

News

UC Classic's Steven Ellis Wins Prestigious Rome Prize

Winners of the prestigious Rome Prize were just announced in New York City, and UC archaeologist Steven Ellis was named among the 30 winners. The prize will advance his research at Pompeii.

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■ The Rome Prize is an award to recognize the uncommon promise of young or middle-stage scholars and artists.

And among the newest recipients of the prestigious award is the University of Cincinnati's Steven Ellis (<http://www.uc.edu/news/nr.aspx?id=8424>), who will use the prize to unearth, figuratively and literally, the continuing promise of Pompeii to tell us about life in the ancient world.

Ellis was just named one of 30 national winners of the Rome Prize in ceremonies held in New York City. With the award, created to further significant achievements in the arts and humanities, he will spend the next academic year at the American Academy at Rome, where he will conduct research into aspects of working-class and middle-class life at ancient Pompeii, a site where he has led archaeological digs since 2005.

Among U.S.-based efforts, UC researchers currently enjoy exclusive access in terms of the right to excavate at Pompeii. And the UC-led excavation there is currently the largest in the history of the site in terms of area and scale of operations.

Specifically, Ellis, an assistant professor of classics, will delve into archives and images from earlier excavations, with a focus on uncovering more about commercial life and retailing in the Roman world. The earliest excavations at Pompeii began in the mid 1700s, and materials from these digs are only available in Rome and in the archaeological sites of Ostia and Pompeii.

The study of the retail landscape of Rome and other Roman cities like Pompeii and Ostia is largely untapped, even though archaeological finds tell us that the streetscape in these cities was dominated by shops vs. any other single kind of building.



UC's Steven Ellis at "A Day in Pompeii" exhibit at the Cincinnati Museum Center.

Ellis explained that at the time of the 79 AD eruption of Vesuvius, which both destroyed and preserved Pompeii under a thick, hardened coating of ash and lapilli (small stones), retail was both booming and becoming something of the “McDonald’s of its time, branded and homogenized so that anywhere you went in the Roman world, retail shops would conform to a certain shape, the counters would be so high, the facades would conform to certain standards... .”

That’s because the emperor at the time, Nero, had passed new laws that essentially called for a common “brand” among retailers of all sorts, whether it be consumables like food and drink, imports or other goods.

Said Ellis, “I’ve always been interested in studying history and culture from the bottom up vs. top down. In other words, focusing on the middle, average people and families who have escaped notice in history since they were considered unimportant at the time but who did have their roles to play in the commercial, social and economic spheres of the time. They did shape their cities.”

Ellis added the middle class in the Roman world, like in our own, was more complex than realized, involving issues of economics, immigration, law, nutrition, status and more. For instance, he wants to pursue a case study on a Pompeian restaurant that seemed more prosperous than others, based on evidence from digs at Pompeii.

“One family in a middle-class neighborhood where we’ve excavated obviously bought out the backyard of a neighbor to expand a restaurant business. The family was more entrepreneurial than others around it, and the differences carry over into their quality of life and even the foods that they ate,” he said.

Long term, Ellis is planning a first-ever book on the Roman retail industry and what it can tell us about urban, cultural and economic life of the time.

And the best part about that effort, according to Ellis, is that long-forgotten individuals, families and a whole sector of ancient society will finally be able to take their place in history.

SEE VIDEO: UC Digs Into Realities of Working Class, Middle Class Life in Pompeii

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