CHRISTOPHER PARSLOW

Camillo Paderni’s Monumenti Antichi and Archaeology in Pompeii in the 1760s

The 1760s witnessed the transformation of the buried city of Pompeii from a rich quarry for antiquities into an archaeological park linked to a royal museum. At the beginning of the decade, sites on private lands were plundered at random by means of tunnels or open trenches and then reburied, as had been the practice since the start of excavations here in 1748. By the late 1760s a more systematic approach was in place and several key monuments had been left exposed and open to the public. The dearth of significant finds that marked the start of the decade and sparked controversies over where to concentrate the excavations was gradually offset by the recovery of numerous works of art and the first civic buildings, including the Porta di Ercolano, the small and large theaters, the Temple of Isis, and the Ludus Gladiatorius. An increasing awareness of the importance of understanding the original architectural context of the finds began to challenge the primacy of the works of art and fueled an ongoing debate over how best to publish the discoveries. Moreover, there was a growing interest in cataloging how the ruins illustrated aspects of Roman daily life described in the ancient literary sources, while the excavators became increasingly observant of the evidence documenting the final moments of the city’s life and the effects of the AD 79 eruption of Vesuvius on the physical remains they were revealing.  

A manuscript produced in the later part of the 1760s illustrates several of these trends from this transitional period. Entitled the Monumenti antichi rinvenuti ne Reali Scavi di Ercolano e Pompei, the manuscript is the work of Camillo Paderni, curator of the royal collection of antiquities at the palace at Portici (fig. 1). The manuscript’s 40 plates illustrate some 157 finds presented individually or collectively in 72 drawings. These document the full array of artifacts recovered throughout this period: wall paintings and mosaics; bronze vessels, pastry forms, signet rings, weights and scales; terracotta lamps and statuettes; and glass vases. An additional four illustrations are interspersed in the written commentary accompanying the plates. Two more small sketches were included on a separate folio bound at the end of the manuscript. The drawings are Paderni’s own, save for three produced by his son, Annibale, and they all vary in quality from very fine to merely competent. The finds were recovered in Herculanenum, Pompeii, and Stabiae during the period 1759 to 1768. The majority, however, are from Pompeii, since Paderni was most actively involved in the investigations of that site in the first half of that period. It was precisely in those years that recognition of the variety and quality of the archaeological remains offered by Pompeii began to influence the methodologies employed in that site’s excavation and documentation.

Paderni dedicated his manuscript to Charles III of Spain, evidently with the intent of highlighting the principal antiquities and curiosities recovered in each year since the king’s departure from Naples in 1759. His inclusion of detailed drawings of such finds as the gladiatorial parade gear, recovered in 1766 in the Ludus Gladiatori (Reg. VIII. vii.16), indicates that he also may have intended his manuscript to provide the king with the first illustrations of this extraordinary find. He probably composed this manuscript in late 1768, but despite the title’s declaration that this constituted the “Prima Parte” this appears to be the only portion he produced. He organized his descriptive text according to the year of discovery, but the manner in which he tended to group some finds together in the plates, by type or material, meant that their presentation was less chronologically faithful. Certain drawings contained several finds from the same building, but Paderni did not always acknowledge this since he often was not aware of a find’s precise provenance and generally could not state whether they had come from a public or private monument. Nevertheless, his approach is in marked contrast to the practice adhered to in Le Antichità di Ercolano, the lavishly produced by the Accademia Ercolanese, which focused primarily on the paintings, organized these by genre or subject matter, and offered only the barest reference to provenance. Like the Accademia, Paderni described each arti-