Pompeii
By Mark Cartwright
2012

Mark Cartwright is a Greek philosophy scholar who contributes to Ancient History Encyclopedia. Pompeii was a Roman town that was buried under over 10 feet of volcanic ash when the Vesuvius volcano exploded in 79 A.D. The site today is a popular location for tourists and archaeologists to uncover the history of the Roman Empire, which dominated the Mediterranean Sea from 27 B.C. to 476 A.D. As you read, take notes on what the preserved city can teach us about everyday life in Pompeii.

Pompeii was a large Roman town in the Italian region of Campania that was completely buried in volcanic ash following the eruption of nearby Mt. Vesuvius in 79 A.D. The town was excavated\(^1\) in the 19th and 20th century A.D., and due to its excellent state of preservation it has given invaluable\(^2\) insight into the Roman world. It may be the richest archaeological site in the world in terms of the sheer volume of data available to scholars.

**Early Settlement**

The area was originally settled in the Bronze Age\(^3\) on an escarpment\(^4\) on the mouth of the Sarno River. The site of Pompeii and the surrounding area offered the twin advantages of a favorable climate and rich volcanic soil which allowed for the blossoming of agricultural activity, particularly olives and grapes. Little did the original settlers realize that the very escarpment on which they built had been formed by a long-forgotten eruption of the now seemingly innocent mountain that overshadowed their town. However, in Greek mythology, a hint at the volcano's power was found in the legend that Hercules\(^5\) had here fought giants in a fiery landscape. Indeed, the nearby town Herculaneum, which would suffer the same fate as Pompeii, was named after this heroic episode. The name Pompeii itself comes from “pumpe,” the commemorative\(^6\) procession in honor of Hercules' victory over the giants.

---

1. **Excavate (verb):** to uncover by digging and removing earth
2. **Invaluable (adjective):** extremely valuable
3. The Bronze Age in Europe, characterized by the use of bronze for tools and weapons, lasted from approximately 3200-600 B.C.
4. An escarpment is a long cliff or steep slope.
5. Hercules is a Greek mythic hero famous for his feats of strength.
6. **Commemorative (adjective):** intended to honor an important person or event
Greeks established colonies in Campania in the 8th century B.C., and the Etruscans were also present until they lost the Battle of Cumae in 474 B.C. From then on, the Samnites people from the local mountains began to infiltrate and dominate the region. The 4th century B.C. saw infighting break out into the Samnite Wars (343-290 B.C.) across Campania and the beginning of Roman influence in the region. Pompeii was favored by Rome, and the town flourished with large building projects being carried out in the 2nd century B.C. However, Pompeii, with its Samnite origins, had always been independent-minded when it came to Roman authority. The Roman dictator Sulla besieged the city following a rebellion and set up his colony of Venus in 80 B.C., resettling 4,000 to 5,000 legionaries in the town. Another period of prosperity followed: a local senate was formed and a new amphitheater and Odeon were built with capacity for 5,000 and 1,500 spectators, respectively. After centuries of ups and downs, the town had reached its peak.

Following seismic activity and coastal changes, Pompeii now stands just over a mile inland, but it would have been much closer to the sea and the mouth of the Sarno River in Roman times, as well as around 13 feet lower. The Roman town of Pompeii covers some two square miles (one third remains unexcavated) but the outer suburbs were also densely populated. There were also hundreds of farms and around 100 villas in the surrounding countryside. The population of the town has been estimated at 10,000 to 12,000, with one third being slaves. Twice as many people again would have lived in the surrounding farms and villas. The coast of Campania was a favorite playground for Rome's well-to-do, and many of the villas were particularly grand with panoramic sea-side views. Even Emperor Nero (reign 54-68 A.D.) is thought to have had a villa near Pompeii; his wife was a native of the town.

A Thriving Trade Center

The town was one of the more important ports on the Bay of Naples and the surrounding settlements would have sent their produce to Pompeii for transportation across the Roman Empire. Goods such as olives, olive oil, wine, wool, fish sauce, salt, walnuts, figs, almonds, cherries, apricots, onions, cabbages, and wheat were exported, and imports included exotic fruit, spices, giant clams, silk, sandal wood, wild animals for the arena, and slaves to man the thriving agricultural industry. We know that the diet of Pompeians also included beef, pork, birds, fish, oysters, crustaceans, snails, lemons, figs, lettuce, artichokes, beans, and peas.

7. The Etruscans were an ancient people who populated modern-day Italy before Roman times and built the Etruscan Civilization in the north and east of Italy from the 8th to 3rd centuries B.C.
8. People from Syracuse and Cumae fought against the Etruscans in the naval battle on the Bay of Naples.
9. The Samnites are an ancient Italian people from south-central Italy.
10. Legionaries are the members of legions, or large groups of soldiers in ancient Rome.
11. **Prosperity (noun):** the state of being successful or wealthy
12. The Odeon was an ancient Greek or Roman building meant for musical performances.
13. of, relating to, or caused by an earthquake
14. A villa is a large house or estate located in the countryside.
15. **Panoramic (adjective):** a full and wide view of something
The town itself, in the Roman custom, was surrounded by a wall with many gates, often with two or three arched entrances to separate pedestrian and vehicle traffic. Within the walls there are wide paved streets in a largely regular layout, but there were no street names or numbers. The town presents an astonishing mix of several thousand buildings: shops, large villas, modest housing, temples, taverns, a pottery studio, an exercise ground, baths, an arena, public latrines, a market hall, schools, water towers, a flower nursery, fulleries to make wool cloth, a basilica, brothels, and theatres. In among all of these were hundreds of small shrines to all kinds of gods and ancestors and around forty public fountains. In short, Pompeii had all the amenities one would expect to find in a thriving and prosperous community.

Pompeii had many large villas, most of which were built in the 2nd century B.C., and they display the Greek colonial origins of the town. The typical entrance of these plush residences was a small street doorway with an entrance corridor that opened out into a large columned atrium with a rectangular pool of water open to the sky and from which other rooms were accessed. A striking feature of these residences is their magnificent floor mosaics, which depict all manner of scenes, from myths to the homeowner's business activities.

Many houses had a private garden with statues, and ornate fountains surrounded by a row of columns called a peristyle. Many private residences even had areas dedicated to growing grapes for wine. Many of the larger villas also had a permanent eating area in the garden so that guests might dine outside on cushioned benches. Villas often employed wall paintings to give the illusion of landscape vistas. Indeed, the wall paintings from these residences have also given insights into many other areas of Pompeian life such as religion, diet, clothes, architecture, industry, and agriculture.

In complete contrast to the richer residences, slave quarters have also survived, and they show the cramped, prison-like existence of this large section of the population. Other more modest architecture included basic two or three-storied residences, simple taverns, and small buildings that resembled curtained cubicles, where lower-class prostitutes worked their trade.

16. A basilica is a large church.
17. **Amenity (noun):** something that makes life easier or more pleasant
18. **Plush (adjective):** fancy and expensive
19. An atrium is an open area inside a tall building that lets in natural light.
20. **Ornate (adjective):** highly decorated
21. **Vista (noun):** a large and beautiful view of an area of land or water
Vesuvius Awakens

The area around Vesuvius received its first warning sign that the mountain was perhaps reawakening when a massive earthquake struck on the 5th of February 62 A.D. The quake measured 7.5 on the Richter scale and devastated the surrounding towns; even parts of Naples, 20 miles away, were damaged. At Pompeii, few buildings escaped damage. Temples, houses, and parts of the thick city walls collapsed, fires ravaged sections of the town, and even sheep in the surrounding countryside died from the release of poisonous gases. The death toll was likely in the thousands rather than the hundreds. The water supply to the town was also severely affected with damage to aqueducts and underground pipes. The recovery process was also hampered by the collapse of the bridge over the Sarno. Things were so bad that a significant portion of the population left the town for good. However, slowly, the town made repairs, some hasty and others more considered and life began to return to normal. The civic repairs and improvements must also have been spurred on by the royal visit of Emperor Nero in 64 A.D., an occasion which led to the lifting of the ban on gladiator games imposed following the famous crowd riots in 59 A.D.

Seismic activity continued for the next decade but it seems not to have unduly perturbed the population. Life, and repairs from the catastrophe of 62 A.D, continued until 79 A.D. It was then, in high summer, that strange things began to occur. Fish floated dead in the Sarno, springs and wells inexplicably dried up, and vines on the slopes of Vesuvius mysteriously wilted and died. Seismic activity, although not strong, increased dramatically in frequency. Something was clearly not right. Strangely, although some people left the town, the majority of the population seemed to still not be too worried about the events that were unfolding. Little did they know that they were about to face an apocalypse.

On the morning of 24th of August a tremendous bang signaled that the magma that had been building over the last thousand years had finally burst through the crater of Vesuvius. Fire and smoke bellowed from the volcano. At this point, it may have seemed that the mountain was doing nothing more than offering a harmless pyrotechnic display, but at midday an even bigger explosion blew off the entire cone of Vesuvius and a massive mushroom cloud of pumice particles rose 27 miles into the sky. The power of the explosion has been calculated as 100,000 times greater than the nuclear bomb which devastated Hiroshima in 1945 A.D. The ash that started to rain down on Pompeii was light in weight but the density was such that within minutes everything was covered in inches of it. People tried to flee the town or sought shelter where they could. Those without shelter tried desperately to keep themselves above the shifting layers of volcanic material.

---

22. The Richter scale measures the intensity of earthquakes on a logarithmic scale, meaning that a level 8 earthquake is 10 times stronger than a level 7 earthquake and 100 times stronger than a level 6 earthquake.
23. Aqueducts are raised channels resembling bridges that carry water across valleys.
24. Hamper (verb): to slow the movement, progress, or action of (something)
25. Unduly (adverb): to an extreme, unreasonable, or unnecessary degree
26. Perturb (verb): to cause (someone) to be worried or upset
27. Magma is hot liquid rock that lies beneath the surface of the earth.
28. like a large display of fireworks
29. Pumice is a volcanic rock.
30. On August 6, 1945, the United States dropped the first of two nuclear bombs ever detonated on Hiroshima, Japan. Soon after the second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki on August 9th, Japan surrendered to the U.S. and its allies, ending World War II.
Then in the late afternoon another massive explosion rang the air, sending a column of ash six miles higher than the previous cloud. When the ash fell it was full of much heavier stones than in the first eruption, and the volcanic material that smothered the town was by now yards thick. Buildings began to collapse under the accumulated weight; survivors huddled near walls and under stairs for greater protection, some hugging their loved ones or clasping their most precious possessions. Then, at 11 p.m., the huge cloud hanging above the volcano collapsed from its own weight and blasted the town in six devastating waves of super-heated ash and air, which asphyxiated and literally baked the bodies of the entire population. Still the ash kept falling relentlessly, and the once vibrant city was buried meters deep, to be lost and forgotten, wiped from the face of the Earth.

**Rediscovery and Archaeology**

Pompeii was finally rediscovered in 1755 A.D. when work on the construction of the Sarno Canal began. Local stories of “the city” were proved to have been based on fact when under just a few feet of volcanic debris lay an entire town. From then on, Pompeii became an essential stopping point on the fashionable Grand Tour, and included such famous visitors as Goethe and Mozart.

Besides architectural remains, scholars of Pompeii have been presented with a mine of much rarer historical artifacts, a real treasure trove of data providing unique insights into the past. For example, the quantity of bronze statues has led scholars to recognize the material was more commonly used in Roman art than previously thought. A particular rich source of data has been skeletal remains and the possibility to take plaster casts of the impressions left by the dead in the volcanic material. One plaster cast reveals a couple holding hands. One reveals a man covering his mouth from the raining ash with a useless piece of cloth. Yet another shows a pregnant woman in the fetal position, trying desperately to protect her unborn child. Skeletal remains and plaster casts provide evidence that bad teeth were a common problem. Diseases such as tuberculosis, brucellosis, and malaria were also rife. The skeletal remains of slaves, often found still chained despite the disaster, also tell a sad tale of malnutrition, chronic arthritis, and deformity caused by overwork.

It has also been possible to reconstruct the daily life of the town through the wealth of written records preserved at the site. These take the form of thousands of electoral notices and hundreds of wax tablets, mainly dealing with financial transactions. The wax of these tablets has long since melted but often impressions of the stylus have remained on the wooden backing. Other invaluable sources of text include signs, graffiti, amphorae labels, seals, and tomb inscriptions. Not only are such sources typically unavailable to the historian, but also their variety permits an insight into sections of society (slaves, the poor, women, gladiators) usually ignored or hardly discussed in traditionally surviving texts such as books and legal records. We know that there were forty festivals of one kind or another every year and that Saturday was market day. Graffiti, for example, tells us how a gladiator was “the sighed-for joy of girls,” a mosaic in the house of a local businessman proudly proclaims “Profit is Joy,” and corrections on tablets reveal the changing status of citizens over time. Something more than names and figures have survived, however. The unique archaeological evidence from Pompeii allows us the rarest of opportunities—the possibility to reconstruct the actual thoughts, hopes, despair, wit and even the very ordinariness of these people who lived so long ago.

---

31. **Asphyxiate** (verb): to cause (someone) to stop breathing, often leading to death
32. The Grand Tour was the name for an extended period of travel throughout Europe that was meant to complete a man’s education.
33. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was a German writer and statesman.
34. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) was an Austrian composer.
35. **Rife** (adjective): very common
36. A stylus is a tool used to write on clay or wax tablets.
37. A tall ancient Greek or Roman jar with two handles and a narrow neck
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best expresses a central idea in the text? 

A. Pompeii was a thriving cultural center of the Roman Empire and its destruction was the greatest loss in human history.
B. While Pompeii is an important resource for archaeologists, the site does not provide any understanding into the emotional impact of the city's tragic end.
C. The preservation of Pompeii has allowed the site to become a major source of income for Italy through tourism, but this has hindered many archaeological digs.
D. Pompeii's preservation contains a great deal of information about daily life in the ancient Roman world and how its citizens reacted to the eruption.

2. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?

A. "It may be the richest archaeological site in the world in terms of the sheer volume of data available to scholars." (Paragraph 1)
B. "In short, Pompeii had all the amenities one would expect to find in a thriving and prosperous community." (Paragraph 6)
C. "The power of the explosion has been calculated as 100,000 times greater than the nuclear bomb which devastated Hiroshima in 1945 A.D." (Paragraph 12)
D. "From then on, Pompeii became an essential stopping point on the fashionable Grand Tour and included such famous visitors as Goethe and Mozart." (Paragraph 14)

3. PART A: What relationship does the author depict between archaeology and history?

A. Archaeology can uncover evidence that may go against previous theories, strengthening the understanding of human history.
B. Archaeology rarely contradicts human understanding of the past, strengthening scholars' understanding of history.
C. History provides scholars with a broad view of the past, whereas archaeology investigates how people died in natural disasters.
D. Archaeology imagines what a city physically looked like in the past, but it cannot help scholars understand ancient peoples' thoughts, feelings, or lives.

4. PART B: Which phrase from the text best supports the answer to Part A?

A. “Temples, houses, and parts of the thick city walls collapsed, fires ravaged sections of the town, and even sheep in the surrounding countryside died from the release of poisonous gases.” (Paragraph 10)
B. “Pompeii was finally rediscovered in 1755 A.D.... Local stories of the city were proved to have been based on fact when under just a few feet of volcanic debris lay an entire town.” (Paragraph 14)
C. “One plaster cast reveals a couple holding hands. One reveals a man covering his mouth from the raining ash with a useless piece of cloth. Yet another shows a pregnant woman in the fetal position” (Paragraph 15)
D. “Not only are such sources typically unavailable to the historian, but also their variety permits an insight into sections of society... hardly discussed in traditionally surviving texts” (Paragraph 16)
5. What is the author’s purpose in writing this text? [RI.6]
   A. to place the readers in the daily lives of the people of Pompeii
   B. to discuss how archaeological research can provide different types of insight
   C. to blame the Roman Empire for its failure to protect the people of Pompeii
   D. to argue why the site of Pompeii should not be neglected by the Italian government

6. How does the section entitled “A Thriving Trade Center” (Paragraphs 5-9) contribute to the author’s depiction of Pompeii? [RI.5]
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. What can we learn about how people faced death in Pompeii based on their skeletal remains and impressions in volcanic ash? While ancient deaths usually feel removed, do the deaths in Pompeii feel more personal because of this archaeological preservation?

2. In the context of this text, what can we learn from tragedy? Cite evidence from the text, your personal experience, and other literature, art, and history in the answer.

3. In the context of this article, who is in control: man or nature? Are there ways in which people could have had more control over their destinies in Pompeii?

4. Do you think that Pompeii is a compelling place to visit today? Why does this town attract more tourists than other ruins? Is it simply their preservation, or the more human undertones found in the town's quick death and entombment?