



POMPEII's PRECURSOR TO McDONALD'S

by Lucy Gordan | Travel | 0 comments



"The Last Day of Pompeii", painted by Karl Bryullov in 1880-3 and now in The State Russian Museum

On January 17th Massimo Osanna, the former and still the interim Director General of Pompeii's excavations until a new one is appointed, as well as the soon-to-be Director of all of Italy's State Museums, was a guest on Sunday evening's popular TV talk show "*Che tempo che fa*". His appearance was carefully timed to announce the reopening of Pompeii on weekdays to visitors with reservations from Italy's "yellow" regions: Campania, where Pompeii is located, and those nearby, Molise and Basilicata, because none of these is subject to stricter rules than a mask, hand-washing, and social distancing.

The topic of host Fabio Fazio's interview with Osanna was the latest discovery at Pompeii, a *thermopolium* also known as a "*popina*", the ancient equivalent of a modern fast food restaurant, a take-away of ready-to-eat, mainly cooked dishes without seating, a place to

grab a bite, frequented mostly by the least wealthy members of Pompeii's some 20,000 inhabitants. One of Pompeii's some 80 *thermopolia*, its discovery dates to the spring of 2019, but was first announced on December 26, 2020.

It's well known that the Naples area, which includes Pompeii, is highly seismic. A major earthquake (between 5 and 6 on the Richter magnitude scale) occurred here on February 5, 62 AD causing major damage. A smaller earthquake two years later was recorded by the historian Suetonius in his biography of the Emperor Nero and by Tacitus in his *Annales* because at that time Nero was paying a visit to Pompeii and went also in Naples to perform for the first time in a public theater. According to Suetonius, ignoring the tremors the Emperor continued singing until he'd finished his song, while Tacitus tells us that the theater collapsed luckily after being evacuated.



A bust of Nero in Rome's Capitoline
Museums

According to Pliny the Younger, since earthquakes were frequent, the inhabitants of Pompeii paid little attention to the tremors felt for four days, clearly a pre-disaster warning sign, before the catastrophic eruption in 79 AD of nearby Mount Vesuvius, the deadliest still today in European history. For two days Vesuvius spewed forth a deadly cloud of molten rock, pulverized pumice and hot ash at 1.5 million tons per second, releasing 100,000 times the thermal energy of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and burying Pompeii under 13 to 20 feet of "debris". "From a charcoal inscription uncovered in 2018," said Osanna, "we know now that the eruption began around 16 days before the Calends of November or around October 24 in the early afternoon, around 1 PM, and not on August 24th as had been believed until recently. This date is confirmed by the modern methods of identifying clothing materials, in this case clearly autumnal not summery, of the some 1,500 corpses so far excavated mostly inside collapsed buildings and by foodstuffs. For examples, in the *thermopolium*'s several terracotta vessels are samples of duck, snails, young goat meat, kind of 'paella' of fish and meat mixed together, fava beans, dried fruits, pomegranates, and *garum*, a

favorite fermented fish sauce used to preserve and flavor. This allows us to know the Pompeians' food preferences and eating habits. Not to leave out the large amounts of wine, proof that the eruption occurred after the year's grape harvest." Other evidence in favor of an autumn date are the significant number of braziers which would not have been in use in the summer and the southeasterly debris pattern because of wind patterns inconsistent with prevailing winds to the west during June, July, and August.

The modern day equivalent of *garum* is a delicacy of the small fishing village of Cetara on the Amalfi Coast. This "*colatura di alici*" or "anchovy drippings", produced by fermenting anchovies in brine, is still used to season pasta.



A view of the thermopolium

"This *thermopolium*," continued Osanna, "was certainly more luxurious or trendy than most. The counters of *thermopolia* were usually not decorated or at most had marble finishing; while this one's large L-shaped counter is decorated with a series of brightly frescoes along its front. The largest is of a Nereid (a sea nymph) riding a seahorse in a



The Nereid

marine setting. It faced a fountain for Pompeii was a prosperous town, which received its water via an aqueduct from Avellino. Its other frescoes are: an illustration of the shop itself, a kind of trademark; of ducks hanging upside down ready to be cooked; a rooster; and a dog



The Thermopolium itself

on a leash, a kind of 'Cave Canem', 'Beware of the Dog'. A rude graffiti was scratched along its frame: 'NICIA CINAEDE CACATOR' which translates 'Nicia,' (who was probably a freedman from Greece), 'Shameless Shitter.' It was probably an insult from someone who had once worked there and had been fired or from a fleeced customer. Beside the dog fresco, among the remains found here, were the skeletons of a dog, of the

thermopolium's owner who was lame and lying on his bed, and of another younger man's bones in a jar, probably stuffed in pieces there by illegal excavators, after looking for coins or jewelry. For since 1748, when the first remains of Pompeii were excavated, many of its 'archeologists' have been fortune-seekers."

Needless to say the archeologists at Pompeii were not always thieves. The engineer Karl Weber carried out the first systematic studies from 1750 to 1764, but other early digging was often haphazard and carried out by untrained workers. This stopped in 1860 when Giuseppe Fiorelli became director and again later under Amadeo Maiuri, Director from 1924-61. Interrupted by World War II and again by the earthquake in 1980, although intensive excavation has continued especially during the 1990s "only two-thirds of Pompeii's 163 acres has been unearthed," said Osanna.

Probably because of the busloads of approximately 2.5 million visitors annually before Co-Vid, there are many tourist-trap restaurants near the excavations, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1997, but for special contemporary *thermopolia*, head to Ristorante Garum or Bettola del Gusto for local specialties and then to De Vivo Pasticceria for dessert. A family business since before World War II, its *sfogliatelle*, *babà* and *gelati* are to-die-for. Instead, if you're looking for somewhere special, head to *President*, an super-elegant 1-star Michelin restaurant, which specializes in fish and local cuisine.



"Cave Canem"