

Dig promises glimpse of good life in up and coming Pompeii

Italy

Tom Kington Pompeii

Archaeologists at Pompeii are hoping to find frescoes, mosaics and skeletons as they start excavating a city block that has been left almost untouched for 2,000 years.

The tops of second-storey walls are emerging as experts carefully dig with picks, trowels and small brushes on a 3,200 sq m site at the heart of the lost Roman city.

"We are about to come into contact with the past, and it's a big unknown. We don't know what awaits us," Gabriel Zuchtriegel, director of the Pompeii archaeological park, said as he knelt to inspect the slowly appearing stonework.

The dig is part of a new golden age of discoveries at Pompeii, which was buried under boiling ash and pumice when Mount Vesuvius erupted in AD79. Archaeologists have uncovered amulets, pendants, furniture, homes, graffiti and even a fast-food counter, as well as frescoes of Narcissus admiring his reflection and Priapus, the god of fertility, weighing his penis on a scale.

A tiny part of the new site, known prosaically as block ten, area nine, was dug out in the 1920s, revealing part of a

bakery and small laundry. Experts say they need 18 months to slowly dig down and uncover who lived behind the shopfronts.

After the ground was checked for Second World War bombs, a drone started monitoring progress from above as ground radar revealed where the walls were. "We can now also analyse the DNA of any skeletons we find and start to see if victims were related to each other," Zuchtriegel, 41, said.

A metal safe for valuables and a fresco of Vesuvius found in neighbouring buildings suggest the area was wealthy, although Zuchtriegel said the presence of the bakery and laundry could point to more middle-class occupants in block ten.

Giuseppe Scarpati, an archaeologist at the site, said the neighbourhood had been coming up in the world. "Before the city was buried they had built a new thermal bath on a nearby corner," he said.

Eyeing one of the walls that protrudes through the newly dug soil, Zuchtriegel said its thickness suggested it was a divider between two properties. Nearby he pointed out disturbed earth next to layers of volcanic pumice and ash. "That suggests someone may have

dug here before but we won't be able to say in what period unless we discover an 18th-century pipe or a Coke can," he said.

Scarpati added: "Unless someone else got there first, or unless the owners managed to clear out as Vesuvius erupted, we could find more frescoes, bodies and bronzes."

Taking a break from digging, Camilla Panziera, an archaeologist, said: "Whatever we find will be the snapshot of an instant."

The block is part of a full third of the city — 54 acres — that has never been dug. Workers are perched about seven metres up on a mound looking out across excavated parts of the city.

The dig, and those preceding it in recent years, is not part of a campaign to excavate the whole city but merely an effort to clear out earth that is at risk of collapsing.

On one side of block ten, where adjacent blocks have already been excavated, a large section of teetering soil collapsed in the 1980s. Zuchtriegel said he was not dreaming of digging up the other 54 acres, despite the treasures they might hide.

"It will be horrible the day everything is dug up," he said. "If they had excavated everything 100 years ago we would have lost so much, given the technology we have today for excavating and preserving. So think what they will have in 100 years' time. Let's leave something for them."

Gli scavi promettono di riportare alla luce momenti di vita nella Pompei che sta emergendo



POMPEII ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARK; TOM KINGTON FOR THE TIMES



A mosaic thought to show Orion is among the treasures discovered in recent digging. Gabriel Zuchriegel, left, expects similar riches from the latest search

Ancient treasure trove

- Recent discoveries at Pompeii have boosted knowledge of life in the ancient city. They include amulets revealing the influence of magic rites, an inscription proving that local gladiator shows featured more than 400 fighters – rivalling the Colosseum in Rome – and graffiti suggesting that the eruption of Vesuvius buried the city in October AD79 and not August, as had been thought.
- In one excavated villa, alongside frescoes of Narcissus and Priapus, an erotically charged fresco of the encounter between the Spartan queen Leda and a swan was found in pristine condition.
- At a fast-food counter, an earthenware container still smelt of wine when it was opened. It was near a house with a rare mosaic showing a half-man, half-scorpion with butterfly wings, thought to be Orion rising to the heavens.
- A dig at a villa on the outskirts of the city has turned up the remains of horses and a ceremonial chariot decorated with bronze and tin medallions depicting satyrs, nymphs and cupids.

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