NO PREP

Pompeii

A City Frozen in Time

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Name: Period: Date:

Pompeii: A City Frozen in Time

The Mountain Nobody Feared

In the summer of 79 CE, Pompeii was a thriving commercial city of perhaps 11,000 people tucked at the foot of Mount Vesuvius on the Bay of Naples. The mountain loomed over vineyards and orchards, its fertile volcanic soil producing some of the finest wine in Italy. Nobody in Pompeii thought of Vesuvius as a threat. There had been earthquakes — a bad one in 62 CE had damaged buildings throughout the region — but the mountain itself had been quiet for centuries. The Romans had no concept of a volcano in the geological sense. Vesuvius was simply a mountain, its upper slopes shaggy with vines and forest. A young naval officer named Pliny the Younger was staying with his uncle, Pliny the Elder, across the bay at Misenum when the eruption began (traditionally dated August 24, though newer evidence points to autumn). His letters, written years later to the historian Tacitus, are the only eyewitness account that survives. He describes a cloud rising from the mountain 'like a pine tree' — what geologists now recognize as a Plinian eruption column, a massive

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Eighteen Hours That Erased a City

The eruption unfolded in two phases. During the first twelve hours, Vesuvius rained pumice and ash on Pompeii. This was survivable. Many residents fled during this phase, and the death toll at Pompeii might have been much lower if everyone had left immediately. But some stayed. They sheltered indoors, hoping the rain of rock and ash would stop. Roofs collapsed under the weight. People died of suffocation or crushing before the worst came. In the early morning hours of the second day, the eruption column collapsed. Pyroclastic flows, superheated avalanches of gas, ash, and rock traveling at hurricane speed, descended the mountain. The first surge to reach Pompeii killed everyone still alive almost instantly. Temperatures may have reached

300 degrees Celsius. The city was buried under four to six meters of volcanic material. By morning, Pompeii had ceased to exist in any practical sense. Its name survived only in Roman legal documents as property records that would never be acted on.

Rediscovery and the Making of Modern Archaeology

Pompeii was not completely forgotten (Roman writers mentioned it), but its exact location was uncertain for centuries. In 1748, workers digging a canal near Naples broke through into decorated Roman rooms. King Charles III of Naples recognized the significance and ordered systematic excavation, making Pompeii one of the earliest sites to receive organized archaeological attention. Early excavators, however, cared primarily about beautiful objects: frescoes, mosaics, bronzes. Stratigraphic context was ignored. Finds were routinely removed without recording their location. The real transformation came in the 1860s under Giuseppe Fiorelli. Noticing that the volcanic debris contained hollow spaces where organic material had decomposed, Fiorelli developed the plaster cast technique: workers pumped liquid plaster into the cavities, allowed it to set, and then excavated around the hardened form. The result was heartbreaking and extraordinary: the exact postures of Pompeians in their final moments, preserved in plaster. A dog straining against its chain. A family huddled together. A man shielding his face with his arm.

What Pompeii Tells Us About Everyday Roman Life

The archaeological value of Pompeii lies not in the spectacular but in the mundane. Nowhere else in the ancient world can we read graffiti scratched into walls by Roman teenagers. Nowhere else can we count the exact meals being prepared when life stopped. A bakery still had bread in the oven. A thermopolium (fast food counter) still had food in its stone vessels. Electoral announcements painted on walls reveal Roman democracy's noisy, competitive character. Crude jokes, love declarations, business disputes, and political insults cover the walls of Pompeii in a way that no formal historical source can match. We have learned that Roman social life was louder, messier, and more diverse than formal histories suggest. Pompeii had a significant population of freed slaves who had become successful businesspeople. Women ran shops and managed finances. The city had at least two purpose-built brothels and dozens of bars. Gladiatorial graffiti covered walls near the amphitheater. The famous 'House of the Tragic Poet,' with its 'CAVE CANEM'

(Beware of the Dog) mosaic, shows us the anxiety of a middle-class homeowner trying to appear wealthier than he was — a feeling entirely recognizable across two millennia.

Ongoing Excavation and Modern Challenges

Approximately one-third of Pompeii remains unexcavated. Since 2017, the Great Pompeii Project has poured hundreds of millions of euros into conservation, infrastructure, and controlled excavation of previously untouched areas. In 2019, excavations in Regio V uncovered a magnificent snack bar with intact painted scenes of animals. In 2020, an intact ceremonial chariot was found at a villa outside the city. Every new season brings discoveries that refine our understanding of Roman life. Pompeii is not a finished story — it is an ongoing excavation that will occupy archaeologists for generations.

Key Information: Pompeii

Detail	Information
Location	Bay of Naples, southwest Italy
Eruption Date	79 CE (traditionally August 24-25; newer evidence points to autumn)
Estimated City Population	~11,000 at time of eruption
Burial Depth	4-6 meters of volcanic material
Eyewitness Account	Pliny the Younger's letters to Tacitus
Plaster Cast Technique	Developed by Giuseppe Fiorelli, 1860s
Portion Still Unexcavated	Approximately one-third of the city
Key Feature	Preserved graffiti, food, buildings, and human remains

Case Study: Marcus, Baker of Pompeii

Marcus Herennius wakes before dawn on the morning of the eruption, in 79 CE. He is a baker. He has been a baker since his father was a baker, in the same shop on the Via dell'Abbondanza that now carries his name. By the time most of Pompeii is still rubbing sleep from its eyes, Marcus has already fed wood into the domed oven and begun shaping the round loaves scored with a knife to divide them into eight portions — the standard Pompeian loaf. His slave, a young man named Philemon who has worked in the bakery for three years, mentions that the ground shook again in the night. Marcus shrugs. The ground has been shaking for weeks, ever since the springs on the hillside dried up in mid-August. Strange, but not alarming. The mountain has always been there. Around midday, the sky changes. The ash begins to fall, soft at first, like gray snow. Customers who had been lining up for bread scatter. Marcus debates closing the oven. The ash is getting into everything. By late afternoon, pebbles are falling. Rooftops are groaning under the weight. Marcus tells Philemon they should go. But the bread is still in the oven. It seems wrong to leave it. Marcus hesitates too long. Archaeologists will find his loaves, carbonized but perfectly intact, nearly two thousand years later.

1. What small, relatable decision does Marcus face, and how does it illustrate a larger truth about why some Pompeians died while others escaped?

2. The reading says Pompeii's value lies in the mundane rather than the spectacular. How does Marcus's story support this idea?

Multiple Choice

1. What made the second phase of the Vesuvius eruption immediately fatal to everyone still in Pompeii?

a) Pyroclastic flows of superheated gas and ash at hurricane speed

b) A massive earthquake that completely collapsed all remaining buildings

c) A tsunami from the Bay of Naples

d) Lava flows that covered the streets

2. What technique did Giuseppe Fiorelli develop that produced casts of Pompeii's victims?

a) Bronze casting into hollow volcanic rock

b) Wax injection into sealed volcanic chambers that formed protective casts

c) Digital scanning of compressed ash layers

d) Pumping liquid plaster into cavities left by decomposed organic material

3. Which source gives us the only eyewitness account of the Vesuvius eruption?

a) Letters written by Pliny the Younger to the historian Tacitus

b) A graffiti inscription written on the walls of a Pompeian residence

c) Julius Caesar's personal diary

d) Official Roman Senate records

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Pyroclastic flow	A) Type of volcanic eruption with a massive column of ash rising into the stratosphere
2. ___ Thermopolium	B) Eyewitness whose letters to Tacitus describe the Vesuvius eruption
3. ___ Pliny the Younger	C) Archaeologist who invented the plaster cast technique to preserve victims' forms
4. ___ Fiorelli	D) Roman fast-food counter with stone vessels holding prepared food
5. ___ Plinian eruption	E) Superheated avalanche of gas, ash, and rock that destroyed Pompeii in minutes

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Pliny the Younger compared the eruption cloud rising from Vesuvius to a _____ tree.

2. The plaster cast technique was developed by archaeologist Giuseppe _____ in the 1860s.

3. Approximately one-_____ of Pompeii remains unexcavated today.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Explain why the reading says Pompeii's value is in the mundane rather than the spectacular. What specific examples support this?

2. Why did the eruption kill some Pompeians but allow others to escape? What role did decision-making play?

3. How did early excavation methods damage Pompeii's archaeological value, and how was this improved under Fiorelli?