

## BOOK REVIEW

*Buried by Vesuvius: The Villa dei Papiri at Herculaneum*. By Kenneth Lapatin. Los Angeles, CA: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2019. Pp. ix + 276. Hardback, \$65.00. ISBN: 9781606065921.

This beautifully illustrated and masterfully arranged exhibition catalogue is a requirement for anyone interested in classical antiquity. *Buried by Vesuvius: The Villa dei Papiri at Herculaneum* is much more than a guidebook to an extraordinary exhibition held at the Getty Villa, Malibu (June 26th - October 28th, 2019). Author and editor Kenneth Lapatin organizes a cohort of experts who contribute concise essays on diverse topics related to past and recent excavations at the Villa dei Papiri. Archaeological exploration at the site has produced undoubtedly the most important group of bronze and marble statuary from antiquity along with the only intact library from the classical world. Buried deep beneath 27 meters of dense volcanic debris, the once sumptuous villa has long intrigued scholars and travelers alike since antiquities began to be unearthed from the ground near Herculaneum in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. The existence of a remarkable excavation plan and detailed legend (hand drawn between 1754 and 1758 by Swiss military engineer Karl Jacob Weber) is an important feature of the catalogue. The plan has served as a model for subsequent archaeological excavations and helped researchers from varied disciplines interpret the subterranean landscape of the ancient villa and its surrounds.

After acknowledgements and an informative introduction by Lapatin, the catalogue is organized in four sections, each with superb photographs and detailed descriptions making the content understandable not solely for scholars of antiquity but also for readers new to the subject matter. Essays inform the reader of the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius and give context to the luxurious 1<sup>st</sup>-century BC seaside villa believed to be owned by the Roman family known as the Calpurnii Pisones. Jeffery Fish's essay reveals that the proposed owner of the villa in antiquity, Lucius Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus, was an important Late Republican statesman who was also the father-in-law of Julius Caesar.

The next section of the book features the rediscovery of the villa during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Christopher Parslow's essay describes difficult conditions workers

encountered during the Bourbon-era excavations. Using mining methodology with hand-dug tunnels and oil lamps for underground illumination, Karl Jacob Weber directed the harrowing underground excavations amid narrow passageways embedded with toxic gases trapped within volcanic debris. Despite these obstacles, workers managed to extract extraordinary items including marble and bronze statuary along with ancient wall frescoes and richly decorated mosaic floors which once decorated the vast seaside villa.

Contributors Luigia Melillo and Carol C. Mattusch inform the reader that King Charles VII directed how the ancient discoveries were to be restored and exhibited. The Royal Herculaneum Museum was created to house the excavated finds in a new wing of the royal palace located in neighboring Portici. Art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann was an early visitor to the museum and criticized the restoration methods employed by workers in the service of the Bourbons as they attempted to preserve the ancient finds.

In addition to bronze and marble sculptures being retrieved, hundreds of ancient scrolls were recovered, leading to the modern naming of the ancient site as the Villa dei Papiri. These papyrus scrolls (as described by Sofia Maresca) were carbonized due to the high degree of heat from the catastrophic volcanic disaster which occurred along the Bay of Naples in August, AD 79. The scrolls exist today as when accidentally discovered, resembling crumpled and blacked chunks of coal. Since excavated, the papiri have created intense interest with an evolving history of efforts to open and interpret the texts. The history of this long quest to decipher the scrolls is documented in the catalogue, including the most recent research using modern technological methodology.

The final group of essays are a summary of the contents of the villa including mosaic flooring, painted frescoes, bronze and marble sculpture, busts, ancient texts and other furnishings that parallel the exhibition list of objects organized in the second half of the book. The essays conclude with fascinating descriptions of recent excavations written by Domenico Camardo, unveiling important finds from previously unexplored lower levels of the Villa dei Papiri. Exquisite mosaic floors and painted frescoes with stucco reliefs have been discovered below the atrium of the villa. The new excavations have revealed the remains of a monumental hall, pavilion and pool that presumably nestled up against the sea in ancient times. In the area of the monumental hall, archaeologists have recovered fragmentary but extraordinary ivory veneered furniture legs and tripod pieces. Contributor Maria Paola Guidobaldi's enlightening essay along with

reconstructive illustrations reveal that these ivory fragments include richly carved images primarily depicting elements known from ancient Dionysian ritual scenes.

The catalogue is unique within the oeuvre of available literature or scholarship on Herculaneum and specifically the Villa dei Papiri because it is all-inclusive, covering multiple areas of interest related to the archaeological site and its excavated contents. The bibliography of this text is a vast resource for anyone interested in further study of the Villa or classical antiquity. Since the Villa dei Papiri was rediscovered it has attracted a confluence of disciplines including archaeology, art history, papyrology, philology, classical studies, volcanology, conservation and the preservation of cultural heritage. Under the direction of Lapatin, these areas of scholarship converge within this volume creating an exceptional catalogue unlike any current or past scholarly project on the subject to date.

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