

‘VESUVIUS, FARE WELL UNTIL MY RETURN.’ A NON-INVASIVE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH PROJECT ON THE SHOPS OF ROMAN POMPEII.

July 29, 2016 Sera Baker Day of Archaeology 2016, Digital Archaeology, Italy, Non-invasive Survey, Photography, Roman, UK Ancient cities, Archaeology, Cultural heritage, Day of Archaeology 2016, digital heritage, Economy, Heritage, History, PhD, Pompeii, Roman, Society, Urban



Via delle Scuole streetscape in Region 8, Pompeii looking towards Mt Vesuvius. Copyright Sera Baker, 2016.

Vesuvius and I have a little one-to-one chat each time I visit Pompeii in southern Italy. It's the first thing and the last thing I do on every fieldwork and research visit. Without Vesuvius I couldn't be the archaeologist and researcher that I am.

As a Roman archaeologist specialising in socio-cultural and economic examinations of ancient Pompeii and the early Roman Empire I have visited the ancient city countless times in the past 15 years. I feel like I know the city like the back of my hand: entering at the Porta Marina gate, sharing greetings with the Pompeii superintendency staff and custodians who I haven't seen in a number of months or years, climbing the steep Via Marina road leading into the city that widens into the city as you arrive at the forum. Turn left and it's the backdrop to the Capitoline Triad temple remains: [Mt Vesuvius](#), the volcano

that catastrophically destroyed and preserved the Roman city, a small town that wasn't of particular great importance in the Roman Empire. The violent eruption of AD 79 had a myriad of consequences, covering the city in several metres of ash and pumice after a 24 hour long bombardment and killing those who had not escaped the city and burying the contents of their homes, businesses, religious sites and theatres entirely.

Nearly two thousand years later the city was 'rediscovered' (although it had never properly been lost) under the Bourbon rulers of Naples in 1748. Ten years earlier the ancient city of Herculaneum had been found and the fever of antiquarianism was rising. Excavation revealed surprisingly familiar aspects of an ancient civilisation: statuary, belongings, homes, and so on. Despite early use of backfilling, a practice in which materials excavated, such as soil, are returned to the opened areas, Pompeii eventually became the open air museum that we understand it as today. But don't be fooled. This isn't a city frozen in time. Since Day 1 of its burial the site has been subject to a slow, natural decomposition in addition to destruction carried out by humans, both in antiquity and from 1748 onwards.

My research, mostly carried out as part of a PhD degree, focuses upon the lesser studied shops and workshops, also known as *tabernae*, which fronted many of the homes along major arteries in the city. These small structures are important because they tell us about what everyday life was like for non-elite Romans, slaves and freedmen (ex-slaves) in terms of where they worked, their trades and crafts, their eating and drinking habits, and, in a few cases, where they may have lived. An insight into Roman shops at Pompeii provides an understanding of population, society, culture, urban planning, trade, and commerce. It also tells us quite a lot about the impact of war and Roman colonisation, slavery, migration, patronage, art, neighbourhood development and industrialisation across the city.



A bakery retrofitted into a two storey house (8.4.27), left, and a shop for bread (8.4.26), right. Another shop (8.4.25), far right. Copyright Sera Baker, 2016.

In light of city's size, I have chosen to work in a quarter known today as Region 8, just south of the forum and Via dell'Abbondanza, close to the two theatres of the Entertainment District, and bordered by the city wall and the Porta Marina and Porta Stabia gates. Most tourists to the city will walk by my shops without noticing their presence or their importance to the city, although they might notice the shops with counters looking like taverns. The majority of the 93 shops in this area are small structures under four rooms in total. Some are directly connected to the elite houses (popularly known as villas, but correctly identified

as *domus*) that were owned by families of local political importance who also maintained commercial interests, which is in contrast to incorrect 19th & 20th century views that Roman elites avoided direct trade and monetary dealings.

One particular aspect of shops is a favourite of mine: the architecture. Quite a lot of my time is spent at my desk in England analysing field research carried out site and the architecture is often the most revealing because 18th & 19th century excavation records rarely include recordings of finds from the shops despite being rich sources of materials and decorated buildings in their own right. Archaeologists often refer to this type of analysis as 'non-invasive research' because it doesn't require further excavation and damage to ancient structures and landscapes. Pompeii is an excellent site to carry out this type of approach because the wealth of material and speed of early excavations means that much remains to be interpreted from exposed buildings and their contents. It is quite a lot like putting a massive puzzle back together when you don't have an entire understanding of what that puzzle is meant to be.

To keep track of the extensive number of photographs, plans, archival records and my own analysis findings I developed a digital database (along with some generous assistance from Derek Littlewood, [@eggboxderek](#)). I love reading the walls for the information that they provide, with or without their finished decoration, revealing building phases and additions, and most importantly telling archaeologists about reconstruction following the seismic activity, including earthquakes, leading up to the fatal eruption in AD 79. Even details such as the simple thresholds set within shop doorways are thrilling: I can understand how and when these doorways and their doors operated, learn about Roman carpentry and locks and take part in scholarly debates around differences between mezzanines and upper floors and why their different terminology and definitions affect their use.

The *tabernae* of Roman Pompeii: shops & workshops of Region VIII

VIII.4.27

Regio 8 Insula 4 Civico (principal) 27 Ambiente a,b,c,d,e,q Typology & subset D.4+
Civico (secondary) 29

Property name *Pistrinum*
or designation

Other names (legacy) *Pistrinum e domus di Felix, Pistrinum Felici, House and pistrinum of Felix lib. (gens Cornelia?)* with two shops, fabbrica di terracotta, bakery in a remodelled house with 2 shops (26, 28), the bakery (27) and baker's residence (29), panificio, abitazione del fornaio

Early association VIII.4.27
with property

AD 79 association VIII.4.26,27,28,29
with property

Excavation Date 1861
(s)

Taberna Images and Plans Taberna Info Streetside Thresholds Published Records Published Records (cont'd) SSBA-PES denom./SELMO SSBA-PES Diari di Scavo



VIII.4.26 (right), VIII.4.27 (centre) and VIII.4.28 (left), E façade, showing rectangular tuff capitals above doorway at 27, white plaster, one ground floor window and three upper floor windows



Import Photo



VIII.4.27, ground floor



Import Plan

Database record for 8.4.27, The tabernae of Roman Pompeii: shops & workshops of Region VIII. A working example. Copyright Sera Baker, 2016. No use without permission.

And while my PhD research isn't a group project, I depend on the regular exchanges of ideas and discussion of new developments at Pompeii with a number of other researchers. Some of the especially important individuals, projects, and publications, that have impacted my area of research in the recent past include Dr Joanne Berry, Drs Steven Ellis and Eric Poehler of the [Pompeii Archaeological Research Project: Porta Stabia](#), Dr Sophie Hay ([@pompei79](#)), and many, many others.

Sera Baker is currently completing a PhD at The University of Nottingham, UK. She enjoys discussing Roman archaeology on her Twitter feed, [@seraebaker](#). To learn more about Pompeii take a look at [the official archaeological website from the Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Pompei, Ercolano e Stabia](#) (English & Italian; for most complete information use the Italian site).