

**‘We know both a lot more and a lot less about Pompeii than we think’ (Mary Beard).
Could the same be said about Troy?**

Before we can begin to apply Beard’s statement about Pompeii to Troy, we must first establish what the statement means in relation to Pompeii. In attempting to do this, the two cities will also be brought into contrast in terms of our discovery of, and relationship with, them.

Beard states that ‘we simultaneously know a huge amount and very little about ancient life [in Pompeii]’ (Beard 2008: 15), and, in order to understand what exactly we know so much and little about, we must discuss each of these things in turn. First, we know a vast amount about Pompeii in terms of the huge wealth of archaeological evidence that has been preserved, to a yet unparalleled degree, thus giving us a rich and comprehensive insight into the life of a Roman city. In addition, Pompeii has such a wealth of archaeological evidence that we now have been able to piece together wide-ranging theories about Roman living spaces¹, and even the horticulture, structure and role of the garden in reflecting social status.²

However, we must remember the boundaries and limitations of the remains of Pompeii.

Although we get extraordinary insight into ancient life through Pompeiian remains, this does not mean that we have a complete and undisputed image of the city. It may seem surprising that despite the many, potentially trivial details we know about the town, such as the identification of intestinal parasites found on the rim of a lavatory (Beard 2008: 16), we still are in the dark as to

¹ See Wallace-Hadrill (1994)

² See Jashemski (1993)

how many people actually lived in Pompeii, where the sea was in relation to the city,³ and even when the eruption actually took place.⁴

Having now established why ‘we simultaneously know a huge amount and very little about ancient life [in Pompeii]’, we must now approach the crux of the question, and deal with the ‘Pompeii paradox’ of knowing more and less about the city *than we think*. (Beard 2008: 15). What is meant by this statement is our inability, despite the wealth of evidence available to us, to appreciate Pompeii for what it was, and, to some extent, still is. When we think about Pompeii, all we think about is AD 79 and, at a push, the earthquake of 62 BC. We are unable to get to grips with the fact that the eruption is only one moment in the life of a city, and so we ignore Pompeii’s history both before, and indeed after, the eruption. This is not only a terrible shame, as, if we tried, we could learn a great deal about the changing face of Pompeii over hundreds of years,⁵ but our exclusive focus on AD 62 and 79 is itself detrimental to our understanding of this very period. Let us take as an example the Forum in Pompeii, which, when excavated, was found to contain no statues. Limiting our focus to AD 79, our interpretation of this absence must be explained by the fact that there simply were no statues there. However, when we look at Pompeii’s slightly later history, we discover that the emperor Titus appointed officials to oversee the post-eruption restoration of the area, and this may have resulted in the salvaging of the statues. This is particularly plausible as open spaces would have been more accessible to

³ Mooring rings for boats are found on the wall near the Marine Gate, suggesting that the sea came up to the walls of the city itself, however Roman structures have been identified further west (i.e. in the direction of the sea), which could not have been constructed underwater (Beard 2008: 16-17).

⁴ The traditional dates of the eruption are the 24 and 25 August 79, but the nutritional remains suggest a more autumnal date, and recent discoveries, such as a coin that could not have been minted until September that year, and a charcoal inscription dated to mid-October both suggest a later date for the eruption.

⁵ The earliest material found in Pompeii is prehistoric, while there is also evidence of a Neolithic presence in the area (a hand axe found near the Nola Gate), and a Bronze age deposit of material near the Nuceria Gate is considered sufficient evidence of a settlement, although its extent is unknown (Ling 2005: 29).

salvagers. This would leave the forum empty for archaeologists to find (Ling 2005: 155-156).

This means that we know a lot more than we think, because we have the resources to understand Pompeii's life as an evolving and changing city rather than just a single snapshot of a town frozen in time, and a lot less, because we only allow ourselves to look at that moment, than we think.

Troy, in many ways is similar to this, although the two cities, at first glance, couldn't be more different; in fact, they are mirror images of each other. Unlike Pompeii, Troy has relatively limited archaeological evidence, yet Homer's Troy was never lost - it is the most famous and well-imagined city in the ancient world, while Pompeii was forgotten for centuries.⁶ These cities have both, in fact, followed opposite paths in our understanding of them: Pompeii's material evidence allowed us mentally to imagine and reconstruct the town, while Homer handed us an imaginary space for which we have had to find the material remains. But in a way, the fact that these two cities are mirror images of each other means of course that if we have a Pompeii paradox, we need to look for a what we might call a "Troy tease".

Applying this principle, we must analyze Beard's statement 'we simultaneously know a huge amount and very little about ancient life' in relation to Troy. On the one hand, we do know a massive amount about Troy, thanks to the earliest and most influential piece of classical literature available to us, the *Iliad*. In fact, many classical archaeologists believe that Homer's topographical description of Troy needed to be accurate enough for people to recognize it, and thus they have grounds to use these descriptions as evidence of Troy's topography (Korfmann 2007: 23-24).

⁶ The town even lost its name, and became known locally as La Civita (the city)

However, this very position also points to the fact that we know less than we think. The theory of Homer's accurate topography has been dismissed by many, and it has been suggested that neither Homer, nor the majority of his audience, would ever have visited Troy, despite being aware of its story, and so his descriptions need not be very accurate at all (Latacz 2007, 40). Additionally, we must remember that this is a work of fiction, not a geographical treatise, so even those familiar with Troy would not expect to see Troy's topography represented perfectly by him – not to mention his legendary blindness!

Furthermore, Homer was composing the *Iliad* 500 years after the Trojan War is now thought to have taken place, and so he is an untrustworthy witness. This is not to say, however, that details of Homer's Troy may not reach back, through rhapsodes, to the thirteenth century.⁷ Homer's account does in fact contradict much of the archaeological record (for example, although new and larger boundaries to Troy VI and VIIa (Hector's Troy) have been found recently (Korfmann 2007: 24), the traditional view is that the city in the thirteenth century was much smaller than the one described in Homer). On top of the unreliability of literary sources, the material remains are not extensive (as Schliemann, in his hurry to find Hector's Troy, dug through the later archaeology, including the 'Troy' that we now consider to be that of the *Iliad*). Additionally, not only was Schliemann's zealous attempt to make the evidence fit the story detrimental⁸ (he destroyed huge amounts of the city), but it also makes our current understanding of the site unreliable, as our evidence was collected by selective rather than comprehensive sampling.

Now we must see whether we know simultaneously *both more and less*. This is a question easily answered by looking at our obsession with *Hector's* Troy. We know a lot more about Troy than

⁷ See Wood (1985: 89-91).

⁸ His wishful thinking is shown through his naming of the treasure he found 'Priam's Treasure', although it was 1000 years too early!

we think because we are exclusively interested in thirteenth-century Troy at the time of the Trojan War (like our obsession with AD 79 Pompeii), and so there is a far greater breadth and depth of knowledge to be had by looking at the other archaeological evidence (not exclusive to Troy VI and VIIa) that is available to us. We ignore the history of the city before and after the war.⁹

Therefore, paradoxically, we know a lot less about Troy than we think, because we hold the misguided opinion that Homer's version of thirteenth century Troy is the only Troy, and so, having established as much as possible about this city, we believe ourselves to have deciphered the city as a whole. Our picture of Homer's Troy as the authentic Troy is in itself ill-informed, because we forget that Homer's city is far from that of Hector, because Homer was already using the story for his own purposes, making it relevant to his contemporary, Iron-Age, audience, at a time where the future of the noble class was in jeopardy (Latacz 2007: 37). This means that our 'authentic' Troy is in fact a fiction, and Schliemann was searching for an imaginary city, which left him, unsurprisingly, disappointed.

Not only do we know both less *and* more than we think about Troy, because of our oversimplification of the multifaceted nature of the city, but we are also in the same situation in terms of the very interpretations of the city available to us. In the recent exhibition, *Troy: myth and reality*, at the British Museum, an effort was made to bridge the gaps between the different Troys (exhibiting Trojan artefacts, later Greek, and then modern, interpretations of the myth of the city). The Trojan war has been appropriated to represent many wars throughout history as if it were the archetype of warfare: for example, the myth was adopted by the Americans during their Civil War, World War II (relatedly, Lombardo's translation of the *Iliad* even has a photo of the

⁹If Schliemann had paid more attention to the later, Greek and Roman, city, he would have been aware of the fact that Hector's Troy was far closer to the surface than he imagined.

D-Day landings for its cover page) and the Korean and Vietnam Wars. However, the Trojan War, let us not forget, was a war fought in what is now modern Turkey, and represented, according to Herodotus (1.5), the conflict between Asia Minor and Europe (i.e. between East and West). The BM exhibition attempts to cover this topic with the inclusion of Shaw-Stewart's poem written near Gallipoli, *I Saw a Man this Morning*, which includes the lines 'stand in the trench, Achilles, flame-capped and shout for me', illustrating how conscious Shaw-Stewart and other classically-educated schoolboys were of the parallels between the Gallipoli campaign and the Trojan war¹⁰. However, this only represents the Western response to Gallipoli- there is another, unexplored side to Troy, that of the Ottoman victors of 'the battle of Çanakkale'. The New Republic of Turkey was founded on the national pride gained from the victory of Gallipoli which was seen as the avenging of their 'ancestors', the Trojans. The Turks' perspective of Troy, and their appropriation of the story to reflect themselves, is expressed perfectly in the words of Yeni Mecmau, writing in 1918 from Homer's point of view, stating that '[m]y main works should not be read anymore' because, 'O famous warriors of Troy! Although your attacks are so brilliant... they are dull compared to the struggles and efforts of the Turks' (Uslu 2017: 195-196).

Having explored whether or not 'we know both more and less about [Troy] than we think', we have established that both Troy and Pompeii are inherently similar, as they are both approached and understood as single moments in the life of a rich and vibrant city, and consequently, their other stories are left untold. The key to the Trojan tease and Pompeiian paradox is that all the information is there if we only knew how to use it. So in this way, we think that we know both more, as we ignore most of the cities' histories, and less, as consequently that same ignorance means that we cannot unlock further available information. Our understanding of these cities has come from completely different directions, as our knowledge of Pompeii began with the

¹⁰ Further parallels include the pointed deployment of the HMS Agamemnon, and the use of an armoured 'Trojan horse' landing-craft (Uslu 2017: 194)

material remains and has spread out into fiction, ranging from Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* to Harris' *Pompeii* - and of course Caecilius' role in the (school-going) public imagination should not be overlooked! At the same time, Troy was a city that starts fully formed in literature, and then, in a backwards movement, an attempt has been made to back up the fiction with archaeology. One is a journey from fact to fiction, while the other, one from fiction to fact.

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