
One of the most important archaeological areas in the world is the region around Vesuvius, where in AD 79 several cities were buried under ash, mud and lava. These cities, in particular Pompeii and Herculaneum, were only discovered after more than 16 centuries, and then only by chance. In 1709, a French general serving in the Austrian army at Naples, called Emmanuel-Maurice de Lorraine, Prince d’Elbeuf, first began excavations by digging the shaft of a well, which revealed the *scaena* of the ancient theatre of Herculaneum. He found dozens of statues and portrait heads and an assortment of decorative marbles, but he did not know in which ancient town or which building he had been wandering. This knowledge came 30 years later, when the Bourbon kings were on the throne of Naples. This period in the history of the excavation of Pompeii and Herculaneum, known as the Bourbon era, is the subject of Christopher Charles Parslow’s book. The central character is Karl Jakob Weber, a Swiss military engineer who was supervisor of the excavations from 1750 to 1764. He was the only member of the Bourbon ‘archaeological team’ who was praised by J.J. Winckelmann in his letters to the world about the remarkable discoveries in the Vesuvian area (*Sendschreiben von den herculanischen Entdeckungen* [1762]; *Nachrichten von den neuesten herculanischen Entdeckungen* [1764]). Yet Weber was considered by his contemporaries in Naples to be a kind of outsider, with excellent military engineering skills, but rather unusual ideas: his main goal was not to dig for as much treasure as possible, but to record the findspots and contexts of the treasures that he found. To this date there has been no biographical study of this archaeologist *avant la lettre*.

In his book, Parslow examines Weber’s life and work as far as possible on the basis of original documents, such as excavation reports, the correspondence of Weber and his associates, and the surviving architectural plans. Much of this material, which is mostly in the Neapolitan archives, has never been published. Fortunately, Parslow quotes at length from these sources and has added some appendices, giving full translations of Weber’s most important plans and descriptions. His book is arranged chronologically and divided into three parts: Part I gives the historical back-
ground of the period before 1750, Part II deals with the first
decade of Weber’s tenure, and Part III focuses on the efforts made
by Weber in his last years to publish his plans and descriptions of
the excavations and to achieve recognition for his work.

Chapter 1 starts with a biography of Weber from his birth in
1712 in Arth (in the Swiss canton of Schwyz) up to his military
career in the Royal Guard of Charles of Bourbon at Naples. Next,
Parslow gives an overview of the excavations at Herculaneum in
the first half of the 18th century, covering the main discoveries and
the people involved before Weber’s appointment. The director of
the operations was the Spanish engineer Roque Joaquin de
Alcubierre, who in 1738 resumed research in the shafts dug by
the Prince d’Elbeuf. These excavations were very successful in that
many ancient objects (statues, parts of wall paintings, utensils etc.)
were found and added to the royal collection of antiquities. Like
moles, the excavators dug tunnels some 20 meters underground,
searching for archaeological treasures. The work was not without
danger, and Alcubierre had to leave his post to recover from illness
from 1741 to 1745. In this period he was replaced by a French ar-
chitect, Pierre Bardet de Villeneuve, who introduced more sys-
tematic methods of exploring and made some important plans of
the buildings which were encountered in the excavations. Until
then the documentation consisted only of Alcubierre’s daily reports
and some roughly sketched plans of the theatre. After Alcubierre
returned, the old system of haphazard tunnelling was resumed. At
first the results continued to be promising, but after two years in-
vestigations were started at two new sites, Pompeii (from 1748) and
Stabiae (from 1749). Here it was easier to excavate, because the
ancient buildings were only buried under pumice stones (lapilli). At
this point Weber appears on the scene of the excavations. The
problems he had to face are described in chapter 2, where Parslow
gives an account of the documents and plans which were (or
should have been) at Weber’s disposal in 1750. It seems that he
had to start almost from scratch, as Alcubierre had produced
hardly anything and Bardet had taken all his (major) drawings and
plans with him when he left.

The second part of the book deals with the results and methods
of the excavations. The excavations in the ‘Villa dei Papiri’ in par-
ticular, discussed in chapter 3, show the tremendous improvement
in archaeological methods introduced by Weber. One of his most
important innovations was his plan of the site, started in 1754,
which shows all the tunnels and the findspots of major objects.