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‘Life and death: Pompeii and Herculaneum’ at the British Museum

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The two south-Italian cities, Pompeii and Herculaneum, destroyed by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE, are literally coming back to life in a major exhibition (curated by Paul Roberts) at the British Museum (28 March – 29 September 2013), which had already generated significant public interest before it even opened and is likely to be busy throughout.

Previous exhibitions of the eruption of Vesuvius (memorably described in Pliny’s *Epistles* 6.16 and 6.20) tended to highlight the element of ‘death’ with a focus on the gruesome last few hours of the cities, showing pictures of the eruption and sometimes the famous casts of dead bodies. While some of these casts (such as a moving group of a family) do feature at the end of the exhibition at the British Museum, overall it concentrates on ordinary ‘life’ and reminds visitors of the fact that the sudden eclipse of these two places and the manner of their destruction offers a unique snapshot of Roman everyday life in the first century CE and preserves details of Roman food or household items like no other place. This is what is meant by ‘life’ in the exhibition’s title: it shows what the private life of middle-class and wealthy people in southern Italy would have been like (though potential differences between social classes are not made explicit). ‘Life’ in this context does not include public life; so there is no material on government buildings or structures, public baths, theatres or temples: impressive remains of the latter have been found in the two cities, but these are perhaps more difficult to adequately represent in an exhibition that, by necessity, must focus on smaller transportable items. That said, the Italian authorities, in particular the Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Napoli e Pompei, have been extremely generous; in other words, the curators at the British Museum had a hard task in making selections, but they have done so very well: displayed are over 250 items, some of which have never been exhibited outside Italy before; some are not even normally on display in Italy, some

are very recent finds. The objects include a number of favourite and well-known pieces, such as the mosaic of the guard dog (who appears as the leading figure in the children's guide), the portrait of the baker Terentius Nero and his wife or the wall painting of Flora.

The presentation of private life underlies the structure of the exhibition, which is organized according to the different areas in which it takes place: after a brief introduction, visitors move through rooms labelled 'street', '*atrium*', '*cubiculum* (bedroom)', '*hortus* (garden)', 'living room' and '*culina* (kitchen)'. For each of these there is an introductory text describing the role of the respective space in the life of a resident in Pompeii or Herculaneum, followed by a collection of everyday items and ornaments that have been found in such spaces in houses in either city or are associated with them. Represented are aspects such as art and ornament (statues and wall paintings), house structure and everyday life (foodstuffs, jewellery, items of clothing), spare time activities (wine jars, graffiti, dice and counters, garden furniture) and religious beliefs (household gods, personal charms).

As a Classicist, you might think that you already know everything about life in the ancient world and you would mainly go to the exhibition to revisit some favourite pieces. However, the range and quality of the exhibits (and their excellent presentation) as well as the particular approach suggested by the selection and arrangements of the items means that almost everyone will discover something new: Did you know how a dormouse was fattened and cooked? Did you know that some Romans were portrayed with warts on their faces? Did you know how to say 'make yourself comfortable' in colloquial Latin? Did you know how to carry your purchases home from a south-Italian take-away? Did you know how to deal with drunks in Latin?

While the introductory panels could have said a bit more about how 'life' and 'death' are being understood and displayed in this exhibition, while differences between Pompeii and Herculaneum could have been explained more clearly (especially as regards the way in which the two cities were destroyed, which means, for instance, that wooden items only survive from Herculaneum), and while it could have been clarified for individual items from surrounding villas (neither from Pompeii nor

Herculaneum) that they have been added to complement the picture, overall, there is not much that could be improved. One can just be grateful that these wonderful pieces have come to the UK!

The reactions of visitors so far, especially of non-Classicists, show firstly that everyday life is an area where access to historical periods is straightforward and always generates interest, since it does not require much background knowledge and invites young and old to make comparisons between past and present, and secondly that well-presented material, with the right combination of exhibits that have a wow-factor, seemingly less exciting items whose importance is clearly explained as well as relevant and approachable information, makes people stay and engage with what is on display.

This kind of successful combination is continued in the material supplementing the exhibition. Even though the exhibition itself deals with material almost 2,000 years old, it is thoroughly up to date in other respects: in addition to an exhibition catalogue written by the curator (available from: <http://www.britishmuseumshoonline.org>; hardback £45, paperback £25), there is a multimedia guide, including statements by well-known Classicists Mary Beard, Amanda Claridge and Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, as well as an app for iPhone, iPad and Android (http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/pompeii_and_herculaneum/app.aspx). The British Museum website features highlighted objects (http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/pompeii_and_herculaneum/highlight_objects.aspx) and curator blog posts (<http://blog.britishmuseum.org/category/exhibitions/life-and-death-in-pompeii-and-herculaneum/>). The exhibition opened with a performance of a song entitled 'Pompeii' by the contemporary London band 'Bastille', the first instance of such a joint venture (<http://londoncalling.com/features-placeholder/bastille-perform-pompeii-at-the-british-museums-opening-night-of-life-and-d/>). And it will give rise to 'the first live cinema event produced by a museum from a major exhibition' on 18 June (see: http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/pompeii_and_herculaneum/pompeii_live.aspx). So, if you cannot get to the exhibition itself (tickets available from: http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/pompeii_and_herculaneum.aspx

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; adult £15, student £12.50), make sure that you benefit from some of the accompanying material!