Definition: Pompeii from Philip's Encyclopedia

Ancient Roman city in SE Italy, buried by a pyroclastic volcanic eruption in AD 79. Pompeii was founded in the 8th century BC and ruled by Greeks, Etruscans and others before being conquered by Rome in 89 BC. The eruption of Mount Vesuvius was so sudden and violent that c.2000 people were killed. The city was covered in volcanic ash, preserving houses intact until excavation began in the 18th century.

Summary Article: Pompeii
From The Encyclopedia of Ancient History

Pompeii is the best known of all Mediterranean archaeological sites, having been famously buried by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE, and then fabulously brought back to "life" following its (re)discovery in the mid-eighteenth century (Figure 1). The immediacy of the ruins, together with the emotion caused by the city's demise, has captured popular imagination with the impression that the Roman city serves as a veritable window onto ancient life. Alas, Pompeii is a little more complicated than that. The ancient city has long been characterized as either an "average" (in the sense of being unimportant) Roman town, or conversely as a "glitzy" seaside resort. It was in fact neither, but instead a regionally important city with an economic and political grip on the productively fertile, incomparably wealthy, and culturally fashionable Bay of Naples.

Plan of Pompeii. Courtesy of Steven J. R. Ellis.

Despite being the principal port-town for the Sarno valley (covering Nola, Nuceria, and Acerrae; Strabo 5.4.8) – and second only to Puteoli for the Bay of Naples itself, which was Rome's principal port during much of Pompeii's history – the city features only rarely among the Roman histories. Most of the textual accounts deal exclusively with Pompeii's destruction rather than with its political, military, economic, or civic history. The almost complete lack of literary works that illuminate Pompeii in any detail is misleading, for there are of course an almost immeasurable number of texts that speak to the historical and cultural milieu in which Pompeii participated. Even so, the unparalleled richness, scale, and

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complexity of the Pompeian archaeological record has overshadowed any perceived absence in the literary accounts, making this single archaeological site the conventional paradigm for the art and architecture of the Roman world.

**Discovery and Excavations**

The first documented discovery of Pompeii was made in 1748, almost forty years after the discovery of Herculaneum some 12 km away. This was not so much a new discovery; "La Civita," as it was already known, had been pinpointed on earlier maps, and a late sixteenth-century water canal had tunneled directly through the full length of the ancient city (even if only two inscriptions were recorded from those extensive efforts!). Interest swung from Herculaneum to the new activities at Pompeii, not so much for the nature of the site itself, but for the fact that the volcanic material was considerably easier for the Bourbon excavators to remove. The earliest efforts were focused on the amphitheater in the east of the city and especially on the suburban villas and tomb-lined street that led into the so-called Herculaneum Gate in the northwest. The street fronts guided the excavations as house after house was exhumed; the tons of volcanic debris were carted away to create the still-standing man-made hills outside the city, or used to inter the skeletal remains of the previously excavated house. The real interest was in the art and artifacts, which were ripped from the buildings with abandon and whisked away from the site to private collections in Naples and beyond. So began the recovery of the longest continually excavated site in the world.

The dizzying fervor for uncovering artifacts, at any cost, sobered in the 1860s under Giuseppe Fiorelli, who as superintendent revolutionized the Pompeian excavations. Fiorelli introduced systematic recording to the excavations and recovery of artifacts, for the times a novel concept in archaeology globally. He pioneered the concept of preservation, deftly choosing to conserve for future generations as much of Pompeii's final phase as possible. Even if those efforts are difficult to recognize and appreciate after years of neglect, current generations still marvel at Fiorelli's initiative to create plaster casts of the voids created by Pompeians in the volcanic ash during the final and painful seconds of life.

Patience and care in the excavation and conservation of Pompeii were seemingly swept aside in the post-World War II economic boom. Hasty excavations became the norm: in part to recover volcanic material for local infrastructure (especially local roads and highways), which had the concomitant advantage of revealing greater tracts of the site for tourism; but also in part to clean up after the war years, during which time around one hundred and sixty Allied bombs destroyed significant portions of the city and the museum. More recent activities have centered upon the conservation of the standing buildings and their surviving art, alongside the excavation and recording (if not always publication) of sub-79 CE phases of Pompeii. This focus on "early" Pompeii since the 1990s – although not new, as systematic excavation below the 79 layers is known from at least the 1890s – has revolutionized Pompeian archaeology, activating a new line of inquiry beyond the city "frozen in time," and deepening our understanding of the various episodes in the development of Pompeii from settlement(s) to city, and how these changes can be related to broader Roman and Mediterranean histories (Guzzo and Guidobaldi 2005, 2008; Ellis 2011).

**The History of Pompeii**

Tradition states that Pompeii was founded by the Greek hero Herakles while on his return voyage from Spain (Solin. 2.5), after which point the Oscans, Etruscans, Pelasgians, Samnites, and Romans each took control (Strabo 5.4.8). The archaeological record refines and further develops the history. While Bronze
Age artifacts have been recovered in sufficient number to indicate activity in the area for the second millennium BCE, the earliest signs of actual settlement at Pompeii, being a few simple huts, date only to around the seventh century BCE. The sixth century BCE yields significantly fuller results, including masonry buildings both secular and sacred, along with the construction of the first identifiable fortification: a 3 km long circuit wall, in parts still visible, which ringed an area of around 66 ha. Only fragmentary parts of the secular buildings survive. The sanctuaries of the Temple of Apollo and the Doric Temple, the earliest constructions that date to this early period, would remain in some form of veneration throughout the city’s existence; no other surviving form of monumental architecture is recognizable until at least the third or second century BCE. These temples served as centers for trade with a Mediterranean world that had been energized by the presence of Greeks and Etruscans in the immediate territory. Greek and Etruscan elements greatly influenced each sanctuary in terms of their architecture, decoration, and in their inscribed votives.

The results of recent studies demonstrate that this fortified zone and its sanctuaries might not have represented a single nucleated settlement, but instead a collection of discrete yet related habitations. The synoecism of these settlements, sometime during the fourth century BCE, took place near the early sanctuaries, at one of the highest points to overlook both the Bay of Naples and the Sarno valley, and probably under the influence of both pre-existing and incoming Samnites. The civic center for this area now began its development into what would become the Forum, in the southwest corner of the city; this area is characterized by Pompeian scholars as the so-called "Altstadt" (old town). To this period is attached our earliest literary testimony for Pompeii: a brief mention from Livy that by 310 BCE Pompeii was known as an autonomous but dependent port-settlement of nearby Nuceria (9.38.2–3).

Our understanding of Pompeian history brightens as we enter the second century BCE, a period conventionally known as Pompeii's "Golden Age." It was now that the city took its shape – culturally and structurally – and at no other time will we recognize a more dynamic urban boom. Monumentality swept across the city, fueled by public benefaction that was anchored to a centralized civic infrastructure. New temples and administrative buildings flattened the simple shops that once circled the forum, while any pre-existing structures were re-decorated to uphold the revitalized appearance of wealth and majesty. A masonry theater was built into the southern quarter of the city, seating five thousand, to which was attached a monumental quadriporticus. Equally important were the streets, many of which were now paved and, combined with a new network of massive subterranean drains, ensured a more effective city-wide drainage scheme to further bolster the public infrastructure (Figure 2). The economy rocketed, and the many massive homes that now dotted the landscape – larger and more opulent than we can detect for many Italian cities, even Rome – testify to the emergence of a highly energized socio-political environment.

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This section of the paved Via Stabiana – located at the lowest part of the city at the Porta Stabia – channeled most of Pompeii's liquid waste beyond the city limits. Mount Vesuvius looms in the background. Photograph by Steven J. R. Ellis.

This Pompeian zenith was by no means idiosyncratic, nor was it coincidental. The military success that Rome was having abroad in the second century BCE helped to transform the urban centers across much of Italy. Most of the money, people, and ideas that came into Italy did so via Puteoli first, just a short journey across the Bay of Naples, from which Pompeii must have profited. A yet more direct gain is known from an extraordinary Oscan inscription that survives on the base of a (now missing) honorific statue in the Temple of Apollo. The inscription gives thanks to Lucius Mummius for his gift of booty, taken from his sack of Corinth in 146 BCE, that he gave to Pompeii (and some other Italian cities: Livy Epit. Oxyr. 53) for their service to the civitas foederata of Rome (Martelli 2002).

However, not everything went according to plan for Pompeii. In the early first century BCE, the Pompeians turned against Rome, siding instead with the allies during the Social War of 90–88 (App. B Civ. 1.39). As a result, L. Cornelius Sulla laid siege to Pompeii in 89 (see Sulla). The Pompeians’ seemingly quick submission to Sulla resulted in a relatively non-violent takeover; while we cannot be sure of this, archaeology records only minimal damage, at least by comparison to the nearby town of Stabiae, which was wholly destroyed (Plin. HN 3.70). The establishment of Pompeii as a colony in 80 (Colonia Cornelia Veneria Pompeianorum, which is a combination of Sulla's family name with that of the goddess Venus), along with the installation of several thousand of Sulla's veteran soldiers, left an indelible mark on Pompeii that colors almost every branch of its subsequent material record. Sulla's veteran soldiers – probably numbering around four to five thousand, but we do not know with any certainty – were the agents of change, aided as they were by the new administrative order for a city that was now under a new titular deity (Venus). Cicero assures us it was a relatively smooth process (Sull. 62). Roman customs and institutions were now more manifest than they ever were. Latin overcame Oscan, if neither suddenly nor completely, while the aedile replaced the Meddix tuticus. Roman monumental tombs caused the re-evaluation of traditional and more modest local burial habits. Public benefaction, already a familiar concept, only intensified: a roofed theater (Odeon) was built,

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constituting one of Pompeii's largest indoor buildings, while the same ambitious benefactors also
constructed the amphitheater, itself the first of its kind in all of Italy. The forum was monumentalized
once more, and we see more new temples. The Roman penchant for lavish suburban villas flooded the
Pompeian hinterland.

The next major episode in Pompeii’s history was dominated by a single individual, even if we have no
record of him ever having visited the city. The impact that Rome’s first emperor, Augustus, had on
those cities under his control is immeasurable. His iconic popularity, institutionalized into the imperial
cult, resulted in new monumental buildings and a growing number of Pompeians serving as Augustales.
More indirect, but equally attributable to Augustus, were his economic changes that invigorated
Mediterranean economy and trade, for which Pompeii was a filter. The Augustan promotion of mass
production and trade caused a flood of foreign commodities onto the Pompeian commercial market, as
evidenced in the unprecedented and sudden spike of foreign imports that is familiar among the
excavated assemblages of early first-century CE houses and shops. Three of the largest new buildings
that coincide with this era of prosperity – the Macellum, the porticus of Eumachia, and the palaestra
that was attached to the amphitheater – were each principally built to house and organize new open
markets.

This economy, the city itself, and the region were devastated by a series of earthquakes which spared
little of Pompeii’s urban landscape in the years leading up to the Vesuvian eruption. The most noted of
these earthquakes occurred on February 5, 62 CE (Sen. Q Nat. 6.1.1–3; Tac. Ann. 15.22). Even the
sturdiest of Pompeii’s standing buildings still show signs of partial collapse and repair, while sub-soil
archaeological excavations reveal that many of the poorest structures were wholly rebuilt in this final
phase of Pompeii’s existence. Even if some Pompeian buildings appear to have been abandoned by
the time of the volcanic eruption, the almost wholesale rebuilding of the city – from the largest
temples to the tiniest shops, and the countless houses humble and haughty – indicates something of
the stability of Pompeii’s civic infrastructure, the maintenance of social and political rewards for
generous public benefaction, and the promise of a repairable economy. Nevertheless, disagreement
remains among some Pompeian scholars as to the impact that the structural rebuilding of Pompeii had
on the restructuring of the city’s socio-economic fabric (cf. Andreau 1973: 369–95; Wallace-Hadrill
1994: 122–3).

Calculating Pompeii’s population in its final years is therefore an almost impossible exercise, and
estimates vary wildly between eight thousand and twenty-five thousand inhabitants. Demographically,
the density remained in the western half of the city, where much of the land was given over to urban
structures, while in the east of the city large horticultural plots were harvested to the very end.

Neither the earthquake nor its after-shocks, now understood as the precursor to the final volcanic
eruption, served as sufficient warning to those living in the shadow of Vesuvius of the volcano’s
tempestuous capacities (Sen. Q Nat. 6.1.1–3 and 6.31.1 on the repeated tremors; and Tac. Ann. 15.22).
Even though Vesuvius was known to be a volcano, and likened to the often volatile Mount Etna, it was
thought instead to be "burned out" and dormant (Diod. Sic. 4.21.5; Strabo 5.4.8). Vulcanological studies
confirm that Vesuvius had never erupted in the living memory of the Pompeians, and that the eruption
on the morning of August 24, 79 was more explosive than anything they could have ever imagined. Our
only eyewitness to document the event, Pliny the Younger, wrote two letters to the historian Tacitus in
106, nearly thirty years later (Ep. 6.16 and 6.20; Cass. Dio 66.21–3 provides a more colorful and
journalistic account, without ever having witnessed the event himself). The letters chronicle in some
detail how, as a seventeen-year-old, he watched as an enormous umbrella-shaped pine-tree cloud of
gaseous pumice and ash shot skyward, how people ran screaming into the hills seeking safety, and how,
ultimately, his uncle – Pliny the Elder – had died during his failed rescue mission. This most explosive
type of eruption is now known as a "Plinian eruption."

How many Pompeians found safety remains a mystery, but their city was now dead and buried, leaving
only the surviving homeless to rationalize the catastrophic loss of life. While the area around Vesuvius
eventually recovered (Stat. Silv. 3.5.72–75), Pompeii remained mostly buried and almost forgotten,
only to become the best known of all Roman cities following its (re)discovery.

SEE ALSO:
Amphitheater; Colonies, Roman and Latin (republican); Earthquakes; Etruria, Etruscans; Herakles
(Hercules); Pompeii, destruction of; Ruler cult, Roman; Sabines and Samnites; Social War, Roman
Republic; Villa; Volcanoes; Wall-painting, Greek and Roman.

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