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MYTHS OF POMPEII: REALITY AND LEGACY

The aim of the article is to examine some aspects of the meaning of Pompeii over time, as a cultural phenomenon in European tradition. The objective and subjective truths of Pompeii do not always coincide, and the analysis of mythical archetypes helps to cast light on these relationships. Tackling wall-paintings as narratives and in contextual connection with the surroundings helps to emphasise mythical archetypes in their mutual relationships: life and death, joy and suffering, and man and woman.

The study of antiquity makes it possible to delve into the different manifestations of human nature, into the functioning of various cultural forms in society, expressions of religion and rational principles. It is not often that this can be done in such a complex form as in the case of Pompeii. Pompeii as a cultural phenomenon unites key issues from different fields: linguistics and philology, religion and ethics, natural sciences, philosophy and art. All of these together reveal different aspects of the history of ideas and traditions and their impact on later eras. The latter aspect in particular makes everything related to Pompeii significant and alive. It is strange how this relatively insignificant provincial town in Ancient Roman culture became so influential later, especially in the 19th century European intellectual life.

In literature and art we do not encounter Pompeii itself, but rather a mythologised image of that town. If we understand myth to be a world-view resting on tradition, which shapes and influences people's behaviour and ways of thinking, and is expressed in various forms of



Fig. 1. Via di Mercurio in Pompeii. Vesuvius in the background. Photo by Anne Lill.

art, we can distinguish two stages in Pompeian myths: before and after the Vesuvius catastrophe on 24 August 79 AD.

Pre-volcanic eruption Pompeii is depicted in the surviving material monuments: the town itself with its buildings, architectural form and artistic peculiarities. The world of myth where Pompeii lived is revealed in wall-paintings and sculptures. On the one hand, this was an interior with aesthetic value that gave indications of ethics; on the other hand, it created an atmosphere where the everyday life and communication in word and deed in the town functioned. Considering its people, we can talk about ethics as the usual way to act, communicate, decide and make choices, whereas observing the mythological environment opens up significant aspects of the urban ethos.

The other aspect is the essence of Pompeii-related myths after the town was destroyed. Here, the values and attitudes of later centuries regarding what happened in ancient times start playing a role. Pompeii's legacy in Europe is primarily associated with these myths. The destroyed town became a symbol which relates to the different aspects of contemporary culture and thus influences literature, art and ways of thinking in general. Real, objective phenomena blend with subjective

images, and the result is the revival of the artistically rich legacy of the ancient world.¹ We should start with an overview of the soil (both in a direct and indirect sense) and the conditions from which the Pompeii-related mythological topics emerged.

CAMPANIAN MYTHS, INHABITANTS AND NATURE

Pompeii was anything but a town with uniform culture, language and peoples. Its oldest recorded history goes back to the 6th century BC, for example the Temple of Apollo on the Forum. In his work *Geographika*, the Greek writer Strabo (64 BC – 19 AD) listed the inhabitants of Pompeii: the Osci, the Tyrrheni (i.e. Greeks), the Pelasgi and the Samnites.² In the pre-Roman era, the language of the tribes and ‘local population’ was Oscian (an Italic dialect). In the third century BC, after the Roman expansion, Pompeii became an ally of Rome, although its inhabitants were not Roman citizens and did not use Latin. Pompeii became officially part of the Roman Empire only during the rule of Sulla in the 2nd century BC and was then called *Colonia Cornelia Veneria Pompeiana*. Having the goddess Venus in the name of the town shows her as its protector. Many buildings date from that time; their ruins, in various degrees of collapse, can be seen today: an amphitheatre, public baths and a roofed theatre (Odeion). Although as part of the Roman Empire Pompeii was largely Romanised, numerous feasts, customs and the calendar were maintained according to local tradition.³ In terms of population, Pompeii was an average town, quite provincial in its way of life and culture.

Located in Campania in central Italy, near the Greek colony of Parthenope (later Neapolis, ‘new city’ in Greek), Pompeii was a part of one of the mythologically most abundant parts of Italy, where the influences of Greek culture were especially strong. In Neapolis, as well as

¹ The world of myths is examined below on the basis of the dynamic opposition of motifs and topics. The analysis of oppositions in myths originated from the structuralist theory. According to that theory, to understand myths it is necessary to distinguish opposing pairs and the mediators needed to surpass them. This approach, in its initial form, was rather mechanical and formal. Further development moved towards the improvement of static models, when a dimension focused on dynamic development and social context was added, which helps to observe cultural processes in various ways. Walter Burkert is one of the prominent scholars in this field of research on Greek myths and religion.

² Strabo, *Geographika* 5.4.8.247c.

³ Mary Beard, *Pompeii lost and found* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008), 280.

in the surrounding towns (Puteoli, earlier the Greek Dikaiarchia, and Cumae, Greek Kyme), the Greek culture and way of life blended with those of Campania, and many Greek names survived, although the people were Romans. The latter followed the Greek way of life, to which they attributed a joyful nature and relaxation.⁴ The importance of the Greeks in that area is also confirmed in myths.⁵ The myth-related wall-paintings prove the vigorous presence of Greek culture as well.

The surroundings of Pompeii were famous for their fertile lands and especially good soil for grape-growing, which made Bacchus (Dionysos in Greek), the god of wine, one of the most popular objects of respect. The foot of Vesuvius was mentioned in ancient times as a lusciously green idyllic place. According to Strabo, the surroundings of Vesuvius were densely inhabited and the fields pretty. Strabo, the author of a geography book, also claims that the volcano ash on the ground made it a perfect place for grape-growing.⁶ Olive oil produced in Pompeii was widely famous as well. In addition to agriculture, Pompeii was renowned for fishing and products made of fish, especially *garum*, fish sauce.⁷ On the other hand, archaeologists have not found many traces of the cultural significance of the town, and the preserved literature contains only a few mentions of Pompeii.

The area around Pompeii thus united idyllic nature and closeness to death, as the seismically active nature of the area did not allow people to forget the danger. Vesuvius, like Lake Avernus, was considered an entrance to the underworld. The cult of the dead was important and a special closeness to death can be perceived in Naples to this day.⁸

⁴ See Strabon, *Geographika* 5.4.7.

⁵ According to legend, Aeneas, who was fleeing from Troy, landed at Cumae (Greek Kyme) and later founded the Roman Empire. Cumae was the most influential place of prophesies, where the sibyl predicted the fame and fortune of the future Roman Empire to Aeneas (see Vergilius, *Aeneis* 6.756–854). The gloomy Lake Avernus was located near Cumae, with a mythological entrance to the underworld.

⁶ Strabon, *Geographika* 5.4.8.247c.

⁷ Christoff Neumeister, *Der Golf von Neapel in der Antike. Ein literarischer Reiseführer* (München: C.H. Beck, 2005), 243.

⁸ For example, the famous catacombs in Naples, where the skulls are kept and looked after.

EARLIEST SOURCES ABOUT POMPEII: PLINY THE
YOUNGER, MARTIAL AND HISTORIANS

Few authors in ancient literature wrote about Pompeii and the volcanic eruption which hit the town in 79 AD. The earliest literary works refer to the catastrophe only briefly.

Silius Italicus (in the epic poem in 17 books about the Punic war *Punica*, ca 80 AD) and Valerius Flaccus (80–90 AD) use the Vesuvius tragedy as a comparison in describing other terrible events. Silius does so in describing the battle of Zama⁹, and Valerius Flaccus in conveying the atmosphere of the furious battle scene¹⁰ and in talking about the destruction caused by the mythical predators the Harpies¹¹.

A dozen or so years after Vesuvius, Martial painted an emotional and vivid picture of the catastrophe in his epigram¹². He depicted the fertile, almost idyllic place at the foot of the volcano, where the best grapes grew, where Bacchus danced with his companions the satyrs, and where Venus and the heroic Hercules lived. Martial's descriptions are confirmed and enlivened by wall-paintings found in Pompeii, showing the wine god Bacchus amongst vines (Naples National Archaeological Museum). The whole idyllic setting was destroyed, and in his poem Martial shows a contrast between the earlier beauty and later destruction.

*Cuncta iacent flammis et tristi mersa favilla.*¹³

(Everything is in flames and drowned in sombre ashes).

Another recollection of the Vesuvius catastrophe has survived from the end of the 1st century. It is the collection of short poems *Silvae* by Statius, which describes various incidents, mostly from his own life, enlivened by frequent mythological references. Statius came from Naples and the destruction of the nearby Pompeii thus particularly concerned him. In *Silvae*, he presents a dramatic image, where life on the site of the catastrophe will one day be resumed, the fields will carry crops and populous towns will emerge, but underneath all that lie the devastated

⁹ Silius Italicus, *Punica* 17.592–596.

¹⁰ Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica* 3.208.

¹¹ Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica* 4.507–509.

¹² Martialis, *Epigrammata* 4.44.

¹³ Martialis, *Epigrammata* 4.44.7.



Fig. 2. A doorway which burnt after the volcanic eruption. Herculaneum, Casa del Salone Nero. Photo by Anne Lill.

towns and their inhabitants.¹⁴ Here is another characteristic contrast between life and death, between prosperity and destruction in this region. In his *Annals*, the historian Tacitus wrote about the havoc wreaked by Vesuvius when he described Capri Island and the Gulf of Cumae (*Vesuvius mons ardescens, Vesuvius – a flaming mountain*).¹⁵

The most comprehensive description of the catastrophe dates from the early 2nd century, and it became the main source for the excavations in that area in the 18th century. The source was a set of letters by Pliny the Younger (lived ca. 61–113), two of which directly tackled the volcanic eruption¹⁶. The letters were not meant as personal messages, but for public information. They were written on the initiative of the historian Cornelius Tacitus, who wanted an eye-witness account of the event and

¹⁴ Statius, *Silvae* 4.4.82–85.

¹⁵ Tacitus, *Annales* 4.67.2.

¹⁶ Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 6.16, 6.20.

description connected with Pliny's uncle, including his death during the volcanic eruption.¹⁷ Although Pliny the Elder was a military man, his interests were extensive and he was curious about such an extreme natural phenomenon as the volcanic eruption in a place near where he and his family lived, and where he was head of the navy.

Pliny the Younger described different stages of the volcanic eruption, but mainly he was interested in the activity and reactions of people, especially his uncle. For Pliny, the Vesuvius catastrophe became a touchstone of human character and morality. The letter emphasised the principles of the Stoics' teaching of moral principles, where the most important virtues included maintaining peace of mind in a situation of danger, the difference between a brave man and the masses who fled the danger (*vulgus attonitum* 'panicking masses'¹⁸), and the need for judiciousness and rational arguments to control emotions, especially fear. Pliny, of course, primarily described himself as that kind of brave and reasonable man. The above-mentioned virtues are supplemented by a sense of duty, and complete loyalty to one's family, society and the gods (*pietas*); for Romans, the shining example here was *pius Aeneas*, one of whose noble deeds was to rescue his father from a burning house in Troy¹⁹. Pliny also described the dark clouds of volcanic ash approaching, and his mother telling him to flee on his own and leave her behind, because a young person would have a better chance of surviving. The son did not agree: *ego contra salvum me nisi una non futurum* ('in my response I refused to save myself without her'²⁰). His uncle Pliny the Elder was a man of high principles as well, who did not feel any fear of the natural catastrophe (*solutus metu* 'without fear'²¹) and tried to encourage his companions. Why so many people actually perished in the volcanic eruption and earthquake and did not leave in time, was also made clear in Pliny's letter. The earthquake lasted for a few days and nobody was unduly worried, as earthquakes were common in Campania²². The general idea in Pliny's letters is that faith in people's spirit, self-restraint and the ability

¹⁷ We know Pliny the Elder (ca. 24–79) from his encyclopedic work *Naturalis historia* (*Natural History*), which consists of 37 books of detailed descriptions of plants, animals, stones and relevant monuments and sculptures. The same work, for example, contains plenty of information about grape-growing, varieties of grapes, conditions of growing and wines.

¹⁸ Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 6. 207.

¹⁹ Virgil, *Aeneis* 2.657–661, 707–726.

²⁰ Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 6.20.12.

²¹ Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 6.16.10.

²² Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 6.20.3.

to conquer natural forces leads to immortal fame. Talking about himself, Pliny stressed conscientiousness, continence and an urge to study. He rested his descriptions on the contrast of moral qualities, where rational self-control opposed the irrational fear of the masses.

Pliny's letters constituted one of the chief sources that helped to preserve the memory of the great volcanic eruption in subsequent centuries. However, unlike in later eras, Pliny in his descriptions remained rational, with his feet on the ground, when he talked about natural elements and man's part in them – he did not mention the gods as the cause of the catastrophe. Pompeii's own mythological atmosphere, conveyed in wall-paintings and the surviving cult buildings, presents the idea of the gods' part in the fate of the town and its inhabitants.

GODS, CULT, RELIGION

Pompeii's religious life was syncretistic – people worshipped gods of different origin and nature. The gods fell into three triads: firstly, the guardian divinities of the town: Venus, Bacchus and Hercules (Greek Herakles); secondly, the traditional triad of Roman Capitolium: Jupiter, Juno and Minerva; and thirdly the triad of Oriental origin: Isis, Serapis and Anubis.²³ The first trio was the oldest and most influential: after all, Hercules was considered the mythical founder of the town and Bacchus the guardian of fertility, especially grape-growing. The importance of Hercules and his personal closeness to the town dwellers was evident in the numerous pictures and figurines of him on home altars (*lararia*).

The art of the town shows that Bacchus (Greek Dionysus) was a much loved deity in Pompeii. He crops up in murals, altars, sarcophagi and various small items. Vesuvius was his holy mountain, where he partied with his companions the satyrs. The atmosphere in Pompeii can be called Dionysian: images and symbols connected with this god prevailed in gardens and interior décor. Garlands that decorated the colonnades in inner courtyards, theatrical masks, the figures of Maenads, Bacchus's companions the sileni and satyrs adorning various rooms emphasise the central role of the god of wine in the town's life. In terms of mythology, Bacchus-related motifs confirm the mutual impact of oppositions,

²³ Robert Étienne, *Pompeii. Das Leben in einer antiken Stadt* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1976), 221.



Fig. 3. Dionysus, covered in grapes, in a vineyard pouring wine to his totem-animal panther. Wall painting, National Museum of Archeology, Naples. Photo by Anne Lill.



Fig. 4. Villa dei Misteri (Villa of the Mysteries), left wall of the big hall, Silen and Satyrs, a running woman with a veil. © Interviu.

especially evident in the later reception of Pompeii: a typical image of the town is created by the opposition of life and death, joy and suffering, man and woman, and wild nature and the cultural environment, on the one hand, and their unity and mutual dependence on the other.²⁴

Nothing, however, shows the significance of Dionysus-Bacchus more than the depiction of his mystery in the villa called Villa dei Misteri. This displays the grandest image of a Bacchus feast, which decorates all the walls in the room near the atrium. The fresco's formal and aesthetic impact, as well as contextual richness, deserve closer observation.

The villa was located in the suburbs. The walls of its big hall (*triclinium*) next to the bedrooms display a grandiose painting of Dionysus (created ca 60 BC.). This also gave the villa its name. The grape-pressing room (*torcularium*), preserving barrels with squeezed juice, and a wine cellar prove that wine-making was extremely important in the villa.

The wall-painting, with its narrative and details, shows how the cultural consciousness of Pompeii blended with the Greek world of myths. The figures on the wall are interpreted based on the principles of narrative, which are based on a gradual conveying of the event. The central part of the fresco on the opposite wall from the entrance depicts Dionysus and Ariadne, Dionysus lying in Ariadne's lap, and his attribute, the th-

²⁴ In tackling the Greek myths and literary works based on them, an analysis based on opposite concepts was used starting in the 1980s. The most thorough example of this is found in the myths about Dionysus. Euripides's tragedy 'The Bacchae' describes the ritual of Dionysos. Charles Segal analyses the play and the myth by means of oppositions: civilisation and barbarity, town and country, man and woman, reality and illusion, etc (Charles Segal, *Dionysiac poetics and Euripides' Bacchae* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982)).



Fig. 5. Villa dei Misteri. Scene with a kneeling woman and a phallus, further *flagellatio* and a dancing woman. © Interviu.

ysus, the god's most important attribute, rests against her. There are female figures on Ariadne's side, and men on the side of Dionysus: the bearded Silenus wearing an ivy wreath, the symbol of Dionysus; the large drinking vessel in his hand is tipped by a young satyr, who is probably drinking from it. According to another version, he sees in the wine the reflection of the mask of a bearded Silenus with bulging eyes, in turn held by another young satyr.²⁵ The satyr glares at a girl who is running in fear on the next wall. The girl with her dark floating veil is caught between sileni and satyrs. A bucolic idyll is depicted on her left, where Silenus, with an ivy wreath, ecstatically plays his lyre, an attribute of Apollo. The picture thus brings together gods who are regarded as opposites: companions of Dionysus, who embody pleasures, and the symbols of Apollo, which represent order and harmony, i.e. laurel (Apollo as companion of the muses) and a lyre (given by Hermes as a present).²⁶ The fresco in Pompeii, however, shows a lyre held by a semi-wild Silenus, and beside him there is a pastoral idyll with two young seated women. One is playing a Pan flute, while the other is breast-feeding a deer (or a kid goat), with a goat standing in front of them. An association emerges with the admirers of Dionysus, Maenads or Bacchantes, at a tranquil and

²⁵ The mask is an important symbol, which in the mystery of Dionysus bears the double meaning of concealment and inner revealing. Dionysus's ritual formed a basis for the emergence of tragedy, and the origin and idea of the mask in theatre developed from the cult of Dionysus. See Jean-Pierre Vernant, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and tragedy in ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 189–206, and Anne Lill, *Tragödiäleksikon* (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2004), 165–166.

²⁶ The Greek taste in music, and especially Plato's treatment, opposed the calm and decorous music of the lyre or kithara to the loud noise made by the aulos and percussion instruments preferred by Dionysus (i.e. the tympanon and crotalos) (Plato, *Politeia* 3.399c1–d8, 400b1–c4).



Fig. 6. Villa dei Misteri. Central wall, Dionysus and Ariadne, sileni with a mask. © Interviu.

idyllic moment, as described by the messenger in Euripides's tragedy *Bacchae*²⁷. This kind of peaceful idyll, however, could turn into a wild orgy and bloody carnage (a part of Dionysus's ritual – *sparagmos* 'tearing into pieces'). The fresco therefore develops as a continuing mythological narrative, which for the viewer transports the scene towards a possible contradictory development.

Left of Silenus, playing a lyre, is a holy scene with a priestess. She is sitting on a high chair between two young women, with her back to the viewer. The priestess wears an olive wreath and a veil. The women on her right and left are probably carrying out a sacrificial rite; one also wears an olive wreath and pours water on the priestess's hand. With her other hand, the priestess lifts the cover from a basket held by the other woman. The third woman approaches the group, carrying sacrificial gifts. The third group behind her represents catechesis. A naked Dionysus-child is reading a ritual text from a papyrus roll, while a woman next to him holds another roll. The group is framed by a woman in a

²⁷ Euripides, *Bacchae* 677–713.



Fig. 7. Villa dei Misteri. Mystery of the initiation, flagellation and dance. © Intervitù.

peplos and veil. There is another seated woman on the left wall by the door, who is easily overlooked.

The third wall, with two women and two small Cupids, depicts how a bride (a young woman) is adorned. She is sitting, and another woman is helping to gather her long hair at her nape. One of the winged Cupids holds a mirror, reflecting the bride's face; the other holds a small bow in one hand and rests the other on a post. The mirror is also one of the attributes of Dionysus and is often used in mysteries (e.g. in the cult of Isis).

To the right of Dionysus and Ariadne is a kneeling woman waiting for initiation, who opens a mysterious vessel (*vannus* 'winnowing vessel') and takes out a symbol of Dionysus – a phallus, a symbol of fertility. The phallus in a kerchief refers to initiation, and thus this woman is probably waiting to be initiated into a cult.

Moving on from the woman holding the phallus, we come to the most dramatic scene of the whole mythical complex, involving four female figures. A black-winged goddess, a daemon, (maybe the god of death, an envoy of Hades) has raised a whip above her head and is about to hit



Fig. 8. Villa dei Misteri. A pastoral scene with animals and lyre playing Silenus. © Interviù.

the bare back of the initiate; the latter tries to hide in the lap of the sitting woman. This is the last ordeal before consecration. The next scene shows the consecrated young woman dancing naked, with her back to the viewer, and in her hands she holds small drums lifted above her head. Dancing is one of the most significant cult activities of maenads, admirers of Dionysus. The percussion instruments are also part of the cult of the god of mystery. However, the woman in the wall-painting is not in an ecstatic pose, usually depicted in reliefs and vase paintings in Greece (hair flowing and head thrown back). In her shadow stands another woman, dressed in dark clothes and holding a thyrus.

The mural, in all its diversity, is open to different interpretations. It is considered a direct depiction of a Dionysian initiation mystery, including his epiphany in the shape of an animal, here as a ram (in the bucolic episode). This could thus constitute an episode from the life of the god. Another, and somewhat more precise interpretation associates the picture with the wedding preparations of Dionysus and Ariadne, where divine powers intervene. Hera is trying to prevent the wedding by despatching a black-winged ghost, Aphrodite is adorning herself,

and Semele is trying to help her son Dionysus. According to the third, and recently most accepted version, the painting describes the marriage rite in general, as an event involving the bride's initiation, i.e. not merely in a mythological sense. The wedding is symbolically represented by Dionysus and Ariadne. Ariadne is seen as an ideal bride, a paradigm of divine and human happiness.²⁸ The picture shows the attributes of Dionysus, the mask and the goblet. Both are associated with the ecstasy and revelatory side of Dionysus. Wine as a gift of the god Bacchus causes intoxication, during which people leave their usual selves and become ecstatic followers of Dionysus. The mask is a symbol of the changed personality. The reliefs and vase paintings depicting Maenads ('crazy, mad') and Bacchantes in Greek art manifest Dionysian wildness in dance, which can be supplemented by a description of music taken from literature, which goes with the orgy: it is a loud accompaniment of drums (tympani) and aulos (double flute). There is no such fervent ecstasy in the Pompeii painting, which emphasises the mystical side, the mysterious tie between life and death, and the role of suffering. Thoughts are led in that direction by the winged spirit, the veiled woman and the motif of flagellation. In this context, *flagellatio* represents suffering-related liberation from material essence and a means of reaching spiritual existence. So far, interpretations have not stressed the importance of postures and movement, which affords the myth narrative surrounding the whole space special emotional tension. It ebbs and flows in a circle across all the walls. The entering viewer sees a static picture on the left, a sitting woman, and movement starts after that in various phases, alternating with sitting figures; the gallery also ends with a quietly sitting woman, who has already been consecrated. The ideological centre of the longer wall is the priestess with her back to the viewer, and two standing assistants. Movement towards the priestess begins on the left, with the Dionysus-child and the sitting woman in the centre. A peaceful bucolic scene with animals and music unfolds on the other side of the priestess. The mood, however, abruptly changes at the end of the wall, where a sharp contrast is presented by a frightened running woman, whose dark veil fluttering around her adds to the dramatic effect. The next wall, opposite the door, is again dominated by two sitting figures, Dionysus and Ariadne, with a kneeling woman beside them. To their

²⁸ Antonio Virgili, *Culti misterici ed orientali a Pompei* (Roma: Gangemi, 2008), 134.

left are Dionysus's companions the sileni, sitting and standing; on the right, after the scene with the phallus, comes the second dramatic apex, sharply contrasting emotionally with the relaxing Dionysus and sitting Ariadne. The black-winged daemon is about to whip the bare back of the frightened kneeling woman, who tries to hide her head in the lap of a seated woman making a protective gesture. Next is a dance marking liberation, and a peaceful scene, where a seated woman arranges her hair. The imaginary force of the grand painting covering the whole wall stands out for its dynamism, expressed in the room as a whole *in situ*. Alternation of rhythm between movement and standing creates tension, which is carried by the room in its entirety. The imaginary acoustic elements are added here as well: the word dominates in the initial stage of the unfolding activity (reading the holy text), followed by playing the lyre and Pan flute. From the point of view of myth, the static-dynamic alternations are significant, reflecting a transition in the consecration ritual from one state to another. The sitting figures express the religious-cultic apex, indicating the finding of peace through consecration.

It is precisely the dynamics in the fresco that clearly differentiate Dionysian oppositions: god and man, young and old, ecstasy and peace, joy and pain, and nature and culture. Oppositions are also inherent in the main attribute of Dionysus, the thyrsus. On the one hand, it is a miraculous means to get at the fruits of the earth, but on the other hand a lethal weapon. There are two thyrsi in the fresco: in the lap of the central divine couple Dionysus and Ariadne, and with the dancing blessed woman. Showing two such staffs quite close to one another, and in both cases leaning diagonally in the same direction, stresses the significance of this attribute in Dionysus's cult. The whole set of images covering the *triclinium* walls in Villa dei Misteri gives the impression of themystical side of the religious world in Pompeii.

As for other gods, the frescos certainly confirm the importance of Venus in the religious life of Pompeii. She was known under different names, e.g. Venus Fisica (Physica) and Venus Pompeiana. Under Roman rule, her significance increased further; after all, Sulla named his new colony *Colonia Veneria Cornelia*. Her attributes in the pictures (an olive branch, sceptre and wheel) confirm her connections with happiness, well-being and victory (compare Fortuna). Connections with Rome emphasise the goddess Venus's political significance for Pompeii. Before the catastrophe, one of the grandest temples on the southern hill was dedi-

cated to Venus; it could be seen from the sea and symbolised the goddess as the guardian of the town.²⁹ Pompeii as the town of Venus offered an abundance of love of all sorts, from frescos depicting divine marriage to brothels in the side streets.

In mythology, the husband of Venus is Mars, who in turn became a more important god in Rome than his equivalent in Greece, Ares. It should also be mentioned that in ancient Rome the importance of Venus for the state was greater than Aphrodite's in Greece. From Gaius Julius Caesar onwards, the emperors tried to trace their origin back to the goddess Venus. The mother of Aeneas, the mythical founder of the Roman Empire, was Venus, who helped and encouraged her son on the journey to Italy and in his mission to establish an empire.³⁰

The popularity of Mars and Venus in frescos confirms the view that Pompeii followed the dominant cultural values in Rome. Pompeii thus emphasised the allegorical meaning of this divine couple, oriented to contemporary social values.

The main figure in the Capitol triad was Jupiter, whose temple dominated the Forum. This can be seen as a symbol confirming the supreme power of Rome. In its seriousness and dignity, the figure of Jupiter in Pompeii resembles that of the Greek Zeus. Small figures of Jupiter and Minerva were displayed on home altars (*lararia*), which proves that people worshipped them as home deities as well.



Fig. 9. Mars and Venus as a loving couple. Wall painting from Pompeii. The National Museum of Archeology, Naples. Photo by Anne Lill.

²⁹ Étienne, *Pompeii*, 227.

³⁰ See e.g. Virgil, *Aeneis*, 1st song, especially 312–413. A popular motif in Pompeii was the foundation myth of Rome and the relevant goddess Venus, who was *Aeneadum genetrix* (mother of 'the descendents of Aeneas' [i.e. the Romans], Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 1.1).

Traces of the cult of Oriental gods dating from the 2nd century BC have been found in Pompeii and its surroundings. One reason why the distant gods reached the Bay of Cumae (Naples) was the importance of the place as a harbour, via which Greek-Egyptian syncretist beliefs arrived. Central among them was the cult of Isis, which also spread to Rome.³¹

The role of gods in the Vesuvius catastrophe has been interpreted in many ways, from totally ignoring them and referring only to rational arguments based on nature (the view of antiquity, especially Pliny), to considering the eruption to be a divine punishment (Christian interpretation).

Against the backdrop of the catastrophe, it was Martial who referred to the gods in the epigram:

‘And the heavenly powers, too, would not have wished to allow this’³² (the meaning is not quite clear, although it probably refers to the exceptional nature of the event even for the gods). The relationship between man and the gods in the natural catastrophe became a major issue, with topics spreading into figurative art and literature. In the ancient era, the foundation for that was laid by Plutarch in his moral treatises. In his treatment of Pythia, the oracle of Delphi,³³ Plutarch tells of the destruction of towns along the coast of the Bay of Naples, and the connection of destruction with predictions. The same theme is more thoroughly developed in the dialogue *De sera numinis vindicta* (On the delays of divine vengeance). Sibyl’s predictions mentioned the mountain and fire of Vesuvius, which spilled over the town of Dikaiarcheia (later called Puteoli, and today Pozzuoli). Plutarch does not mention Pompeii, only a town north of Naples, an important harbour at the time.³⁴ The theme of Pompeii thus raised an ethical problem: was it divine vengeance and if so, then for what?

The importance of divine vengeance increased considerably in Christian tradition. The church father Tertullian mentioned several catastrophes which the Bible called punishments for man’s sins and evil deeds. He also mentioned Pompeii, submerged in fire from the mountain,

³¹ Isis was a goddess who was especially revered among simple people and was very popular in Pompeii (Étienne, *Pompeii*, 231–232).

³² Martialis, *Epigrammata* 4.44.

³³ Plutarchos, *De Pythiae oraculis* 9–10.

³⁴ Plutarch observed the problems which emerged sharply in the Attic tragedy: whether the fate that befell man was just, what part in it belonged to the gods and why punishment for crimes came later and often involved the innocent.

although this was not seen as divine vengeance at the time.³⁵ Tertullian said that God could have been angry, as he was before the Christians but, after Christianity emerged, the calamities (*clades*) became smaller.³⁶ It is difficult to establish what the role of Christians in the life of Pompeii before the catastrophe actually was. There was a Christian congregation near Pompeii, and graffiti referring to Christians have been found in Pompeii.³⁷ In his work *Apologeticus*, Tertullian placed pagans and Christians in opposition regarding their attitude towards their gods/God: the main difference lies in the fact that the pagan way of life does not show respect for the gods, but the Christian way of life shows respect for God. For that reason, the pagan gods remain indifferent to human suffering in times of disaster.

MYTH AND CONTEMPORARY TIMES IN POMPEII'S FRESCOS

The frescos of Pompeii show modern viewers what aspects of the mythical world were interesting to urban inhabitants, so that they chose them to decorate the walls of their homes. The motifs from myths on the walls constitute pictures of a distant and exotic world on the one hand (Greek mythology and the archaic past), and reflect people's daily life on the other, i.e. they chose topics that expressed the prevailing moods and emotions at the time.

Understanding and interpreting the meaning of frescos has been an issue for more than two centuries. In the 19th century, the wall-paintings were mostly regarded as a fascinating gallery of pictures whereas, by the end of the 20th century, more attention was being paid to their connections with the surrounding life. Frescos offered ideal situations for real life, thus improving or compensating for everyday circumstances and people in their behaviour and communication. Therefore, contacts between viewers and the space where they are located become important. This kind of analysis developed especially rapidly at the beginning of the 21st century; the best example here is the research by Katharina

³⁵ Tertullianus, *Apologeticus* 40.7–8.

³⁶ Tertullianus, *Apologeticus* 40.11–13.

³⁷ Hans-Joachim Glücklich, *Pompeji lebt. 2000 Jahre Texte, Bilder, Opern und Filme* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 42–43.

Lorenz on the role of myths in the Pompeii frescos in interiors.³⁸ The discourse evoked by mythical frescos encouraged desires and fantasies among people at the time, and told stories that became part of everyday life, and a means of visual communication. Thus not only the aesthetics and artistic realisation of the frescoes, but also their semantics and communicative value reveal their impact on the contemporary world and explain their meaning to later periods. The aesthetic influence of the mythological frescos of Pompeii works together with the sociological aspects of art. During the early days of the Empire, frescos structured the whole context of Roman domestic life and constituted multifarious means of social communication.³⁹ Mythical scenes represented on the walls evoke a relationship between themselves and the interior. They create a common atmosphere, which fills all rooms. The frescos thus produce a compact narrative, where mythical characters and scenes blend with contemporary customs, values and social ideals. The frescos reveal two tendencies: 1) mythological narrative, containing exotic elements, which takes people away from everyday reality, and 2) introducing important topics which establish foundations for collective symbols and their spread in society.

In variations, about one hundred topics were used in mythological scenes, mostly originating in Greek mythology. Aphrodite (Venus) and Ariadne were the dominant female figures; the first could occur on her own, whereas Ariadne was always depicted together with Theseus or Dionysus (Bacchus). The bigger and wealthier the houses, the grander and more centrally exhibited were the mythological scenes. In a succession of different styles, the role of erotic topics gradually increased. The third style focused on landscapes inspired by mythology, and naked mythological figures appeared in the fourth style. Among goddesses, *Aphrodite pescatrice* ('fishing Aphrodite') prevailed. Some topics were often repeated, e.g. Leda, Europe kidnapped by Zeus in the form of a bull, Polyphemus and Galatea.⁴⁰ Narrative as part of spatial design began to diminish in the course of the 2nd century, replaced by individual figures and scenes.⁴¹

³⁸ Katharina Lorenz, *Bilder machen Räume. Mythenbilder in pompeianischen Häusern* (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008).

³⁹ Lorenz, *Bilder machen Räume*, 461.

⁴⁰ Jürgen Hodske, *Mythologische Bildthemen in den Häusern Pompejis. Die Bedeutung den zentralen Mythenbilder für die Bewohner Pompejis* (Stendal: Franz Philipp Rutzen, 2007), 131–132.

⁴¹ Lorenz, *Bilder machen Räume*, 452–453.

Looking at the mythological world of the frescoes from the aim of this paper, we should keep in mind a wider dimension 'outside' pictures (especially regarding style no 3). This means that the emotional impact of pictures is not limited to the depicted scenes, and not even to the surrounding interior, but the influence of myths reached psychologically much further than the visual plan. It worked in two directions: involving contemporary reality on the one hand, and considering the wider narrative context of myths on the other. In both cases, reception functions through the subjective starting point of the receiver (viewer). Narrative outside pictures continues the theme of a depicted scene, takes it to the next phase and produces a tension with a special meaning for the viewer. It is a continuation of the picture and can move in two directions in its emotional tone: in the same emotional field or opposing it. A typical example of the latter is when the depicted happy situation is followed by a tragic ending in mythological tradition. Tension thus arises between the recorded moment and the continuing narrative, in the creation of which an individual viewer takes part. In such case, frescoes are regarded as stories, based on traditionally familiar mythical events. The main role in achieving the emotional impact of whatever is depicted thus does not lie in the pictorial scene itself, but in the narrative that develops it further.

Figures shown in mythological pictures visualise significant roles in early Roman society, either in a positive, i.e. confirming, or in a contradictory sense. In Pompeii, Greek myths were set in the Roman context, manifest in the way in which characters were depicted and in the surroundings, where they were placed in frescoes: the nature of Campania, Roman villas and typical interiors. The scenes afforded emotional meaning to everyday life, the dramatised events providing change in everyday life.

In addition to their meaning as mythical characters, the male figures also stood for the contemporary ideal of man, emphasised, for example, by their clothes. The same goes for women, goddesses and heroines, whose hairdos and garments reflect contemporary Pompeii.⁴² Frescoes created an ideal world, which the citizens of Pompeii would have liked to have themselves or at least see in the form of artistic expression. In such an interpretation, the scenes of marriage, for example, reveal the

⁴² *Ibidem*, 251–252.

harmony between man and woman, and the pictures display the prevailing expectations and values dominant in society and in the family. The multi-detailed frescoes indicate a wish to understand myths in a wider context and to playfully emphasise various aspects of them (e.g. in describing the myths about Ariadne, Dionysus or Theseus). All this shows that the characteristic trait of the Pompeii frescoes is their emotional abundance and conveying of tensions, which indicates a creative approach to the myths.

The frescoes depict collective values, creating important narratives for the time, which in their communication with the viewers provide the rooms with their characteristic atmosphere. Frescoes and their motifs in different rooms are combined and grouped according to four principles: they confirm, supplement, oppose or develop the ideas in neighbouring or nearby paintings.⁴³ Their themes and ideas come from mythology and epic narrative but, on the other hand, they contain elements from outside of the myths, i.e. images that refer to the contemporary era and the viewers' personal and social experience.

Thematically, the Pompeii frescoes can be divided into three groups: firstly, heroic topics and epic tradition, secondly, gods and cosmogonic motifs, and thirdly, erotic themes. The first approach in interpreting the pictures and motifs is to associate them with works of ancient literature. However, it would be a simplification to reduce the frescoes to mere illustrations of these literary works. A more general approach requires considering the philosophical and religious ideas which the frescoes might display. Recent developments have tried to open the narrative structures of artworks, consider their mutual impacts and dynamics, their connections with rooms where they are located, and how they influence viewers as a complex whole. Pictures of Mars and Venus as a married couple, for example, introduce wedding symbols in general, which had specific meaning for people at that time.

Considering architectonic and social contexts helps to make connections between different mythical frescoes in the same room. As a result, a fresco in an interior can be placed in the wider context of Roman life, and so it becomes one of the means of communication. For example, the pictures of Venus and Mars (Greek Aphrodite and Ares) represent a married divine couple conveying a cosmogonic meaning. The figure of Mars

⁴³ *Ibidem*, 463.

conveys man's strength and courage, and Venus a woman's beauty and charm. In a spatial context, they have an impact on several levels, both ethically and aesthetically. It is particularly here that the major difference between Roman and Greek cultures is evident. Venus, for instance, shows no trace of the vain and moody Aphrodite found in Homer. The difference between the Roman Mars and Greek Ares is even greater; the latter was considered a blood-thirsty, pugnacious brute. Through Zeus, Homer says about him that Ares was the most hated amongst the Olympian gods (*Iliad* 5.890). Pompeii's frescos show Mars as a great dignified god, who represents male perfection and forms a near ideal couple with Venus. Homer describes Aphrodite's affair with Ares, in which Hephaistos catches them and ridicules them in front of other gods, whereas the frescoes show us a union between man and woman in a positive emotional light.

Scenes on mythological topics are also related to the general system of decoration stages. The second style emphasises landscape and the connection with myth goes through landscape motifs, whereas in the third style landscape is no more than a background to mythological figures. Figures gradually become more plastic and the images deeper. Mythological characters and their activity are in the foreground. The fourth style focuses on the figures even more and introduces new features in their depiction: hermaphroditic youngsters, gentle and pretty young men, and naked female figures (e.g. Venus). The depiction of figures becomes more diverse: the action is not only conveyed through protagonists, but includes various minor characters and activities. The scene with the prophesying Cassandra, for instance, also shows the transporting of the wooden horse to Troy and the despair of the ruler Priam. Laocoon's punishment is supplemented by crowds of people around him.

The central theme of the fourth style is love; for the first time, only couples and individual figures are depicted who express their yearning for their loved one (Ariadne) or affection for themselves (Narkissos, Ganymedes and Kyparissos). The personal emotional tension and drama in the pictures increases.

In examining mythological topics it is not always easy to draw clear borders between the styles. There is a pluralism of style that depends on a wider context, and thus we cannot use precise dating or periodization in considering mythological frescoes, because some similar topics were

depicted in the same way in the third and fourth styles. For example, the Mars-Venus relationship is mostly shown as mutual and equal, and the erotic attraction of each is worthy of the partner. Their figures vividly express an emotionally elevated state. There is only one picture where Mars shows his superiority – when he reaches out for Venus.⁴⁴

Against the background of the era's social relations, this kind of approach is rather exceptional, considering man's dominant role in family and society. From this perspective, the scenes involving Theseus and Ariadne, and Perseus and Andromeda, where man's superiority is evident, are much closer to the ideals of that time. Theseus abandons Ariadne on the Island of Naxos, and she becomes the victim of his manipulation. In the same context (Casa di Meleagro), however, the mythological narrative continues with Ariadne's escape when the god Dionysus finds her on the island.⁴⁵ Perseus saves Andromeda and her life directly depends on his bravery.

Describing the erotic aspect is different in the third and fourth styles: in the earlier version, the beauty and attraction of Venus is mainly visible via the way Mars approaches the woman. In the fourth style, the naked Venus herself is remarkably alluring. Mars changes as well. The initial fighter-type becomes considerably softer and more domestic in the fourth style. The allegorical meaning of depicting this divine couple becomes clear: it is based on contemporary social values and brings mythical figures closer to everyday life.

In describing the figures, the typical features in the roles of men and women, essentially quite different, are evident. Stereotypes prevail in the case of men, whereas the roles and behavioural patterns of women are much more diverse.

In different styles, young men are depicted as heroes, strong and masculine (e.g. the Athenian hero Theseus). Occasional comic motifs occur in the case of older men, although they are mostly fatherly figures. Man, on the whole, is thus a fighter, who dominates through his

⁴⁴ A similar treatment of the topics characterises the frescoes in other villas in the neighbourhood of Vesuvius. Male activity and even aggression is expressed, for example, in Apollo, who pursues the nymph Daphne (Villa of Ariadne in Stabia).

⁴⁵ Besides Pompeii, the popularity of the myth of Ariadne is evident in other towns around Vesuvius as well (best known is the Villa of Ariadne in Stabia). An epic poem (epyllion) by Catullus (87-54 BC) about the marriage of Peleus and Thetis dates from the end of the Republic of Rome. It describes a carpet showing Ariadne, who was abandoned by Theseus, and Bacchus, with his grand entourage, who hurries to rescue her, the sileni and the dancing Bacchant-Maenads (Catullus 64, 251-265).

will. The exceptions here are the gentle youths of the fourth style, who do not demonstrate their strength.

Depictions of the god Dionysus are sometimes contradictory. On the one hand, he is a powerful god while, on the other, he is a figure with a feminine-gentle shape. The frescoes in Pompeii follow the Greek mythical ideal of Dionysus, and also the image of this god in tragedy.⁴⁶

The frescoes largely represent men, both gods and heroes, in a moment of leisure. Not much fighting is shown, and scenes on that topic are mainly of the Trojan War. The focus is then on the figure of Achilles, connected with his arrival in the Trojan War and the conflict over a slave girl who Agamemnon took away from him. From the point of view of the mythological narrative, it is interesting to observe a picture where Achilles is not in sight, but his fate is revealed implicitly. The fresco in the 'House of gilded Cupids' represents Achilles's mother Thetis, to whom Hephaestus shows the famous shield made for her son (also described at length in Homer's *Iliad*). The picture also shows other military equipment: helmet and armour, specially made for the hero. The expression on Thetis's face, however, makes clear that the mother is well aware of the tragic destiny awaiting Achilles. Here we can see the heroic plot on the one hand, and human sadness and inability to avoid tragedy, on the other. Although Achilles is not in the picture, his presence is felt, and he dominates even more than he otherwise would have if depicted.

The mythological cycle of Thebes contains an example of the fight between brothers, sons of Oedipus; the theme of Pentheus and Lykurgos is represented as well. Choosing not to show actual battle scenes was natural, as the paintings were made for domestic interiors, where people wished to relax and enjoy their time of leisure. When men are depicted with or near women, they assume the role of observers, and these scenes produce a feeling of expectation, with an erotic undertone. A woman is thus an object of a man's interest (in a passive role), but at the same time she is active in arousing interest in herself. The goddess

⁴⁶ Euripid's *The Bacchae* is here the best example, where Dionysus exhibits the same contradictory features. The god appears in Thebes in the form of a woman; especially striking are the locks of hair. Euripides depicts the god in contrast to the manly and robust Pentheus, who rules at Thebes. In the first half of the tragedy, Dionysus indeed surrenders to Pentheus. The second half turns the tables: Pentheus dresses as a woman, and Dionysus begins to show his power, which ends in a dreadful massacre. Poetry at the beginning of the Roman Empire continued depicting the double character of Dionysus and his attribute, wine (e.g. see Horatius, *Odes* 3.21 about wine in a jar which can bring joy and relaxation but also fights and quarrels).

Venus excels in the latter aspect. Woman taking an active role is shown in the scene with Selene and Endymion, where the woman approaches the sleeping man. In addition to the topic of Perseus, man as a protector or saviour of woman becomes evident in mythological scenes with Hercules and Hesione.

The representation of relationships between male and female figures can roughly be divided into two parts: they either complement and conform, or oppose each other. In relationships between men and women, different moments of closeness are depicted, from looking from afar to intimate contact. In that respect, the pictures in a room are in dynamic connection and reveal the developing situation: one picture follows another and takes the plot further. Mythological pictures have an impact on the viewer, creating a narrative, which causes affirmative (confirming), complementary (supplementing), contrasting (opposing) and consecutive (concluding) connections.⁴⁷ Examples of this kind of association can be found in pictures showing Mars and Venus, and Dionysus and Ariadne in *tablinum* (the third style, Casa di M. Lucretius Fronto).

There are no paintings in Pompeii that precisely repeat the same activities and motifs. There are, however, repetitions in the plot, especially in the fourth style. Combinations of different mythological scenes include similar figures, which express various forms of expressing emotional states, from opposition to complementing one another.

The fourth style, for example, depicts Narkissos mostly in the same situation (40 times), whereas on seven occasions he is combined with a fishing Venus. Both figures are naked, and the erotic context and exotic nature are also similar. The contrast, in terms of figures, involves emotions: Narkissos who falls in love with himself, and Venus whose efforts are directed towards others. The situations of Narcissus and Ariadne complement one another: they are both by the water and hope to find love there. Narcissus, however, falls in love with himself, whereas Ariadne hopes to find a companion.

The frescoes emphasise the importance of love. More than half of the surviving frescoes depict couples in love, either on the divine or human level, conveying situations of closeness and affection, including the erotic.

⁴⁷ Lorenz, *Bilder machen Räume*, 272.

A separate theme is happiness and the suffering caused by love. Ariadne is one of the central characters, expressing the sadness of abandonment. Theseus leaves her in her sleep, but Dionysus saves her.

Female figures in the frescoes are more diverse. The beauty and virtues of goddesses and mortal heroines are equally emphasised, with *pulchritudo* (beauty) being a part of a woman's *virtus* (virtue). Both are evident in appearance (clothed or naked), postures and movements. An erotic aspect is added in the third and fourth styles, and nakedness prevails in the latter. There is much more sadness in women than there is in men. For example, the figure of Medea before making her fatal decision: her solitude and tragedy is increased by the children playing behind her, as she does not even notice them. It is evident, especially in depicting women, that in the 1st century the Pompeii wall-paintings became emotionally richer and the topics more mundane. The tragic side of love is seen in the treatment of myths, where emotions lead to unhappy endings. The background of the description of the relations between Heracles, Deianeira and the centaur Nessos is the typical love-triangle motif. Heracles's initial victory over Nessos, shown in the fresco, turns against him in mythological tradition, and he dies from the poison sent by Nessos.⁴⁸ This is another example of the importance of a tradition-based mythological narrative continuing outside of the scene in the fresco.

A separate theme is the self-sacrificing woman, e.g. the myth of Admetos and Alkestis. The fresco shows Admetos in the foreground; he is listening to Apollo's prediction that he must die, unless someone else is willing to replace him. His wife Alkestis sits beside him, but seems distracted – later it becomes evident that only if Alkestis sacrifices herself can her husband be saved.⁴⁹

Scenes depicted in frescoes can have various effects. Naturally, they are not direct reflections of everyday life, although via their tendency to focus on ideal or dream situations they create a dialogue with contemporary life, raise questions and encourage discussions of situations and circumstances. The frescoes in people's homes suggest certain be-

⁴⁸ This topic is tackled by Sophocles in his tragedy *Trachiniai*. Deianeira unwittingly gives her husband Heracles a robe soaked with the blood of Nessos, which turns out to be a lethal poison, and Heracles dies.

⁴⁹ This myth is known in literature from Euripides's tragedy *Alkestis*, which has a happy ending. Heracles defeats death and brings the wife of Admetus back from the world of the dead.

havioural models and express images of the physical and moral ideal. The repeated motifs produce collective symbols and, despite the variety of individual pictures, certain conventional ideas of ethical and moral values take shape.

POMPEII IN THE EUROPEAN CULTURAL LEGACY

The Byzantine sources that use and quote ancient authors contain references to the mythical and supernatural causes of the Vesuvius catastrophe. The main author to rely on in this respect is Cassius Dio, who described the event in his Roman history. According to him, huge men were seen moving around and even flying around Vesuvius, in the surrounding areas and in towns – a sign allegedly predicting an imminent disaster. Together with Pliny's letters, it is Cassius Dio who has most influenced the subsequent descriptions of the destruction of Pompeii.⁵⁰

Two popular viewpoints exist today regarding the causes of the catastrophe. First, the destruction of Pompeii was the judgement of the gods against people who lived in sin and immorality. The second view is rational, i.e. the town perished through natural causes, which was supposed to be a lesson to human beings of how to be cautious, overcome their fear of death and follow common sense in instances of danger.

The Pompeii catastrophe stayed in cultural memory for centuries. Later studies by different authors, until the first excavations in Herculaneum and Pompeii in the mid-18th century, mostly relied on Pliny's descriptions, i.e. written sources. Until the first half of the 18th century, Pompeii's influence was evident in antiquity-oriented art and fashion, especially in France.⁵¹ The event in Europe which vividly reminded people of the Vesuvius disaster was the earthquake in Lisbon in 1755, when the town was almost totally destroyed, along with thousands of inhabitants. That dreadful event led thoughts to the relationship between man and nature, and to divine will and justice.

Writers and artists were especially influenced by what was discovered in the course of excavations in Pompeii, which inspired intellectual and artistic circles throughout Europe. A trip to Pompeii became a neces-

⁵⁰ Hans-Joachim Glücklich, *Pompeji lebt. 2000 Jahre Texte, Bilder, Opern und Filme* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 46–47.

⁵¹ Étienne, *Pompeji*, 50.

sary part of one's education and cultural development, and its emotional impact was immense. This included both the ruins, the former Roman temples and villas, and the human tragedy, in which the skeletons discovered under the ashes conveyed a tragic picture of suffering and destruction.

THE LITERARY IMAGE OF POMPEII

In the 18th-19th centuries, the topic of Pompeii became both an image of horror and an object of admiration, and it was described in art and literature.

The English envoy at the court of Naples in the 18th century, Sir William Hamilton, published a book on cultural and natural phenomena around Naples and on volcanoes. The book greatly influenced the subsequent understanding of antiquity. Collecting antiquities became a popular hobby; monarchs in their courts and wealthier people set up special rooms filled with antiquities. Another fascination at that time was the cult of Isis, encouraged by the excavations at Pompeii. In his work "Metamorphoses or the Golden Ass", Apuleius (2nd century AD) described at length the cult of Isis.⁵² In Rome, the Isis mysteries spread especially rapidly after the beginning of the empire. The Isis temple in Pompeii was among the first to be excavated in a fairly good condition, and it became the favourite location of tourists in Pompeii.

The topic of mysteries (especially in connection with the cult of Isis) and the natural catastrophe, as well as a wave of romanticism, created fertile soil for the genre of horror novels, which became widespread in the early 19th century. Various motifs of Pompeii were used, as were methods of creating the general atmosphere, for example in the novels of Walter Scott (e.g. *The Bride of Lammermoor*, 1819, and *The Lady of the Lake*, 1810). Depicting death and the world of spirits was also inspired by the numerous skeletons unearthed at Pompeii.

The 19th century saw a new stage in studying antiquity, when archaeology and the historicist approach to history developed. Fascination with Pompeii was expressed on a number of different levels: besides artistic

⁵² The entire long last chapter in this book is devoted to a detailed description of Isis-related customs and beliefs. The description of the attributes of Isis and of the procession in honour of the goddess in Apuleius form the only thorough source of the mysteries of Isis.

means of expression, Pompeii-related topics also spread commercially via souvenirs, postcards, toys and through other channels. Pompeii was reborn in a new context, when it joined contemporary cultural developments and was able to express them vividly and emotionally. Man was depicted in the grasp of supernatural phenomena, e.g. divine power or the forces of nature, which could not be explained by rational thinking. The central theme in describing disasters and catastrophes was divine punishment for human sins. It is no coincidence that the idea of the tragedy of destiny spread at the same time; in that light, the events and characters of the Attic tragedy (5th century BC) were also interpreted.

The best known work was Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834). The plot unravels in Pompeii before the catastrophe and the events move through various intrigues towards a tragic ending. The author depicts a town where greed, evil, excessive desire for pleasure, chasing luxury, indifference to fellow citizens, profanity and the worst kind of superstition prevail. Considering all that, it was no wonder that divine judgement was seen behind the disaster. The main opposition in the novel is between the malicious priest of Isis and the Christian worldview promoting positive ideas. Bulwer-Lytton used places found and described by archaeologists in the town, and 'woke to life' the skeletons discovered under the ruins of houses and temples. The plot unravels at every discovered location (the Forum, baths and the amphitheatre). The home of the main characters, the 'House of the tragic poet', became especially famous. It was named after a wall-painting in which a poet is allegedly reading his work to listeners. Later, it was identified as a mythological scene, where Admetus and Alkestis are listening to the oracle.⁵³ The frescoes also depict scenes from Greek mythology. The most famous fresco in the house, however, is the floor mosaic with a dog, bearing the sign *cave canem* ('beware of the dog'). The protagonists of the novel, young lovers, escape the volcano catastrophe and, in the end, the good are saved but the wicked perish through the forces of nature. It was thought in the first half of the 19th century that a large number of the inhabitants managed to get away across the sea. How hopeless this route of escape really was became clear during the excavations in the last decades of the century.⁵⁴ *The Last Days of Pompeii* was immense-

⁵³ Beard, *Pompeii lost and found*, 82.

⁵⁴ Eugene Dwyer, *Pompeii's living statues. Ancient Roman lives stolen from death* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 22.

ly successful in various parts of Europe and has even been translated into Estonian twice: in 1935 (translated by Marta Sillaots) and in 1993 (Margit Tamme).

The image of what actually happened in Pompeii was greatly influenced by the opportunity in 1863 to restore the cavities left by human bodies in the volcanic soil and found during excavations: this created a realistic image of people at the moment of death.

This radically changed the romantic view of the ancient city and the tragedy that had taken place there. It was assumed until the end of the 19th century that Pompeii was destroyed by one

powerful volcanic eruption, where people either escaped or perished. Today we know that Vesuvius erupted twice. The first phase is described by Pliny: for eighteen hours, stones of varying sizes and ash came down from the volcano.⁵⁵ At that time, people were killed through stones falling on them and roofs collapsing. They sought protection in cellars and other places thought to be relatively safe. During the second phase, hot lava flowed all over the town and surrounding areas, covering everything that was left in the town.⁵⁶ Everything except human skeletons survived underneath the air-tight layer of lava and mud, but cavities shaped by the bodies were left in the soil, preserving the position of hands and legs, elements and clothing, and even the expressions on the faces. When Giuseppe Fiorelli, the head of the excavations, poured a mixture of gypsum and glue into these cavities, a shocking picture of human victims emerged. The human moulds showed traces of hair, clothes, footwear and jewellery. The bodies were in the positions they had assumed when death struck, and the whole horror of the catastro-



Fig. 10. Pompeii, Garden of the fugitives, victims of Vesuvius. Moulds of the burnt human bodies *in situ*. Photo by Anne Lill.

⁵⁵ Christoff Neumeister, *Der Golf von Neapel in der Antike. Ein literarischer Reiseführer* (München: C.H. Beck, 2005), 270–278.

⁵⁶ Dwyer, *Pompeii's living statues*, 13.

phe could be felt in its actual expression. Men, women, young and old, children and dogs – the moulds eloquently revealed the tragedy of their last moments. That objective picture of death was something totally different from the literary works or paintings of romantic historicism.

PAINTING AND THEATRE

Eighteenth century paintings reflected the Pompeian moods in the typical manner of the era. For example the painting by the Swiss artist Angelika Kaufmann *Pliny the Younger during the Eruption of Vesuvius* (1793) was inspired by the letter of Pliny. The author described Pliny's firmness of mind during the catastrophe: he calmly continued with his intellectual work and refused to run away, whereas others fled in fear. The figures in the painting reveal dramatic tension and passionate dynamics. One of the artist's favourite methods was contrast, where the calmly sitting young man is placed in opposition to other figures, whose expressions and movements show fear and tension. The painting acquired a special meaning due to the fact that it was completed one year before the next eruption of Vesuvius (15 June 1794).

The best-known painting on the topic is *The Last Day of Pompeii*, by the Russian artist Karl Brüllov, completed in 1833. Brüllov lived in an era when classicist trends mixed with romanticism. The artist visited Pompeii and observed the excavations. The revealed tragic events inspired him to describe people trying to escape from the town destined for destruction. The expressions and movements of each human figure and group show the maximum degree of tragic emotions. The painting combines the historical event in Pompeii with mythology, where the impact of Virgil's epic *Aeneid* is especially obvious.⁵⁷ Brüllov's picture also places Christianity and paganism in opposition, which was typical of the era: amidst the general disaster, Oriental priests are shown rummaging for treasures.

In theatre, especially in opera, the topic of Pompeii has provided material for representing dramatic conflicts between man and the gods. In his opera *The Magic Flute* (1791), Mozart used an unusual version of the

⁵⁷ Aeneas, the legendary founder of the Roman empire, arrived in Italy from the destroyed Troy and, according to legend, landed on that particular shore at Cumae, not far from Pompeii.

cult of Isis. Ancient mystery religion is set side by side with the Masonic cult, although these two do not make a comfortable pair. In the opera, however, the Queen of Night and the ruler, the priest Sarastro, find a common language. The stage set used the motif of the temple of Isis found in Pompeii. The story is also exceptional because it shows Egyptian religion and its priests in a positive light and with worthy ethical principles – this differs from later versions in literature, where everything connected with Isis is mainly negative. Mozart visited Pompeii in 1769 and was inspired to use the mysteries of Isis in his opera.

In the 19th century, the emphasis shifted and the catastrophe was depicted as God's punishment for people's sins. An earlier example was Giovanni Pacini's opera *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* (*The Last Day of Pompeii*, 1825), which successfully premiered in Naples, and was then performed in Milan and other European cities (including Lisbon in 1828, where memories of the dreadful earthquake were still fresh in people's minds). The plot follows typical rules of melodrama and tragedy: a woman wrongly accused and condemned to death is saved when the roar of Vesuvius's eruption is heard and those who have accused her admit their crime. The opera had a great impact; the same motifs were treated in the light of the modern era, which largely shaped the image of Rome and its people at the beginning of the Common Era. The Romans were typically depicted as brutal and deprived, and the cult of Isis as an example of a pagan and corrupt superstition, whereas Christians were all pious, honest and good-natured, but had to suffer at the hand of evil forces. The eruption of Vesuvius and Pompeii's destruction thus became a divine punishment for a corrupt town and its inhabitants. A few decades after Pacini's work, another opera staged the theme of the volcanic catastrophe, but this time in Herculaneum (Félicien David's *Herculaneum*). This, too, focused on the opposition between Christians and pagans, and Christian lovers who were wrongly condemned to death. The role of mystical and supernatural forces is especially emphasised; even Satan makes an appearance, and is about to win when Vesuvius erupts. Christians see the eruption as God's punishment and a promise of eternal life.

POMPEII IN FILM

Literature, opera and painting, as well as the excavations at Pompeii and relevant publications, influenced numerous films and television programmes produced from the beginning of the 20th century. Their conceptual approaches followed the earlier 19th century general trends. It is interesting to see how these differ from ancient ideas of the volcanic eruption and its impacts. Fascination with extreme natural phenomena (Pliny the Elder), man's ability to cope with catastrophic conditions (Pliny the Younger), and setting the destruction against the earlier happy life (Martial) were the prevailing themes for Romans themselves. One of the favourite topics of romantic-era Europe was displaying extreme conflicts. This was carried by the extreme pathos of the struggle between good (Christianity) and evil (paganism), where a natural catastrophe became god's punishment of the evil and the corrupt.

In that respect, the novel by Bulwer-Lytton was especially influential. Until the mid-20th century, it was the basis for almost all films made about the destruction of Pompeii.

In 1900, the first silent film was made in England, followed in 1908 by the Italian film *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (remade in 1913 and 1926). Both in the films and in the book, Vesuvius is a force that helps innocent and good people to escape and brings criminals punishment.

A film made in 1935, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, distances itself from Bulwer-Lytton's manner of depiction and develops the topic of Christianity further, although the opposition between bad Romans and good Christians is still there. The main story line shows how the protagonist initially helps to capture Christians and slaves, but finally converts to Christianity, so that at the end of the film when the volcano erupts, he is saving the Christians.

Later treatments of Pompeii were more liberal, and only some motifs from Bulwer-Lytton's novel were used (a French film in 1949, a German-Italian-French in 1959, and an Italian-French version in 1961-62). More violent scenes were added, showing the Romans' cruelty towards Christians.

Beginning in the 20th century, the emphases became more diverse and attention was paid to people's everyday life in Pompeii. This was observed through the modern eye, and the theme of antiquity was placed

in the contemporary world. A good example here is Roberto Rossellini's film *Viaggio in Italia* (1953).

Several horror and catastrophe films have been made about Pompeii. Motifs assumed to have the greatest impression on the audiences prevailed: gladiator fights, with muscular male characters, who are superb horse riders and chariot racers, and horrible and brutal episodes, involving Christians, eroticism and pretty women. These elements especially characterised American films. In Italian films, the Romans are not always corrupt, brutal and pleasure-seeking. At worst, they are badly advised by foreigners. Many Romans are good, honest and decent, whose life and problems can be easily understood today as well. Pompeii was also the subject of television serials (in 1984 in Italy, England and the USA, and in 2007 in Italy), where destruction is seen in terms of dramatized history.

Pompeii has become a mythologised phenomenon in European culture. It blends the idea of Christianity with an apocalyptic picture of the world. Figures, ideas and images of the mythical world keep cropping up in all forms of artistic expression. The descriptions of Pompeii's destruction and the resulting human tragedy contain most of the elements known from mythology, e.g. typical ethical oppositions between the good and bad, the evil and noble. The main opposition, however, is between life and death. The most important and decisive deed of every legendary mythological hero (e.g. Heracles and Theseus), is the descent into the underworld and conquering forces connected with death. Similarly, the central theme of mythical Pompeii is also facing death. Death thus became the basis from which the idea of mythologised Pompeii emerged. Seen through the eyes of Christians, Pompeii turned into a myth which afforded an apocalyptic meaning to the towns destroyed by the eruptions of Vesuvius.

For Romans, though, Pompeii was not a myth, but reality. Hence Pliny's rationalism and Martial's human-emotional attitude. The essential problem for the Romans was how to carry on after the catastrophe. Pompeii was suddenly brought back to life for Europe when archaeologists uncovered the ancient city in all its diversity. Its impact was felt in a large number of fields of life, science and culture, and is still going strong. One example of this in 20th century science and culture is the story of Gradiva.

AN ARTWORK BROUGHT TO LIFE – GRADIVA AND ITS ROLE IN 20TH CENTURY CULTURE

In 1903 the German writer Wilhelm Jensen published a novel entitled *Gradiva, ein pompejanisches Phantasiestück*. The book, and especially its influence, can be seen as a symbol of the entire Pompeii reality and its mythologised manifestations.

In a scientific publication, Jensen noted the picture of a walking girl on an ancient relief. It was initially regarded as part of the Roman art legacy, and the writer was greatly impressed by it. Although later research proved the relief's Greek origin, its first erroneous association with Pompeii persisted. The relief shows a girl moving along with a light dancing step, and she is one of the three Agraulidae goddesses of dewy nature. Historical truth is not really important here: the subjective emotional truth of the writer is. For Jensen, the girl in the relief came from Pompeii and she perished together with others in the disaster. This quite mediocre novel proved to be amazingly successful. Sigmund Freud read it and found confirmation of his theory of dreams. Freud's article *Der Wahn und die Träume in Jensen's Gradiva* (1906, *Delusion and Dream in W. Jensen's 'Gradiva'*) is the first case in the history of psychoanalysis where the method is employed for a literary character. Freud was able to read the Gradiva story with empathy because he had conducted an ethnographic study in Trieste in 1876, so that he could identify with the protagonist Hanold decades later.⁵⁸

Jensen's novel develops the topic of an artwork-sculpture that comes to life (compare *Pygmalion*; this phenomenon in psychoanalysis was later called lithophilia, love of stone). The protagonist is the young archaeologist Norbert Hanold, who sees a relief image of a girl in a Roman museum and is captivated by her. He has a copy made, calls it Gradiva and hangs it on his wall at home. He then dreams that the girl is in ancient Pompeii and they meet. He is in Pompeii on the very day of the Vesuvius catastrophe. On the Forum, in the middle of the town near the temple of Jupiter, he suddenly sees Gradiva, recognises her from his relief, and notices how she moves: *lente festinans* ('slowly hurrying'). In the dream, Gradiva goes to the colonnade of the Temple of Apollo, where

⁵⁸ Mary Bergstein, "Gradiva Medica: Freud's model female analyst as lizard-slayer", *American Imago*, 60, 3 (2003), 288.

she turns gradually paler until she finally resembles the marble image. She is lying dead on the temple steps when the volcanic ash covers her. Under the influence of this dream, Hanold travels to Italy, staying at first in Rome, where he experiences another Pompeii-related dream, this time brief. However, he does not see Gradiva, but instead various ancient sculptures: Belvedere Apollo and the Venus of the Capitol. Apollo is carrying Venus into a shady place. The previously sensible young archaeologist, who has relied only on sound reasoning, is now overcome by erotic feelings. He travels on to Pompeii, where he suddenly notices a real girl resembling Gradiva walking along the ancient cobbled streets, but he loses sight of her. Hanold cannot

understand whether this is reality or illusion. The girl's gait acquires special significance: the way the charming girl moves (*Gradiva* – *gradi* in Latin means 'to walk, to step'), how light her step is, and how she seems almost to float. This has totally bewitched Hanold in the ancient relief. He even asks one of his anatomist friends to explain such a movement – he thus initially still clings to a rational explanation. When he actually sees a girl in Pompeii walking like that, emotions take over, and the borders between dream and reality become even vaguer when the scientific approach turns out to be useless in solving the problem. The image is simultaneously dead and alive for him. Hanold also confronts the presence of Vesuvius throughout his stay and sees it every night from his hotel window. He then dreams about the city for the third time, seeing a brief episode in Pompeii, where Gradiva is trying to catch a lizard.



Fig. 11. A copy of *Gradiva*. The original relief is in the Vatican Museums. Photo wikipedia.org.

Wilhelm Jensen described Pompeii with such thoroughness that the book could be taken for a travel guide for anyone visiting the city in ruins. The gates Porta di Stabia and Porta del Vesuvio, the streets leading from the Forum to the amphitheatre, other smaller streets, such as Vicolo Mercurio and Strada di Mercurio, houses such as Casa di Castore e Polluce, Casa del Fauno and Casa di Meleagro, with its artworks, the cemetery, Via dei Sepolcri and many other details – the protagonist Hanold walks around everywhere and his emotions and thoughts bring these locations to life.

Jensen's book places reason and emotions, scientific explanation and intuitive perception in opposition. The girl in the marble relief becomes *Gradiva-rediviva*, a revived walker. At the end of the story, the real German girl in Pompeii whom Hanold has taken for a live Gradiva, helps him return to reality. The novel intertwines antiquity and Hanold's time, life and death, knowledge and ignorance, dream and wakefulness, and remembering and forgetting. Pompeii acquires mystical shades, and Vesuvius becomes a symbol of death and the world beyond; in the evening Hanold sees a dead city in its petrified immobility, which starts talking like death itself.

When Freud read the book he recognised his own theory of dreams in Jensen's story. In his article *Der Wahn und die Träume*, Freud developed an archaeology metaphor, with which he compared the method of psychoanalysis. Like archaeology, psychoanalysis unearths the deeply buried past. Finding hidden, latent and unconscious meanings is essential in both. The way leading into this hidden world is dream, which through analysis can uncover things that cannot be reached consciously. When writers have their characters experience dreams, they follow the principle that people continue to think and feel in their dreams.⁵⁹ Freud saw the main character Hanold as someone whose imagination and intellect could turn him into an artist or a neurotic. Influenced by his dream, Hanold's reality blends with dream fantasy and he imagines that he himself lived two millennia ago in Pompeii, and saw the girl Gradiva there. Freud analysed the plot in the novel in great detail, episode by

⁵⁹ Sigmund Freud, "Der Wahn und die Träume in Jensen's Gradiva" – Sigmund Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*. Bd. 7: *Werke aus den Jahren 1906-1909* (London: Imago Publishing, 1941), 32–33 (1st edition Wien: H. Heller, 1907); Anne Lill, "Järelsõna" – Sigmund Freud, *Unenägude tõlgendamine* (Tallinn: Tänapäev, 2007), 568–579.

episode, its characters and especially their dreams, and concluded that this was not a fantasy tale, but a psychiatric study.⁶⁰

Reading Jensen's novel and Freud's analysis, we can conclude that more important than the literary characters and the psychoanalyst's ideas about them is the myth-creating Pompeii itself. Through Gradiva, although erroneously placed there from the point of view of art history, Pompeii nevertheless exists at the birth of psychoanalysis. The novel mixes the aesthetic beauty of the image, mystical perception and archetypal oppositions: dream and reality, life and death, the influence of which can be truly felt in Pompeii. Indeed, Freud considered especially important the girl's claim that one must first die in order to come to life again.⁶¹ Freud was fascinated by Gradiva and, like the character Hanold, he had a copy made of the ancient relief and hung it in his study in London, where it can still be seen in the Freud Museum. Furthermore, it became fashionable at the time in Europe to acquire a copy of Gradiva for one's home.

Freud's profound article and Gradiva-analysis were enthusiastically received in cultural circles. Gradiva became an important symbol in surrealist literature and art in the first half of the 20th century. The wave reached France after Freud's article was translated in 1931. For surrealists, Gradiva signified the Madonna. She was regarded as a link between reality and otherness (non-reality); she was a woman who managed to penetrate the wall of reality, and reveal the invisible forces of life. Gradiva constituted the mysticism of dreams, a symbol of sexuality and wild love. The girl gracefully walked away from the control of the mind, the foundations of aesthetics and principles of morality. Gradiva was a muse to Salvador Dalí and André Breton. The enthusiastic surrealist Breton claimed that there was a certain area in the human mind where life and death, reality and imagination, past and present, the understandable and incomprehensible, and the high and low are no longer regarded as opposites.⁶² In art, the topic of the walking girl appears, for example, in André Masson's painting *Metamorphosis of Gradiva*, where the surrealistically chopped-up female figure is shown in a pose that

⁶⁰ Freud, "Der Wahn und die Träume in Jensen's Gradiva", 68.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 62.

⁶² Patric Waldberg, *Surrealism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), 76.

unites birth and death.⁶³ André Breton named his surrealist gallery opened in Paris in 1937 Gradiva.⁶⁴

Pompeii has had, therefore, a lot to say to subsequent generations for centuries. Everything connected with the city (except what is totally commercial and exploited superficially) makes us take a look at ourselves, and face our existential fears and expectations. This is a place where the closeness of death can be directly perceived. From the Pompeii Forum, behind the Temple of Jupiter, Vesuvius rises like an eternal reminder of destruction. There are traces of the former life among the ruins, for example graffiti and drawings on the walls, faded frescoes, wine shop counters and stones in the pavement that helped people cross the road when it rained. The latter inspired Jensen's protagonist to imagine a girl gracefully stepping on such stones.

Pompeii is much more than a city buried underneath volcanic ash in ancient times, more than the antiquities and artworks found there. Pompeii is a myth that has shaped ensuing cultural cognition, influenced the interpretation of the main issues of life, and created archetypes of the world of thought. It is probably impossible to fully understand what the 'real' Pompeii was, but this quite ordinary provincial town has certainly left a legacy, which keeps inspiring literature, art, philosophy and the perception of history in such a way that myth turns into reality.

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KOKKUVÕTE: Pompei müüdid: tegelikkus ja pärand

Artiklis on jälgitud mõningaid aspekte Pompei kui kultuurifenomeni tähendusest järelpõlvedele Euroopa traditsioonis. Objektiivne

⁶³ Martin Ries, "André Masson: the ecstasy of discontent", *Art e Dossier*, 17 (2002), 176. (www.martinries.com/article2002AM2.htm, retrieved 06. III 2011).

⁶⁴ Thomas Girst, "Duchamp's window display for André Beton's *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture* (1945)", *tout-fait*, 2, 4 (2002), 4 (www.toutfait.com/issues/volume2/issue_4/articles/girst/girst4.html, retrieved 06. III 2011); Sam Perry, "'Only in dreams': Philip Larkin and surrealism", *English*, 59 (2010), 227 (<http://english.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2010/01/28/english.efp049.full>, retrieved 06. III 2011).

ja subjektiivne tõde Pompeist ei kattu alati ning müüdiarhetüüpi-de analüüs aitab neid suhteid selgitada. Seinamaalide käsitlemine narratiivina ja kontekstuaalses seoses ümbrusega aitab välja tuua müüdiarhetüübid nende vastandlikus mõistes: elu ja surm, rõõm ja kannatus, mees ja naine.

Antiikaeg annab võimaluse süüvida inimloomuse erinevatesse avaldustesse, mitmete kultuurivormide toimimisse ühiskonnas, religiooni ilmingutesse ja ratsionaalsuse põhimõtetesse. Harva saab seda teha mineviku suhtes nii komplekselt nagu Pompei juures. Pompei kui kultuurinähtus ühendab endas eri valdkondade võtmeküsimusi: keeleteadus ja filoloogia, religioon ja eetika, loodusteadused, filosoofia ja kunst. Kõik see koos toob ilmsiks mõtteloo ja traditsiooni erinevad tahud ning nende mõju hilisematele aegadele. Just see viimane aspekt muudab oluliseks ja elavaks kõik selle, mis liitub Pompei temaatikaga. On omamoodi kummaline, kuidas antiikaja Rooma kultuuris suhteliselt tähtsusetu provintsilinn muutub hiljem, eriti 19. sajandi Euroopa vaimuelus niivõrd mõjukaks.

Kirjanduses ja kunstis kohtume mitte niivõrd Pompei endaga kui mütologiseeritud ettekujutusega sellest linnast. Kui mõista müüdi all traditsioonil rajanevat maailmapilti, mis kujundab ja mõjutab inimeste käitumist ning mõtteviisi ja mis leiab väljendust erinevates kunstivormides, siis eristuvad Pompei müütide puhul kaks järku: enne ja pärast Vesuuvi katastroofi 24. augustil 79. aastal.

Vulkaanipurske eelsest Pompeist annavad tunnistust säilinud materiaalsed mälestised: linn ise oma hoonete, arhitektuurilise vormi ja kunstilise eripäraga. Müüdimaailma, mille keskel Pompei elas, avavad seinamaalid, skulptuurid, pisiplastika. Ühelt poolt oli see interjäär, mis kandis esteetilist väärtust ja andis vihjeid eetikale, teiselt poolt lõi see õhustiku, milles toimis linnas igapäevane elu, suhtlemine nii sõnas kui teos. Kui inimeste puhul võime kõnelda eetosest kui tavapärasest viisist tegutseda, suhelda, otsustada ja teha valikuid, siis mütoloogilise keskkonna jälgimine võib avada linna eetose olulised tahud.

Teiseks aspektiks on Pompeiga seotud müütide olemus pärast linna hävingut. Selle puhul hakkab toimima hilisemate sajandite väärtuste ja hoiakute suhe antiikajal toimunusse. Pompei pärand Euroopas seostub esmajoones selliste müütidega. Hävinud linnast saab sümbol, mis suhestudes kaasaja kultuuri eri külgedega mõjutab

kirjandust, kunsti ja mõttemalle üldiselt. Siin põimuvad reaalsed, objektiivsed nähtused subjektiivse ettekujutusega ning tulemuseks on kunstiliselt rikkalik antiikmaailma pärandi elustumine.