

THE SECRECY OF THE BOURBONS:

How the History of Excavations within Ancient Vesuvian Cities Impacted Antiquarianism and Archaeological Practice

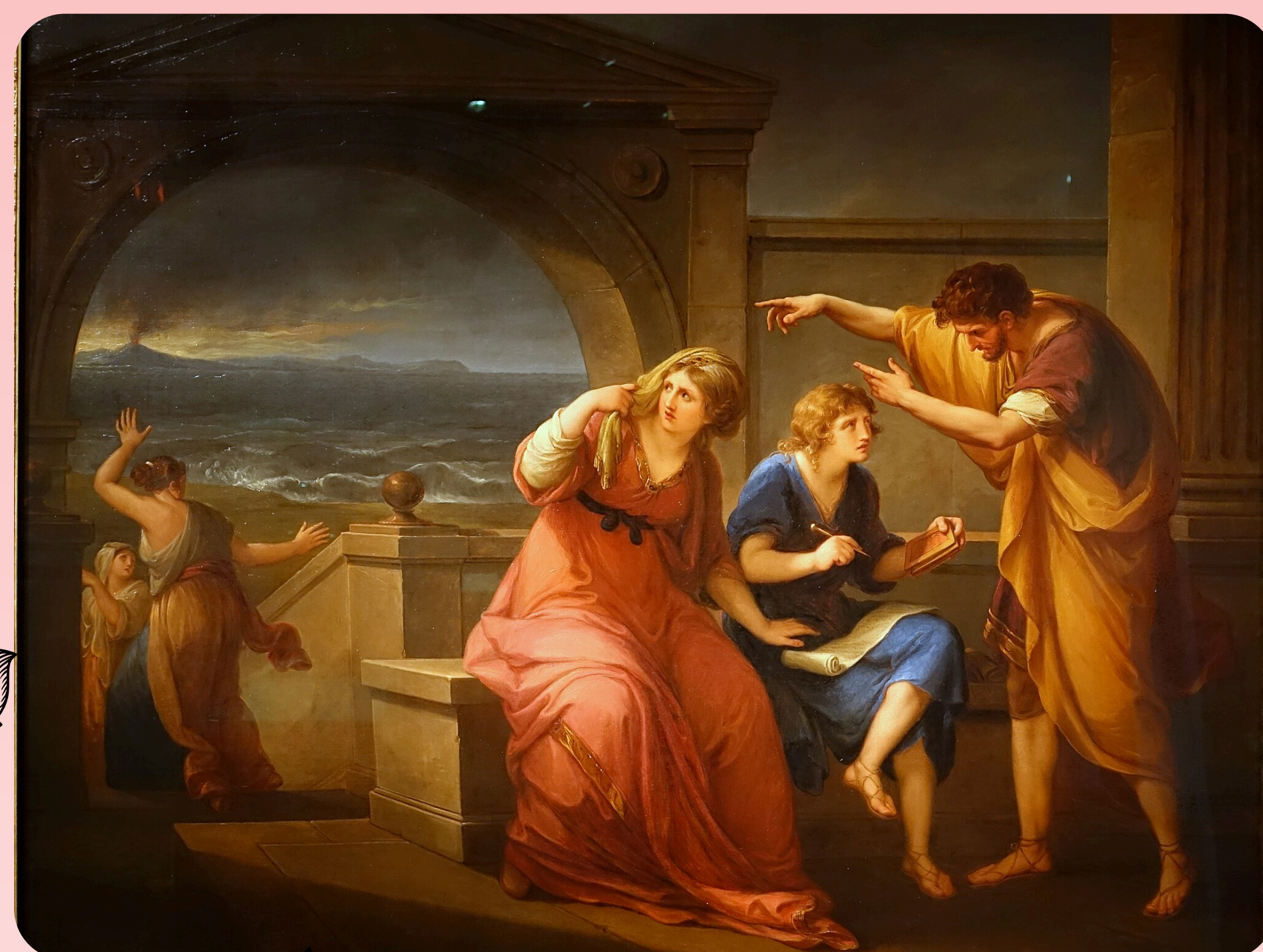
Reagan Gibson & Dr. Andrea DeGiorgi - Department of Classics - Tyler Center for Global Studies - Florida State University

Introduction

- In AD 79, the volcanic eruption of Mt. Vesuvius buried Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Stabiae under thick sediments of pumice, ashes, and lava. The discovery of these sites still entices scholars worldwide, as they seek to unravel the stimuli and strategies that drove the early excavations in the 18th century.
- Despite the wealth of archaeological research on the ancient sites of the Vesuvian geographic area, the analysis of the earlier collections and the vicissitudes that led to their recovery remain a sizable gap of understanding.
- The aim of this research is two-fold: first, it will bring into focus the detrimental effects of the excavation practices at Vesuvian sites on the general understanding of archaeology at that time; Second, it will highlight the damage and losses the collections of these Vesuvian sites suffered.

The Neoclassicist Boom of the 18th Century

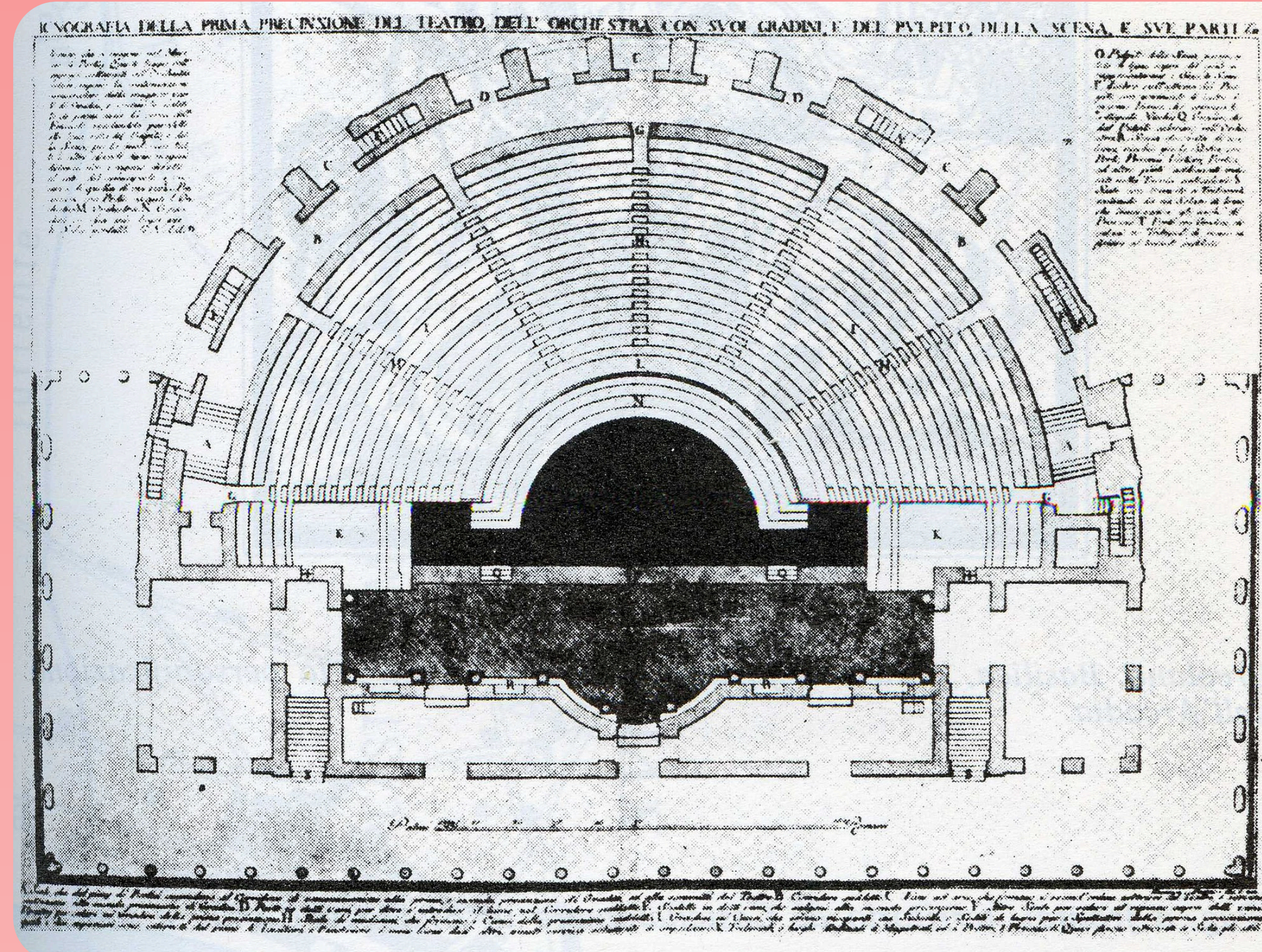
- In the 18th century, an exciting (re)discovery was made in Campania – Herculaneum. After a flurry of activity and excavation, suddenly, a plethora of archaeological artifacts lay at the feet of the House of Bourbon.
- Eventually, across several decades, these ancient works will be shipped out to family and friends to secure alliances, stored in museums, moved, looted by esteemed visitors and workers alike, destroyed, and more – all to establish a seemingly small niche in history.



Pliny the younger and his mother at Misenum, AD 79. Angelica Kaufmann, 1785. Oil on canvas. Princeton University Art Museum.

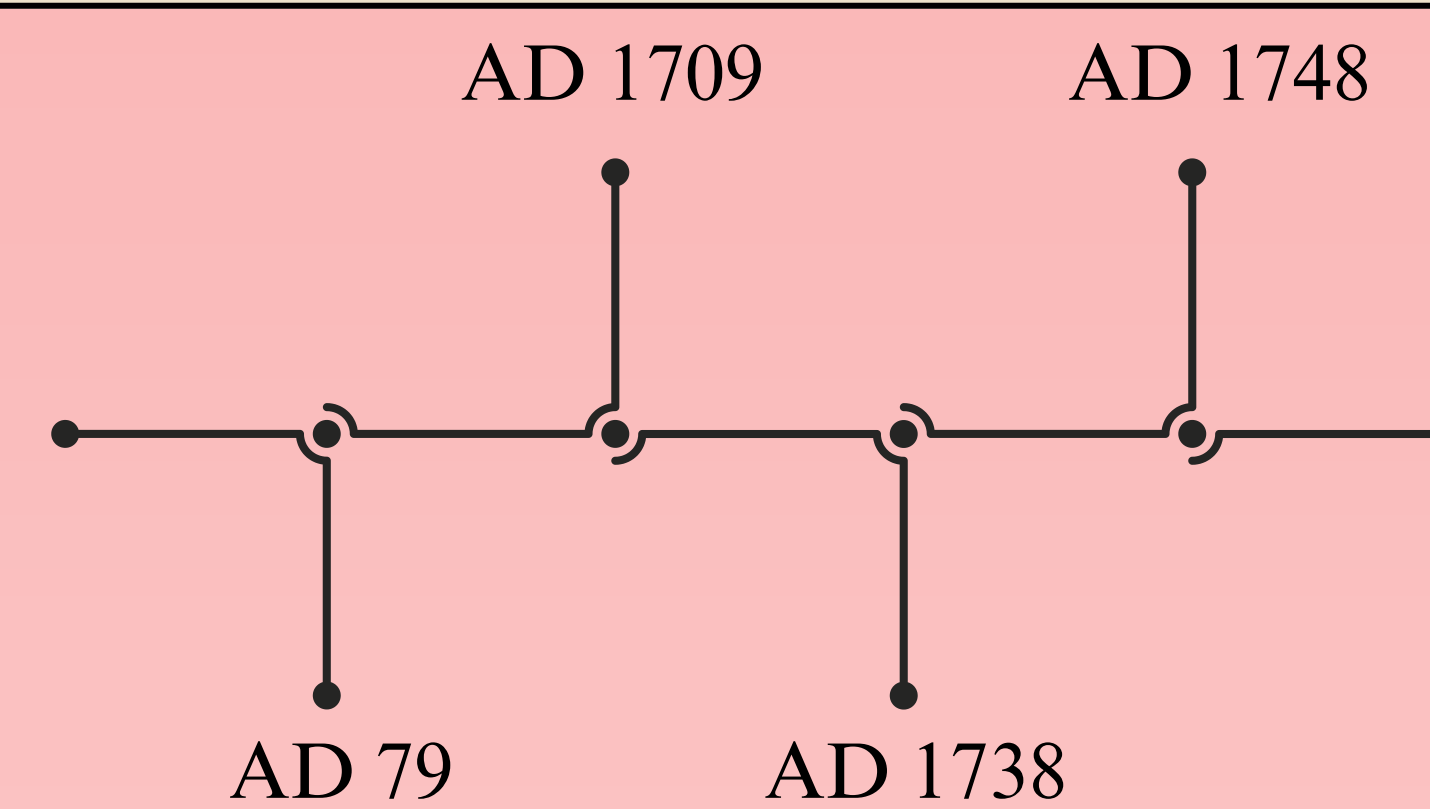


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A drawing of the Theater of Herculaneum during the 18th century. Likely published in an academic journal for interested viewers

The Timeline: Early Excavation

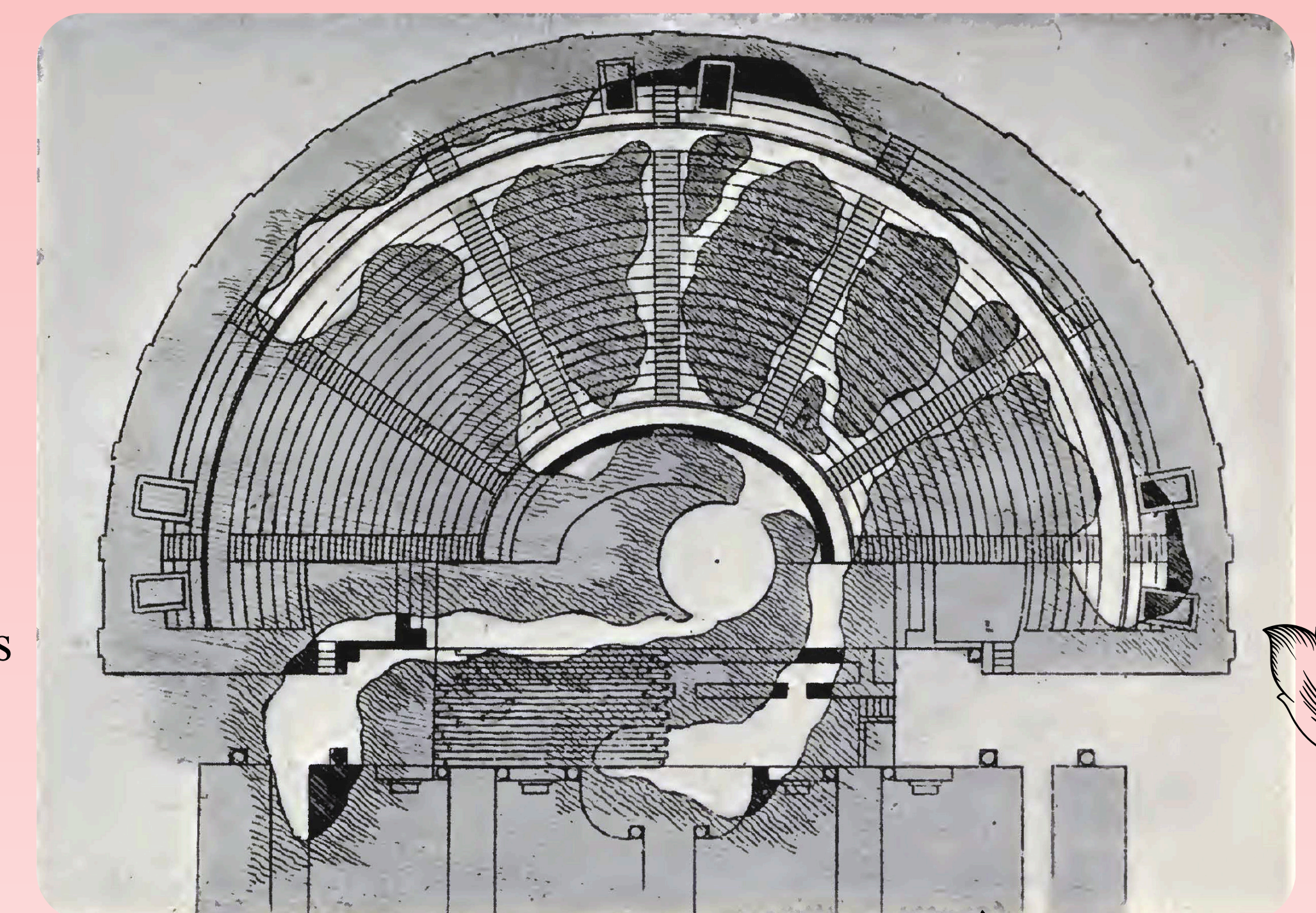


- AD 79: The eruption of Mount Vesuvius buries the surrounding cities in pumice and ash, including Pompeii, Herculaneum, Stabiae, Neapolis and Misenum.
- AD 1709: A farm worker discovers several marble remnants while digging himself a well, and Prince D'Elbeuf begins to excavate.
- AD 1738: Prince D'Elbeuf has sold his land to Bourbon rule, where "proper" systematic (and relatively problematic excavations are taking place in Herculaneum.)
 - a. Prince D'Elbeuf begins to export statuary to his friends and associates.
- AD 1748: Pompeii is discovered under the regional influence of King Charles VII of Bourbon, and statuary is now shipped out to bolster the name and power of his kingdom and improve foreign relations with neighboring superpowers.



Figure II

Plan of the Herculaneum Theatre "after Cochin and Bellicard 1754" by Ethel Ross Barker in Buried Herculaneum 1908, plan 3.



Want to know about these pictures?
Scan here for my citations and some highlighted resources!



Recurring Themes and Research Discussion

- By cross referencing the documents of the time (such as legislative documents, scholarly papers and letters/reports) with contemporary research, as well as visiting several of the sites, this research will address & discuss the following claims:
 - The military approach to excavating Herculaneum encouraged an improper approach to archaeology after its "successful completion" in retrieving and displaying these artifacts in a wrongful and deplorable manner.
 - Charles VII of Bourbon and his team of proto-archaeologists knowingly destroyed centuries of ancient work in situ of immense value in favor of allowing looters to steal them or if they were not authorized for display.
 - The present state of the artifacts that were either lost or stolen (stolen being defined as a documented state of being as catalogued from letters of correspondence) serve as a testament to the widespread malpractice of the Bourbon's affiliates.
- Overall, did these practices and excavations bring to bear the stimuli that drove the transition from antiquarianism to archaeology?

Excavations at the Theater of Herculaneum; 1754/1908