Case Study 3: The Archaeology of a Text and a Culture

Setting
In 79 CE Mt. Vesuvius in the region of Campania erupted, levelling cities, taking thousands of lives and leaving an indelible impression upon the landscape and our collective memory. Almost 1700 years later, Charles of Bourbon, the King of Naples, issued orders for the construction of a summer palace south of the city and, as the workmen were building the foundation, they uncovered the remains of Herculaneum, an ancient seaside resort town covered by more than 60 feet of ash and pumice. From this initial work in 1738, scholars and tourists have studied and explored this site, the much larger city of Pompeii further south along the Bay of Naples, and individual villas destroyed by the cataclysmic eruption of the volcano.

One particular villa in Herculaneum, the house of Julius Caesar’s father-in-law Lucius Calpurnius Piso, was a lovely seaside summer resort, replete with gardens, fountains, and an elaborate complex of buildings. The main structure included all of the standard components of a Roman villa of the 1st century BCE – an atrium, an impluvium to catch rainfall, a peristyled garden, reception and living quarters, and a triclinium for dining and entertaining guests. Piso’s villa, however, reflected both his status and his wealth – the grounds were littered with statues and busts, shaded walkways that wound their way through multiple sculpture gardens, not one but two peristyles, two swimming pools, and a library of papyrus scrolls badly charred and, at first blush, unrecoverable and indecipherable.

Plan of Piso’s villa, drawn by Karl Weber in the 1750’s (Wikipedia)
Excavations of this most luxurious of Herculaneum’s homes have focused on Piso’s library, which contains the charred remains of nearly 2,000 papyrus scrolls. Now known as the “Villa of the Papryi,” the home containing Piso’s collection of mostly philosophical texts – many by Philodemus, an Epicurean philosopher of the 1st century BCE – has provided a window on literature unavailable until now. The application of advanced technology – particularly the use of lasers – has allowed scholars to read texts that the original excavators deemed unrecoverable.

Case Study: Petronius’ Satyricon

Let us imagine that among the papyrus scrolls is one which contains the text of Petronius’ Satyricon, and that this text was unknown until its discovery at the villa (in fact, we have been in possession of this work since antiquity, and the novel has had a long and infamous career due to its content). As the historian assigned this work, you relish the opportunity to publish this remarkable piece of literature. But first, you have some reconstructive work you must do to help readers place this text in its appropriate context. In so doing, you will conduct the “archaeology of the text” and use it as a means of presenting the “archaeology of a culture.” Because of the length of what has
survived, you begin with that portion that seems virtually intact – the dinner at Trimalchio’s house, or the Cena Trimalchionis.

Read the Cena in your copy of Petronius’ Satyricon and then prepare answers to the following questions for our class discussion:

When encountering a new piece of evidence such as this one …
- what questions can you ask?
- what distinguishes this work from other Roman literary works?
- what conclusions can you draw?
- what kinds of evidence can you use?
- what can you learn about Roman social customs?
- to what extent can you trust this work as a reliable picture of Petronius’ world?

What is your impression of Trimalchio? To what segment of Roman society would he belong? Do you think the household of Trimalchio presents a typical Roman family? Would you have enjoyed attending this dinner? Why or why not?

To help you with this case study, read the appended essays at the end of volume.