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Escape from Pompeii

While the outside of the Australian National Maritime Museum was pelted with rain and angrily howled at by the wind, the inside was filled with the remnants of another dramatic and daring natural event. Titled *Escape From Pompeii*, this exhibit relayed the tale of Pliny the Elder's courageous attempts to rescue those on the Bay of Naples when Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD.¹ Though Pliny ultimately lost his life, the exhibition painted him as a hero and recounts his deeds. The choice of the Australian National Maritime Museum as the residence for this exhibition was well thought out. In the context of a daring sea rescue the exhibition's focus seemed to be on both the destruction of cities in the Bay of Naples, and the seafaring expedition to rescue the inhabitants. However, as I will soon discuss, the exhibition itself covered a lot more than just the rescue effort.

The exhibit did not begin with the eruption itself, but rather with Pliny observing the events on the horizon as a messenger is being sent to him by a noble woman named Rectina to seek his assistance. It was highlighted that Pliny's role as Naval Admiral of Misenum placed him in the right position to come to their aid. The opening of the exhibition focused on Pliny the Elder's role among the various citizens on the Bay of Naples. It highlighted the daring ship journey that caused his demise, and positioned him as an unlikely hero due to his stature. Though, I found this tactic a little odd, there was great emphasis on Pliny the Elder being overweight. Though this may be setting up for the exhibition's assumption that it was a heart attack and not the volcano that took Pliny's life, I thought the emphasis a little unnecessary.²

1 The exhibition runs from 31 March to 3 September 2017.

2 Suetonius muses in his life of Pliny the Elder that it may have been the ash, or perhaps one of Pliny's slaves that led to his death, already calling the volcano story into question.

To contextualise the exhibition there was a brief description of Roman naval power, including one particular artefact: a Roman naval ram with the image of Victory carved into the structure. Apparently, this ram was used during the First Punic War almost three centuries before Mount Vesuvius erupted. I am unsure whether the exhibition contextualised the object well in terms of chronology. When examining the past it is often difficult to visually assess the age of an object out of context and I do not feel that the fact it was centuries older was clear, although the description did mention that the inscription was in archaic Latin. The ram was, however, an excellent addition to the exhibition and demonstrated Roman shipbuilding.

There is a widespread idea in popular media that the Romans were bellicose, featuring a somewhat warlike emphasis in their nature. This exhibition did not defer from this impression, demonstrating the terror of Roman warfare with a ballista ball that had been used on the town of Pompeii. Sulla, well-known for his occupation of Pompeii in 89 BC, used these ballista balls to destroy and damage major sections of Pompeii as well as numerous other settlements when they dissented from Roman rule. It was exciting to see one, as I had seen the damage that these ballista balls had caused on a previous visit to the site of Pompeii, but I had yet to see the weapons themselves. This artefact was the most exciting of my visit and it was a complete surprise to see it amongst the other carefully curated objects.

Even with these striking artefacts of Roman war, it seemed to me that Pliny the Elder was the string that held the exhibition together, and the curators used quotes from his *Natural History* (*Naturalis Historia*) to describe the thematic elements of the displays. One such example was a display of food carbonised in the eruption such as bread and, more importantly, figs. For this particular display Pliny's *Natural History* 15.19 where he analysed different types of figs and their origins was quoted. It was fitting for several reasons beyond being food themed. It displayed the reach of the Roman Empire, as the section covers the areas that these figs were imported from. In addition, Pliny's discussion on figs corresponded well with the interactive displays, one of which involved being a trader and having to import as well as export goods—with one of the imported goods being figs.

In addition to Pliny the Elder's words being dotted around the exhibition landscape, it is important to note that examples of Latin were on display. In order to depict the full scope of a Roman life, there were even funerary inscriptions, engravings for the dead. Several of these were on graves or *stelae* and gave the visitor a glimpse into the complex lives of individuals. One interesting addition was the grave marker of a man who had passed at the age of thirty-five with an illustrious army career and a wife who outlived him and even had her name Valaria inscribed in the funerary monument. It is important for social history to see how those in the past commemorated their dead. However, in the exhibition, the *stelae* had not been translated into English—only a brief description was thought to suffice.

While using Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* for the thematic context of displays was standard across the exhibition, there was one non-Pliny quote that grabbed my attention—coming from Trimalchio's speech in Petronius' *Satyricon* and focusing on the second section of the exhibition related to the daily life and times of those who lived in Campania, it gave an impression of the life of the elite. This half of the exhibition was mostly full of jewellery, lamps, and copies of the plaster casts of some unfortunate Pompeians in their final moments. It was as if to say 'what was it all for'?

As I progressed through the exhibition, I noticed that some important elements could have been highlighted better. Three artefacts piqued my interest; a lamp with Zeus Ammon, a necklace with Isis Fortuna and a statue of Hermanubis. The origins of these hybrid deities were only somewhat acknowledged, and their roles as markers of the multicultural nature of the Roman Empire were not emphasised. Zeus Ammon was an interesting case, Zeus and Ammon being both head deities of the Greek and Egyptian gods. He was present in the exhibition as an imprint on a slightly ornate oil lamp. However, there was no mention of his pre-Roman origins or his existence during the Hellenistic period. Isis Fortuna was another interesting hybrid deity, residing on a necklace, but again there was no emphasis on the prominence of Isis, traditionally an Egyptian goddess, in Rome as a deity.

Nor was there any explanation on how Isis was combined with a Roman deity—in particular Fortuna—establishing her as not just Egyptian but also Roman. Finally, Hermanubis' portrayal in the exhibition was the most interesting. As a combination of both Hermes and Anubis, he was seen as a messenger god in this exhibition, a role that Greek Hermes fulfilled, but Egyptian Anubis did not. This artefact piqued my interest but the description of the god itself was unfortunately not very informative. Religion and especially syncretic religion, was an important element to Roman life, although this was not emphasised in the exhibition.

The end of the exhibition brought in Mary Beard's Pompeii documentary, the section shown being Professor Beard speaking with esteemed Pompeii expert and Australian Dr Estelle Lazer. The video itself was a discussion of the plaster casts made of the Pompeians, including the fact that the Pompeian casts originally used metal to replace some of the bones. It also discussed the plaster cast of two women—commonly thought of as a mother and daughter—of which a copy lay opposite to the video screen. All in all, this proved a profound ending to the exhibition demonstrating the bitter fact that although a sea expedition was mounted to rescue the people of Pompeii, and some were able to get out of the city alive, others still did not make their escape and perished in the tragedy that befell the city.