

Pompeii and the Collapse of the Domus of the Gladiators

Judith Harris (November 22, 2010)



On November 6, the Domus of the Gladiators, one of the millennia old buildings in the ancient city of Pompeii, crumbled to pieces. And, conveniently, it is nobody's fault.

ROME—For the moment let's set aside the collapse of the Domus of the Gladiators at [Pompeii](#) [2] as a metaphor for the past two decades of political Italy, and concentrate on the crumbling of the building itself.

The rear wall of the Domus backs up against an earthen embankment; its front door entry is on one of Pompeii's most traveled streets, Via dell'Abbondanza (like all street names at Pompeii, this is modern). Shortly before dawn November 6 first its back wall collapsed, and then the modern cement roof brought down the entire Domus, according to the reconstruction of horrified custodians. The



rubble spilled into the Via dell'Abbondanza before being piously covered with a tarp.

Other houses being of greater interest, this has been of no great attraction to the cruise ship tourists who flood into Pompeii. Even the archaeologists at Pompeii are somewhat vague as to its precise use. It is often described as a sort of gladiator's clubhouse and hangout, but its official name is the Schola Armaturarum Juventis Pompeiani, suggesting it is more likely a training center for local youth—a sort of gym. Others believe the name suggests its use as a weapons depot even though, unless it was heavily guarded, this would seem unlikely; the Establishment did not relish the concept of armed professional fighters in their midst, and gladiators and their weapons were kept nicely separate when not in the arena.

The point of examining its purpose is important in trying to evaluate what was lost. As one archaeologist at Pompeii said, "Every stone is vital." In addition, the building contained wall paintings that might contribute to further understanding of its purpose. When first discovered it also contained burnt matts that were presumably used by the youths during workouts. On half-columns on either side of the door there were also two stone bas reliefs of trophies honoring the [Emperor Augustus](#) [3] with sculpted helmets, shields, spears, a tunic with winged griffins, a cart. To the best of my knowledge at this time there is not yet news of whether these of the fresco paintings which show gladiatorial details and are now buried in the rubble have been found and can be reassembled.

Who is to blame? "Not me," said [Culture Minister Sandro Bondi](#) [4]. "If I were, I would resign." He did not, but must face a vote of confidence on Nov. 29, brought by the left, for once agreeing upon an action. Bondi's supporters call this call for a confidence vote (in effect, a vote of no confidence) an act of political squadismo, or Fascist-style ganging up. Bondi's justification was that this has been a terribly rainy autumn. He blames this and the heavy cement roofing added atop the building in the 1950's combined with the rainfall that weakened the embankment behind the Domus—in other words, a small landslide aggravated by short-sighted restorations of a half century ago. On the other hand, there are also reports that a restoration of the building was begun some months ago.

But the reports are still contradictory; according to the mayor of modern Pompeii, Claudio D'Alessio, the cause was negligence, a "lack of attention. Funds arrived in the past but were not used and the restoration was not begun." At any rate, if it was rain, the noted Neapolitan writer Cesare De Seta points out that the ancient Romans had splendid systems of dealing with drainage and sewers.

During the past two years Pompeii fell under the management of the [Civil Protection Agency](#) [5] headed by the now-resigned [Guido Bertolaso](#) [6]. The archaeologists who served as directors of Pompeii were elbowed aside (today there is an archaeologist as temporary director but with a limited brief). The declared goal was to make the sites earn more money, and to this end the Civil Protection Agency—whose brief includes "great events"—prepared the ancient theater for great events by cementing over the bleachers and bringing in lighting cables. I attended one of these "great events" along with 200 or so others, and was appalled at the sight of the same cementification concept that brought down the Domus of the Gladiators.

While I'm at it, let me put in a plea for the custodians of Pompeii. There is only one for every six houses that are open—too few. There are perhaps 250, which sounds like many until one recalls that guarding Pompeii is a 24-hour task in all weather. I also regret that loss of the local company that managed the little cafeteria cum café and restaurant adjacent to the Forum Baths. They served Pompeii and visitors—including Bill Clinton—very well indeed, but have been replaced by a food chain whose food and service is decidedly inferior. I suppose that complaining about the food seems petty in comparison with the other risks of Pompeii, but if the Culture Ministry can boast that it is dealing with the (utterly harmless) dogs of Pompeii, then I can complain about the presence of a fast food chain that has ousted a valid local business.

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- [1] <http://www.iitaly.org/files/gladiatori1290450251.jpg>
- [2] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pompeii>
- [3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emperor_Augustus
- [4] <http://www.beniculturali.it/mibac/export/MiBAC/sito-MiBAC/MenuPrincipale/Ministero/Ministro/index.html>
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