

Exhibit shows Pompeian life before Vesuvius' wrath

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The UC team of archaeologists works on site at the Pompeii excavation.

As doomsdays go, few can top Pompeii's. The volcanic cataclysm of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D. buried the vibrant city and many thousands of its residents under layers of ash and rock several feet thick. It was a force so sudden and swift, there was no escape.

The Roman populace near modern day Naples, Italy, was left frozen in the throes of death and hidden for nearly 1,700 years. The fate of Pompeii is one of history's enduring tragedies, and now the excavation site has grown into one of the most popular tourist attractions in Italy.

That's the story you know. But there's one you don't.

Thanks to a special collaboration between the University of Cincinnati and the Cincinnati Museum Center, you'll learn more than how the city died – you'll learn how it lived.

The traveling exhibit, "A Day in Pompeii," opens March 2 at the museum. Visitors will attend educational programs and be able to see ancient artifacts, large frescoes and body casts of the dead. What makes this version of the exhibit exceptional is the involvement of faculty and students from the McMicken College of Arts & Sciences' Classics Department.

Steven Ellis, assistant professor of classics, heads the university's archaeological excavation project at Pompeii, which is the largest and best-known active excavation on site. The Pompeii Archaeological Research Project: Porta Stabia covers a nearly 50,000 square foot area where researchers have uncovered a neighborhood with homes, shops, restaurants and factories. Ellis brought the project to UC in 2007 and was instrumental in connecting the university's vast resources with the Cincinnati Museum Center staff for the upcoming exhibit.

"Even though the exhibit has gone around the world, you can never get an experience like this anywhere else," says Ellis, whose work on the exhibit was recently featured in [The Enquirer](#). "It's practically impossible to put this exhibit in another American city and have as many resident experts as here."

The intent of the collaboration is to take this exhibit beyond just learning about the city's demise by sharing the unique expertise only UC can offer. The Classics Department has been researching this Pompeian neighborhood's history back to its earliest days in the fourth century B.C. Through UC's help, the exhibit will give insight into the lives of

Pompeii's ill-fated citizens and how the city's development connects to local and broader histories.

“Visitors to the exhibit will not only learn how the city was destroyed, which is so incredibly emotive, but also how the city lived and how it thrived – and what kind of city was destroyed,” Ellis says. “They get a pretty rich account of what life was like for the very rich right through to the middle classes and the poor. They’ll take away a sense of wonder, a sense of what it must have been like to live in a Roman town 2,000 years ago.”

The UC team of archaeologists works on site at the Pompeii excavation.

Faculty and graduate students from UC's Classics Department will be involved in lectures, outreach programs, workshops, gallery talks and museum staff training throughout the exhibit's run. They'll serve as docents, create podcasts and design mock excavations. Ellis even plans to videoconference with the museum from the trenches of the Pompeii excavation.

To add a bit of modern history to the exhibit, the students also have arranged to bring a living, breathing piece of Pompeii to Cincinnati. Doctoral student Bea Peruzzi invited Pompeii Mayor Claudio D'Alessio to visit. Peruzzi is still finalizing the details of the trip, but D'Alessio is scheduled to stop by the museum and campus March 12 and 13.

Organizing an event of this magnitude has been no small feat for the students. Ann Santen is a UC alumna, longtime contributor to the Classics Department and president of the local chapter of the Archaeological Institute of America. She helped coordinate the museum's efforts with UC, and has been impressed with the work done by the students, particularly Allison Emmerson, Sarah Lima and Peruzzi.

“I set up the initial contacts, and the students have run with it,” Santen says. “They have done an extraordinary job managing the whole thing and have been amazingly creative.”

While the task has been daunting, the benefits are myriad. Doctoral student Emmerson has worked at Pompeii and plans to pursue a tenure track faculty position at the university level when she finishes her studies at UC. She said the opportunities for community outreach and interaction with museum staff afforded by working on this exhibit have been invaluable.

“This allows us to engage the artifacts in a different way,” Emmerson says. “Being able to see behind the curtain and see how a museum works has been really valuable for all of us involved.”

Ellis shares Emmerson’s sentiments on embracing the chance to connect their research with those beyond academia. Ellis hopes the Classics Department’s volunteer efforts with the exhibit will promote its commitment to community outreach. He says it’s great to be able to work in his field of research with members of the community, and it serves as a reminder about what we know and what we have yet to learn.

“It’s a fantastic way of getting out in the community and sharing our passion for the ancient world,” Ellis says. “We often find we’re learning as much from the community about how they see the world and the past as they learn from us.”

A handful of votive cups discovered by UC grad student Alison Fields at the Pompeii [excavation](#).

Santen expects the exhibit to call attention to the central role UC plays in Pompeii research. Having docents who’ve actually helped excavate the ancient society will make it hard for exhibit visitors to miss that point.

She says the Classics Department as a whole deserves to be recognized.

“The department is one of the very finest in the entire world, and the department library is the finest in the world,” Santen says. “People come from literally all over the world to study for a few months and use the library.”

Ellis knows the powerful appeal of the exhibit coupled with his department’s community outreach efforts will shine a positive light on all of the university’s endeavors.

“This will absolutely get the community excited about what we’re doing at [Pompeii](#) and what so many of the research initiatives coming out of UC are working on,” Ellis says. “This is just one example of the full range of exciting things that are happening here at UC.”

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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