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'Pompeii-mania' in schools Down Under

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Abstract

Each year around 11,000 teenagers in the Australian state of New South Wales study the archaeological sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum as a compulsory topic in the senior school subject of Ancient History. Students examine written and archaeological evidence of the everyday lives of ancient people, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, and how the sites were rediscovered and excavated. Most importantly, they learn to critically examine ethical issues relating to the conservation, reconstruction and interpretation of Pompeii and Herculaneum and how they affect tourism and heritage management in Italy today. The topic has become so popular that it can best be described as a 'Pompeii-mania' which has spawned a thriving 'industry' of conferences, textbooks, university courses and even school trips to Italy. In this paper I explain how 'Pompeii-mania' developed, its impact on teachers and students, and provide evidence of its influence on students' choices of university subject.

Keywords

 Pompeii, Herculaneum, Ancient History, Archaeology, Schools, Australia

Introduction

At around the same time Lieutenant James Cook was exploring the east coast of 'Terra Australis' and claiming it for the British Empire in 1770, the ancient sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum were slowly being revealed for the Bourbon monarch Ferdinand IV under the careful management of Spanish engineer Francesco La Vega; a new world was being colonised while an old one was being resurrected. And now, although separated by 2000 years and thousands of kilometres, the famous 'Cities of Vesuvius' and the state of New South Wales are linked by a distinctively modern phenomenon that can best be described as 'Pompeii-mania'.

Each year around 11,000 Australian teenagers study the archaeological sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum as a compulsory topic in the senior high school subject of Ancient History. The topic was first introduced in 1994 as a non-compulsory option in Ancient History to interest teenagers in Roman archaeology and social history. It became so popular with teachers and students that in 2006, when the New South Wales Board of Studies was required to designate a compulsory topic for examination that would appeal to the majority of students, curriculum developers decided to make *The Cities of Vesuvius: Pompeii and Herculaneum* the topic that all candidates would study.

The inadvertent result was the creation of a 'Pompeii-mania' phenomenon that can be measured by the steady numbers of students who choose to study Ancient History each year. A thriving academic

industry has also emerged that has produced many textbooks, research articles, teacher conferences, student study days, and even school trips to Italy. The longer-term impact of this phenomenon can be measured by the numbers of students who are so inspired by their experience of Ancient History at school that they choose to study Ancient History and Archaeology at university.

School students are valuable members of ‘the public’

Generally speaking, the research focus of archaeology education tends to be at university level, both in Australia and elsewhere (Burke & Smith 2007; Colley 2002; Smardz & Smith 2000). School children and teachers are often left out of definitions of ‘the public’ except when they are composed by those directly involved in teaching archaeology to school children at sites, museums or in schools (see Corbishley 2011; Kehoe 1994; Nichols et al. 2005; Owen & Steele 2005; Smardz Frost 2004). If schools are generally considered to be a primary place for the transmission of society’s knowledge, values and beliefs from one generation to the next (Davis 2000), then it is reasonable to expect that they should be recognised as key places where interpretations of the past are produced, reproduced, enacted and interpreted (Jeppson & Brauer 2003). Teachers, children and young adults are valuable members of ‘the public’ who can be actively interested in learning about archaeology, and when given the opportunity, enthusiastically participate in excavations and analyses of data. They are important stakeholders and a potential audience - or in economic terms, a ‘market’ - for the dissemination of archaeological information.

School teachers and students began to emerge as a significant subset of ‘the public’ in New South Wales during the 1980s when archaeology was first introduced into the newly-constructed subject of Ancient History. Since then interest and numbers have steadily increased over the years in response to curriculum change, and this has subsequently created a need in the teaching and learning

community for current and accurate information about archaeology and access to authentic archaeological sites and artefacts (Zarmati 2015; Zarmati & Frappell 2009).

Organization of the history curriculum in New South Wales, Australia

Australia is comprised of six states and two territories (Figure 1), and although a new national curriculum has now been implemented for all Australian children aged 5 to 16 (ACARA 2016a), at the time of writing this article, each state is still responsible for developing its own senior secondary curriculum for students aged 16 to 18 years in the final two years of schooling. Since 2000 New South Wales has offered three senior history subjects: Ancient History, Modern History and History Extension. These courses are developed by the New South Wales Board of Studies, Training and Education Standards (BOSTES). *The Cities of Vesuvius: Pompeii and Herculaneum* is the core study within the subject of Ancient History and all students must answer compulsory questions on it in their final examination. In order to understand the ‘Pompeii-mania’ phenomenon that has emerged over the last ten years, it is necessary to briefly examine how the subject of Ancient History has developed in New South Wales since the early years of this former British colony to the present.



Fig. 1. Map of Australia showing the state of New South Wales (B.Wood).

A brief history of Ancient History in New South Wales

By the late 19th century, as part of the desire

to educate the European settlers in the British colonies of Australia, schools and a handful of fledgling universities had firmly embedded studies of Ancient Greek, Latin and Ancient History into their curricula. These courses were distinctively British in character and based on the Oxford/Cambridge tradition of the 'Great Civilisations' as models for imperial progress.

In the 1960s and early 1970s university academics, rather than practising teachers, were responsible for developing the curriculum and examinations for the secondary school subject of Ancient History. Professors Edwin Judge of Macquarie University and Greg Stanton of the University of New England Armidale (both members of the Ancient History syllabus development committee) noticed that Latin was in decline in secondary schools as a result of broader changes in society. They proposed that school students would benefit from access to a wider variety of written sources and ancient cultures, thereby gaining a broader understanding of the ancient world in relation to their own. They suggested that the school subject of Ancient History could be made more appealing if students could read written texts in translation from a broader range of ancient cultures.

This move was strongly opposed by two academics from the University of Sydney's Classics Department who argued that such radical changes would only lead to a decline in the number of students studying Latin and Ancient History at university because they would be using texts in translation rather than the 'original source' in Latin or Greek. Judge counter-argued that if students enjoyed studying Ancient History in secondary school they would be more likely to choose the subject at university. "Our subject [Ancient History] is being increasingly called upon to give [secondary school] students their only introduction to the ancient world and we are surely justified in seeking to make it as a full one as possible" (Judge 1966, cited in Schmidt 1998, pp. 53-54). Classical texts in translation were eventually included in the Ancient History syllabus in the late 1970s and, as Judge and Stanton predicted, many students who had

enjoyed studying Ancient History in secondary school went on to study Ancient History and Archaeology at university.

Under Judge's leadership as founding professor, Macquarie University's Department of Ancient History was proactive in training and supporting teachers to help build the subject in schools. By the end of the 1980s Macquarie University's Department of Ancient History had produced a large cohort of graduates who had become secondary school teachers, and they in turn communicated their passion for Ancient History in New South Wales classrooms. A symbiotic relationship developed whereby Macquarie University staff supported its graduate teachers in their classroom practice of Ancient History, and those teachers influenced their own students' choice to study Ancient History and Archaeology at Macquarie University.

Addition of archaeology in the 1980s and 1990s

Archaeology was first included in New South Wales secondary Ancient History courses in the early 1980s at the same time the Australian government was promoting a social policy of multiculturalism, and when the children of parents who had migrated to Australia after World War Two from the 'Old World' cultures of Europe, the Mediterranean and Middle East were in secondary school or university. It also coincided with the popularisation of archaeology in the media in the form of the swash-buckling Indiana Jones, and more academically reliable BBC documentaries such as Michael Wood's *In Search of the Trojan War* (1985).

Syllabus designers, academics and teachers remained committed to retaining the text-based approach (in translation) to sources of evidence, but perhaps in response to an increased interest in archaeology in popular culture, decided to include archaeology and the ancient cultures of Egypt, Assyria, Persia and Israel. Teachers could teach with an emphasis on either 'Written Evidence' or 'Archaeological Evidence' and select topics from Greek, Roman or Near Eastern cultures. This dual approach

proved to be quite popular and encouraged more teachers to become interested in learning about archaeology so they could incorporate it into their lessons.

The revised 1994 syllabus was a turning point in the construction of the subject because for the first time written *and* archaeological sources were seamlessly integrated. The definition of 'archaeology' was broadened to include its function as an investigative science, and the geographical and temporal sweep of topics was widened. This included ancient China, India, ancient human remains (mummies, European Bog Bodies, Ötzi the Iceman), Aztecs, the Tomb of Tutankhamun, the Celts and, most importantly, Aboriginal people of ancient Australia. Pompeii and Herculaneum were introduced as optional topics, but at this stage were not compulsory.

Figure 2, compiled from BOSTES examination data, shows that the numbers of candidates choosing Ancient History began to increase significantly around 1998 when the integrated 1994 syllabus began to take effect. The new contemporary and controversial topics proved to be of great interest to teenagers. They appealed to their fascination with ancient

mysteries and provided opportunities for students to develop their own interpretations of the past.

Further change came in 1999 when the New South Wales curriculum was completely restructured to offer only one level of study (as opposed to three) for most subjects. Ancient History was revised accordingly; however, most of the topics remained the same as in the 1994 version. The impact of this change can be seen from 2000 when the number of candidates increased dramatically from 7,475 in 2000 to 10,191 in 2005. This represents a 36% rise for the subject, compared with a total rise of candidates of only 5% for the same period. Following the success of Ancient History in New South Wales, the state of Queensland also introduced a senior Ancient History course in 2001 which included archaeology, and Pompeii and Herculaneum as an optional topic.

In 2006 the New South Wales Board of Studies was required to designate a topic that all Ancient History students would study so that their examination results could be moderated. After extensive consultation with teachers around the state it was decided that *Cities of Vesuvius: Pompeii and Herculaneum*

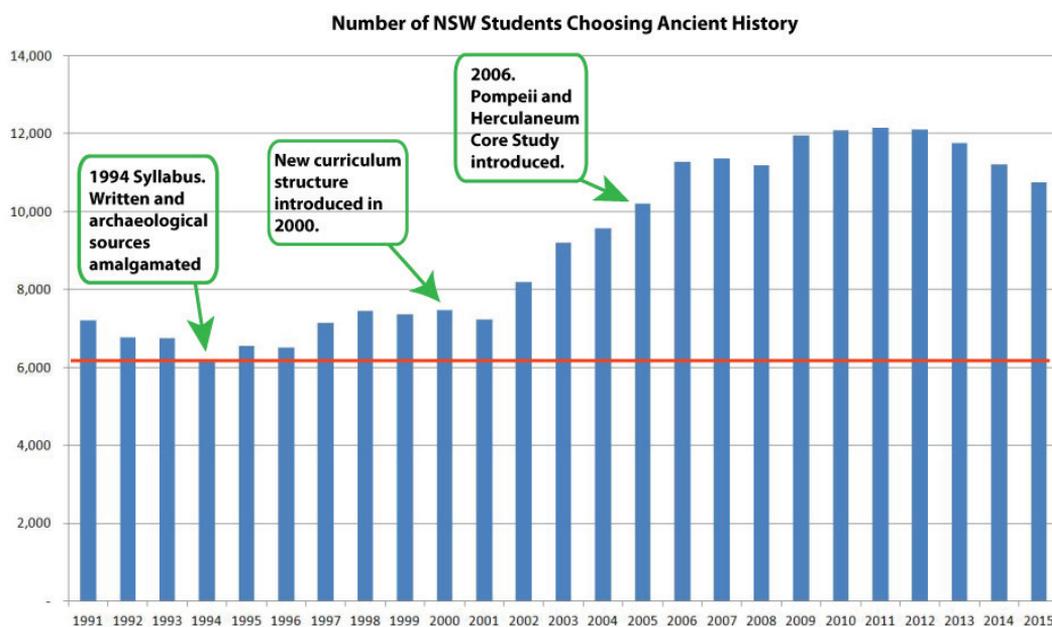


Fig. 2. Number of students choosing to study Ancient History increased from the 1990s.

was the most suitable because of its general appeal. The topic has become so popular that Ancient History is now one of the top 6 elective subjects chosen by students to study for their matriculation. What is it about the history and archaeology of Pompeii and Herculaneum that captures the interest and imagination of around 11,000 teenagers 'Down Under' in Australia each year and attracts them, and their teachers, to the study of Ancient History?

Why study Pompeii and Herculaneum?

The study of Ancient History allows students to develop empathetic understanding of people with the detachment of at least two millennia so that they can examine problematic and controversial issues. The emphasis of the course is not only on acquiring factual information about ancient cultures, but also on developing students' investigative skills as historians and archaeologists.

Pompeii and Herculaneum were rediscovered over 200 years ago, and their remarkable state of preservation still provides a poignant window into everyday life during the Roman Empire. They appeal to teenagers because they are places of natural disaster and human tragedy that have a (deceptively) 'frozen in time' appearance (Allison 1992). As a student wrote after seeing the skeletons in the waterfront boatsheds at Herculaneum in 2005, "Herculaneum is truly awesome. You can actually see the real bodies of people who died in the eruption."

Evidence of the popularity of Ancient History over the last 10 years can be seen in data gathered from the BOSTES website (2016b) and reported in Figure 2. The number of students who chose Ancient History increased when the *Cities of Vesuvius: Pompeii and Herculaneum* became the core study in 2006. This is a significant impact considering 75% of the syllabus remained unchanged from the previous 2000 version. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the addition of Pompeii and Herculaneum is primarily responsible for the increase in student numbers. Although numbers slightly fluctuated and then decreased in 2014 and 2015, overall they have

averaged 11,500 students per year since 2006. This means that in the last 10 years a total of just under 116,000 students in one Australian state alone have studied the topic in their final year of high school.

A view of the cities of Vesuvius from 'Down Under'

Ancient History students spend 10 weeks in their final year of high school studying Pompeii and Herculaneum. The topic covers a broad scope of factual information, such as the history of the sites, the early discovery and brief history of the excavations, and how Pompeii and Herculaneum have been interpreted and represented by scholars and in popular culture over time. Students use the heuristic of historical inquiry to examine written sources of evidence, such as Pliny the Younger's account of the eruption, as well as official inscriptions and graffiti, and critically examine the limitations and reliability of sources.

One of the strengths of the course that make it so popular is its focus on archaeology. Students examine public buildings, private houses, public spaces such as streets and the Forum, wall paintings, statues, mosaics, and organic and animal remains. They also delve into the scientific aspects of archaeology by examining volcanological evidence for the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE, and forensic studies of human remains uncovered at Pompeii and Herculaneum. Most importantly, students develop skills of critical thinking by exploring a range of controversial and ethical issues relating to reconstruction, ownership and custodianship of the past, such as conservation and reconstruction, the impact of tourism and the study and display of human remains.

Teachers' professional knowledge of Pompeii and Herculaneum

As a result of the demand created by the introduction of Pompeii and Herculaneum, an industry of resources designed to make current and accurate information more accessible to teachers and students has developed in the last 10 years.

In order to master the content knowledge required to teach the topic at a deep level, it has been necessary for teachers to undertake specialist professional learning, and much of this has been done in their own time out of work hours. It is not unusual to see between 100 to 200 teachers who have travelled from all around New South Wales in a university lecture theatre on a Saturday morning, eager to learn the latest information about Pompeii and Herculaneum, and Ancient History in general. Support has been provided by the New South Wales History Teachers' Association (HTA NSW), the Macquarie Ancient History Association (MAHA) and specially-designed professional learning courses provided by universities, such as University of Sydney and Macquarie University. Well-known, Australian scholars with internationally recognised expertise such as Professor Jean-Paul Descoeudres, Professor Frank Sear, Dr Estelle Lazer, Dr Penelope Allison, Dr Jaye McKenzie-Clark, Associate Professor Kathryn Welch and Dr Steven Ellis have contributed by lecturing at professional learning days and student study days, writing scholarly publications and textbooks, and even operating as tour guides at Pompeii and Herculaneum for Australian teachers and students.

World-renowned experts such as Professor Fausto Zevi (1996) and Professor Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (2008) were invited to present a series of lectures to teachers and the general public around Australia. In 2013 Sarah Court from the Herculaneum Conservation Project, Christian Biggi, Manager of the Herculaneum Centre and Australian Pompeii specialist Dr Estelle Lazer were jointly sponsored by Academy Travel and HTA NSW to present the *Cities of Vesuvius Professional Development Tour* at a number of schools in Sydney and in regional New South Wales. One excited teacher from a rural school exclaimed, "I have died and gone to heaven – a whole day of archaeology!" (Hurley 2016). Two 'block-buster' Pompeii exhibitions have attracted record numbers of visitors to museums. In 1994-95 the Australian Museum in Sydney hosted *Rediscovering Pompeii*; in 2010 Melbourne Museum and the

Western Australian Museum presented *A Day in Pompeii* and provided tailor-made learning materials and activities for school children. Two university museums, the University of Sydney's Nicholson Museum and Macquarie University's Museum of Ancient Cultures, have both developed hands-on archaeology education programs for school students and continue to provide specialised sessions on Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Many teachers have completed postgraduate studies and scholarly research on Pompeii and Herculaneum in Italy and at Australian universities. For example, in 2005 while teaching Ancient History in a New South Wales high school, I was awarded a travelling history scholarship sponsored by the Premier of New South Wales to further the professional study of history teachers. I travelled to Italy to conduct research on Italian archaeologist Amedeo Maiuri which was published in the teachers' professional journal (Zarmati 2006). And as a requirement for his Master's degree in Ancient History at Macquarie University, high school teacher Robert Brown spent 8 years working as an archaeologist with the *Pompeii Food and Drink Project* and published the results of his research (Brown 2013; 2015).

Several textbooks written by teachers according to the requirements of the syllabus, and in language targeted to the cognitive abilities and literacy levels of 16 year-olds, appeared as soon as the new topic was introduced and are still in use today (Bradley 2005; Brennan & Lazer 2005; Cameron & Lawless 2006; Zarmati 2005). Websites, on-line examination coaching businesses and videos have been produced. HTA NSW contributed to Italian film maker Marcellino de Baggis's documentary about Amedeo Maiuri (2007), and Australian video producer Phil Sheppard made two DVDs at the insistence of his daughter, who had studied Pompeii at school and believed there was a need for a comprehensive tour of the sites targeted to the needs of students (2008). Many teachers even organize excursions for their students to visit Pompeii, Herculaneum and other sites in Italy.

School excursions to Italy

Academy Travel is a privately-owned travel company located in Sydney that specializes in providing around 30 school tours each year that focus on specific subject areas across the school curriculum, especially tours to Rome and the Bay of Naples. Its *Rome and the Cities of Vesuvius* tour was designed by academic experts to follow the New South Wales Ancient History syllabus. The tour gives students a broad understanding of the historical context in which Pompeii and Herculaneum developed, as well as providing a detailed examination of private and public life, the economy, building, art and religion in the ancient cities. There is particular emphasis on the use of both archaeological and written historical sources in constructing and discussing evidence. One of the highlights is being guided around Pompeii by Dr Estelle Lazer who published her study of the skeletal remains of Pompeii in *Resurrecting Pompeii* (2009). Since 2006, the Pompeii and Herculaneum core study has contributed to the growth of Academy Travel's business. There has been a steady increase in numbers of schools that have undertaken field trips to Italy to visit Pompeii and Herculaneum, as well as other Roman sites and European countries. Director of Academy Travel Robert Veel believes: "the distinctive thing is that the archaeological focus of the core study means that there is a real benefit in visiting the sites, rather than just reading about them or watching documentaries."

Tumut is a small rural town in the south-western New South Wales with a population of around 11,500 people (Figure 1). In 2015 Tumut High School had a total enrolment of 537 students who came from within the town and surrounding communities. Each year students and teachers from the school undertake a cultural tour of Europe to visit Italy (Rome, Pompeii and Herculaneum) and World War One battlefields and museums in France and Belgium. Airfares and accommodation for four teachers, and scholarships for disadvantaged students are provided by a generous bequest to the city of Tumut by Mrs Lillian Maude Blakeney Millar. About 300 students from this

small country town have visited Italy since the school trips started in 2003, and the cultural tours have had a big impact on the school and local community. For many Tumut High School students, who have never even visited the cities of Sydney or Canberra, the trip to Italy is a big event in their lives because it is their first time away from home and outside Australia.



Fig. 3. Three students from Tumut High School during their tour of Pompeii (Photo K. Hayes).

Impact of school Ancient History on university choices

For over 30 years Macquarie University's Department of Ancient History has offered an undergraduate subject called *Archaeology in Society*. The course is an introduction to the archaeology of ancient Mediterranean societies, with particular focus on Greek and Roman cultures. Students investigate the results of archaeological fieldwork and examine the material remains of these societies. One of its strengths is that it incorporates hands-on analytical analyses of artefacts in Macquarie University's Museum of Ancient Cultures.

In 2016, 75 students out of a total of 113 registered in the *Archaeology in Society* course responded to a SurveyMonkey questionnaire of 13 questions to determine the impact of their experience (if any) of learning Ancient History at school on their choice to study Ancient History and/or Archaeology at university. Three targeted questions elicited information about students and their motivations for choosing *Archaeology in Society*:

- ◆ 81% of respondents were aged between 18 and 30 years;

- ◆ 63% of respondents had studied Ancient History in New South Wales at high school;
- ◆ 44% of the 63% who had studied senior Ancient History at high school said it had a positive influence on their choice to study Archaeology in Society at Macquarie University.

The age range of the students indicates that 63% of students had studied Ancient History after the 1994 syllabus had amalgamated written sources with archaeology, and broadened the temporal and cultural parameters to include archaeological sites such as Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Eleven students stated explicitly that Pompeii and Herculaneum was their favourite topic when they studied Ancient History at school. One student commented: “I really enjoyed Ancient Rome and Greece, as well as the Mayan and Aztec civilisations. They greatly impacted my choice to study Ancient History because I enjoyed the class in high school so much.” Another said: “Studying the Roman Republic and Pompeii [at school] greatly influenced me to study Ancient History [at university].” Another commented: “My experience studying Ancient History in school was a major influence on my choice to study in university. In particular, I had a fantastic history teacher in my last three years of school who made history even more enjoyable and encouraged me to teach history. Going on a trip to Rome and Naples also influenced my decision as it was such an incredible experience seeing history in front of you.” These statements by tertiary students justify Professors Judge and Stanton’s argument that if students enjoyed studying Ancient History in secondary school, they would be more likely to choose the subject at university.

Conclusion

The future is looking positive for studies of the ancient past in Australia. For the first time in Australia’s history, a national curriculum is in the process of being implemented in every school for students aged 5 to 16 years (ACARA 2016a). A new national Ancient History course has been developed for senior secondary

students (aged 16 to 18 years), and some states will be offering it in the final two years of high school. The national course follows the same progressive formula as the New South Wales Ancient History course with a mixture of topics from ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome and the Near East, and uses a combination of written and archaeological sources of evidence (ACARA 2016b). One of the options for study is *Pompeii and Herculaneum, 80 BC–AD 79*, so there is a distinct possibility that ‘Pompeii-mania’ may spread to other states of Australia in the next few years. It is also worth noting that the study of Pompeii and Herculaneum - and archaeology in general - in the high school curriculum is helping to build in the next generation of Australian citizens a greater awareness and appreciation of Australia’s rich archaeological resources, especially our Indigenous past, in the wider context of world heritage.

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