

Issues of conservation and reconstruction: Italian and International contributions and responsibilities

Gabby

‘A Second Death’ - Henri de Saint-Blanquat

- In 1986 Henri de Saint-Blanquat declared Pompeii was “an archaeological disaster of the first order”
- By the mid 1990s, the site had deteriorated rapidly that only 14% of the site was open to the public
- It only began to recover during the first half of the 21st Century
- However, in 2010, both the Schola Armaturarum and the House of the Moralist collapsed in Pompeii
- These incidents lead to media hysteria and a political blame game, with many pointing the finger that Italy was clearly under-educated and unable to care for their site
- There were of course, various factors both influenced by society and natural forces that ultimately lead to the deterioration of Pompeii and Herculaneum

Natural Forces

Sunlight

- Various excavated structures and objects exposed to sunlight were susceptible to deterioration, and were then exposed to the effects of sun, wind and rain
- The sunlight particularly saw vibrant frescoes fade in colour, carbonise and deteriorate quickly
- The harsh sun in the Campania region, alongside the ozone, saw large quantities of paintings and organic materials fade, bleach and breakdown as a result
- The results were so harrowing that JP Desourdes and Kay Francis of the Sydney University found that in Schefold's original inventory, 50% of the wall paintings were lost forever and their damage was irreversible

Water

- In Herculaneum, the Suburban Baths complex were saturated by surface water, causing the rapid deterioration of vaulted roofs → the Baths eventually had to be closed to the public
- The high content of calcium in wall paintings also dissolve under the influence of moisture and soluble salts can damage paintings
- As a result of increased pollution over time, acid rain has also caused discolouration, abrasion and corrosion of various surfaces

Natural Forces Continued

Weeds

- The fertility of the Campania region is often referred to as “another enemy of the ruins” with fast-growing, hard to manage weeds and parasitic plants growing over the excavation sites
- More than 30 types of weeds and brambles have been identified in Pompeii such as wild carrot, fennel, fig, ivy and valerian
- Difficult roots also disrupt the foundations of houses, destabilise walls and buckle and loosen mosaic floors
- Brambles of ivy continue to grow in inner walls and cling to outer walls, destroying many of the ancient stoneworks in the houses → they are also difficult to remove, often resulting in the cracking, breaking away and crumbling of walls, therefore making the site susceptible to dampness and subsequent deterioration

Birds

- A large number of pigeons at Herculaneum have nested in secluded site corners and their acidic excrement has had a corrosive, deteriorating effect on floors and wall decorations
- Their pecking at carbonised wooden beams, doors and window frames also causes irreparable damage
- Falcons were regularly brought into the site in addition to removing their nests and excrement and installing nets to limit their access

Poor Restoration Work

Lintels

- The replacement of lintels over doors and windows by softwood, instead of seasoned hardwood, saw rotting, mould and the infestation of termites on the site
- The rusting of iron armatures in reinforced concrete used for repairs in the mid 20th Century also split open concrete and saw the collapse of both restored and ancient structures

Fresco “Protection”

- Frescoes have been damaged by the application of modern mortars (the release of salts), paraffin wax and varnish

Non-Expert building firms

- In the past, local firms were used. Whilst they were up to date with modern trends and building practices, they were inept at understanding the process of restoration and conservation
- These non-expert building firm usage resulted in roofs collapsing and covering marble floors with rubble

Tourism - the double-edged sword

- Up to 3 million tourists visit the site year, which is beneficial for much needed revenue and funding which can go directly into conservation and educating the public, however there are many negative impacts

Negative tourism impacts

- Millions of feet trample mosaics and wear down street pavements, in many cases exposing lead pipes which crack and break
- Hot, humid, human breath and camera flashes cause further deterioration to the already faded wall paintings
- Backpacks and fingers brush against walls
- Perspiration react to ancient surfaces
- Rubbish is dumped and left on the site, attracting vermin
- Cigarette butts are often discarded
- Fragments of marble and pottery are collected as souvenirs, damaging original artefacts
- Tourists often climb over strict barriers in order to get photos
- Inevitable and damaging graffiti that is often irreversible

Poor Site Management

Looting & Poor Site Management

- Between 1975-2000, nearly 600 items were stolen from sites
 - 1975: a museum at Pompeii had to be closed after it was robbed
 - 1977: 14 frescoes were cut from the walls of the House of the Gladiators
 - 1990: a storeroom was robbed at Herculaneum with more than 250 artefacts taken and in later robberies, frescoes were cut from the walls of the House of Chaste Lovers (fortunately they were recovered)
 - 2003: thieves broke into Pompeii and stole a 33 kilogram head from a fountain in the House of the Ceii.
- It has been argued that these robberies were an ‘inside job’ involving associates of the Neapolitan mafia who infiltrated the ranks of site guards and demanded lucrative contracts for conservation and restoration work
- When the superintendent of Pompeii Pietro Giovanni Guzzo took a stand against the mafia, several unfortunate incidents occurred
 - 1997: the heads were cut from several Pompeiian plaster casts
 - 2000: guards went on strike and locked out 12,000 tourists
 - 2000: in September, a fire was set near the house of Iphigenia
- According to UNESCO, the guards still remain a problem. Only 23 are on site at the one time and aren’t very vigilant. They have been reported of often ‘lazing around’ in groups of 3/4 in the shade.

HSC Study Questions

1. Explain the challenges facing Pompeii and Herculaneum in the 21st Century - 10 marks
2. How have conservation efforts attempted to deal with the impact of tourism at Pompeii and Herculaneum? - 10 marks
3. Describe Italian and international contributions to the conservation of the sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum - 10 marks
4. Explain the different ways in which archaeologies have reconstructed the past in the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum - 10 marks
5. Discuss the challenges of conserving the sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum - 10 marks
6. To what extent has tourism influenced the way the sites of Pompeii and/or Herculaneum have been managed since the 1800s?
7. Assess methods used by archaeologists and/or other specialists to reconstruct the past at Pompeii and/or Herculaneum - 10 marks