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The Latest Discovery in Pompeii: A Human Dimension of the Past

A wooden cabinet, untouched since 79 A.D., reveals the personal belongings, daily routines and childhood keepsakes of a family buried by Vesuvius



Italian Hours
Lucy Gordan



The fourth style wall painting in the room where the cabinet was found. All photos courtesy of the Archeological Park of Pompeii.

Time: 3 mins read

On October 29, the press office at Pompeii's Archaeological Park announced in a news release a new and unique discovery. Archaeologists there had recently uncovered a wooden cabinet that no one had opened again after Mount Vesuvius's eruption buried the city with ash and pumice in the fall of 79 A.D. Although badly damaged, the archaeologists could reconstruct the piece of furniture and its contents in full. They'd found it in a room with fine Fourth Style wall paintings in House IX, 11, 7, also known as the House of Cornelius Maximus, which faced Via dell'Abbondanza, one of the city's most central and busiest streets.

The cabinet's contents paint a picture of a middle-class woman's daily life, even though we don't know her name. It contains grooming tools: tweezers and a small pestle for mixing makeup, plus a glass *balsarium* (a perfume or ointment bottle) and an incense burner to fill the house with pleasant fragrances. A bronze lamp was also found next to lead weights, which imply that the homeowners were merchants or tradesmen. These weights had been kept in a small wooden box that has nearly rotted away. The shelves also held glass, bronze and ceramic cooking pots and pans, as well as an elegant little mug decorated with pine cone scales.



The bronze lamp

The most special find here is a necklace with at least 24 charms made of faience, bone, glass paste and rock crystal. Each has a hole for hanging. The miniature charms represent the gods Bes and Mercury, human feet and hands, pine cones, and bunches of grapes. In the past, archaeologists believed these charms to be similar to ancient Egyptian amulets or magic tools for protection. Instead, we now know that they are *crepundia*, which in Latin means "rattles." Parents hung them around the necks of their children to keep them safe; thanks to their jingle, they could know where the child was. Children often kept their *crepundia* for life. The one here was conserved in a cloth bag inside the cabinet. All levels of Roman society moved around a great deal, with many people living far away from their birthplace and family, so their *crepundia* were an easily transportable keepsake of their childhood.



The pots and pans found in the cabinet

The cabinet's other important find was a stash of 38 bronze coins in a small basket of woven plants, known as a *cistella*. These coins suggest that either Cornelius Maximus and his family were not in Pompeii at the time of Vesuvius's eruption or that they escaped in such a hurry, with no time to collect their valuables, hoping to save their lives. According to the historian Tacitus, some survivors or their heirs did return to Pompeii to retrieve their possessions, but no one came back for the cabinet, so in all likelihood the owners died in the disaster, as did their heirs and between 15% and 20% of Pompeii's inhabitants.



Weights and the cabinet's lock

"Pompeii is not just a place of great works of art," commented Gabriel Zuchtriegel, director of the Archaeological Park; "it's somewhere where the most ordinary objects restore the human dimension of the past. The value of this discovery lies in the possibility of reading together the different traces of a life: personal habits, work, and memories. We cannot reconstruct with certainty the identity of the people who lived

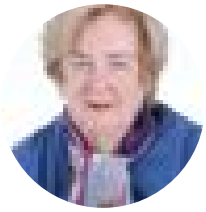
in the house, but these fragments bring us closer to their everyday life."



Some of the 38 coins found in the cabinet

Not far from the cabinet, archaeologists also found the fragmented skeletons of two small mice inside an amphora kept in a raised storage area—evidence that some problems of urban living haven't changed in 2,000 years.

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