Evidence of Palma Campania settlement at Pompeii

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The Swedish Pompeii Project investigates the buildings of Insula V 1, but the process of documentation has also brought to light a large quantity of prehistoric pottery in situ under ancient Pompeii. Responsibility for investigating the buildings in the northwestern corner of Insula V 1 is jointly shared by Henrik Boman and myself. In this area, two localities with prehistoric finds have been identified, viz. inside the well in the kitchen area (room f) of Caupona V 1,13 and in a trench that was opened up in Vicolo delle Nozze d’Argento (Fig. 1). 2

The first find was made inside the well, where the interior plaster lining of the well had come away from the wall and the soil underneath was exposed. A grey hard layer, constituting the consolidated deposition of ashes from a volcanic eruption, was clearly visible, and both above and below were layers containing pottery (Fig. 2). By means of laboratory analyses performed at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History by Mark Robinson, emmer wheat, six-row barley and grape seeds were identified in the soil sample from the layer above the volcanic ashes. 3 Much of the plant material consisted of wheat glumes, i.e. the waste from the processing of grain. The presence of the waste-product was an indication that the find-spot was a settlement-site or in the near vicinity of one, where the processing had taken place. As for the date, two radiocarbon analyses on emmer wheat both gave a date around 3500 BCE, 4 but this Neolithic dating did not appear to be consistent with the pottery. The pottery exposed inside the well was generally in a fragile condition and without significant characteristics, but there were few fragments with indented rims and oblong decorative swellings (Fig. 3). Owing to these decorated pieces, the suspicion arose that they should actually be one or two millennia younger than the radiocarbon dates suggested; they are rather representative of the Early Bronze Age culture of Palma Campania. 5 In fact, a third radiocarbon analysis was later carried out on hazel charcoal from the same context, with a more agreeable result, dating it to 1890–1690 BCE. 6

Clearly, excavation cannot be safely conducted inside a well, and a trench was therefore opened up in Vicolo delle Nozze d’Argento in the hope of yet again encountering untouched prehistoric layers. 7 The same sequence of pottery layers was indeed found, followed by a stratum of volcanic ashes under which were more pottery layers. In the process, the stone-paved street and its unpaved predecessor were investigated, and, incidentally, not a single piece of pottery was found, and only a stratum of volcanic ashes under which were more pottery layers. There is, however, many hundreds of diagnostic sherds for which Palma Campania parallels have been found and numerous fragments can actually be put together, although this is a very trying and time-consuming task. It is especially so since much of the pottery is in a fragile state and crumbles each time it is being handled. The pottery just beneath the ash layer is in a particularly brittle state and the first interpretation was that secondary burning may have affected it, 8 but now it seems rather that it is chiefly the acidity of the soil that has made the ceramics decompose. The seashells, in particular, were dissolved to such a degree that they were not even in solid form when they were brought out of the soil.

A short and very simplified survey of the find-contexts is presented, with the reservation that ongoing analyses may modify the final results. It is clear that the pottery deposited both before and after the volcanic event is related, i.e. all layers belong to

1. The Swedish Pompeii Project, under the auspices of Stockholm University and the Swedish Institute at Rome, is directed by Prof. A.-M. Lean-der Touati, while the expenses of the prehistoric investigations have been covered by the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation and the Friends of the Swedish Institute at Rome. The Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei is gratefully acknowledged for its cooperative and generous spirit, with a special thanks to Prof. P.G. Guzzo and Dr. A. d’Ambrosio, for it is to this generosity that the project owes the results herewith presented.
2. A third find-spot is the peristyle garden in Casa degli Epigrammi Greci (V 1,18), where M. Robinson has conducted excavations in collaboration with M. Staub Gierow, who is responsible for the publication of the building.
5. Cf. parallels in e.g. Esposiro & Morillo 1999, figs. 4:8, 6:2,4; Andros Linder, Carboni & Esposiro 1999, fig. 7:3,8,9; Andros Linder & Marcocciella 1999, fig. 4:3-4.
6. Robinson in this volume.
8. For a short description of the earlier street under Vicolo delle Nozze d’Argento, see Boman in this volume.
9. Nilsson & Robinson 2005, p. 99. This interpretation may still be valid to a certain degree since charred matter demonstrates the presence of fire, but the ceramic disintegration is unusual in its character.