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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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HERCULANEUM - A CITY RETURNS TO THE SUN

Souvenir Press.

\$4.60 (N.Z.)

Hutchinson Publishing Group Limited, Auckland

P. Bellwood

As the author states clearly in his introduction, this book "though drawing freely on other books, is based mainly on what is perceptible to the eyes and to the emotions at Herculaneum". For those who have not hitherto heard of Herculaneum (a town close to Pompeii, and also buried in the Vesuvius eruption of A.D. 79), the author of the foreword, Frank E. Brown, will arouse your interest with the view that it is "probably archaeology's most flagrant unfinished business". Deiss's descriptions convince one that he may be right, for Herculaneum is a whole town, a microcosm of the Roman world, paralysed in the act of living on August 24th, A.D. 79 - one month after the accession of the emperor Titus. The paralysis was caused by thousands of tons of volcanic mud, which covered the town to a depth of up to 80 feet, and fortunately preserved it rather better than the loose ash covering Pompeii, which was more conducive to systematic ransacking of treasures, although Herculaneum certainly received its share of destruction at the hands of eighteenth century tunnellers - ironical, considering the previous 16 centuries of quiet repose.

Mr Deiss gives us a well-written description of the houses, things, people, art and gossop of Herculaneum: of majestic villas, tenement houses, patrician residences and half-timbered mass-produced houses for the plebs. Shops with food and drink ready for serving, wine ready for selling, a sick boy left to die on his couch, a prisoner to die in a locked room in the Collegium of the Augustales, a Christian cross torn from the wall in haste, an official poster threatening punishment to litterbugs - all these things and more represent the once pulsating life of this provincial Roman town. Yet only a small part has been excavated, for a modern town covers much of its ancient forbear, which is separated from the former by a huge thickness of almost solid sediment.

Herculaneum is without doubt the greatest museum in the world - better, in terms of preservation, than Pompeii. The reason lies in the survival of everyday life. For monumental buildings which show Herculaneum to be the small town it really is, can be seen at Lepcis Magna or Baalbek, and Rome itself. Yet something lacks in all these

places - something which Mr Deiss reveals very well, especially with his references to earthy graffiti and the numerous representations of Priapus. In our terms, the inhabitants of Herculaneum were perhaps straightforward in their views on delicate topics, but they might well leave us far behind in the arts of elegant living. The architecture of many of the houses is superbly adapted to the Mediterranean environment, and within the houses and public buildings, works of art - wall paintings and statuary - brought aesthetic pleasure to an undoubtedly aesthetic population.

The book is designed, therefore, to give a popular account of an amazing discovery, of which three-quarters may still remain to be discovered. The author draws attention to the poor preservation of the site due to lack of money, and to the National Archaeological Museum in Naples where works of art are scattered at random, often without labels, mosaics are set in the floors for visitors to walk on, and where the magnificent mosaic of Alexander and Darius at the Battle of the Issus, from the House of the Faun at Pompeii, is simply stuck on a wall totally out of context (but at least preserved!).

Masonry exposed between 1869 and the present has begun to crumble on re-exposure. Weeds choke the dining rooms of wealthy patricians. In 1963 the reviewer joined an excavation for three weeks at Herculaneum, and came away impressed with the amount of labour involved in the removal of almost rock-hard volcanic mud, in temperatures in the nineties. In 1964 and 1967 I visited the site again, and here, more so at Pompeii, could not fail to be impressed by the obvious good health of head-high weeds. More funds are needed, and Mr Deiss makes this point very well in his closing chapters. I certainly hope that someone will read it.

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