

Consolidation Work at Pompeii Reveals New Fresco of Priapus

Judith Harris (August 16, 2018)



For the ancient Greeks and Romans, the image of Priapus represented the origin of life itself, plus good luck and business success. Now, during consolidation work at Pompeii, archaeologists discovered a fresco painting of Priapus, weighing on a scale his huge phallus against a pile of coins.

ROME -- Working to consolidate a fragile long wall at Pompeii, archaeologists have just discovered a hitherto unknown fresco painting of Priapus, weighing on a scale his huge phallus against a pile of coins. At his feet was a bowl of fruit. "Just one more tale of sex and money," a modern viewer might say with a yawn. But for the ancient Romans living at Pompeii before its destruction in 79 AD,



Priapus, the son of Aphrodite and Hermes, represented the origin of life itself.

This is the second painted Priapus found at Pompeii. The other, similarly weighing his phallus, was in the well known House of the Vetti, excavated in the late 1890s. In that roomy house were found both a fresco with a similar Priapus weighing his phallus on a scales, in a doorway entrance, plus a statue of him, probably used in a garden as a fountain. As journalist Antonio Ferrara points out, the door remained open throughout the day so that passersby could not help but take note of the image and hence of the owner's wealth and power.

Unlike Herculaneum, which lies deep beneath hardened rock, Pompeii is buried no more than ten feet below the surface under a fairly shallow layer of solidified volcanic detritus (pebbles, dust). Pompeii was therefore relatively easy to excavate, and in fact two-thirds of this rich commercial city are excavated. However, for decades the complex and expensive work of protecting and preserving that already excavated two-thirds of the town has had priority, and no new excavations have been permitted. The problem is that the unexcavated one-third looms as a wall hovering over the excavated houses, temples and roads.

The Priapus fresco, at the entry way of a posh villa near the splendidly restored House of Marcus Lucretius Frontone, came as a truly unexpected gift. In the same wealthy household, in addition, a number of other handsome paintings have been found; on a nearby wall is the painted face of a woman -- a matron, the archaeologists call her. Elegant frescoed decorations also cover a wall in a bedroom near a garden area.

The area abutting the unexcavated part of Pompeii is being shored up during consolidation work underway in Regio V, Insula 6, on the crowded Via del Vesuvio, the long road that crossed Pompeii from North to South. Involved in the current consolidation work are, along with Via del Vesuvio, the Via dei Balconi (the Street of the Balconies) and the Via delle Nozze d'Argento (the Street of the Silver Wedding). The famous House of the Silver Wedding there is one of the most elaborate of all the villas at Pompeii, but has been closed to the public for decades. Happily its restoration is slated to begin this coming autumn,.

Massimo Osanna, director general of Pompeii, explains that, "Pompeii is at a turning point in archaeological research, not only for these exceptional finds that literally thrill us, but also because a new scientific and interdisciplinary approach to their study has been adopted." Working together are geologists, architects, vulcanologists, engineers, restorers and specialists in paleobotanics, archeozoologists, physical anthropologists and restorers. Another example of the results of the new approach, thanks to the current work on consolidation and restoration work, was the discovery last April inside the well known Central Baths of the skeleton of a child of seven or eight. The skeleton was found just a few inches (10 cm) below the surface, and is now under study in the Pompeian research laboratory.

The new work on Pompeii comes via the Grande Progetto Pompei, or Great Pompeii Project, passed in 2012, with support from the European Regional Development Fund as well as from the Italian government. The Project, which requires careful oversight of contracts, involves a half dozen Italian ministries together with Italian and other universities and research centers. Among its aims: reduction of hydro-geological risk by securing unexcavated embankments, as along the Via del Vesuvio; consolidation and restoration of masonry and decorated surfaces throughout the site;



protection of buildings from weather exposure; and expansion of video-surveillance.

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