

Rick Jones, University of Bradford/Anglo-American Project in Pompeii
"Two Centuries of Vestals: Changing Perceptions of Archaeology at Pompeii"

Pompeii has remained in the forefront of ideas about the ancient world since its discovery 250 years ago. No other site has challenged it as a source of inspiration about how we visualize and conceive how people lived in antiquity. Every generation creates our own mind-pictures of the past – and Pompeii therefore plays a crucial role in understanding how antiquity has been conceptualized. Pompeii has held such an authority over our constructions of the “Imagined Communities” of the past that it demands analysis.

The Insula of the Vestals (VI, 1) was one of the earliest parts of the ancient city to have been exposed in the eighteenth century. It therefore received the attention of the leading scholars and cultural tourists of its day. The frescoes, mosaics and finds from its two large residences, the House of the Vestals, and the House of the Surgeon, were widely reputed and can now be seen in the museum collections at Naples and even in Paris in the Louvre. However the passing of time and the discovery of new treasures meant that other regions overtook the fame of this part of the city.

Since 1994 a new program of research has recorded what remains of the buildings and decoration, enhanced it by new excavations, and investigated the records from two centuries ago. The result is an unprecedented record both of the history of occupation in antiquity, and of the changes on management and conservation through the modern period. Not least, our work shows the changing attitudes to Classical archaeology. Pompeii provides an unrivalled resource for ancient art history and architecture. Current work adds different dimensions from modern scientific archaeology, such as seeds and animal bones revealing diet. This also emphasizes a changed social focus, bringing into the picture the whole ancient community, not just the elite who lived in the grandly decorated houses.