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THE FACE OF LAKE LEDNICA

A wooden beam decorated with a lifelike human face has been discovered in Lake Lednica, Poland.

Systematic underwater archaeological research in Lake Lednica has been taking place since the 1980s and has uncovered a wealth of material. Among the finds are numerous discoveries associated with a fortified settlement built on Ostrów Lednicki, the largest island in the middle of the lake, in the late 10th century by Mieszko I, a member of the powerful Piast dynasty and the first Christian ruler of Poland.

The realistic human image recently discovered carved into an oak beam was found among the remains of a collection of wooden structures believed to be part of a defensive rampart built by Mieszko I that collapsed shortly after its construction. Dendrochronology indicates that the tree used to make the decorated beam was felled in AD 967, supporting this interpretation. The structural element bearing the face would have faced out towards the water, suggesting that this carving had some kind of apotropaic function, perhaps representing a deity, spirit, or hero intended to protect the inhabitants of the settlement.

The perfectly preserved carved wooden face is an unusual discovery, although a few similar examples are known from places such as Wolin, Novgorod, and Staraya Ladoga. These objects are changing our understanding of the material manifestations of early medieval Slavic spirituality, demonstrating that it was not just monumental statues but also everyday objects, including parts of buildings and palisades, that had a spiritual dimension. The latest discovery also gives further credence to the suggestion that such anthropomorphic representations may have been more common than the surviving number in the archaeological record indicates. Additionally, this remarkable face from Ostrów Lednicki – where Mieszko I's baptism may have taken place in AD 966 – represents a fascinating example of pagan art and apotropaic traditions during a time when Christianity was being established in the country.



LEFT
The face was carved on to a structural wooden beam that would once have faced out towards the lake.

NEWS IN BRIEF

POMPEII REOCCUPIED AFTER ERUPTION

Excavations at Pompeii have uncovered evidence that certain areas of the city were reoccupied after the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79. This had been suggested before, but previous excavations focused on reaching Pompeii's pre-destruction levels overlooked traces of later activity. Recent work in the Insula Meridionalis has now found signs that survivors of the eruption with nowhere else to go returned to the city, where they may have been joined by homeless people from other areas, attracted by both the prospect of a place to live and the possibility of finding valuable items left behind among the rubble. These new inhabitants settled on the upper levels of houses that had re-emerged from ash, while the original ground floors became cellars where hearths, ovens, and mills were established. This disorganised living situation lasted until the 5th century AD, when the area was fully abandoned, possibly as the result of another eruption.



A LOST MAYA STRONGHOLD

When Spanish conquistadors destroyed the Maya city of Lacam-Tún in 1586, its inhabitants, the Lakandon Ch'ol, retreated into the Lacandon jungle of southern Mexico and founded a new capital, known as Sak-Bahlán (meaning 'Land of the White Jaguar'). There they remained, independent from Spanish rule, for more than 100 years. But it was not to last: the Spanish arrived in 1695, and by 1721 the city had been abandoned. Now archaeologists from INAH believe they have pinpointed the location of the lost stronghold. Using a combination of historical documentary sources and GIS (geographic information systems), researchers developed a computer model to predict the location of the city and carried out archaeological fieldwork to investigate this area. The site has now been inscribed in the Public Register of Monuments and Archaeological and Historical Zones as 'Sun and paradise. Probably Sak-Bahlán.'

ARTEFACTS FROM A JAPANESE IMPERIAL BURIAL

The 5th-century Daisen Kofun, in Osaka, is Japan's largest keyhole-shaped burial mound. The tomb, traditionally associated with Emperor Nintoku, was excavated in the late 19th century by local official Kaichiro Kashiwagi, who created drawings of the objects uncovered before returning them to the burial chamber. However, it now seems that he may have kept a couple for his personal collection. Last year, Kokugakuin University Museum acquired two pieces from an art dealer: an ornate gold-plated knife in a cypress sheath and several fragments of gilded iron armour. The artefacts were wrapped in paper dated September 1872, stamped with Kashiwagi's seal, and accompanied by handwritten notes that listed their origin as the Daisen Kofun. Now analysis carried out by the museum appears to confirm this. The rediscovery of these grave goods makes them the first verified objects from the tomb available for modern analysis, as access to the *kofun* is strictly controlled.

RIGHT *Being a Woman in Ancient Pompeii* examines the female inhabitants of the Roman city through the objects they left behind.



Being a woman in ancient Pompeii

An exhibition at the Archaeological Park of Pompeii explores what life was like for Roman women.

Pompeii, frozen in time and perfectly preserved, is uniquely placed to offer insights into aspects of the ancient world that are often overlooked. This was the thesis behind last year's exhibition at the Palestra Grande, *The Other Pompeii* (CWA 125), which focused on the city's less wealthy inhabitants. Now the same approach has been applied to Pompeii's women and girls, using archaeological discoveries to draw out details of their daily lives and the positions they occupied in Roman society.

In the home

The exhibition documents every stage of women's lives, beginning at birth. Childbirth was an important, and dangerous, part of life in the ancient world, posing considerable risk not just to the mother, but also to the child. Infant mortality was high, and girls appear to have been at a further disadvantage, judging by a Roman law that forbade the infanticide of male children but did not extend this to female offspring except in the case of the firstborn. However, daughters could be a source of joy, as we see in a graffito in a small

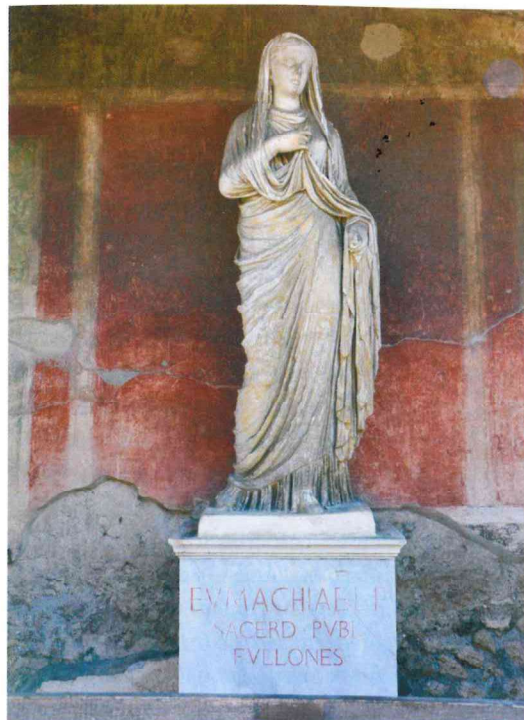
room in Regio VII, which celebrates the birth of baby girl called Juvenilla. There were other women present in the delivery room, too. A set of forceps, which looks startlingly similar to the modern equivalent, may have been used by one of the many women who served as midwives in ancient Pompeii. Elsewhere, we have another piece of medical equipment: a spatula that bears the inscription 'Sperata': this is the only doctor's name known from ancient Pompeii and it belongs, remarkably, to a woman.

The next major milestone for many Roman women was marriage. Following a complex series of rituals, a young woman (sometimes very young – preparation for marriage could begin as early as 11 or 12 years old) became a 'matron'. The matron was a figure strongly associated with the domestic sphere: she held the keys to the house and was responsible for its day-to-day running, managing staff and often controlling the household finances as well. Weaving and spinning to make clothes for the family was another of the matron's responsibilities. Such textile work was a traditional symbol of matronly virtue, and its importance is reflected in the quantity of spindles, whorls, distaffs, bobbins, and loom weights discovered in homes around the city. Women were also expected to keep up certain beauty standards, and many associated objects have been unearthed in Pompeii, from make-up and unguent bottles to combs, hairpins, needles, and mirrors, as well as jewellery, which played an important part in the image of a high-status Roman woman. There are numerous frescoes and statues, too, that demonstrate the changing fashions in female hairstyles and clothing over time. A well-off matron had opportunities for leisure activities as well, including making music, painting, shopping, and spending time with friends.

However, the archetypal Roman matron was not alone in the *domus*. She would have been surrounded by female slaves and servants, ranging from nurses who cared for the children to attendants who helped with textile work and maids who assisted



LEFT Changes in popular fashion and hairstyles are reflected in the female sculptures and frescoes found in Pompeii.



LEFT Eumachia was one of the Pompeii's most important noble women; the inscription below this statue highlights her status as a 'public priestess'.

BELOW This sign on the property owned by Julia Felix advertises the luxurious spaces available for rent within.



with personal grooming. Others worked in the kitchens, preparing and serving meals, and some were expected to provide sexual services to the household as well, as is believed to be the case for a slave girl called Eutychis, whose name is mentioned in a piece of graffiti at the House of the Vettii.

In the public sphere

Outside the home, Roman women were subject to various legal and societal restrictions. Nonetheless, there were many who appear to have wielded considerable financial, social, and even political influence. Eumachia was one of most important women in Pompeii in the early imperial age, famed for commissioning and funding the construction of a monumental building on the eastern side of forum for the benefit of the city. Eumachia was also one of several noble matrons from prominent families who were awarded the title *sacerdos publica* ('public priestess'), suggesting that, unusually for women in the Roman world, they could play an active role in religious ceremonies.

We know of other women, too, at various levels of society, who ran businesses with great success. One, named Holconia, who came from the prominent Holconii family, was entrusted

BELOW This funerary monument, built by Naevoleia Tyche, celebrates the freedwoman's rise through society.



with management of their brick and ceramic factories, and numerous tiles have been found stamped with her name. Another, Julia Felix, established a thriving real-estate enterprise by renting out spaces in her property, which occupied a whole block of Regio II: a large inscription on the wall outside describes the spacious bathhouse, shops, and apartments on offer. Lower down the social order, women were frequently involved in food retail. A woman called Asellina ran one of Pompeii's most famous bars, a fact she proudly proclaimed on the sign outside. Asellina also involved herself in politics – as much as a woman could – by having a message painted on the wall of the tavern encouraging customers to support her preferred candidate in the elections for public office. And, of course, we cannot overlook the world's oldest profession. Numerous graffiti refer to Pompeii's sex workers, of whom there were at least a hundred, ranging from the older women who haunted the city's cemeteries offering their services for pennies to those, like Fortunata, who reportedly charged 23 asses.

Finally, some women are most visible in the memorials they left behind after death. Mamia, another of Pompeii's 'public priestesses', constructed a *schola* tomb directly outside the Porta Ercolano on public land granted to her for her generosity towards the city. Nearby, a freedwoman named Naevoleia Tyche built herself a second funerary monument, covered with decorations proudly proclaiming her and her husband's rise through society. We are reminded, though, of the thousands of women who lacked the resources to create a lasting memorial, as well as all of those who lost their lives in the eruption of Vesuvius.

Whether we know their names and faces or their identities have been lost to time, the women of Pompeii are, at last, being restored to their rightful place in the story of the ancient city. ■

DETAILS

Essere donna nell'antica Pompei

Address: Palestra Grande, Pompeii

Open: until 31 January 2026

Website: <https://pompeisites.org/en/exhibitions/being-a-woman-in-ancient-pompeii/>