

# Leda and the Swan: A Fresco Comes to Life in Pompeii Excavation



An ancient fresco depicting the mythical rape of Leda by Zeus in swan form was unearthed in a bedroom of a house under excavation in Pompeii, Italy. Credit... Cesare Abbate/Pompeii Archaeological Park, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

By [Elisabetta Povoledo](#)

ROME — The ancient Pompeian fresco depicting the mythological scene of Leda and the swan was well preserved. It shows the rape of the queen of Sparta by Jupiter, the Romans' Zeus, in the form of a swan.

The archaeological treasure, unearthed this month in the bedroom of a house being excavated on the Via del Vesuvio in Pompeii, was the latest find from an extensive excavation campaign to secure some of the fragile [archaeological site](#)'s most at-risk areas.

“This is one of the most critical areas of Pompeii,” Massimo Osanna, the site's director general, [said in a video](#), which shows an archaeologist carefully brushing centuries of earth from the Leda fresco, which was buried — along with the rest of the city — under ash, lapilli and rubble when Vesuvius erupted in 79 A.D.

The recovery of the house is part of a large-scale intervention, known as the [Great Pompeii Project](#), in the Regio V sector of the city, begun in July 2017 with funds from the European Union.

The project involves excavating and securing more than two miles of earth that border an unexcavated area of the ancient city. The archaeological remains along this front have suffered in recent years as a result of collapses and landslides caused by heavy rains.

The remodeling will gradually decrease the slope of the hill, and is expected to drastically reduce the pressure created by the earth on the excavated structures.

Mr. Osanna said in a phone interview that the Leda fresco was merely the latest of the excavation campaign's many finds.

"There have been extraordinary discoveries," he said.

In August, archaeologists also unearthed in an adjacent room of the same house a fresco of the **fertility god Priapus weighing a phallus**.

Erotic works of classical mythology were popular in first-century Pompeii, Mr. Osanna said, including the Greek myth of Leda, the Spartan queen and wife of Tyndareus. She was **seduced and raped by Zeus in swan form**, before having intercourse with her husband.

There are variations to the myth; one holds that Helen, blamed for the Trojan War, and the twins Castor and Pollux were hatched from two eggs from these unions.

Mr. Osanna said that the presence of the Leda and Priapus frescoes in the house suggested that the owner, likely to have been a freed slave who had made good, was showing off his family's power.

"These are iconographies that this specific social and political class liked," he said.

Antonio Varone, a former director of the excavations at Pompeii, and the author of a book about **Pompeian erotic art, said that sex was seen as "a natural impulse" in ancient times, and that in many cases, homeowners "sought to entertain guests" while showing off their erudition.**

"These scenes would not have been scandalous; we find **even cruder scenes**" at some sites, he said.

This year, the excavations on Via del Vesuvio included two houses "with extraordinary mosaics and frescoes," Mr. Osanna said.

[Skeletons](#) were found in one dwelling, as well as a charcoal inscription etched on a wall; Pompeii officials said it supported the theory that Vesuvius erupted in October and not in August, as tradition holds.

The [inscription](#) (posted by Mr. Osanna on Instagram) was found in a room that had been undergoing renovations, and gives a date corresponding to Oct. 17. Pompeii officials suggested in a news release that the inscription dates "to a week prior to the great catastrophe."

This year, archaeologists also found the skeleton of a man who was initially thought to have been crushed by a rock as he tried to escape, though later findings [cast doubt on that theory](#).

[New York time story source](#)