

## **Core Study: Australian Archaeologists at Pompeii: Estelle Lazer, Jaye Pont, Penelope Allison**

Australians are at the forefront of scholarship and archaeological investigation and have contributed significantly to our understanding of ancient Pompeii and Herculaneum. In the following section, the recent work of three Australian scholars is profiled.

### **Estelle Lazer**

#### **Qualifications**

- BA (Hons) in Archaeology, University of Sydney
- PhD University of Sydney, 'Human Skeletal Remains in Pompeii'.



*Photo courtesy Chris Griffiths, Head of Forensic Dentistry, University of Sydney*

#### **Contribution to new research on Pompeii**

##### **A Study of the Human Remains from Pompeii**

The collection of human skeletal remains in Pompeii is remarkable in that it provides a large sample of individuals from antiquity with a known cause of death who died over a very short period of time.

Although excavations at Pompeii commenced in 1748, the human skeletal evidence was largely neglected until the latter part of the 20th century. This can, at least, be partially explained by the influence of the development of the discipline of art history on Pompeian research.

The impact of popular culture on Pompeian scholarship, as exemplified by Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, cannot be overestimated. Bulwer-Lytton re-animated skeletons he observed in-situ and gave them characters of his own invention. He interpreted their last moments from their positions and associated artefacts. This approach continues to influence the interpretation of the skeletons and casts of the victims of the AD 79 eruption.

It is notable that a large sample of the skeletal remains has survived from the 250-odd years of excavation at Pompeii. It was not uncommon for skeletal material to be discarded from 18th and 19th century excavations elsewhere. One of the reasons for the survival of Pompeian skeletons was that they were occasionally used as props for macabre vignettes of the last moments of the lives of the victims. These scenes were created for the edification of visiting dignitaries.

The skeletons were subsequently stored in such a way that they became disarticulated. This diminished the amount of information they could provide and discouraged a number of scholars from initiating research projects on the Pompeian material. Despite this there was a tendency for scholars to make proclamations, unencumbered by evidence, about the composition of the population of Pompeian victims of the eruption. These included the assertion that the victims consisted of the old, the infirm, the very young and females. In addition, assumptions have been made about the population, purely on the basis of ancient literary sources. An example of this is the presumed heterogeneity of the Pompeians.

A major aim of my work was to re-assess these problems by testing such statements against the skeletal evidence. The skeletal material was examined to provide a profile of the population of Pompeian victims in terms of sex, age-at-death, general health, including stature and pathology, and population affinities.

The proportion of males to females in the adult sample was found to be almost equal, with perhaps a slight bias towards males. The age-at-death profile suggests that the sample is biased towards adults. There were no neonates or very young juveniles, though it should be noted that these groups tend to be under-represented in the archaeological record. The presence of certain age-related pathological bony changes was observed with a frequency consistent with that expected in a modern western population. This implies that the lifespan of individuals who survived to adulthood may have not have been as short as is generally attributed to ancient populations.

Height reconstruction from the long bones revealed that the average heights for males and females in the ancient Pompeian sample were similar to those of the recent Neapolitan population.

Although the general health appeared good, there was very little evidence of dental or surgical intervention in this sample. Oral hygiene does not appear to have been practised and tooth attrition was exacerbated by dietary intake of abrasive particles as a result of the milling process for flour.

There was no apparent skewing of the sample towards infirmity. Although some gross pathology was observed, there was no evidence to suggest that it would have had an impact on survival potential in the majority of cases.

The evidence provided by the skeletal sample is consistent with the volcanological evidence for the eruption sequence. It has been demonstrated that there were two phases in the AD 79 eruption. The first was not particularly lethal and lasted about eighteen hours. The second was marked by a series of deadly hot gas avalanches. It appears that the potential for survival from the eruption was based more on whether individuals chose to escape during the comparatively safe first phase of the eruption than on their sex or general health.

The evidence I obtained for population affinities was unclear. It was difficult to resolve the issue of whether the population was heterogeneous or mixed, as claimed in the literature. The non-metric evidence that I analysed suggested that the sample was homogeneous. It is possible that the victims, while providing an apparently statistically representative sample, do not necessarily reflect the entire population of AD 79. It could be argued that there may have been some bias in the types of individuals who chose to escape. It is possible that certain individuals, like slaves, may not have been in a position to leave. Also, people who had additional residences outside Pompeii may have left before those whose life and livelihood was entirely bound with Pompeii.

Despite the limitations of the sample, the human skeletal remains from Pompeii were able to be used to test long-held assumptions about the population and its demise. The results of my analysis challenge the views presented in the popular and academic literature. In addition, the skeletal remains provided sufficient evidence for a profile of the population of victims to be developed.

**Recommended Reading:**

Brennan, B & Lazer, E, *Pompeii and Herculaneum: Interpreting the Evidence*, Ancient History Seminars, Sydney, 2005.

## **Jaye Pont**

### **Qualifications**

- Currently a PhD student, Ancient History – Macquarie University
- Postgraduate Qualifying Program – Macquarie University
- Interior Design Diploma – Sydney Technical College
- Architectural Drafting Certificate – Sydney Technical College
- Diploma Course in Ceramics – East Sydney Technical College



After many years working in a variety of fields, including architectural design, animation, advertising, educational resources, book illustration, fine arts and ceramics, Jaye joined the Anglo-American Project in Pompeii in 1998. The Project is a research initiative of the University of Bradford in England, working in collaboration with the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei, the Italian authority in charge of the ancient city. The Project is part of a new research program in Pompeii, which aims to explore contexts beneath the level of AD 79. The team is investigating the urban development of Regio VI, Insula 1, a triangular city block which lies inside the Herculaneum Gate on the Via Consolare, one of the main streets leading into Pompeii from the north. It aims to trace the habitation of this area, from its earliest settlement through to its destruction in AD 79.

### **Contribution to new research on Pompeii**

Since 1999 Jaye has performed the dual role of chief illustrator and ceramic specialist with the Project. The position of illustrator includes liaison with the directors of the Project and specialists to select items for publication. Chosen artefacts such as ceramics, glass, metal and worked bone are drawn at a scale of 1:1. These are later digitally scanned and refined before being reduced to half full-size, ready for publication. The work of a ceramic specialist involves the classification and provenance of pottery based on its shape and physical characteristics. This is usually determined by examining the composition of the clay, the quality of manufacture and vessel typology. Where these attributes match pottery from a specific production centre it is possible to determine the origin and the approximate date of the vessel. The identification of potters' stamps, if present, also assists in this task. Estimates of the number of vessels present and analysis of their distribution enables the ceramic specialist to establish the use and trade of pottery within the ancient society. Jaye is responsible for the analysis of red slip pottery from the Project excavations. This fine-bodied tableware was manufactured in Roman times in many regions from the 1st Century BC.

The examination of red slip ceramics in Pompeii has traditionally involved the study of pottery from AD 79 contexts because archaeological excavation has predominantly concentrated on the removal of the volcanic deposit from these levels. From the middle of the 20th century, however, clearance of the areas covered by the eruption decreased. As a result the ceramics held in the National Archaeological Museum in Naples and the storerooms of Pompeii and Herculaneum largely consist of vessels selected from earlier excavations and reflect the priorities and values of those past excavators. The collections contain mainly intact or decorated vessels, the majority with potters' stamps. Evaluations of pottery consumption in Pompeii based on this archival material are therefore problematic as the vessels within these repositories represent only a partial view of the red

slip tableware in use in Pompeii. Consequently Jaye's doctoral research aims to investigate intact assemblages of red slip pottery from pre-AD 79 contexts and will endeavour to provide a more accurate analysis of the origins, distribution and use of this pottery in Pompeii prior to the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. The investigation is still in progress and to date has involved a total of 40 weeks of fieldwork in Pompeii over the last seven years.

Red slip pottery assemblages from two regions of Pompeii will be examined in this research. The first assemblage is from the excavation of Regio VI, Insula 1, conducted from 1994 to the present day by the Anglo-American Project in Pompeii. This excavation encompasses residential, commercial, industrial and public spaces. The second assemblage, from the excavation of the House of the Etruscan Column in Regio VI, Insula 5, conducted from 1976 to 1979 by Maria Bonghi Jovino, is one of the most important and comprehensive excavations of pre-AD 79 contexts in Pompeii. Jaye's investigation will allow a modern re-assessment of this assemblage in line with recent findings.

The compilation and analysis of data, gathered from a broad range of social contexts within these two areas of Pompeii, will furnish an extensive understanding of the use of red slip tableware in Pompeii in the years leading up to the eruption. Scientific analyses will provide positive identification of the provenance of red slip pottery found in these areas. It will then be possible to establish the volume of ceramics from various production centres and this in turn will furnish information on the trade and exchange of red slip pottery in Pompeii. Analysis of the distribution of the various types of pottery will identify patterns of consumption within the city from a range of social contexts and highlight social differences over time in the urban development of Pompeii. Furthermore this research will provide an awareness of the quality and quantity of red slip pottery produced in the Bay of Naples region and provide understanding of the structure and organisation of ceramic production within the Campanian region.

Jaye is currently an Education Officer in the Museum of Ancient Cultures at Macquarie University with special responsibility for updating the Museum Database. She is a frequent guest lecturer in Ancient History and has presented numerous public lectures at the University for the History Council of NSW during History Week. Recently Jaye has presented papers at the Macquarie Ancient History Association Conference and the History Teachers' Association (NSW) Conference.

#### **Recommended Reading**

Bon, S & Jones, R (eds.), *Sequence and Space in Pompeii*, Oxbow Monographs, Oxford, 1997

Descœudres, J-P (ed.), *Pompeii Revisited: the Life and Death of a Roman Town*, Meditarch, Sydney, 1994

Etienne, R, *Pompeii – the Day a City Died*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1992

Harris, EC, *Principles of Archaeological Stratigraphy*, Academic Press, London, 1979

Laurence, R, *Roman Pompeii: Space and Society*, Routledge, London, 1994

Orton, C, Tyers, P & Vince, A, *Pottery in Archaeology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997

Shelton, J-A, *As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988

Wallace-Hadrill, A, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, Princeton University Press, 1994

Zanker, P, *Pompeii, Public and Private Life*, Harvard University Press, 1998

## Penelope Allison

### Qualifications

- BA Pure Mathematics, University of Canterbury, NZ, 1973–1975
- MA, Classical and Near Eastern Archaeology, University of Sydney, 1977–1979
- MA, 1st class Honours Classical Archaeology, University of Sydney, 1983–1986  
Thesis: ‘The Wall-paintings of the Casa della Caccia Antica in Pompeii’
- PhD in Classical Archaeology, University of Sydney 1987–1992: ‘The Distribution of Pompeian House Contents and its Significance’.



Contribution to new research on Pompeii

### Pompeian wall-painting

From 1983–86 I was a student member and wall-painting analyst for the Australian Expedition to Pompeii (funded by the Australian Research Council). My research into Pompeian wall-painting has had a significant impact on the field of Roman painting. I have been able to demonstrate that current methods for establishing chronologies of Roman wall painting are unreliable. I have published a number of scholarly articles proposing models for identifying artists and their workforce

organization, or ‘workshops’ and also the relationships between wall-painting and the use of space in Pompeian houses. I am also the principal author of the 11th volume in the German series, *Häuser in Pompeji*.

### Pompeian domestic space

My research in this area has developed methodologies for classical archaeologists to use contextual information and artefacts, as well as structural and decorative remains, to pursue more informed investigations of domestic behaviour in Pompeii. This research has been based on two projects. The first project was my doctoral thesis which involved the analysis of artefact assemblages and room use and assessing the abandonment processes of Pompeii. This project is shortly to be published as a monograph and a website. The second project was my participation in the British Pompeii Research Committee’s project concerning the Insula of the Menander at Pompeii. My contribution consists of a detailed catalogue and analysis of the artefacts from all the rooms in the houses in this insula and is currently being published by Oxford University Press as the third volume in the series on the Insula of the Menander.

### Recommended reading

Allison, P, ‘Room use in Pompeian houses’ in J-P Descoedres (ed.), *Pompeii Revisited: The Life and Death of a Roman Town*, 1994, pp 82–89

Allison, P, *Pompeian Households. An Analysis of the Material Culture*, Monograph 42, Cotsen Institute of Archeology, University of California, LA, 2004

- Allison, P (ed.), *The Archaeology of Household Activities*, Routledge, 1999
- Bon, S & Jones, R (eds), *Sequence and Space in Pompeii*, Oxbow Books Monograph 77, Oxford, 1997
- Gazda, E (ed.), *Roman Art in the Private Sphere: New Perspectives on the Architecture and Décor of the domus, Villa and Insula*, University of Michigan Press, 1991
- Laurence R & Wallace-Hadrill, AF (eds), Domestic Space in the Roman World: Pompeii and Beyond, *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, Supplement 22, Portsmouth, 1997
- Shelton, JA, *As The Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History*, Oxford University Press, 1988
- Wallace-Hadrill, AF, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, Princeton University Press, 1994
- Zanker, P, *Pompeii: Public and Private Life*, Harvard University Press, 1998

**Website**

[www.stoa.org/pompeianhouseholds](http://www.stoa.org/pompeianhouseholds)

Pompeii households: Analysis of the material culture, Database associated with Monograph 42 of Cotson Institute of Archaeology, UCLA (includes detailed information on 30 Pompeian houses and their contents, consisting of 865 rooms and more than 16,000 artefacts).