

Understanding of ancient pompeian and herculaneum civilisations history essay



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Pompeii and Herculaneum became Roman towns more than a century before the eruption and many aspects of Roman society were reflected through their social structure.[1] Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum was a mix of different social classes that was well-ordered and divided into three the upper class, middle class and lower class.[2] Buildings, frescoes, statues, graffiti and inscriptions revealed some names and faces of men and women from all levels of society. This essay will be discussing an upper class woman, Julia Felix an upper class man Marcus Nonius Balbus and prostitution.

According to the Romans the social status of men and women was influenced by their wealth, their family background or their official positions.[3]

Julia Felix was a very wealthy Roman woman. She inherited her money from her family and owned a villa that took up an entire block in Pompeii.[4]

A house is a strong reflection of social status.[5] The features and size of the house of Julia Felix suggest that it belonged to a wealthy person. It was well furnished, decorated with paintings depicting scenes from the Forum and frescoes depicting scenes from everyday life and items enjoyed by the household.[6]

Excavations revealed that after the 62AD earthquake the house was ruined. Julia then decided to rent out part of her house to help people from the shortage of accommodation. The house then consisted of apartments, shops, toilets, gardens, and bars. She also opened her private bath to the public. This supports that the household was wealthy, as in ancient Pompeian times not all houses featured baths as they were costly.

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An inscription has been found in the House that said: " To let, in the estate of Julia, daughter of Spurius: elegant baths for respectable people, shops with upper rooms and apartments... the lease will expire at the end of the five years." [7] This suggests that women could own property without the interference of any male meaning they were independent and can take charge of constructing buildings with their own money. [8] This inscription also reveals that Julia was involved in business activities. She was a main public figure that made her influential in Pompeii. However historians may never know the true extent of the independence of women. [9]

When excavations took place many sections were uncovered they include, the triclinium, garden, and private bath.

The triclinium in the house of Julia Felix was well decorated with frescoes depicting everyday life scenes. It consisted of marble beds with a fountain with a waterfall and three klinai, on which diners would sit to take their meals. Each couch had room for three diners who could lie down on cushions while they were served by slaves. [10]

The private baths were complex. They consisted of a dressing room with cold tub, a warm and hot bath, a cloak room, an open pool as well as a waiting room where bathers could have a chat and purchase snacks from the tavern. [11] At first the bath was strictly used by the households but later it was used by the public if they paid. [12]

The garden of the house was ample of space and water. It was divided into two parts, one part was a great viridarium decorated with statues, fountains, and marble columns whereas the other part was planted with trees and <https://assignbuster.com/understanding-of-ancient-pompeian-and-herculaneum-civilisations-history-essay/>

there was a fruit orchard divided by paths for walking.[13]And a small shrine to the Egyptian goddess, Isis was found in the garden.[14]

Another archaeological source revealing information about the upper class is the marble statue of Marcus Nonius Balbus.

Marcus was born in Nuceria, but lived in Herculaneum; he was the proconsul of Crete and Cyrene, a supporter of Octavian and the tribune of the lower class in 32BC.[15]He is also known as a supporter of the Vespasian in the Civil War in AD68-69.[16]

Marcus was also an important political figure; as he was a good friend of Julius Caesar and helped in having the First Triumvirate, between Caesar, Crassus and Magnus in 60 BC.[17]

Inscriptions reveal that Marcus was a duumviri; he was elected ten times which indicates that he was active in the community.[18]

The altar and statue were located near the suburban baths in Herculaneum, but unfortunately the statue was found in pieces, as the head was several meters away from the body. It is believed that the altar and statue were built in the early Augustan period, by the local senate of Herculaneum dedicated to Marcus.[19]

Inscriptions found state: " To Marcus Nonius Balbus, son of Marcus, praetor and proconsul, from the Herculaneans" and " Marcus Nonius Balbus, son of Marcus, proconsul, [built] the basilica, gates [and] wall with his own money". [20]

These reveal that Marcus was named the patron of Herculaneum as the 62AD earthquake Herculaneum was ruined therefore; he donated money to the reconstruction and renewal of the city. A basilica, public baths were built along with walls surrounding Herculaneum.[21]Therefore, building inscriptions reveal that upper class men owned sufficient amount of money to improve qualities of the city and honour the person who built them.

The altar and statue imply that upper class men were honoured and respected and had influential powers. When he passed away he was greatly honoured and this is shown through an inscription carved on the altar where his body was burnt and his ashes were collected.[22]

Another aspect of social status in Pompeii and Herculaneum was prostitution. Prostitution was common in Pompeii. It was not illegal, as it was a normal business just like other businesses but prostitutes were considered low.[23]It is difficult to determine the status of the prostitutes but it was believed that they were slaves, freedwomen and foreigners many from Egypt and Syria. [24]Upper class women such as wives, and daughters were forbidden to practice prostitution. Prostitution was a normal part of the sexual life of any Roman man.[25]Many men visited brothels as well traders from other towns. [26]Twenty five brothels were identified by the Professor Thomas McGinn in Pompeii, whereas none were identified in Herculaneum; however it is assumed prostitution was also practiced there.[27]

Professor Andrew Wallace-Hadrill excavating at Pompeii and Herculaneum used a criteria to identify the brothels:

brothels were situated on a corner isolated from the main areas of social activity

consisted of at least five rooms upstairs featuring stone beds

large amount of graffiti and wall paintings

Lupanar was one of the main brothels in Pompeii; it was situated two blocks east from the forum.[28]It was a two storey building consisting of ten stone beds with mattresses, each bed in a separate room, and a toilet under the stairs.

The walls revealed the different sexual activities offered, the prostitutes names and the prices. The average price was six hundred sesterces.[29]

Grffiti revealed the customers opinions on Lupanar and the prostitutes. One hundred and twenty graffiti were found. A graffiti states: " Here I had sex with a very beautiful girl admired by many".[30]

Prostitutes operated in different places and were differently paid depending on their social status. The poor prostitutes such as slaves did their business in archways while high class courtesans operated in better surroundings.[31]

Prostitution was profitable, prostitutes were to register with the aediles and tax was introduced during the emperor Gaius period.[32]

To conclude, the social status of men and women was influenced by their wealth, their family background or their official positions.[33]The survival of ancient buildings such as House of Julia Felix and Lupanar, and statue of

Marcus Balbus, graffiti, frescoes and inscriptions greatly contributed to the understanding of the ancient society of Pompeii and Herculaneum, by revealing much information that gave historians and archeologists an insight of that ancient society.