

Uncovering Plebeian Pompeii: Broader implications from excavating a forgotten working-class neighbourhood

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This paper presents the preliminary results from the first two seasons of the 'Pompeii Archaeological Research Project: *Porta Stabia*' (2005 – 2006). Our project – under the direction of Gary Devore of Stanford University and Steven Ellis of the University of Cincinnati – is bringing to light the SE corner of *insula* VIII.7, a largely forgotten corner of Pompeii with great potential for enlightening Pompeian and Roman studies. All of the buildings here fronted onto the *via Stabiana*, one of the primary streets of the city, just inside one of the busiest gates, the *Porta Stabia*. The southern zone of the *insula* was built against the city fortifications, while the western and northern limits adjoined, respectively, the Quadriporticus and the Odeon of the so-called 'Entertainment District'.

Our project aims to unravel the sequence of building programmes for these properties through selective excavations, structural analyses, and geophysical surveys. Apart from understanding the developing relationships of this unique neighbourhood, and given the predilection of many recent Pompeian excavations to focus on elite housing, our interests have instead concentrated on the recovery of a more varied Pompeian record through the excavation of several modest and non-atrium style habitations. This residential and commercial *insula*, in the shadow of the grand monumental edifices of the Entertainment District and the city defences, also has the potential to tell us much about the complex relationships between public and private space in the Roman city. We hope to ask more of the city, rather than to simply demonstrate and reiterate the already familiar dichotomy between rich and poor, public and private. Instead, through a more incorporative and systematic approach to urban space, we hope to contribute to a more nuanced

understanding of the roles that non-elites played in the shaping of an ancient city.

At the generous consent of the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei, we began to excavate in the summer of 2005.¹ Our preliminary aims were first to establish the structural and social shape of the *insula*, then turn to uncovering and refining the complete sequence of urban activities that defined this corner of the city. We have since opened 10 trenches across the *insula* (numbered 1000 through 10000; Fig. 1) which, combined with our architectural analyses and study of the material record, have established for the first time that six separate properties defined this *insula* in 79 CE (Fig. 2). Our studies have spanned the full sequence of human occupation in the area – from identifying the important layering of geological events (both natural and artificial) to charting the developmental history of each of the six properties through to 79 CE. This paper will introduce four of the stories that have emerged at the forefront of our investigations:

- The natural topography of this area had a significant effect on many developments in the *insula*, and it affords us a compelling, preliminary glimpse at archaic Pompeii.
- Because *insula* VIII.7 was intimately connected with the building programme of the Entertainment District, our excavations have provided evidence to place the District in some stratigraphic context.
- By analysing the ancient property boundaries in this *insula*, we have uncovered a picture of several of the inhabitants' working class aspirations and innovations.
- While studying the relationship between the civic defences and the *insula*, we discovered a unique votive

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