



Women in Pompeii

Author(s): Elizabeth Lyding Will

Source: *Archaeology*, Vol. 32, No. 5 (September/October 1979), pp. 34-43

Published by: Archaeological Institute of America

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41726375>

Accessed: 16-05-2018 12:55 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

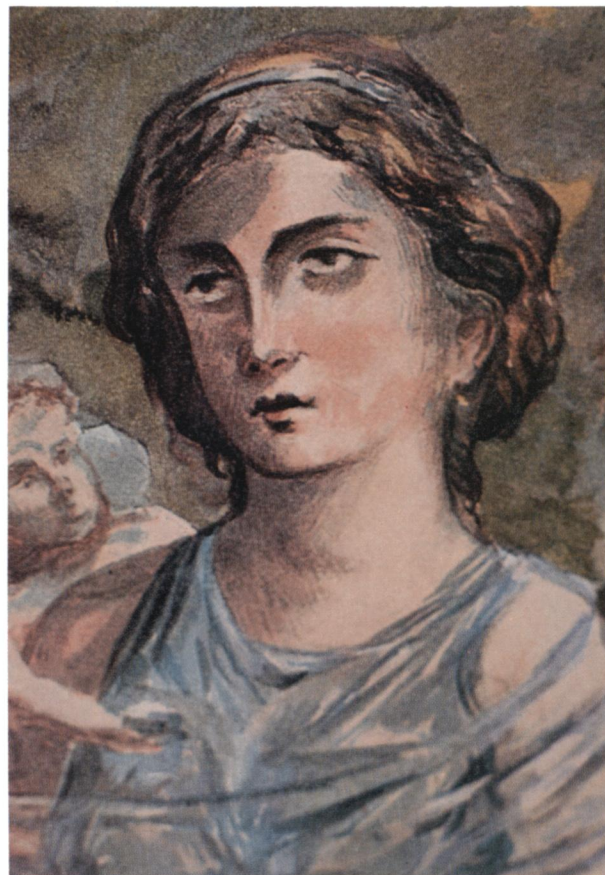
Archaeological Institute of America is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Archaeology*

Women in Pompeii

by ELIZABETH LYDING WILL

The year 1979 marks the 1900th anniversary of the fateful burial of Pompeii, Herculaneum and the other sites engulfed by the explosion of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79. It was the most devastating disaster in the Mediterranean area since the volcano on Thera erupted one and a half millennia earlier. The suddenness of the volcanic onslaught almost instantly froze the bustling Roman city of Pompeii, creating a veritable time capsule. For centuries archaeologists have exploited the Vesuvius disaster, revealing detailed evidence about the last hours of the town and its doomed inhabitants. Excavation has also uncovered facts about the lives of Pompeians in happier times, when the rich soil on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius yielded abundant harvests of grapes, olives, fruits and vegetables. In those days, a volcanic holocaust had seemed an impossibility. After all, Pompeii had flourished safely for six hundred years, basking in the sun of southern Italy. Within three days, however, the entire city was buried by volcanic ash. Eventually even its very location was forgotten. As layers of rich soil accumulated over the site, what had been a thriving city became fertile countryside.

The men and women of Pompeii abandoned everything in the wake of disaster. They left behind a wealth of unedited public records, mostly in the form of inscriptions. But while men such as M. Holconius Rufus and L. Caecilius Jucundus, who were of only local importance, have taken their place in Roman history because of Pompeii's unique historical position, the women of the city have been largely ignored. They are overlooked in studies of Pompeii as well as in histories of women in antiquity. But archaeology provides abundant



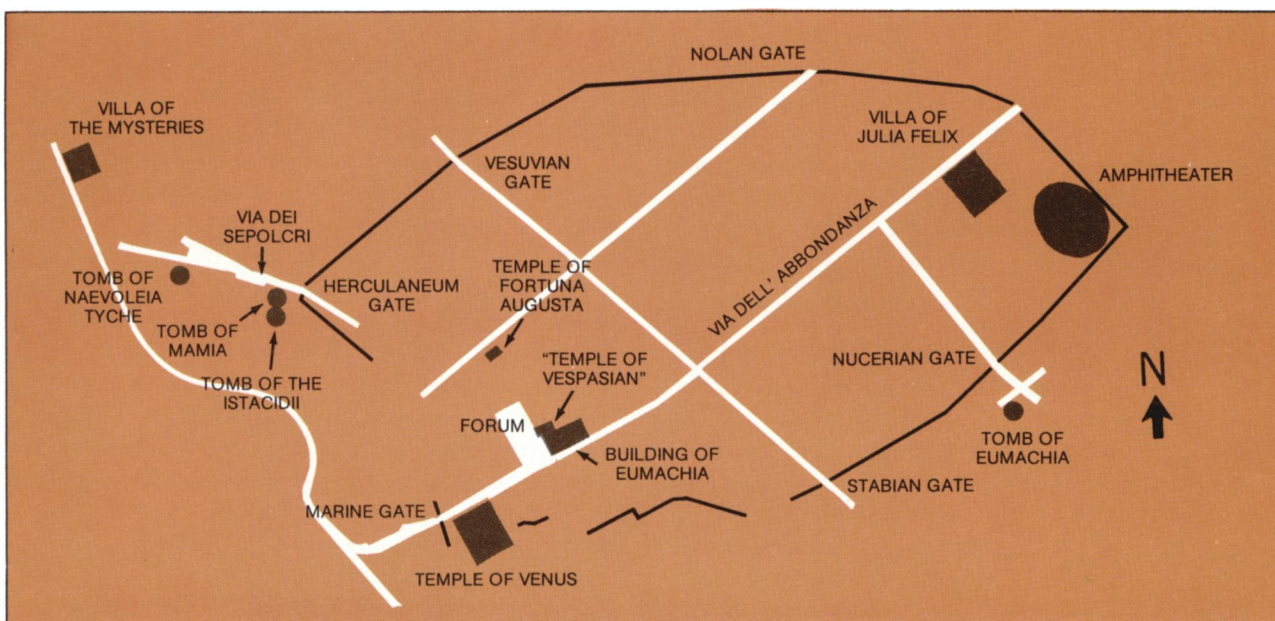
A well-born Pompeian woman drawn from the original wall painting in the House of Ariadne by Pierre Gusman (1862-1941), a French artist and art historian. Many Pompeian women were successful in business, including those from wealthy families and freedwomen.

evidence about the female members of society. It is an important source of information, in fact, about the women of antiquity in general. Yet archaeology is a source that has gone largely untapped. Studies of the women of ancient times have tended to draw their evidence from literature, even though the remarks about women in ancient literature are few in number and often lack objectivity. Since Pompeii provides more archaeological evidence about women than most other ancient sites except Rome itself, the failure to come to grips with the evidence is all the more regrettable.

Although the great nineteenth-century Pompeianist, Johannes Overbeck, frequently refers to women, later scholars like August Mau, Amedeo Maiuri and R.C. Carrington, consider women's activities less worthy of record. Their works were written in periods which saw history as being guided by political and military events—areas where women's participation traditionally has been minimal. More recent studies of Pompeii based on this research perpetuate the tendency to overlook women, or to refer to them only incidentally in



"Domina" or woman of rank from the Hall of the Mysteries in the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii. It is possible that the painting represents Istacidia Rufilla, a public priestess whose family probably owned the villa some time in its history.





Fresco of Venus from the House of Venus Marina in Pompeii. The painting covers a large part of the back wall of the garden. Venus was the patron divinity of Pompeii.

discussions of brothels, jewelry and mixed bathing. But with the growing contemporary emphasis on economic and social history, such attitudes seem more and more out of date. Although women's history is still in its infancy, and ways to organize and present the facts are largely lacking, there is little doubt that it is precisely in the context of economic and social history that women's accomplishments must be seen and understood. One must look for the specific role women played during antiquity. In this search, archaeology must be used as a primary tool, and the women of Pompeii must be recognized as a major source of evidence.

One way to approach the study of Pompeian women is to consider the city's patron deity first. Venus, the prototype of femininity, was designated Pompeii's guardian divinity by the Roman general Sulla after he made the city a Roman colony in 80 B.C. The Venus of Pompeii, as represented in sculpture and painting, is at once seductive and dignified. She is both coquette and *mater familias*, at times unclothed and other times heavily

robed. Venus was a fertility symbol, stern city guardian and overseer of people's lives—in essence, she ruled as the "Great Mother." In her honor, Pompeii erected a temple so impressive that it contained nearly 300 columns before it was damaged by an earlier earthquake in A.D. 62. The dual nature of the Pompeian Venus may in some way indicate the attitude of Pompeians about women generally—females are both mother and temptress, wielding universal power over society.

As child-bearers, women were of pivotal importance in the home throughout antiquity. But at Pompeii something more has emerged. There is strong evidence that during the last two centuries of the city's history many women were actively involved outside the home in civic and religious life as well as in business. The best documentation comes from inscriptions carved, scratched and painted on tombs, temples and houses. Several particular inscriptions at Pompeii mention the office of public priestess. This duty must have been held in high esteem since it is mentioned prominently on tombstones and elsewhere. But only a few women are actually referred to by name. One public priestess named Mamia was accorded the

rare honor of burial on land donated by order of the municipal council of Pompeii. Mamia was a member of a prominent old family, a leftover of the Samnite nobility once in control of Pompeii before it became a Roman colony. She probably died some time during the first quarter of the first century after Christ. The special plot where she was buried lay close to the gates of the city—a place of honor where very few persons were buried. Her tomb can still be seen today on the Via dei Sepolcri, or Street of Tombs, just outside the Herculaneum Gate. The sepulcher is in the shape of a semicircular bench inscribed on the back with large letters commemorating the honor paid her by the city.

What had Mamia done to merit such public honor? Another inscription, found in the Forum of Pompeii, provides an explanation. On the east side of the Forum lies a small building which is most often referred to as the "Temple of Vespasian" or the "Temple of the Genius of the Emperor." An inscription found there almost certainly names Mamia (one letter of the name is damaged) as the donor of a temple to the *genius* (the name for the tutelary deity or "soul") of an emperor, perhaps Emperor Augustus himself. The block of stone on which the inscription appears exactly fits the cornice of the temple's *cella*. The gift of this important building led the Pompeians to honor the priestess Mamia, just like they did when the city official M. Tullius donated the Temple of Fortuna Augusta in 3 B.C. He was buried at public expense outside the Stabian Gate in a tomb in the shape of a semicircular bench.

Unlike M. Tullius, however, Mamia is rarely mentioned in discussions of Pompeii. Another public priestess named Eumachia is more well known. Like Mamia, Eumachia died long before the fatal eruption of A.D. 79. She was a priestess of Benus or of Ceres, the Roman agricultural deity. Although the temple of Ceres at Pompeii has not yet been identified, the prestige of this cult and its exclusively female leaders must have been as great as the one in Rome itself. Eumachia's rise to a position of religious authority was surely facilitated by her wealthy family's business interests in which she actively participated. In fact, as early as the first century after Christ, women in the city of Rome were rising to positions of power in trade and industry, although no direct political power was gained. Perhaps Eumachia combined business activity with her high priestly duties.

Her father, L. Eumachius, was apparently of Greek extraction and had evidently not risen out of slavery, but might have been a descendant of one of the Greek colonists who came to the area of Pompeii some time after the sixth century B.C. By the latter half of the first century B.C., his estate was so extensive that he was able to export Pompeian wine, doubtless the famous *Vesuvium*, all over the Mediterranean. Wine amphoras bearing his trademark have been found as far away as Spain, France, Carthage, Athens and probably Rhodes. Numbers of bricks stamped with the name L. Eumachius and the name of one of his freedmen, have been discovered at Pompeii. Dishes made by him have also been found in Rome.



Tomb of Mamia on the Via dei Sepolcri from a watercolor by Alberto Pisa. Mamia apparently donated an important building to Pompeii. When she died, the city honored her by granting land so that she could be buried just outside the Herculaneum Gate.

The family estate included a pottery factory large enough to produce bricks, shipping jars and dishes for international export. After her father's death, Eumachia probably carried on the family business with the help of her husband, M. Numistrius Fronto, who was apparently a *duovir*, one of the two annually elected chief magistrates at Pompeii in A.D. 3.

Whatever the source of her money, Eumachia donated a huge and curiously designed building to Pompeii some time during the first quarter of the first century after Christ. It is located next door to the Building of Mamia at the southeast corner of the Forum. Inscriptions naming Eumachia as the donor can still be seen on the architrave over the columns across the front of the building and above a door at the side of the building. Both inscriptions state that Eumachia erected the building in her own name and, in smaller letters in one inscription, is the name of her son, the younger M. Numistrius Fronto. She dedicated the entire structure to Concordia Augusta and Pietas, both personifications of Livia, the wife of the Emperor Augustus. This dedication may refer to the severe illness and recovery

of Livia in A.D. 22, an occasion on which the altar of Pietas Augusta in Rome was dedicated in gratitude for the life of the empress. Decorations in the Building of Eumachia also seem to suggest the later Augustan or Tiberian period; Augustus ruled from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14 and Tiberius ruled from A.D. 14 to 37. The massive front door, for example, is bordered by a marble acanthus leaf decoration that rivals the delicacy of the stylized floral decoration on the famous Ara Pacis or Altar of Peace in Rome dedicated in 9 B.C. Johannes Overbeck regarded the Corinthian column capitals found in the Building of Eumachia as the purest and most elegant found in Pompeii. A series of four small rectangular niches on the façade seem to honor the heroes of Rome. Aeneas, the son of Venus who came to Italy after the fall of Troy, and Romulus, Aeneas' descendant who founded Rome, were represented by statues and inscribed eulogies in two of the niches; the two other niches may have been dedicated to the dictator Julius Caesar (ca. 102-44 B.C.) and the Emperor Augustus (63 B.C.-A.D. 14). A similar series of niches located in the Forum of Augustus in Rome, consecrated in 2 B.C., may have served as the architect's model. There, as here, the mythical ancestors of Augustus were among those honored.

A statue of Concordia Augusta holding a



Façade of a shop in Pompeii with the heavily robed figure of Venus Pompeiana on the left side. Cloth and felt were made and sold in the shop; the unexcavated part of the building can be seen through the entrance.



Inscription on front of the tomb of Naevoleia Tyche reading: "Naevoleia Tyche, freedwoman of Lucius, for herself and Gaius Munatius Faustus, Augustalis and suburban official, to whom the municipal council with the consent of the people voted a bisellium for his services, this monument Naevoleia Tyche made while she was still living for her freedmen and freedwomen and those of Gaius Munatius Faustus." Above the epitaph is a portrait of Naevoleia; underneath is a funeral scene.



Roman relief showing merchant ship from the Naevoleia Tyche tomb in Pompeii. Naevoleia Tyche was a successful freedwoman who erected a tomb for herself, her husband and her household.

gilded cornucopia was found in the central apse of Eumachia's building. The head of the statue is missing, but it may well have been a likeness of Livia. It stood in a huge open courtyard separated from the Forum by an outer colonnaded porch or *chalcidicum* adjoining the Forum colonnade, and by a four-sided inner colonnade or *porticus*. Behind the porticus on three sides ran a covered hall or *crypta* with windows opening onto the porticus. A statue of Eumachia herself stood in the middle of the rear wall of this hall; it is dignified and idealized in the Augustan manner with traces of reddish color still visible in the hair. The original can be found today in the National Archaeological Museum in Naples, while a copy stands in the Building of Eumachia. On the pedestal one can read that the statue was dedicated to Eumachia, daughter of Lucius and public priestess, by the *fullones* or launderers. The fullones cleaned, dyed and pressed clothes and prepared newly woven cloth. There were four laundries in Pompeii, but one can only guess what connection this group may have had with Eumachia.

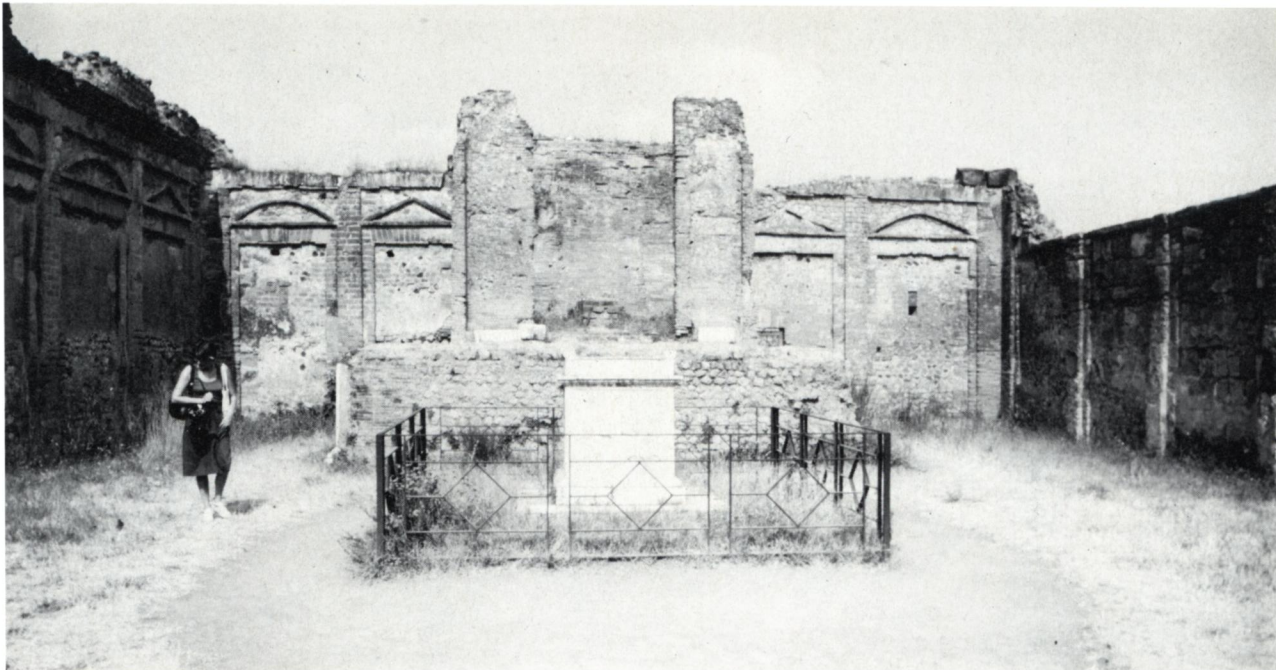
This inscription and the odd floor plan have given rise to an extraordinary number of interpretations of the building's purpose. The large open court and narrow corridors of the structure do not suggest a temple, market or basilica, or indeed any other type of public building. Was it a laundry or a market for wool goods, or was it the headquarters for a guild of fullones? Perhaps it was a combination of market, fullones headquarters and business club catering especially to

wool traders. The most convincing suggestion yet, by the French scholar Jean Andreau, interprets the building as a club for all the businessmen (and businesswomen?) of Pompeii, perhaps particularly the shippers and export traders. Since Eumachia herself was probably carrying on the family wine and pottery enterprises in the tradition of some of her female contemporaries in Rome, she may have been more aware of the need for such a center where high level business discussions and arrangements could take place.

The exact purpose of Eumachia's large building, measuring 60 by 40 meters, still raises heated discussion and controversy. If the structure is too large to have served as a shrine for the personifications of Livia, whose names were inscribed on the marble façade and over the side entrance, perhaps it was intended as a partly covered extension of the Forum itself. The Building of Eumachia would then take on the nature of a basilica oriented more toward commercial than judicial activities. Excavations in Pompeii have not yet uncovered a place where traders, both foreign and domestic, could congregate and negotiate. Perhaps the fullones were simply grateful to Eumachia for her enlargement of the city's facilities. She was also the head of a large household and staff and would have been, one supposes, a valued client of the fullones as well. In any case, the structure's elegance, and its clear association with the Imperial family would seem to argue against its having been used only by the fullones. Eumachia's family connections and prob-



Woman painting in her studio from Pompeii, the House of the Surgeon, now in the National Archaeological Museum, Naples. A cupid holds the picture of the herm of Dionysus as the woman mixes colors on her palette. She is apparently copying the statue bust on the right.



Outer colonnade and front door of the Building of Eumachia as seen from the Forum at Pompeii. The dedicatory inscription can be seen on the architrave, part of which rests on the ground. Three of the four small rectangular niches which contained statues and eulogies honoring the heroes of Rome appear on either side of the entrance. The function of this structure is still undecided, but it may have been used as an informal meeting place for businesspeople.

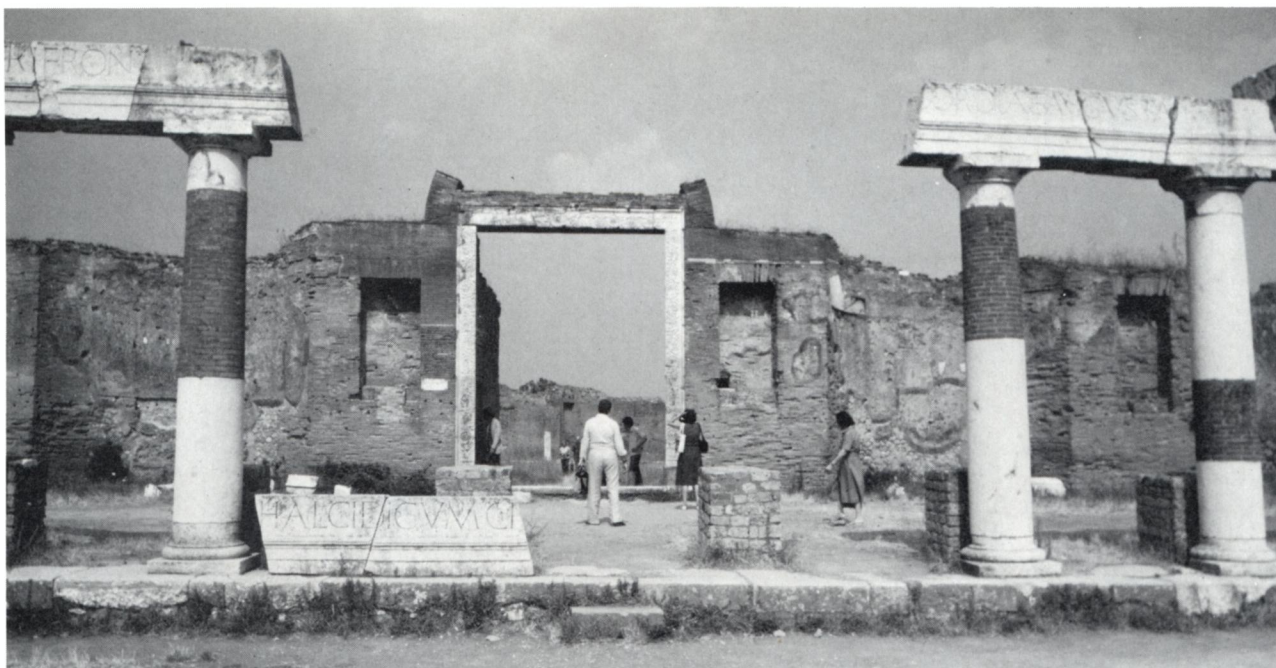
able business interests suggest a much more general purpose for the structure.

The important location as well as the scale and beauty of the Building of Eumachia reveal a sense of Eumachia's personality. Her tomb, located south of the city close to the Nucernian Gate, is similarly grandly conceived. It was not, moreover, built at city expense but was erected by Eumachia for herself and her household, as two inscriptions on the retaining wall reveal. Even in ruins and deprived of the altar and columns that were originally its superstructure, the monumental hemicycle or semicircular recess on its high terrace is impressive. It was by far the largest and most sumptuous tomb in the area, if not in all Pompeii.

It is worthy of record that the small 20,000 person town of Pompeii produced two such ambitious women as Eumachia and Mamia at the same time. Pompeii produced many other women whose activities extended beyond the household. Successful women who lived in Pompeii come alive through inscriptions in an endless procession: Arellia Tertulla, whose funeral expenses were paid for by the city; Aesquillia Polla, dead at age 22, whose husband Herennius Celsus, twice duovir, built a beautiful tomb outside the Nolan Gate, marked by an exedra and a tall marble column crowned with an

amphora; Mulvia Prisca, who erected an elaborate tomb for her young son C. Vestorius Priscus at her own expense on a plot given by the city outside the Vesuvian Gate; Servilia, whose tomb for her husband outside the Herculaneum Gate immortalizes him as her "soul's friend." Across the road, Alleia Decimilla, another public priestess of Ceres, set up a huge sepulcher on land provided by the city for her husband, the distinguished politician M. Alleius Luccius Libella, and her young son of the same name. Even in ruins, the tomb suggests the splendor of the Via dei Sepolcri before the eruption of A.D. 79 buried the dead for a second time. Closer to the Herculaneum Gate, the public priestess Istacidia Rufilla was buried with members of her family in an elaborate mausoleum adjacent to the grave of Mamia.

There is evidence, including a seal and a graffito found in the structure, that the family of the Istacidii may have been the owners of the famous "Villa of the Mysteries" which lies down the hill, northwest of the family tomb. In the "Hall of the Mysteries" inside this villa, it is tempting to look for Istacidia Rufilla herself in one of the 20 women portrayed in the Dionysiac frieze. Perhaps she is seated beside a small boy and holds a book scroll in one hand and a writing stylus in the other. Or perhaps she is the "Domina" or woman of rank attired in purple and gold, sitting thoughtfully with a writing tablet beside her.



Interior of the Temple of Vespasian probably donated to Pompeii by the public priestess Mamia.

Another tomb on the Via dei Sepolcri marks the final resting place of Naevoleia Tyche. Not a well-born public priestess, she nevertheless built a monument that illustrates the position to which even a freedwoman could aspire in a provincial Roman city during the first century after Christ. The tomb which she erected for herself, her husband G. Munatius Faustus, and her household is both imposing and well preserved. Naevoleia crowned the tomb inscription with her own “un-retouched” fullface likeness—not an immodest gesture, but also not vain. The direct, earnest gaze is striking and one could imagine her to be a no-nonsense businessperson. A relief on one side of the tomb depicts a large woman sitting in the stern of a ship, who gestures toward an energetic group of sailors. It has been suggested that this figure represents Fortuna, the Roman goddess of good luck. Since the Greek word for Fortuna is Tyche, the figure may be a pun on part of Naevoleia’s name or may even represent another portrait of Naevoleia herself.

Naevoleia was not necessarily an anomaly during her time. Women were quite actively engaged in business, including the shipping industry, during the first century after Christ. During his rule, the Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54) even gave financial incentives to female shippers who would support his shipbuilding program. Rather than interpreting the ship on Naevoleia’s tomb as symbolizing the soul’s final journey, one may view it as a direct reference to the woman’s shipping interests, as Overbeck suggested many years ago. Similarly, the relief on the front of the tomb, a

bisellium (an honorary ottoman awarded to outstanding citizens) refers to her husband’s accomplishments. In death, both husband and wife equally recorded their achievements on opposite sides of their tomb. Unfortunately, Eumachia and Mamia do not give similar information on their tombs, but their higher social standing no doubt put constraints on such self advertisement.

Another type of advertisement was practised by at least one other prominent woman of Pompeii. Julia Felix was not, as far as we know, a public priestess nor has her tomb been located. Perhaps she perished in the eruption of A.D. 79. Her huge and elaborate villa lay north of the amphitheater and was one of the first buildings excavated in Pompeii during 1755-57; it was reexcavated nearly two centuries later. Digging revealed an imaginatively laid-out and elegantly decorated domestic setting. On an outside wall of the house, however, a rather startling painted announcement informs passers-by that within the estate a bath, shops and flats were available for rent. The assumption is that Julia Felix found it necessary, perhaps owing to financial reverses stemming from damage suffered in the earthquake of A.D. 62, to add to her income by opening part of the house to the public—an unusual step for a well-born woman.

Privileged women living in Pompeii thus involved themselves with the outside world as circumstances and opportunities dictated. We encounter them in community service, business, religion and even in real estate. Although they lacked the political rights of male citizens, such as the

right to vote or hold political office, the archaeological evidence shows them playing active roles in spheres other than politics. They often won official recognition for their services and, in some instances, women's voices were heard even in politics. In electoral notices scratched or painted on the walls of Pompeii, most of them dating after A.D. 62, women's names are frequently signed to appeals for chosen political candidates. The scratched graffiti and painted *dipinti* attest to the lively political concerns of some women. Caprasia, Iunia, Lollia, Petronia or Statia, for example, "requested" that so-and-so be elected by running these public notices. Many of them were signed by women from the less privileged classes of society. Even without the wealth and power of Eumachia and Mamia, these women still expressed involvement with the world around them. In Pompeii, the working class women, many of them slaves or former slaves, spent their lives playing integral parts in the city's economy as shop keepers, waitresses, prostitutes, actresses, painters and musicians. Asellina, Fortunata, Glyceria and Phoebe were doubtless the models for many of the women's faces one finds in the wall paintings from Pompeii. The figures are depicted dancing, painting, playing the lyre or flute, reciting or thinking.

Even in the small provincial city of Pompeii, 150 miles south of Rome, women from all levels of society felt free to reach out beyond the home and to involve themselves in the life of the community. If one multiplies the female inhabitants of Pompeii by all the women in the Roman world, it is clear that a balanced historical perspective of Roman history will only be attained if the accomplishments of women are added to the record. Their activities, both major and minor, communal and domestic, had a direct bearing on economic and social events. Failure to consider women only distorts history. By refocusing our attitudes toward women in antiquity, we can gain a better understanding of the role of women today.

FOR FURTHER READING ON Pompeian women and women in antiquity: J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Roman Women* (Bodley Head, London 1962), is chatty, lively and learned but does not stray far from the evidence in ancient literature. There are, therefore, few references to Pompeian women. Readers with access to back issues of the London *Evening Standard* can consult Balsdon's short article on Pompeian women, "A Woman's Life: Shopping, Bathing and Hairdressing," in the special "Pompeii A.D. 79" edition of November 15, 1976; Paavo Castrén *Ordo Populusque Pompeianus. Polity and Society in Roman Pompeii* (Bardi Editore, Rome

1975), a fascinating discussion of 479 Pompeian families and individuals (including women) who composed them, and the parts they played in the city's history; Michele D'Avino, *The Women of Pompeii* (translated by M.H. Jones and L. Nusco, Loffredo, Naples 1967), lists by occupation about 250 Pompeian women named in various kinds of inscriptions. Comments are brief and D'Avino's perspective is anything but feminist, but the book is a very useful compilation; Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women in Greece and Rome* (Samuel-Stevens, Toronto 1977), presents the translated texts of a small but well selected group of ancient readings (literature, inscriptions, papyri) bearing on the topic of women's lives in antiquity. Eumachia's inscriptions are included; Sara B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves* (Schocken Books, New York 1975), finds the evidence from antiquity more negative than positive. Her bibliography is excellent and Pompeian women active outside the home are discussed briefly.

On references to Pompeian women specifically (especially Eumachia): Jean Andreau, *Les affaires de Monsieur Jucundus* (Ecole française de Rome, Rome 1974); Robert Etienne, *La vie quotidienne à Pompéi* (2nd edition, Hachette, Paris 1974); Michael Grant, *Cities of Vesuvius: Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1971); Theodor Kraus and Leonard von Matt, translated by R. E. Wolf, *Pompeii and Herculaneum: the Living Cities of the Dead* (Harry N. Abrams, New York 1975); Amedeo Maiuri, *Pompeii* (translated by V. Priestly, Itinerari dei musei e monumenti d'Italia, no. 3, 7th edition, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Rome 1965); August Mau, *Pompeii, its Life and Art* (translated by F.W. Kelsey, 2nd edition, Macmillan, London and New York 1902); Johannes Overbeck, *Pompeii in seinem Gebäuden, Alterthümern und Kunstwerken* (4th edition, Wilhelm Engelmann, Leipzig 1884).

On Pompeii in general: R.C. Carrington, *Pompeii* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1936); L. Richardson, Jr., "Pompeii," *Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites* (Princeton University Press, Princeton 1976); John Ward-Perkins and Amanda Claridge, *Pompeii AD 79* (Imperial Tobacco Ltd., London 1976 and Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 1978); the two latter are both excellent brief commentaries; A. W. Van Buren, *A Companion to the Study of Pompeii and Herculaneum* (2nd edition, American Academy in Rome, Rome 1938), an old but still very useful summary of primary and secondary sources.

On the Building of Eumachia: Walter O. Moeller, "The Building of Eumachia: a Reconsideration," *American Journal of Archaeology* 76(1972):323-327, for a recent discussion.