newsletter). The third speaker was the undersigned, who gave an overview of the Herculaneum papyri, their history and decipherment, in preparation for the visit to the Office of the Papyri the day after. Of course, the latest results of the Vesuvius Challenge could not be overlooked (see elsewhere in this Newsletter for a report on that).



Approaching the Villa of Papyri (centre). Flooding due to breakdown of pumps

Friday was a busy and perhaps overly ambitious day. First up were the Villa of the Papyri and the underground theatre. First surprise of the day: the water pumps at the Villa had broken down, and the usual access was flooded—an illustration among many of the maintenance problems posed by this massive and incomplete excavation. So, we trooped along the now passable ancient shoreline (see above!) and under the Via Mare to get at the Villa from that side (which actually afforded an interesting new perspective on the intervening buildings). We were able to climb up to the atrium quarter, inspect the mosaics and get a sense of the layout; our guide here was another one of the outstanding Herculaneum archaeologists, Dr Mario Notomista. The theatre is now open to the public two days a week (not on a Friday, however), and accessibility has noticeably improved since the last time we went down. But it is still unavoidably wet and slippery. We are grateful to Dr Sarah Senatore who joined Mario to guide us.

We left the theatre in good time to embark shortly after 12:00 for Naples; first milestone met. But a second surprise greeted us on arrival in Naples: as a result of a change in traffic regulations, the nearest the coach could get to the Biblioteca was a 20-minute walk away. This was a challenge for some Friends, and it was not easy to keep the group together in Naples traffic, even with the new underground concourse traversing part



Congress attendees making their way to the Officina dei Papyri in Naples

At the Biblioteca, once we had all got there, linked up with Gianluca Del Mastro (one of our trustees, and longtime labourer in the Office of the Papyri), sorted ourselves into two groups, and gone by several different routes (one with a lift if needed) to our two destinations within, a good deal of time had passed, but the reward at the end more than made up for the any confusion.



Dr Holger Essler explaining the history of the unwrapping of the Herculaneum scrolls in the Officina

In the Officina, Holger Essler (another trustee and veteran Office denizen) showed and explained some choice papyri, while the other group marvelled at a selection of the Library's manuscripts (this is one of the great collections in the world), including a lavishly illustrated seventh-century book on the medicinal qualities of plants. This was taken from Dioscorides' *On Medical Material* (written in the 1st century AD), which was the standard reference on pharmacology throughout the Middle Ages and Early Modern period. Our learned

guide here was Dr Claudia Grieco. The groups swapped, and then proceeded either by coach or cab to the National Archaeological Museum. Here two more excellent guides, Roberta Avilia and Marzia Senza, showed us the highlights, devoting plenty of time of course to the rooms housing the finds at the Villa of the Papyri. I received many delighted comments, not exclusively from first-time visitors, about the richness of the collection. A suitable cap to the day's fabulous agenda; and, when you think of it, whatever the challenges, not many groups get to see all those things with such guides, and that as only one day in an extended programme.

A convivial evening with our old friends in the Tubba Catubba restaurant awaited upon returning to Ercolano, but here was the last of our surprises, for a mistake about numbers had come to light only that afternoon, and despite heroic efforts the family could not make up the difference in time. They did their best, but the evening had to be brought to a premature close or there would be no transport home. One felt for them, and it was good to see Friends expressing understanding and sympathy upon hearing the explanation.

Saturday was altogether more straightforward, beginning with a visit to the newly refurbished Reggia Quisisana, also known as the Museum Libero d'Orsi. Here in a spectacular setting high above Castellammare di Stabia are housed finds from the villas at nearby ancient Stabiae. There were many breathtaking exhibits, but it was the frescoes above all that struck one dumb with admiration. None of us had ever seen so many uniquely beautiful pieces in one place. The layout is thoughtfully designed, and English explanations were provided alongside the Italian. A place to visit again, for sure, and next time we will incorporate a visit to the villas themselves to see the original context of the artefacts. On this day, however, our next stop was Boscoreale, where for the first time our group could visit the rural villa and the museum together. The latter has been supplemented recently by finds at Civita Giuliana, where in 2017 the discovery of looters' tunnels triggered emergency excavation. Plaster casts of two human victims and a horse were on display, and many domestic items, but most impressive was a reconstructed ceremonial



Ceremonial Carriage at Boscoreale

The signs tentatively suggested suggested it was used for weddings, but to me the decor suggested rather a festival of Bacchus in this wine-producing region. The carriage would have conveyed the priest in the procession.

Saturday evening is the traditional ending of the "formal" congress, which this year we celebrated at the Villa San Gennariello, a beautiful eighteenth-century villa which is also the di Fraia family home. Francesco is our genial taxi driver for the airport runs. The matriarch prepared a "light" supper of mixed dishes and pastries *da morire* (to die for)—light being a relative term! Impossible to beat an Italian mamma's cooking. And such a setting—the villa full of antiques, an exotic garden guarded by an indignant peacock, and a terrace affording a perfect view of a romantic sunset over the Bay.

Sunday, the "extra day," took us to Baia, where we boarded a glass-bottomed boat to see the underwater archaeology. An interesting tour, but the water was murky owing to the unsettled weather, so only ghostly outlines were visible (aptly enough, I suppose, from one point of view). Still, it was a novelty, and after lunch by the seaside we proceeded to the grand amphitheatre at Pozzuoli, a substitute for Rione Terra, which we already knew before the congress was closed due to seismic activity. A final surprise awaited us in the form of restoration works, which prevented access to the cavea. Much of the interest here, however, lies underneath in the architecture and engineering, and this part was visitable.

Un sentito ringraziamento to all involved in the organization of another successful Congress—Christian Biggi, Alison Carter, Krystyna Cech, and Kate Starling—and especially to the many Friends whose enthusiastic presence makes it possible, and worthwhile.



A fabulous walkway connecting Via Mare and the main entrance to the archaeological site (at the end of Via IV Novembre) affords great views from above giving an exceptional appreciation of the whole excavated site. Here is a view looking down on the *decumanus maximus* with the blue sea of the Bay of Naples in the background.

The Crete-Campania relationship: the Cretan wine trade in Herculaneum

Roberto D. Melfi

PhD student in Archaeology and Cultures of the Ancient Mediterranean
Scuola Superiore Meridionale di Napoli

My doctoral project, entitled *Campanians in Crete, Cretans in Campania: land holdings and socio-commercial relations from the 2nd century BC to the 3rd century AD*, aims at elucidating the dynamics of the circulation of people and Cretan wine between Campania and the island of Crete, as well as the socio-political relations that linked these two areas in the imperial period. The analysis was conducted through an examination of literary and epigraphic sources, as well as the analysis of Cretan amphorae found in Campania.

One of the core areas of investigation in this research project is the relationship between Herculaneum and Crete. This connection is substantiated by the discovery of approximately fifty Cretan amphorae within the city, the majority of which have inscriptions. Additionally, the role played by M. Nonius Balbus as proconsul of Crete, likely in the latter part of the 1st century BC, further supports this hypothesis. He played a pivotal role in the territorial reorganization of the island and in the stabilization of the territory between Gortyn, Knossos, and the Capuan colony founded by Augustus in Crete in 27 BC. This is evidenced by the five Herculaneum honorary inscriptions dedicated by the Cretans to Balbus (*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* X 1430-32; 1433; 1434).

During my research, it became necessary to undertake a visual study of the Cretan amphorae from Herculaneum. I am therefore grateful to the Friends of Herculaneum Society for their generous grant, which enabled me to travel to the archaeological park and work on the materials on a daily basis.

The investigation resulted in the study and cataloguing of 33 amphorae, the majority of which originated from Amedeo Maiuri's 1932 excavation of the so-called *Taberna vasaria*, located in *insula* IV, 14. A single batch of 35 Cretan amphorae of types 2 and 4 was discovered within the entire room (cf. A. Maiuri, *Ercolano: i nuovi scavi* (1927-1958), Rome 1958). The find was so distinctive that Maiuri initially postulated that it might have belonged to a retailer of this specific wine, so the room was called a *Taberna vinaria*. He subsequently re-defined it as a shop selling these transport containers and pottery in general (*Taberna vasaria*), also because of

of the presence of an inscription, now illegible, between insula IV, 14 and 15, that read VASA (pottery).

In my study of the *tituli picti* (commercial information written on the vases), the names of T. Claudius Epaphroditus, Zosimos and L. R. Antigonos stood out (of which only Epaphroditus and Zosimus are documented in Pompeii). This necessitated a re-examination of the inscriptions that had previously been published in *CIL* IV, particularly 10889, 10893-4. Later, alternative interpretations of the inscriptions were put forth by other scholars, although without the benefit of autopsy. However, further study is required to confirm my “new” readings of these inscriptions, which will be included in future publications.

While there is no direct evidence of a connection between M. Nonius Balbus and the Cretan wine trade in Herculaneum, nevertheless his role as a mediator for the Cretans could be directly or indirectly relevant to the later presence of Cretan wine in Herculaneum. It is therefore imperative that further research be conducted in order to gain a deeper understanding of Cretan wine in Herculaneum. Fortunately, the evidence from Herculaneum allows this to a greater extent than in other cities in the Gulf of Naples, apart from Pompeii, even if it occurs there in apparently different distribution patterns.

Finally, the support provided by the Herculaneum Society, for which I express my profound gratitude, has also helped to fund this research. Their assistance has enabled me to undertake comparative studies in Crete, which have greatly enriched my research. I am optimistic that in the future, they will also facilitate chemical-physical analyses on the Cretan amphorae from Herculaneum.



Roberto Melfi standing in front of *amphorae* stored at the Antiquarium, Herculaneum Archaeological Park

Progress report on fieldwork connected with undergraduate dissertation

Adam Bracchi

Undergraduate in the Department of Classical and Archaeological Studies, University of Kent



Gold and Precious Stones jewellery on display as part of the SplenDori exhibition at Herculaneum Archaeological Park

My undergraduate dissertation “Archaeological Evidence for the Items of Personal Adornment within Magna Graecia during the Republican Era” studies the exceptional jewellery assemblages from the Bay of Naples through the lens of spatial studies. I consider the choices Romans made in their self-presentation and beautification to help place them into the physical space of the city. I endeavour to view the evidence as part of the spaces themselves: from those open, bustling areas, to the intimacy of the *domus*. To begin, I am completing a thorough investigation into the jewellery’s sensory qualities. This will be followed by an interpretation of wearers’ intentions, taking into account a wealth of factors. This research would not have been able to blossom without the generosity of the Herculaneum Society, and a visit to the sites themselves.

Research included a long time spent in the museums of Herculaneum, Pompeii, Naples, and Paestum, noting the ways the assemblages command attention or how light interacted with items during my viewing. Where possible I recorded the construction techniques of the jewellery and their visual motifs, and considered the types of people who might have worn it. From this, I have begun to analyse the items on their own, as items that can both modulate an individual’s visual prominence and focus of attention, as well as having their own spatial properties. This has revealed, at times, the lack of a link between items assessed to be of high value, and highly visible ones. While it may be the case that certain items such as the solid gold hemispherical bracelets do show a correlation, necklaces made from assorted cheaper materials (glass; semi-precious stones in shapes such as amphorae or phalluses) are visually

distinct in themselves, and were worn on the chest – an area that studies have shown to be much more noticeable than the wrist for the bracelets. Likewise, many items were made with gold foil (rather than solid) and featured glass gems, which, from afar, may have tricked a viewer. On the other hand, certain items in the collection such as a bracelet of bronze and glass have been analysed previously to be of a high value due to the complexity of the techniques, while having less expensive, and potentially less salient materials. Here, we may be able to observe an attempt to appear more discreet, to combat the political narratives surrounding sumptuous consumption. All this, however, requires the context from the sites themselves and the spaces these people existed in. Much of my time at Herculaneum was spent studying many of the finer houses, noting their layouts, natural lighting and wall features, as well as the monumental open spaces of Pompeii. These different locales would have greatly altered perceptions of the items, and add factors to my interpretations of the objects. This trip has been a boon to my research and my dissertation. I am now thrilled to write it up fully and shed further light on the ancient inhabitants of Herculaneum within the city itself.

A Note from Dr Michael McOsker

Michael McOsker is a papyrologist of both Herculaneum and Egyptian papyri and a researcher in the Department of Greek and Latin at University College London in the “Hexameters Beyond the Canon” project.

Compared to the wonderful news and achievements of last year, this one has been relatively quiet (so far!), but a lot is still going on. Most of my efforts are directly towards the Oxyrhynchus papyri, but I still found time to participate in a few Herculaneum-related activities.

On 20–21 June, Nicholas Freer (Newcastle) and Thomas Coward (Scuola Superiore Meridionale, but soon a UKRI/MSCA research fellow at Bristol) organized a conference with the theme “The Herculaneum Papyri: Texts and Interpretations.” There were nine speakers: Richard Janko presented his work on one of the Paris Herculaneum papyri and argued it was a historical work about the wars of Alexander the Great’s successors. It would be the only non-philosophical Greek text known from the Herculaneum library so far, and a hint that there might be more literary texts in a different, unexcavated part of the villa. Alessia Lavorante, Claudio Vergara, and Marzia D’Angelo (all Naples) presented parts of their current projects, a book of Epicurus’ *On Nature* dealing with time, an Epicurean treatise written against the Stoic conception of providence, and some reflections on

Philodemus’ various theological works. Tom Coward presented new work on a complicated bit of Philodemus’ *On Piety*, while Nicholas Freer used Philodemus’ *On Anger* to interpret Vergil’s *Aeneid*. Esther Meijer (University of St Andrews) spoke on Statius’ use of Philodemus and the *Appendix Vergiliana* and Alison Keith (Toronto) about Philodemus’ influence on the Roman Elegists. Finally, I considered what Philodemus’ mission in Italy was. Thomas and Nickolas asked me to help edit the conference proceedings, and we’ve started assembling the volume and talking to publishers.

In the meanwhile, as interest in the Herculaneum papyri has grown, the lack of an up-to-date English language introduction to the Villa of the Papyri and its library has been felt ever more acutely. In 2023, Gianluca Del Mastro approached me on behalf of the authors of *La Villa dei Papiri: Una residenza antica e la sua biblioteca* (Carocci 2020) and commissioned me to translate it into English. I was happy to accept. The translation has been completed and, we hope, will appear next year. The book covers a wide range: the original excavations in the 18th century and those in the 1990’s, the discovery of the papyri and attempts to unroll them, the effect that the papyri had on 18th and 19th century European culture, and the question of the owner of the Villa (probably Piso Pontifex, brother-in-law of Julius Caesar, rather than Piso Caesoninus, his father-in-law). Details of the papyrology and contents of the library are also summarized. My translation will include a chapter updating the text to take account of the Vesuvius Challenge and the resulting lightning-fast progress of the last year or two, as well as all the more traditional scholarship published in the meanwhile.

Finally, just a few weeks ago, I spoke at a conference sponsored by the Michigan Institute for Data and AI in Society (MIDAS) in Ann Arbor. My topic was on the texts from Herculaneum identified and studied so far, but I also made some suggestions for what’s in the still-rolled up papyri. It shouldn’t be a surprise that the answer is “a lot more Philodemus,” but Richard Janko’s recent identification of a historical work in PHerc. Paris 1 allows us to hope for one or two more one-in-one-hundred finds. It was a pleasure to meet two of the grand-prize winners of last year’s competition, Julian Schillinger and Youssef Nader and hear them as well as Seth Parker and Mami Hayashida, both from Brent Seales’ lab, talk about the technical progress. Brent Seales and Richard Janko laid out an expansive and inspiring vision for the future: soon, we hope, we will study many new Herculaneum texts but the lessons learned from them will be generally applicable to other damaged books and rolls. In fact, similar “unrolling” work is already being done on a badly damaged codex of Acts held by the Pierpont Morgan library in New York City using Seales’ techniques and scans.



The Vesuvius Challenge

As many readers will be aware, the Vesuvius Challenge (www.scrollprize.org) is a global competition sponsored by IT entrepreneur Nat Friedman and associates to perfect a non-invasive way of reading those Herculaneum papyri which remain rolled up. Any attempt to unroll them physically results in disastrous damage to the fragile, carbonized books. Over the years we have reported in this Newsletter on the progress of Brent Seales's team at the University of Kentucky as they used CT scanning to map the scrolls' interior and distinguish ink from papyrus. The scanning (like medical scanning, but using a synchrotron light source: see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diamond_Light_Source) easily detects ink if it contains metallic elements, but the Herculaneum ink, which is entirely carbon-based like the papyrus on which the letters were written, is very hard to detect.

The Challenge's strategy was to invite the world-wide community of computer scientists to build on the Kentucky results, incentivized by some serious prize money. Over 1200 teams joined the race. Along the way, smaller prizes were offered for solving various aspects of the bigger puzzle, with the winning code being made available to everyone at each stage. This laudable design ensured maximum momentum in the global effort. Artificial intelligence was the key: using correlations between scans and known letters in previously opened papyri, the computer could learn by itself how to find more ink, and become better and better at it. There were two juries, one to judge the computing, the other to judge the papyrology. Several current and former trustees of the Society were members of the latter jury.

Throughout 2023 everyone looked forward to the two bigger prizes. First was the "First Letters Prize," which awarded \$40,000 to the first person to detect at least 10 letters within a 4 cm² area of a scroll. This was won by Luke Farritor, an undergraduate at the University of Nebraska. He pipped Youssef Nader, a PhD student at the Freie Universität in Berlin, at the post, by getting his entry in first; Youssef had actually succeeded in reading more letters in the same part of the scroll. Luke's reading produced the word "purple," which made headlines around the world, accompanied by speculations as to what the context could be. A treatise on luxury seemed a good guess, purple dye being expensive in the ancient world. Youssef and Luke cleverly teamed up to compete for the Grand Prize, co-opting Julian Schilliger, a computer scientist in Basel, Switzerland. Entrants were required to find 4 passages of 140 characters each, with at least 85% of the characters recoverable. Bear in mind that,

when the Challenge was launched, no one had any idea whether this was a reasonable target. In the end, it was spectacularly exceeded, as our stalwart trio brought to light parts of 15 consecutive columns, including the end of the text (the half-column in the illustration). For this achievement they carried off \$700,000.

The subject turned out to be sensory perceptions and how they relate to pleasure: how different qualities, quantities, and mixtures affect taste, vision, and hearing. Pleasure, properly understood (that is, in due measure and context), is the chief aim in life according to Epicurean philosophy, which is the commonest subject in the Herculaneum papyri. We haven't got enough of the text yet to identify its title or author; Philodemus is a strong possibility, given the knotty style and the parting fling at his opponents at the end of the text. Here we may hope for progress from the 2024 instalment of the Challenge, which has set a goal of reading 90% of the four scrolls scanned to date. From there, the goal will be to scan all the rolled-up Herculaneum papyri, about 270 in number. This would involve developing a bench-top scanner, to avoid the prohibitive cost and labour of transporting all the scrolls to the synchrotron facility near Oxford. Such a goal would have seemed unthinkable a few years ago, but so would the results so far achieved. A new age of papyrology is dawning.

Bob Fowler

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