

Pompeii



A portion of the ruins of Pompeii, Italy, with Mount Vesuvius looming in the background.

John and Lisa Merrill/Corbis



Pompeii, Italy, designated a World Heritage site in 1997.

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Pompeii, Italian **Pompei**, ancient city of Campania, Italy, 14 miles (23 km) southeast of Naples, at the southeastern base of Mount Vesuvius. It was built on a spur formed by a prehistoric lava flow to the north of the mouth of the Sarnus (modern Sarno) River. Pompeii was destroyed, together with Herculaneum, Stabiae, Torre Annunziata, and other communities, by the violent eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE. The circumstances of their destruction preserved their remains as a unique document of Greco-Roman life. Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Torre Annunziata were collectively designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1997.

Pompeii supported between 10,000 and 20,000 inhabitants at the time of its destruction. The modern town (*comune*) of Pompei (pop. [2011 est.] 25,620) lies to the east and contains the Basilica of Santa Maria del Rosario, a pilgrimage centre.

History

It seems certain that Pompeii, Herculaneum, and nearby towns were first settled by Oscan-speaking descendants of the Neolithic inhabitants of Campania. Archaeological evidence indicates that the Oscan village of Pompeii, strategically located near the mouth of the Sarnus River, soon came under the influence of the cultured Greeks who had settled across the bay in the 8th century BCE. Greek influence was challenged, however, when the Etruscans came into Campania in the 7th century. The Etruscans' influence remained strong until their sea power was destroyed by King Hieron I of Syracuse in a naval battle off Cumae in 474 BCE. A second period of Greek hegemony followed. Then, toward the end of the 5th century, the warlike Samnites, an Italic tribe, conquered Campania, and Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Stabiae became Samnite towns.

Pompeii is first mentioned in history in 310 BCE, when, during the Second Samnite War, a Roman fleet landed at the Sarnus port of Pompeii and from there made an unsuccessful attack on the neighbouring city of Nuceria. At the end of the Samnite wars, Campania became a part of the Roman confederation, and the cities became "allies" of Rome. But they were not completely subjugated and Romanized until the time of the Social War. Pompeii joined the Italians in their revolt against Rome in this war

and was besieged by the Roman general Lucius Cornelius Sulla in 89 BCE. After the war, Pompeii, along with the rest of Italy south of the Po River, received Roman citizenship. However, as a punishment for Pompeii's part in the war, a colony of Roman veterans was established there under Publius Sulla, the nephew of the Roman general. Latin replaced Oscan as the official language, and the city soon became Romanized in institutions, architecture, and culture.

A riot in the amphitheatre at Pompeii between the Pompeians and the Nuceria, in 59 CE, is reported by the Roman historian Tacitus. An earthquake in 62 CE did great damage in both Pompeii and Herculaneum. The cities had not yet recovered from this catastrophe when final destruction overcame them 17 years later.



Mount Vesuvius erupted on Aug. 24, 79 CE. A vivid eyewitness report is preserved in two letters written by Pliny the Younger to the historian Tacitus, who had inquired about the death of Pliny the Elder, commander of the Roman fleet at Misenum. Pliny the Elder had rushed from Misenum to help the stricken population and to get a close view of the volcanic phenomena, and he died at Stabiae. Site excavations and volcanological studies, notably in the late 20th century, have brought out further details. Just after midday on August 24, fragments of ash, pumice, and other volcanic debris began pouring down on Pompeii, quickly covering the city to a depth of more than 9 feet (3 metres) and causing the roofs of many houses to fall in. Surges of pyroclastic material and heated gas, known as *nuées ardentes*, reached the city walls on the morning of August 25 and soon asphyxiated those residents who had not been killed by falling debris. Additional pyroclastic flows and rains of ash followed, adding at least another 9 feet of debris and preserving in a pall of ash the bodies of the inhabitants who perished while taking shelter in their houses or trying to

escape toward the coast or by the roads leading to Stabiae or Nuceria. Thus Pompeii remained buried under a layer of pumice stones and ash 19 to 23 feet (6 to 7 metres) deep. The city's sudden burial served to protect it for the next 17 centuries from vandalism, looting, and the destructive effects of climate and weather.



Excavated room in Pompeii, Italy, with a glass case containing a plaster cast of a person who died ...

Mimmo Jodice/Corbis

History of excavations

The ruins at Pompeii were first discovered late in the 16th century by the architect Domenico Fontana. Herculaneum was discovered in 1709, and systematic excavation began there in 1738. Work did not begin at Pompeii until 1748, and in 1763 an inscription ("Rei publicae Pompeianorum") was found that identified the site as Pompeii. The work at these towns in the mid-18th century marked the start of the modern science of archaeology.

Under the patronage of Don Carlos, king of Naples, the military engineer Karl Weber carried out systematic studies from 1750 to 1764, but other early digging was often haphazard and irresponsible, carried out by treasure seekers or other untrained workers. Haphazard digging was brought to a stop in 1860, when the Italian archaeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli became director of the excavations. Areas lying between excavated sites were cleared and carefully documented. Pompeii was divided into nine regions; the insulae (blocks) in each region were numbered, and each door on the street was given a number so that each house could be conveniently located by three numerals. Fiorelli also developed the technique of making casts of bodies by pouring cement into the hollows formed in the volcanic ash where the bodies had disintegrated.

In 1951, after the interruption caused by World War II, intensive excavation was resumed under Amedeo Maiuri, who was in charge of the excavations from 1924 to 1961. Large areas were uncovered to the south of the Via dell'Abbondanza, in Regions I and II, and the debris piled outside the city walls was cleared away. This revealed the Porta (Gate) di Nocera and an impressive stretch of cemetery lining each side of the road leading from the gate to Nuceria. By the 1990s, about two-thirds of the city had been excavated.



Polyphemus and Galatea in a landscape, Roman fresco from the imperial villa of Agrippa Postumus at ...

Photograph by AlkaliSoaps. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, Rogers Fund, 1920 (20.192.17)

In the vicinity of Stabiae and Gragnano, excavations initiated by Don Carlos of Naples discovered 12 villas between 1749 and 1782. Work was resumed there in the 20th century. The Villa of San Marco, with its two large peristyle gardens and bath, is the best preserved. Other villas have been found at nearby Scafati, Domicella, Torre Annunziata, and on the lower slopes of Vesuvius near Boscoreale and Boscotrecase. Many of these villas were reburied after excavation, but a few can be seen, notably the Villa of the Mysteries.

Description of the remains



Via dell'Abbondanza, one of the main streets of ancient Pompeii, Italy. Grooves in the paving ...

Mimmo Jodice—Corbis

The city of Pompeii was shaped irregularly because it was built on a prehistoric lava flow. Excavations indicate that the southwestern part of the town is the oldest, but scholars do not agree on the stages by which the walls were expanded or on who the builders were. The walls are 2 miles (3 km) in circumference, and they enclose an area of about 163 acres (66 hectares). Seven city gates have been excavated. The chief street running in a southeast-northwest direction was the Via Stabiana; it connected the Porta Vesuvio, or Vesuvius Gate (144 feet [44 metres] above sea level), in the highest part of the city, with the Porta di Stabia, or Stabiae Gate (26 feet [8 metres]), in the lowest part. Through this gate came traffic from the Sarnus River and Stabiae. This street was crossed by two other main streets, the Via dell'Abbondanza and the Via di Nola.

The public buildings are for the most part grouped in three areas: the Forum (elevation 110 feet [34 metres]), located in the large level area on the southwest; the Triangular Forum (82 feet [25 metres]), standing on a height at the edge of the south wall overlooking the bay; and the Amphitheatre and Palaestra, in the east.

The Forum was the centre of the city's religious, economic, and municipal life; it was a large rectangular area surrounded by a two-story colonnaded portico. Dominating the Forum on the north was the temple dedicated to the Capitoline triad of deities: Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva. To the east was the Macellum, or large provision market. To the south were the small sanctuary of the city Lares (guardian deities), built after the earthquake in 62 CE; the Temple of Vespasian; and the imposing headquarters of the woolen industry, erected by the wealthy patroness Eumachia. Opposite the Capitolium, on the southern end of the Forum, were the meeting place of the city council and the offices of the magistrates of the city. The large basilica, with its main room surrounded on four sides by a corridor, is the most architecturally significant building in the city; it is of considerable importance in studying the origin and development of the Christian basilica. It served as a covered exchange and as a place for the administration of justice. To the west was the Temple of Venus Pompeiana, patron deity of Pompeii. Across from the basilica was the Temple of Apollo, one of the earliest in the city.



Ruins of the Forum at Pompeii, Italy.

Lucy Davies—Axiom Photographic Agency/Getty Images

The Triangular Forum is the site of the Doric Temple, the oldest temple in Pompeii. Between the 3rd and the 1st century BCE a theatre, a palaestra (sports ground), and a small covered theatre were built to the east of the Triangular Forum. The temples of Zeus Meilichius and of Isis and the old Samnite palaestra were nearby. In the east corner of Pompeii was the Amphitheatre, and to the west a large palaestra was built to replace the



Temple of Apollo, Pompeii, Italy.

Photo.com/Thinkstock



Small statue of a faun in the impluvium (cistern) of the House of the Faun, Pompeii, Italy.

Fotoworld/Photographer's Choice/Getty Images

old Samnite palaestra. Baths were scattered throughout the town: the Stabian Baths (which predate the Roman period), the Forum Baths, the Central Baths (still under construction at the time of the eruption), and many baths in luxurious private homes.

But more significant than the public buildings, examples of which have been excavated at other sites, are the hundreds of private homes. These are unique, for only at Pompeii is it possible to trace the history of Italic and Roman domestic architecture for at least four centuries. The earliest houses date from the first Samnite period (4th–3rd century BCE). The House of the Surgeon is the best-known example of the early atrium house built during this period.

The most luxurious houses were built during the second Samnite period (200–80 BCE), when increased trade and cultural contacts resulted in the introduction of Hellenistic refinements. The House of the Faun occupies an entire city block and has two atria (chief rooms), four triclinia (dining rooms), and two large peristyle gardens. Its facade is built of fine-grained gray tufa from Nuceria, the chief building material of this period. The walls are decorated in the First Pompeian, or Incrustation, style of painting, which imitates marble-veneered walls by means of painted stucco. The famous Alexander the Great mosaic found in the House of the Faun is probably a copy of a lost Hellenistic painting. Many of the houses from this period were decorated with elaborate floor mosaics. (See mosaic: Roman mosaics.) The House of the Silver Wedding, with its imposing high-columned atrium, was also built during this period, but it underwent later alterations. The handsome banquet hall and the exedra, which served as a schoolroom for children of the family, were decorated in the Second Pompeian, or Architectural, style, which was popular from 80 BCE to 14 CE.

The large number of houses built during the Samnite period made it necessary to build fewer houses in the Roman period. Those that were built were usually less imposing, with lower atria, but with more elaborate decoration. The House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto is a small but elegant house of the Roman Imperial period. The tablinum (master's office) is decorated in especially fine Third Pompeian, or Egyptianizing, style, usually dated from the early empire to the earthquake. The House of the Vettii is typical of the homes of the prosperous merchant class of the Roman period. Some of its rooms are decorated in the Fourth Pompeian, or Ornamental, style.

The atrium-peristyle house, with its handsome paintings, elegant furniture, and beautiful gardens with fountains and bronze and marble sculptures, is not as typical as has generally been supposed. There are also numerous small homes throughout the city, many of them shop houses. Excavators now preserve as completely as possible all aspects of ancient life. The homes of the humble are as informative as those of the wealthy. Many roofs, second stories, and balconies have been restored.



Mosaic of Alexander the Great discovered in the House of the Faun, Pompeii, Italy.

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Peristyle in the House of the Vettii, Pompeii, Italy.

Foto Vasari

Influence on European culture



Dionysiac initiation rites and prenuptial ordeals of a bride, wall painting, c. 50 BCE; in ...

SCALA/Art Resource—EB Inc.

The discoveries at Pompeii and other sites buried by the Vesuvian eruption had a profound influence on European taste. News of the excavations kindled a wave of enthusiasm for antiquity that spread throughout Europe. The laudatory pronouncements of the eminent German classicist Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who made his first trip to Naples in 1755, and the etchings of Giambattista Piranesi did much to popularize the excavations. Naples, Pompeii, and Herculaneum became important stops on the European Grand Tour made by English visitors.

Artists, architects, potters, and even furniture makers drew much inspiration from Pompeii. Contemporary painted interiors were inspired by the frescoed walls found in the excavations. The stucco work popularized in England by the 18th-century architects James and Robert Adam used the same motifs. In France, the Louis XVI style incorporated Pompeian motifs, and the apartment of Louis's queen, Marie Antoinette, at Fontainebleau was decorated in this style, which became popular throughout Europe. Jacques-Louis David and his student Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres drew inspiration for their paintings from the excavations. Indeed, the Neoclassic style stimulated by the discoveries at Pompeii completely replaced the Rococo and became the artistic style of the French Revolution and of the Napoleonic period.

Importance as historical source



Mount Vesuvius looming over the ruins of the ancient city of Pompeii.

Tony Waltham—Robert Harding World Imagery/Getty Images

The extent of the archaeological sites makes them of the greatest importance, for they provide a unique source of information about so many aspects of social, economic, religious, and political life of the ancient world. The many well-preserved house shrines give a hitherto unexpected picture of the vitality of religion in the family. The bakeries, complete with mills, kneading machines, and ovens, some still containing loaves of bread, show how this staple of everyday life was produced. Numerous fulleries (processing and cleaning plants for wool) make it possible to study this important industry. The shops of the sculptor, toolmaker, and gem cutter, as well as the factories for *garum* (fish sauce) and lamps and the many wine and food shops, document other aspects of ancient life. Pompeii was a busy port town that exported products throughout the Mediterranean region. Merchants and tradesmen found food and lodging near the city gates and the Forum. Some restaurants and inns were quite attractive and served food to guests who reclined in the garden; in the cheaper places, the rooms were small and dark, and customers sat on stools.

Inscriptions provide further information. They include monumental inscriptions on public buildings, tombs, and statue bases; the business transactions recorded in the famous wax tablets of the banker Lucius Caecilius Jucundus; announcements of gladiatorial combats; and many election notices, echoes of hotly fought contests. Preserved in the graffiti are accounts, lists of market days, insults and accusations, the exchanges of lovers, quotations from Virgil, and even the scratched alphabets of children. Epigraphical and archaeological evidence makes it possible to study the stratification of society and learn more of the freedmen, slaves, small businessmen, and aristocrats of the ancient Roman world.

Further, Pompeii offers the best opportunity for the study of city planning and land use in an ancient city. Excavations since the mid-20th century have revealed an unexpected amount of open land. The large insula across from the Amphitheatre was not the Foro Boario (Cattle Market), as had been long supposed, but a vineyard. Many vineyards, fruit trees, and gardens have been found, indicating less intensive land use and a smaller population than had been thought.

Unfortunately, the excavations are constantly endangered by the ravages of weather, tourist traffic at the site, and destructive vegetation. Reinforced concrete roofs were applied to many structures in the 1950s, but over subsequent decades this protective measure made upkeep difficult as some of the concrete deteriorated. In 1995 Pietro Giovanni Guzzo was made superintendent of the site, and existing conservation efforts were revitalized and expanded. Despite such actions, however, Pompeii continued to face numerous problems, including degradation, mismanagement, and vandalism. In July 2008 the Italian government took the unprecedented step of declaring a one-year state of emergency for the site and appointed a special commissioner to oversee Pompeii. Of first importance is the preservation, restoration, and study of the valuable evidence already uncovered before it is lost forever.

Wilhelmina Feemster Jashemski

The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica

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