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‘Bombing Pompeii!!! Why not the Pyramids?’ Myths and memories of the Allied bombing of Pompeii, August–September 1943

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In August and September 1943 Pompeii was hit by over 160 bombs dropped by British, Canadian and US aircraft (Maiuri 1956, 110; García y García 2006, 24–5, n.15). These caused considerable damage to the archaeological site, most of it in the southwestern part of the ancient city. This included the destruction of the Antiquarium (on-site museum) and damage to the House of the Faun (Works of Art in Italy 1945, 25; García y García 2006). The ‘real’ explanation is that the damage was accidental, due to inaccuracies in bombing other targets nearby. However, alternative explanations – namely that the bombing was deliberate and aimed at German troops occupying the site – did emerge at the time and have persisted (Rowland 2014, 251). While these alternative explanations are, strictly speaking, incorrect, they shed important light on contemporary attitudes towards heritage in total war, popular misconceptions about bombing and issues of memory and authority in historical evidence.

My recent study of documentation from the UK National Archives and the US Air Force Historical Research Agency collection showed that bombs hit Pompeii in error rather than because it was targeted deliberately (Pollard, in press). Damage was done in two phases, firstly on the night of 24–25 August 1943, and secondly between 13 and 26 September 1943 (García y García 2006, 31–4). The bombs that caused damage on the night of 24–25 August were dropped in error by British bombers; they were intending to attack railway marshalling yards and steelworks at nearby Torre Annunziata. The bombs that hit the site in September were
intended for important transportation nodes (road and rail intersections) west of the site, between modern Pompeii and Torre Annunziata. Bombing these transportation targets formed part of the effort to stem the dangerous German counterattack against the Allied Salerno beachhead south of Pompeii (see Molony 1973, 289–324; Blumensen 1969, 115–36). Bombing was mostly carried out in good visibility with very little opposition, but the intended targets were too close to the site and contemporary bombing methods too inaccurate to avoid damaging Roman Pompeii.

However, as noted, alternative explanations emerged at the time and sometimes recur even in recent discussions. These explanations hold that ancient Pompeii was bombed deliberately, either because German troops occupied the site or because Allied commanders mistakenly believed that they did. There are three intersecting ‘strands’ seen in contemporary media and post-war memoirs and accounts. One is exemplified by the accounts of Allied journalists and military personnel who visited the site after its liberation. Another comprises the memories and opinions of contemporary Italian civilians – especially Amedeo Maiuri, the archaeological superintendent of Campania, whose activities at Pompeii at this time have been examined recently (Osanna 2017). Another ‘strand’ derives from a broadcast by Radio Londra, the BBC wartime Italian language service, following the first bombing of Pompeii.

The interrelationships of these strands are complicated by their chronology. While all relate to events that occurred between 25 August and 2 October 1943, the dates on which accounts were broadcast or published range from 29 August 1943 to 1978. The accounts are set out here in the order in which events took place, or were alleged to have taken place.

25 September 1943: Radio Londra reported by Maiuri

Pompeii was first damaged by bombing on the night of 24–25 August 1943, the result of inaccurate RAF bombing targeting the steelworks at Torre Annunziata, 1.5 km west of the ancient site, and the nearby marshalling yards. Site records report instances of damage on that night. All occurred in the southwest corner, closest to Torre Annunziata, including the destruction of the Antiquarium by the Porta Marina (García y García 2006, 31–2; Maiuri 1956). To put this in perspective, that night’s damage to Pompeii, while serious where bombs hit, probably was caused by 4–6 bombs, while contemporary RAF records suggest over 300 bombs (ranging from 500lb–4000lb) were dropped during the night’s attack.
Maiuri’s *Taccuino napoletano (A Neapolitan Notebook)* takes the form of a contemporary diary of events through which he lived. However, its structure is belied by some entries’ foreknowledge of events to come, and occasional reflections from the perspective of 1956. Maiuri recounts that at the time of the August bombing, Radio Londra (the BBC Italian service) deplored damage to the site, but justified it by claiming that a German headquarters was located in the Albergo del Sole hotel by the Porta Marina (Maiuri 1956, 107). While I have not been able to verify the broadcast independently of Maiuri’s account – it is not, for example, among the Radio Londra broadcasts catalogued in Piccialutti Caprioli’s inventory (Piccialuti Caprioli 1976) – there is no particular reason to disbelieve the substance of Maiuri’s memory on this occasion.

In contrast, *The Times* reported and analysed the previous night’s bombing solely as an attack on installations at Torre Annunziata, with no mention of Pompeii as a target (*The Times*, ‘Naples Railways Again Bombed’, 26 August 1943, 3).

### 13–26 September 1943: Allied newspaper reports

The main phase of bomb damage to Pompeii was 13–20 September 1943. It is clear from contemporary Allied documentation that this was accidental damage caused by attacks against road and rail targets close to the ancient site. Contemporary bombing was insufficiently accurate to ensure that none of the bombs aimed at those targets hit Pompeii instead. Wartime data for USAAF daytime bombing under comparable conditions to those encountered around Pompeii (United States Strategic Bombing Survey 1947) suggest that 70 per cent of bombs might land more than 1000 ft (305 m) from their intended target, 18 per cent more than a mile (1609 m) from it, and so forth. One heavily bombed transportation target lay only c.300 m from the western limits of the archaeological site of Pompeii, and from the wartime bombing accuracy data c.5 per cent of the bombs aimed at that target might have been expected to fall on the site, even in good conditions.

These attacks formed part of the Allied response to dangerous German counterattacks against the Salerno beachhead that had begun on 12 September. They were intended to prevent or delay movement of reinforcements and supplies to the Salerno area. Numerous contemporary US and British newspaper reports of the bombing specify road and rail routes near Pompeii as the intended targets, rather than the site itself. Among them are *The Times* [London] (15 September 1943, 4; 17
September 1943, 3); *Chicago Daily Tribune* (15 September 1943, 4) and *New York Times* (15 September 1943, 1). Their agreement with official records is hardly surprising, as official communiqués often served as the newspapers’ sources. However, this agreement also implies no concerted effort to distort the reasons for the bombing at this time by suggesting, for example, that German troops actually occupied the ancient site.

### 15 September 1943: memoirs of Amedeo Maiuri

Maiuri’s *Taccuino napoletano* (1956) records a widespread belief among local Italians that the ancient site of Pompeii was occupied by German troops. He himself knew this to be incorrect, but believed that the Allies bombed the site because of an incorrect assessment on their part that it was true.

This allegation first appears in Maiuri’s observations on resistance to the Salerno landings in an entry dated 4 September 1943. This discusses the initial (subsidiary) British landing in Calabria on 3 September. However, his reflections also anticipate the main Allied landing in the Gulf of Salerno on 8 September – emphasising that, despite its appearance, *Taccuino napoletano* is not an unedited version of Maiuri’s contemporary diary. He recounts:

> News gathered by bad informants must have led the [Allied] military headquarters to believe that Pompeii was a fortified camp and that the ruins were hiding armed men and munitions. Some small group of visitors or deserters surprised on the Theatre steps by reconnaissance flights surely provided confirmation of that belief. Another factor … was our own unfortunate use in those days of reinforced concrete and eternit [corrugated cement with asbestos fibres] for roofing [excavated Roman] buildings in the New Excavations, making them look like barracks. In this way a myth was created that Pompei had become a German strongpoint. The myth spread and grew, to the point that in my pained stupor I even heard it repeated, by a young Red Cross nurse at the hospital in Torre del Greco when I was being treated there. Therefore it was not a surprise when the first American correspondent told me, as justification of the bombing, that their headquarters had been informed, with certainty, that a whole German armoured division was encamped in the ruins.

(Maiuri 1956, 109–10; author’s translation)
Maiuri’s reference to the hospital at Torre del Greco is explained in a later entry relating his treatment there after being wounded nearby on 15 September 1943 by an Allied air attack. The medical staff were amazed that he had been in Pompeii, because they had heard that there was an entire German division in the excavations ready to resist the Allied landings at Salerno. The circulation of this false story, Maiuri claims, was the ‘unfortunate reason why those 160 bombs fell on the blameless ruins of Pompeii’ (Maiuri 1956, 119–20; my translation).

Thus Maiuri’s story was that Pompeii was bombed deliberately by the Allies due to their (mistaken) assessment that German troops occupied the site. He suggests this derived from inaccurate information passed on by ‘bad informants’ and misinterpretation of aerial reconnaissance data. When local Italian civilians had come to believe that the Germans were in the ruins is unclear from Maiuri’s account, but he implies that such stories were current by 15 September, the date when he was hospitalised.

The day after Allied entry into Naples (2 October), Associated Press correspondent Relman Morin met and interviewed Maiuri in the city’s Museo Nazionale. Still wounded, Maiuri was living in the museum. The interview included discussion of the museum itself and other cultural sites in Naples, and Maiuri also expressed his views on events at Pompeii. Clearly he believed that the site had been deliberately targeted, but mistakenly so:

> The tragic irony of the bombing of Pompeii was that the Germans had never actually encamped inside the famous excavated city. [Maiuri] said they were only in the vicinity.

(Morin 1943)

29 September 1943: Allied correspondents at Pompeii on its liberation

A BBC radio report was recorded in Pompeii itself by Canadian correspondent Matthew Henry Halton on 29 September 1943. It is clear from the recording (Imperial War Museum catalogue 1369, 29 September 1943) that combat was still going on in his immediate vicinity.

> And early today I was able to enter Pompeii – you can hear the sound of enemy guns – with one of the first British units … I speak now from Pompeii. I speak actually from the ruins of the Roman amphitheatre, nearly 2000 years old. I am standing on the high wall
of this amphitheatre. It was used by the Germans as a gun position, with the result that we had to bomb it, and there is a gaping bomb crater right in the middle of the arena.

### 30 September 1943: memoirs of Mortimer Wheeler

The strand of ‘Allied personnel and journalists’ is also represented by the memoirs of the Royal Artillery’s Brigadier Mortimer Wheeler, a well-known archaeologist. He was important in the origins of Allied military cultural property protection (Wheeler 1955, 1–2; see Nicholas 1995, 215–17; Moshenka and Shadla-Hall 2011). Wheeler reminisces, in a characteristically stagey account, on a visit to Pompeii on the night of 30 September 1943, the day after the site’s liberation (see Hawkes 1982, 224 for the date of the anecdote):

> More than six years previously in the dusk I had thrust my military caravan into the Amphitheatre gate of Pompeii as far as a new bomb-crater would allow me, and all night long that same Vesuvius had leered at me with an inflamed Cyclopean eye. At dawn I had walked into the city, a little gingerly, preceded by a sapper who thrust a bayonet ever and anon into the suspect soil. The reconstructed two-storey houses of the *nuovi scavi* had been bombed with satisfactory nicety by our fellows up above: not their fault – they had been told that a German armoured division was ‘in Pompeii’, and the map writes POMPEII across the blackened mass of the old city, while the insignificant modern townlet on the main road is merely ‘Pompeii’.

While Wheeler’s observation is correct for the standard GSGS 4228 series 1:25,000 Allied military maps of the area, his explanation for the bombing is contradicted by all the contemporary Allied air force documents. It is curious that Wheeler, a British Army officer recently involved in establishing British military cultural property protection efforts in Libya, should give an ‘incorrect’ explanation of the bombing, one that is documented nowhere else. At first glance, it is tempting to take Wheeler (a soldier and archaeologist) as an authority. Yet his military duties as commander of an anti-aircraft regiment at that time meant that he was far from the headquarters planning the bombing, and there is no particular reason why he would have known the ‘real’ explanation for the damage. Furthermore this anecdote, more entertaining than evidence-based, accords well with Wheeler’s critical and impatient stance (documented in contemporary letters) towards wartime Allied cultural property protection efforts.
16 October 1943: memoirs of Spike Milligan

Pompeii soon became a regular destination for Allied personnel on leave. An early documented example is the visit paid on 16 October 1943 by Gunner Spike Milligan of the Royal Artillery (subsequently a famous comedian). In his wartime memoirs, Milligan observes:

> I discovered that the Americans had actually bombed it! They believed German infantry were hiding in it! Not much damage had been done, museum staff were already at work trying to repair it. Bombing Pompeii!!! Why not the Pyramids, Germans might be hiding there?

(Milligan 1980, 51)

Comic hyperbole aside, the theme that the site was bombed because it was German-occupied (or because the Allies believed it to be German-occupied) recurs.

9 November 1943: ‘Damage at Pompeii. British Officer’s Account’, The Times

On 9 November 1943, a few weeks after Milligan’s visit, The Times published an account entitled ‘Damage at Pompeii. British Officer’s Account’. Attributed to a contemporary military visitor, it re-iterated the suggestion that Pompeii was bombed because it was occupied by German troops:

> We have received from a British officer, who recently visited Pompeii, an account of the damage done to the place during September, when the Germans were encamped on the site and allied aircraft were obliged to treat it as a military objective. The following is a summary of damage observed …

12–15 April 1944: Italian staff at Pompeii to Capt. F. H. J. Maxse

Allied officers of the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Subcommission of Allied Military Government undertook inspection visits to Pompeii after the bombing and liberation of the site (Coccoli 2017; Nicholas 1995, 222–72). There they liaised with local staff (including
Maiuri) regarding repair and re-opening of the site. A report of one such visit was written on 17 April 1944 by British monuments officer Captain Frederick H. J. Maxse (Royal Sussex Regiment), recording his visit to Pompeii and Herculaneum on 12–15 April. Surprisingly, Maxse relied on local Italian staff for an explanation of the damage. He reports:

> From the evidence given by the custodian and other personnel who witnessed the bombings it would appear that the object was to destroy a German Command Post in the Albergo [hotel] near the Porta Marina and the concentration of bombs round the Museum and the Forum suggests the likelihood of such an aim. There were a few German tanks near the Villa dei Misteri, but the only German troops inside the old city were visitors. There was no concentration of troops within the old city ...

(Subcommission MFAA 1944, 3)

This explanation mirrors Maiuri’s account of the Radio Londra broadcast – unsurprisingly since Maiuri directed the staff on the site. He and his colleagues shared the experience of the bombing and undoubtedly discussed it. While Maxse does not specifically cite Maiuri as his source, he was certainly present for part of the visit, actually taking Maxse to Herculaneum on 15 April. This anecdote is also interesting in that it confounds expectations of authority. Here a British officer appears to be relying on local Italian civilians to explain damage inflicted by the officer’s own air force. However, as with Wheeler, there is no reason why Maxse, a junior officer within the institutions of Allied military government, should have had any special insight into the bombing.

Thus there are essentially three ‘incorrect’ explanations of why Pompeii was bombed. To summarise:

A. Accidental: collateral damage while bombing a German headquarters near the site

This explanation was advanced in the Radio Londra broadcast regarding damage caused on 24–25 August 1943, published by Maiuri in 1956. It was reported to Maxse in April 1944.
B. Deliberate: targeting of the archaeological site because it was occupied by German troops and thus a legitimate military target

This is seen on/after 29 September 1943 in accounts by Allied correspondents and visitors. A conviction that the site was occupied by German troops is also attributed by Maiuri to local Italian civilians, with the implication that this story was current by c. 15 September.

C. Deliberate: intentional targeting of the archaeological site due to mistaken intelligence

The third explanation for the damage is that ancient Pompeii was targeted deliberately but mistakenly. This is either because Allied commanders made an incorrect assessment that the site was occupied by German troops (Maiuri), or because of an error confusing ancient and modern Pompeii on the map (Wheeler).

Explanation ‘A’ – that damage was collateral to the bombing of a German headquarters near the site – is implausible as a ‘real’ explanation of the damage to Pompeii on that night. Maiuri (1956, 107–9) states that a ‘little group’ (not a headquarters) of Germans were in the hotel. He outlines German military dispositions around, but not in, the archaeological site, something reiterated in other contemporary accounts (see Pesce 1993, 120). Even had the Albergo del Sole headquarters existed, none of the documentation of operations by the Allied air forces suggests that it was targeted. Nor would the Allies have been able to target a single building precisely, especially at night when the damage was caused. As already noted, the intended targets near Pompeii on 24–25 August were the Torre Annunziata steelworks and railway marshalling yards. Undoubtedly the damage to ancient Pompeii was caused by a few stray bombs intended for those targets.

However, the reported Radio Londra explanation may have been created and propagated by British sources to counter negative stories about damage to the site in the Italian and international press, invoking military necessity due to German military ‘use’. I can find no evidence that this explanation was cited directly in English language broadcasts or media. For example, The Times article of 26 August 1943 discusses the night’s missions against the railway system and steelworks at Torre Annunziata without reference to Pompeii, either in terms of targeting or of damage. On the other hand, the damage was reported in contemporary Italian and German media, such as the Giornale d’Italia (27 August 1943, 1; 29–30 August 1943, 3) and the Kölnische Zeitung (28 August...
All three refer to damage to the Arch of Drusus in the Forum, the House of Romulus and Remus and the Antiquarium. So does discussion of Pompeii in a *New York Times* article citing ‘Rome radio’ as its source (27 August 1943, 4; see also García y García 2006, 21).

It seems likely that the message – damage to Pompeii was caused in the course of an attack against a German military target – was specifically tailored for Italian audiences. Concern about Italian public opinion regarding damage to heritage sites by Allied forces is documented in a number of contemporary Allied military documents. While Radio Londra avoided the overtly propagandistic content of other ‘black’ Allied radio stations and print sources, its substantial audience in Italy, its ability to respond to Italian press reports and the anecdotal and discursive nature of much of its programming made it an effective medium for shaping Italian perceptions of the damage (see Briggs 1970, 435–41; Piccialuti Caprioli 1976).

Explanations ‘B’ (that the archaeological site was targeted deliberately because it was occupied by German troops) and ‘C’ (that it was targeted deliberately because the Allies believed it, incorrectly, to be German-occupied) are clearly interrelated.

In international law, German military use of a heritage site would have legitimised its bombardment on the grounds of military necessity. The 1907 Hague Convention was the basis of international law on this issue in 1943 and by extension of contemporary military law, quoted in both the [British] War Office, Manual of Military Law (1929) and the [US] War Department’s Rules of Land Warfare (1940). Hague 1907 (Article IV, in International Committee of the Red Cross, 2017) states:

> In sieges and bombardments all necessary steps must be taken to spare, as far as possible, … historic monuments … provided they are not being used at the time for military purposes.

Protocols for targeting in the vicinity of heritage sites distributed to Mediterranean Allied Air Forces in February 1944 echo this legal provision:

> If a town is in the actual zone of military operations on the ground, and is occupied by the enemy, no restrictions whatever are to be applied. The sole determining factor will be the requirements of the military situation.

(Headquarters Mediterranean Allied Air Forces 1944, 2)

Thus a plausible claim that German troops had occupied the archaeological site of Pompeii could be used to shift responsibility for its damage.
from the Allies onto the Germans – implicitly branding them as barbarous for using a heritage site for military purposes and exposing it to damage. Certainly Allied and Axis/German media competed to depict one another as careless or downright rapacious of cultural property during the Italian campaign (Nicholas 1995, 231). While the idea that deliberately targeting a heritage site can be more legitimate than accidental damage seems strange, the key legal distinction is based on enemy occupation and a consequent judgement of military necessity. Enemy occupation of an historic building removes its protection from targeting, whereas responsibility for accidental damage is a far more problematic issue. The British Manual of Military Law (War Office 1929, Amendment No.12, p.33, note 1 on No.133) emphasises that accidental and collateral damage is a grey area:

Hague Rules 27. The introduction of long range artillery, aircraft &c. makes it difficult to ensure immunity for such buildings, but they should not be bombarded deliberately.

The legal status of collateral damage to heritage sites close to (but not occupied by) military forces remains problematic in post-war international law (Boylan 1993, 55–6). Furthermore, a claim of deliberate targeting (rather than collateral damage) masked the relative inaccuracy of contemporary Allied bombing techniques and tactics from friendly civilians as well as from the enemy. Pre-war debates about bombing had led to exaggerated perceptions of its accuracy and effectiveness among both military and civilians (Overy 2014, 19–55). Naivety regarding the realities of bombing in 1943 is revealed by a contemporary newspaper anecdote of how Superintendent Maiuri tried to signal Allied bombers away from the site of Pompeii (Morin 1943, 15) and García y García’s modern incomprehension that bombers might hit the site in error even in daytime, in clear view (García y García 2006, 26).

Thus propagation of explanation ‘B’ may have been an attractive option to the Allies. Explanation ‘C’ is merely a version of ‘B’, perhaps reflecting cynicism about the competence of higher command and military intelligence.

However, there is no clear evidence that explanation ‘B’ originated high up in Allied political and military circles as deliberate propaganda – at least not with respect to the damage inflicted in September. As noted, contemporary newspaper reports in the US and Britain specify (correctly) that the intended targets of the bombing were transportation systems near the modern (and ancient) town. Claims that German troops made military use of the site and were deliberately targeted by Allied bombing
seem to have emerged and spread at grassroots level, among Allied correspondents and military visitors to the site, rather than descending from the top as organised propaganda to justify the damage. Even *The Times* report of 9 November cites a source ‘on the ground’, namely the ‘British officer, who recently visited Pompeii’.

The question of how these Allied ‘grassroots’ explanations intersected with the Italian civilian versions is a difficult one. Maiuri’s account, if accurate, suggests ‘Germans in the ruins’ stories were widespread among local civilians by c.15 September, when he was wounded and hospitalised.

How did these stories develop? They may have owed their origins to the August Radio Londra broadcast, stretched and adapted to explain damage inflicted on Pompeii in September. Perhaps later Radio Londra broadcast other similar stories, although one might expect Maiuri to have heard of them. Alternatively, these stories may have been purely local, popular rationalisations of the intense Allied air activity around Pompeii, of damage caused to the site and/or of the German presence in modern Pompei and the roads around the site. In turn, these local accounts may have influenced explanations of the damage recorded by Allied correspondents and personnel, as guides, custodians and other local civilians shared their views. Certainly it is particularly striking to see Frederick Maxse, a British Army monuments officer, receiving and accepting the local staff’s ‘incorrect’ explanation of the damage.

References


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