CHAPTER IV

THE UNEARTHING OF THE CITY

The first excavations at Pompeii were undertaken by the survivors shortly after the destruction of the city. As the upper parts of the houses that had not fallen in projected above the surface, it was possible to locate the places under which objects of value were buried. Men dug down from the surface at certain points and tunnelled from room to room underneath, breaking through the intervening walls. This work was facilitated by the stratification of the volcanic deposit; the loose bits of pumice stone in the lower stratum were easily removed, while the stratum of dust above was compact enough to furnish a fairly safe roof for narrow passageways. Only infrequently is a house discovered that was left undisturbed; from this we understand why comparatively little household furniture of value has been found. Not only were rich house furnishings in demand,—the excavators carried away valuable building materials as well. So eagerly were these sought after that large buildings, as those about the Forum, were almost completely stripped of their marble.

In the Middle Ages Pompeii was quite forgotten. Possibly some remains of the ancient buildings were yet to be seen; at any rate it seems to have been believed that a city once existed there, for the site was called La Civita.

In the years 1594-1600 Domenico Fontana was bringing water from one of the springs of the Sarno to Torre Annunziata, and in the course of the work cut an underground channel through the site of Pompeii and discovered two inscriptions; but no further investigations were made. The indifference of Fontana may be explained by the fact that the water channel was not dug out from above, like a railway cutting, and then covered over, but was carried as a tunnel
through the hill on which the city stood, so that the workmen came to the ancient surface at only a few points. In the part now excavated, the original level was disturbed in but one place, near the temple of Zeus Milichius; here the inscriptions were probably found.

The excavation of the buried Campanian towns began, not at Pompeii, but at Herculaneum, where in 1769 the workmen of the Austrian general, Count Elbeuf, sunk a shaft, reaching the ancient level at the rear of the stage of the theatre. The current statement that Elbeuf discovered the site of Herculaneum by accident, his workmen being engaged in digging a well, is erroneous. The location of the city was already known, and Elbeuf was searching for antiquities. The error probably originated in a misunderstanding of the Italian word pozzo, which has a double meaning, “shaft,” and “well.”

At first little was accomplished, but after 1738 excavations were carried on by King Charles III in a more systematic manner. The director of these excavations, Rocco Gioacchino de Alcubierre, in March, 1748, had occasion to inspect the water channel mentioned above, and learned that at the place called La Civita — which he thought was Stabiae — objects of antiquity were often found. He came to the conclusion that this site was more promising than that of Herculaneum, where the excavations just then were yielding little of value; the result of his recommendation was that on the thirtieth of the same month excavations were commenced at Pompeii, with twelve workmen.

The first digging was done north of Nola Street, near the Casa del Torello; then the men were set at work on the Street of Tombs, near the Herculaneum Gate; and a part of the Amphitheatre also was cleared. In 1750 the work was stopped, because the results were thought to be unimportant.

Attention was again directed to Pompeii in 1754, when workmen engaged in constructing the highway that runs just south of the city discovered a number of tombs. About the same time, west of the Amphitheatre, the extensive establishment of Julia Felix, arranged like a villa, and some buildings lying north of it, were excavated; but they were all covered up again, as was also the so-called villa of Cicero, which was uncovered in 1763.

The parts excavated were not left clear until after 1763, when the discovery of the inscription of Suedius Clemens, on the Street of Tombs, had established the fact that the site was that of Pompeii. Important discoveries were made soon after. In the years immediately following 1764 the theatres, with the adjacent buildings, and the Street of Tombs, together with the villa of Diomedes, were laid bare. The excavations were conducted slowly and without system, yet with scientific interest fostered by the Herculaneum Academy (Accademia ercolanese), which had been founded in 1755.

Under Joseph Bonaparte and Murat, 1806–15, the work received larger appropriations, and was prosecuted with greater energy, particularly in the quarter lying between the Herculaneum Gate and the Forum. In the same period the Forum was approached from the south side also. In 1799, at the time of the Parthenopean Republic, the French general Championnet had excavated, south of the Basilica, the two houses which are still called by his name. From these, in 1813, the excavators made their way into the Basilica, whence, in November of the same year, they pushed forward into the Forum. However, the excavation of the Forum itself with the surrounding buildings, prosecuted less vigorously and with limited means in the period of the Restoration, was not completed till 1825; by this time the temple of Fortuna and the Baths north of the Forum had also been uncovered. The following years, to 1832, brought to light the beautiful houses on the north side of Nola Street—the houses of Fonsa, of the Tragic Poet, and of the Faun—and those on Mercury Street; later came excavations south of Nola Street and in various parts of the city.

The disturbances of the period of Revolution caused a cessation of work for two years, from July 3, 1848, to September 27, 1850. During the next nine years effort was expended chiefly in clearing Stabian Street and the Stabian Baths.

The fall of the Bourbon dynasty and the passing over of Naples to the Kingdom of Italy caused another interruption, which lasted a year, from December 5, 1859, to December 20,
1860. On the last date the excavations were resumed under the direction of Giuseppe Fiorelli, a man of marked individuality, who left a permanent impress upon every part of the work. To him is due the present admirable system, excellent alike from the technical and from the administrative point of view. We owe it to him, that better provision is made now than formerly for the preservation and care of excavated buildings and objects discovered; the earlier efforts in this direction naturally left room for improvement, and the painstaking of the present administration is especially worthy of commendation.

Fiorelli put an end to haphazard digging, to excavating here and there wherever the site seemed most promising. He first set about clearing the undisturbed places lying between the excavated portions; and when in this way the west part of the city had been laid bare, he commenced to work systematically from the excavated part toward the east. Since 1860 only one public building has been excavated — the baths at the corner of Stabian and Nola streets; but many private houses have been uncovered, some of which are of much interest. Fiorelli remained in charge of the excavations until 1875, when he was called to Rome to become General Director of Museums and Excavations; he died in 1896, at the age of seventy-two. His successors, first Michele Ruggiero, then Giulio de Petra, have worked according to his plans, and in full sympathy with his ideals.

Up to the present time about three-fifths of Pompeii have been excavated. In 1872 Fiorelli made the calculation that if the excavations should continue at the rate then followed the whole city would be laid bare in 74 years. Since that time the work has progressed more slowly, partly in consequence of the greater care taken for the preservation of the remains. At the present rate of progress we may believe that the twentieth century will hardly witness the completion of the excavations.

Articles of furniture and objects of art that can easily be moved, as the statuettes often found in the gardens, are ordinarily taken to the Museum in Naples; a few things have been placed in the little Museum at Pompeii. Now and then small sculptures have been left in a house exactly as they were found; but the necessity of keeping such houses locked and of guarding them with especial care prevents the general adoption of this method of preservation.

In respect to the preservation of paintings the practice has varied at different periods. Generally, however, the best pictures have been cut from the walls and transferred to the Museum, while the decorative framework has been left undisturbed. It is keenly to be regretted that in this way the effect of the decorative system as a whole has been destroyed, for the picture forms the centre of a carefully elaborated scheme of decoration which needs to be viewed as an artistic whole in order to be fully appreciated; and the removal of a painting can hardly be accomplished without some damage to the parts of the wall immediately in contact with it. A far better method would be to leave intact all walls containing paintings or decorative work of interest, providing such means...
of protection against the weather as may be necessary. A good beginning in this respect has been made in the case of the house of the Vetti, the beautiful and well preserved paintings of which have been left on the walls and are preserved with the greatest care.

The treatment of a mosaic floor is an altogether different problem. While the floor as a whole, with its ornamental designs, is left in place, fine mosaics representing paintings, which are delicate and easily destroyed, are wisely taken up and placed in the Museum.