

Mary Beard. *The Fires of Vesuvius: Pompeii Lost and Found*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 2008. Pp. 360. \$26.95.

In the English-speaking world during the last two decades, scholarly interest in Pompeii has escalated. Consequently, there have been several recent English-language publications for visitors to the site, for students launching into Pompeian studies, and for interdisciplinary scholars using this site for comparative study. Few present Pompeian research in such a critically informative and, at the same time, vivid and captivating manner as does Mary Beard.

Beard engages with a range of Pompeian studies, from skeletal analyses to art historical research to contextualized analyses of inscriptions, and embellishes them with anecdotes from ancient authors. With her lively use of language, she fills Pompeii's streets and houses with noise and activity and demonstrates that an informed understanding of this town is not the preserve of specialists.

This book is organized into nine themes, with chapter titles like "Street Life," "Painting and Decorating," and "Who Ran the City?". These present aspects of the daily lives of Pompeians that engage with their material world, while exposing the questions, doubts, and controversies

surrounding current understandings of those engagements. Each chapter has a selected reading list for interested readers to review the sources for Beard's often controversial stance against the perceived wisdom, indeed the mythology, that has built up over centuries of investigation and interpretation of Pompeii's remains. Beard takes a synthetic, but also a pragmatic and skeptical, approach to Pompeian scholarship, sifting through these layers of interpretation and questioning their relationship to the actual evidence. Thus she concludes that "Pompeii was a city without zoning" (p. 62), and downplays the role of festive dining in daily eating practices (pp. 96-97). Her argument that only one Pompeian brothel meets the "function follows form" criterion by which many scholars label Pompeian spaces (pp. 237-240) puts paid to debates over the "real" number of brothels in Pompeii (cf. David J. Newsome, "New Books on Pompeii," *Rosetta* 5 [2008]). There are some gaps in the further readings, though, such as no reference for the intriguing shopping list (p. 224). And some of Beard's speculation about the execution, choice, and organization of the decorative schemes in Pompeian houses (pp. 124-131) has already been addressed by the active international field of Roman wall-painting studies (e.g. Eric M. Moormann, ed., *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Instituut te Rome, Antiquity* 54 [1995]).

<mc>In my opinion Beard is not always critical enough. For example, the dating of the relief found the House of Caecilius Iucundus to A.D. 62 (p. 286 and Ill. 5) stems from the fact that only one earthquake was reportedly recorded in the written sources (p. 12). Pompeii undoubtedly experienced several earthquakes in its last decades (p. 14), any of which may have been illustrated in this relief. Beard similarly assumes that the work on the House of the Painters at Work was halted by the final eruption (p. 121). All we know is it was halted prior to this eruption and never resumed, possibly during one of the earthquakes. Unfortunately, even for recent excavations in Pompeii archaeologists have paid inadequate attention to depositional processes to resolve such specific chronological problems. This is also the situation for the interpretation of the state of the Temple of Venus, the remains of which Beard proposed would be much the same whether this temple was in the process of being constructed at the time of the eruption or looted afterwards (p. 285). Her proposal only applies to a site that has not been carefully excavated and recorded.

<mc>Beard frequently refers to interpretations made by so-called "archaeologists" (e.g., pp. 102, 236-237), but those cited do not always have formal archaeological training. Rather, they are often classically trained scholars who have become interested in the material remains and use them

as a context from which to discuss the written sources. As Beard is aware, this has often led to a misrepresentation of the archaeological record.

But these details are of interest mainly to students and specialists using this book as a basis for further study. This rigorous and scholarly work is aimed rather at a general, but educated, audience, particularly those about to visit Pompeii and who want more than the popular mythology about this Roman town. For them it is a must read. It is well illustrated with many useful images rarely seen in such publications (although the figure labelling is slightly confusing, with most in-text photographs and drawings labelled according to a different numbering system from the plans). Importantly, this book distinguishes "our Pompeii"—resulting from centuries of often fanciful interpretation of its material remains—from the Pompeii that was destroyed in A.D. 79.

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In *The Fires of Vesuvius*, Cambridge University classics professor Mary Beard restores Pompeii in all its bustling everydayness. She describes a mid-size city, one that was provincial yet highly culturally diverse, a hive of busy traffic, in-your-face advertising, and noisy commerce. Were those trapped by Vesuvius typical Pompeians or (more like Katrina than 9/11) only those who could not or would not flee? Beard calls this the "Pompeii paradox," the fact that we simultaneously know a huge amount and very little about life there. That's also what makes this learned but lively account a rather haunting read. A visit to Pompeii almost never disappoints, Beard insists. To read this book is to agree. Marjorie Kehe is the Monitor's book editor. You've read of free articles. *Fires of Vesuvius* by Mary Beard. > Book Review by Ursus. In 79 CE, Vulcan pounded his forge beneath Vesuvius a little too harshly, and fiery destruction was rained down on several communities in its wake. Bad for the people living there, but good for us: Towns like Pompeii have yielded innumerable archaeological treasures about life in Roman towns in the first century. The author states we simultaneously know much and very little about Pompeii. By that she means there is a considerable amount of material evidence, but a lack of certitude as to its proper interpretation. Much has been written about Pompeii by various authors boldly asserting their pet theories. Beard seems to delight in annihilating their overly presumptuous conclusions. I bought this book about a month before a planned trip to southern Italy and a visit to Pompeii, so this is a review both of the book itself and the subsequent experience of visiting the actual site. The book is excellent. This isn't an dry academic treatise, but a beautifully written and very engaging account of life in Roman times, as preserved in the provincial town of Pompeii. The book is very well written and gives a good understanding of what happened when the Vesuvius erupted and what a modern visitor is looking at when visiting Pompeii (reconstruction). I recommend this book to anyone interested in the period and/or archaeology. Read more.