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***Rediscovering Antiquity: Karl Weber and the Excavation of Herculaneum, Pompeii, and Stabiae*, by C.C. Parslow, 1995, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge**

by

**James E. Snead  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Arizona**

***Rediscovering Antiquity* is an example of the genre of historical writing which seeks to recast the careers of little-known figures who have fallen into obscurity. This is typically intended to move them and their work into the proper "lineage," that is, the select group of ancestral figures from which modern practices are derived. Parslow is interested in the 18th century excavations of the Vesuvian cities, which, he argues, have been misunderstood by historians of archaeology. Indeed, common sources, such as Daniel (1981: 55), describe the initial explorations of Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Stabiae, sponsored by the Bourbon kings of Naples, as "...treasure hunts and not serious excavations." While the Roman artifacts removed from the sites are credited with spurring interest in antiquity in Enlightenment Europe, modern scholars have until now devoted little attention to the means through which they were recovered.**

**In attempting to rectify this situation Parslow focuses on Karl Jacob Weber (1712-1764), a Swiss officer and military engineer in the Neapolitan Royal Guard. Weber was made assistant to Rocque Joaquin de Alcubierre, director of the excavations at Herculaneum, in 1750, and for the next 13 years planned and conducted excavations there and at Pompeii and Stabiae under Alcubierre's direction. Weber died in 1764, his health shattered by the exigencies of the job. Given Alcubierre's 42 years in charge of the excavations and the involvement of various others before and afterward, Weber's tenure might be seen as a minor episode in a work lasting generations; but Parslow sees his activities as foreshadowing important developments. "Weber established the first truly systematic approach to the excavations," he writes, "anticipating, in the process, the scientific methodologies of modern archaeology" (3).**

**In the process of describing Weber's career, Parslow provides what may be the most detailed discussion of the Bourbon excavations in the English language. His discussion ranges from the earliest excavations at Herculaneum, sponsored by the Duke D'Elbeuf following 1709, through the efforts of Alcubierre's successor Francesco La Vega, towards the end of the 18th century. The intricate system which grew up around the procurement and interpretation of the Vesuvian antiquities is depicted in detail. The prestige of the court of Charles of Bourbon was heavily invested in the archaeological finds of the vicinity, and the project was overseen by the Prime Minister. Direct responsibility for the antiquities was shared by the director of the Museum Herculaneum, the superintendent of the excavations, and the Real Academia Ercolanese di Archeologia, who were usually bitter rivals for royal favor. Subordinate officials such as Weber were thus subject to competing interests in their efforts to conduct the excavations. The technical aspects of the project were also daunting, since the tunnels through which most of the work was conducted were prone to collapse, dusty, poorly ventilated, and occasionally filled with noxious fumes. All of the project supervisors appear to have had health problems associated with their work, from which the probable fate of the workers who excavated the tunnels can be surmised. Many were forced laborers, and the opportunity to augment income by selling artifacts on the side was probably diminished by the fact that those accused of "stealing" antiquities were subject to torture and imprisonment (208).**

Despite such unpromising conditions Weber seems to have developed his own agenda for the excavations. He was an innovative draftsman, and Parslow argues that Weber's plan of the Praedia Iuliae Felicis at Pompeii "is the earliest use of axonometric projection in archaeology" (170). His efforts to approach the buried ruins systematically, rather than in the baphazard method previously common, were novel but ultimately constrained by the pressure to find artifacts. Interestingly, Weber became an advocate for the preservation of the ruins *in situ*, proposing in one case that a mosaic pavement at Herculaneum be left intact, rather than removed to the museum, for the benefit of visitors. His incomplete monograph on the architecture of select buildings in the Vesuvian cities is notable for its inclusion of information from various categories of evidence, rather than the "typological" approach favored by the Accademia (197), the reason why it remained unpublished.

One of the major strengths of the book is its reliance on primary archival material, and his discussion of the vicissitudes suffered by the records of the 18th century excavations over the following centuries makes it clear that Parslow is in thorough command of his sources. Such a detailed rendering of the progress of the excavation of the Vesuvian cities will be of considerable service to specialists. The tale he tells, however, is weakened by the obscurity of its central figure. Many of the details of Weber's life remain unknown, and his own ambitions are largely a matter of conjecture. His unsuccessful efforts to gain admission to the Academia Ercolanese are reminiscent of those of other "practical archaeologists" throughout history who, despite superior firsthand knowledge and experience with excavation, are prevented from full participation in scholarly discussion by their lack of credentials. It is thus questionable whether, despite his innovations, Weber can be said to have truly influenced the conduct of archaeology, particularly since many of Weber's maps seem to have been unavailable for decades after his death. His reputation seems to have entirely rested on the favorable comments of the classicist J. J. Winckelmann, who was a periodic observer of the Bourbon excavations and a critic of many of the academicians involved.

The treatment of archaeological data has as much to do with the uses to which that data is put as it does with the abilities of the scholars concerned, and perhaps the most interesting aspect of *Rediscovering Antiquity* is its description of a time and place wherein the production of knowledge about the past was directly pertinent to social and political fortune. Parslow describes the destruction of duplicate artifacts from the sites "to prevent them from falling into the hands of foreign collectors" (208); a mechanism for the publication of excavation results that was wholly in the hands of the state, and international scrutiny over the conduct of archaeology which was both a source of pride and of resentment by state officials. This depiction of the political economy of archaeology in the Bourbon court, while possibly secondary in the author's estimation, remains the most important contribution of his work to the broad range of interested readers. In this it is an archaeological companion to Springer's text-based study of the role of symbols of antiquity in Italian society between the late 18th century and the Risorgimento (1987). Parslow has accomplished his task of reconstructing Weber's reputation, but it is his descriptions of the context within which Weber lived that are the most compelling.

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