

# Paweł Filipczak

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"Pompeii. The life of a Roman town",  
Mary Beard, London 2008 ; "Pompeje.  
Życie rzymskiego miasta"... :  
[recenzja]

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Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach  
dozwolonego użytku.

**MARY BEARD, *Pompeii. The life of a Roman town*, Profile Books, London 2008, pp. 360 [Polish translation – *Pompeje. Życie rzymskiego miasta*, trans. N. RADOMSKI, Dom Wydawniczy REBIS, Poznań 2010, pp. 414].**

The book begins with an evocative description of the events of 25 August A.D. 79, the day Pompeii ceased to exist. A group of twenty-four women and men are trying to escape from the town, where first pieces of lava and ash are falling. Some of them succeed to get outside the town walls, hoping that now they will quickly leave the threatened area – a moment later they get hit by a so-called pyroclastic surge, a deadly combination of gases, dust and lava. When after almost nineteen hundred years their bodies were found, they were mixed up with branches of wood, which indicates that the people had attempted to shelter behind trees or that trees had been felled on them by the blasts of the volcano. Another eleven hundred people died, buried alive in a several-metre thick layer of pyroclastic flow. A medical man with a box of instruments. A couple with keys to the apartment. A man with a dagger.

Focusing on detail, the device with which Mary Beard begins the story of Pompeii and which she applies to the last pages, rivets the attention of the reader, intrigues and even keeps them in suspense. It reveals the primary, popularising aspect of the book, which, at the same time, is the quality that will attract antiquity enthusiasts, and maybe even a wider audience interested in history. It is for them that *Making a Visit*, one of the last chapters of the book, including a list of ten most interesting monuments in Pompeii, is intended. Beard clearly attempts to establish contact with the audience, hence phrases addressed directly to them like *Go to visit the house now* (p. 133). Her knack for the written word is evident in the fine and flowing language, only rarely tainted by too colloquial phrases or even vulgarisms. With expressions such as ‘brothel’ (many times), ‘boozing’ (p. 177), ‘whore’ (p. 232) or ‘sucks you off for a fiver’ (l. cit.) the author shows too much favour to less refined readers.

The unique narrative mode and the lack of a classical scholarly apparatus in the form of

precise references to the literature and sources should not be the reason to disqualify *Pompeii...* as a scholarly book. Beard does not avoid polemics and often exposes moot points, though she rarely makes judgments. She rather subtly demonstrates the inaccuracy of some theories, while giving a perceptible priority to others. The author argues *sine ira et studio*. She presents the up-to-date state of research on Pompeii, which is not free from arguable issues. Such are the qualities of good professional literature. Moreover, *Further Reading*, the closing chapter of the book, is not a simple index, but something like a thematic annotated bibliography, in which almost each of about 220 titles (apart from the sources) is provided with a brief comment. It is, in fact, the essential knowledge base about the achievements of the contemporary science concerning the research on Pompeii for both students and scholars.

Were the book to have another subtitle, it could be *The Myths of Pompeii Demolished*. The writer rejects the stereotypical idea, deeply ingrained in the conventional wisdom, of a vibrant and normally functioning provincial Roman town that suddenly froze in time as a result of the eruption of Vesuvius. What was by no means ‘normal’ was the outward appearance of Pompeii, which from the great earthquake in A.D. 62 right up until the disaster of A.D. 79 underwent extensive renovation work covering both private dwelling houses and public buildings. After the earthquake of A.D. 62 as well as after a series of minor shocks right before the eruption in A.D. 79, a part of the town was in a state of ruin. There is no doubt that some of the public buildings, even such important ones for the proper functioning of the then society as baths, were closed or operated only to a limited extent. Naturally, the rhythm of the everyday life of the Pompeians must have been much different from ‘normal.’ As a matter of fact, a considerable part of the inhabitants abandoned the town before the day of its apocalypse. The town was severely dam-

aged again as a result of the Allied bombings in 1943. After World War II, it was reconstructed, but at the same time, the 'original' Pompeii was lost. The Villa of the Mysteries, the only house preserved in its entirety, is to a great extent the work of contemporary conservators. Moreover, the town was given a new, completely modern identity. Although the antique Latin names of streets, houses and gates are known, most of them sank into oblivion. *Porta Salis* is now called Herculaneum Gate. Many more such examples could be given.

Another myth is the obvious assumption that the destruction of the town meant the destruction of its inhabitants. In Beard's view, the eruption of Vesuvius killed "a small, or very small, proportion" of inhabitants (p. 10), estimated at no more than two thousand people (to the above-mentioned eleven hundred people, it is necessary to add those whose bodies lie in the unexcavated part of the town). It is uncertain, however, as the author emphasises, how many people lived in Pompeii just before the eruption. As there are significant divergences in this respect – the data vary from about 6400 to 30000 – it is possible to accept Beard's view unquestioningly only if one assumes the latter number to be most likely.

There are numerous common but erroneous beliefs about the everyday life of the inhabitants of Roman towns. The textbook image of Romans half-lying and feasting on long couches is a picture of a ceremonial dinner on a special occasion. An ideal banquet. However, on the basis of the reconstructed kitchens and dining rooms – quite cramped even in wealthy houses in Pompeii – it is possible to assume that people usually ate at a regular table or squatting in the peristyle, or simply "on the wing." Moreover, it was common to eat out in dozens of bars. These places often were not only bars and the women working there were not only barmaids. The services they provided after hours were in no way related to cooking. The image of prostitutes as a clearly separate group of courtesans, and the image of a brothel as a separate building is a distorted one. Due to poverty, women from the lowest social groups, working in trades of the worst reputation

(flower-sellers, weavers etc.), were at the mercy of pimps who offered their services throughout the town.

The demise of Pompeii, for the wider audience, the most 'spectacular' moment in its history, is not much of a riddle for science any more. The academic discussion focuses rather on the opposite pole of the history of Pompeii – on its origins. When was the town founded? How did it develop? Who were its first inhabitants? The territorial range was determined in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, as the town walls date from this period and a street network already existed at that time. However, whether it was the native Oscan peoples, the Etruscans or perhaps the Greeks that were the driving force behind the development of Pompeii in the pre-Roman period is unknown. From the close of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the population began to increase rapidly and the building development boomed, which suggests that it was only then that Pompeii transformed into a town *par excellence*. It was a provincial town, but – because of the proximity of Rome – it was not such a "provincial hole" as it is sometimes considered to have been. The news from the capital reached there within a day, and the visits of prominent Romans were not infrequent in the town.

Pompeii was not divided into distinct districts: of the rich and of the poor, and dormitory and working ones. In this respect, it was similar to eighteenth-century London, where residential buildings were situated next to craftsmen's workshops, or even present-day Naples, where craftsmen's workshops occupy the ground floors of grand mansions. This is a reflection of the scholar whose knowledge does not come only from her snug study but also from observing the vibrant Italian city.

Mary Beard's vision of Pompeii is presented in selected but not narrow freeze-frames showing the life of the town and its inhabitants. The traffic, the craftsmen at work, the entertainments in the amphitheatre, the interiors of private houses, the visits in the baths, the relationships with gods or the attitude to the dead are images which, as a whole, make up a panoramic picture including the most important fields of functioning of urban society.

From an expert's point of view, it is perhaps not a complete image, but the author did not mean it to be so. Mary Beard, a Professor of Classics at University of Cambridge, is a populariser of the ancient history and civilisation, the Classics editor of the widely-read *Times Literary Supplement* and is well-known in British circles. *Pompeii* is not her literary debut, but it is a part

of the series of popular science titles that she dedicated to the contemporary icons of antiquity, the Parthenon and the Colosseum. The latest book by Mary Beard possesses all the attributes necessary to play a truly important role in disseminating knowledge of ancient towns.

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**Илия Илиев, Св. Климент Охридски. Живот и дело [Saint Clément d'Ohrid. Vie et œuvre], Фондация Българско историческо наследство, Пловдив 2010, pp. 262.**

Le nouveau livre sur Clément Ohridski est le travail d'Ilija G. Iliev. Son apparition est logique et attendue, après son implication de longue date avec les monuments littéraires ainsi que les sources concernant le saint Bulgare. Après sa traduction des œuvres « Bulgares » de Théophylacte d'Ohrid<sup>1</sup>, et d'un livre sur Démétrius Chomatenus<sup>2</sup>, ainsi que d'autres écrits au fil des années consacrées à cette question<sup>3</sup>, il en découle logiquement le résumé de ses recherches sur Clément d'Ohrid.

Dans le premier chapitre de l'ouvrage sont examinées les sources sur la vie et le travail de Clément d'Ohrid, suivi d'un bref examen historiographique des études sur le savant et écrivain bulgare. D'abord vient une biographie détaillée

du saint écrite par l'Archevêque Théophylacte d'Ohrid (ainsi que de Le Bulgarie entière). Ici, comme dans la plupart des études dans les dernières décennies, il est soutenu que Théophylacte à utilisé pour écrire la biographie une vieille légende bulgare qui n'est pas parvenue jusqu'à nous. De la sorte, est prise une de position sur une controverse passée qui est toujours en dispute de nos jours, quant à savoir si c'est bien Théophylacte ou quelqu'un d'autre qui a écrit cette biographie. L'auteur défend fermement son opinion que l'auteur de la biographie est bien Théofilacte.

L'autre source importante de laquelle l'auteur traite est une brève biographie de Clément d'Ohrid, écrite par un autre archevêque, égale-

<sup>1</sup> Произведенията на Теофилакт Охридски, архиепископ български, отнасящи се до българската история, vol. II, ed. И.Г. Илиев, София 1994 [= FGHB, 9].

<sup>2</sup> И.Г. Илиев, Охридският архиепископ Димитър Хоматиан и българите, София 2010.

<sup>3</sup> И. Илиев, Бележки върху биографията на Климент Охридски, ИП 40, 1984.1, p. 97–105; ИДЕМ, Бележки върху творчеството на Теофилакт Охридски, ИП, 47, 1991.3, p. 67–91; ИДЕМ, Кирило-Методиевски традиции в творчеството на Теофилакт Охридски, [in:] Сборник 1080 г. от смъртта на Наум Охридски, София 1993, p. 140–142; ИДЕМ, Теофилакт Охридски, архиепископ български, Ист 4, 1996.1, p. 28–33; ИДЕМ, Българският първоучител св. Климент Охридски, Род 1996.1,

p. 109–121; ИДЕМ, Пространното житие на св. Климент Охридски в историческа интерпретация, Мин 3, 1996.3, p. 21–30; ИДЕМ, Димитър, по Божия милост архиепископ на Първа Юстиниана и на цяла България, ИП, 60, 2004.1/2, p. 3–39; ИДЕМ, Делото на Кирил и Методий и на техните ученици и последователи в България през погледа на охридските архиепископи от XI и XII век, КМС 17, 2007, p. 356–371; ИДЕМ, Кореспондентите на Теофилакт Охридски според печатите от България, [in:] Юбилеен сборник по случай сто години от рождението на д-р Васил Хараланов (1907–2007), Шумен 2008, p. 233–239; ИДЕМ, Мястото на *Ronemata Diarhoga* в книжовното наследство на Димитър Хоматиан, SB 27, 2009, p. 73–85; ИДЕМ, За Краткото житие на св.