

Max Weber Lecture by Mary Beard

16 December 2009 at 17.00

Max Weber Programme, EUI, Villa La Fonte

Abstract:

In May 1884 a three-day series of "re-enactments" were staged on the site of ancient Pompeii. In a style that seems uncomfortably reminiscent of Disney-history, local performers dressed up as Romans and staged gladiatorial games and chariot races, as well as recreating Roman weddings and funerals and serving mock-up Roman vintages from carefully restored Roman bars. Starting from this celebration, which was widely reported in the British and American press (making more of an impact abroad than in Italy itself - where it was mostly notable for incurring a terrible financial loss), this lecture explores the experience of visiting the site of Pompeii in the nineteenth century.

Can we detect a shift from "Romantic" to "Archaeological" tourism? Or was Pompeii always as much as "City of the Dead", as a reconstructed museum of ancient life? What was the relationship between fictional and factual reconstructions of the city? What was the difference? Where does reenactment end and sheer fakery begin?

The answers to these questions reveal unexpected sides of nineteenth-century tourism. But they ought also to prompt reflection on our own engagement with the material traces of antiquity. Is archaeology always in part a performance? Does it always involve the suspension of disbelief?