

The Lost City of Pompeii

Frozen in Time by a Volcanic Catastrophe

Discover how Mount Vesuvius destroyed and preserved an entire Roman city — and what its ruins reveal about ancient daily...

B2 Reading · 35 min · History

1 Before You Read — Reflect & Discuss

Consider the following questions and discuss with a partner or your teacher:

1. What do you know about volcanoes? Have you ever seen one, or studied them at school?
2. If a natural disaster preserved your city exactly as it is today, what would future archaeologists learn about how you live?
3. Why do you think people are so fascinated by ancient civilisations? What can we learn from them?

2 Reading

A City Buried Alive: The Destruction and Rediscovery of Pompeii

On the morning of August 24, 79 CE, the people of Pompeii — a prosperous Roman city of approximately 11,000 inhabitants on the Bay of Naples — went about their daily lives. Merchants opened their shops. Bakers lit their ovens. Children played in the streets. A local election campaign was underway, with political **slogans** freshly painted on the walls. Nobody knew that Mount Vesuvius, the mountain that had loomed quietly over the city for generations, was about to produce one of the most catastrophic volcanic **eruptions** in recorded history — an eruption that would bury the city under metres of ash and pumice, killing thousands, and preserving Pompeii in extraordinary detail for nearly two thousand years.

The Eruption

The eruption of Vesuvius lasted approximately 18 hours. It began around noon with an enormous **explosion** that sent a column of volcanic material over 30 kilometres into the sky — a type of eruption now called "Plinian" after Pliny the Younger, the Roman writer who provided the only

surviving **eyewitness** account. For the first several hours, a dense rain of pumice stones and ash fell on Pompeii, accumulating at a rate of approximately 15 centimetres per hour. Roofs began to collapse under the weight. Many residents fled; others sheltered indoors, hoping the worst would pass.

It did not pass. In the early hours of August 25, the eruption entered its most deadly phase. A series of **pyroclastic** surges — superheated clouds of gas, ash, and rock fragments travelling at speeds of up to 700 kilometres per hour and temperatures exceeding 300°C — swept down the mountain and engulfed the city. These surges killed everyone who remained instantly, through thermal shock rather than **suffocation**. The city was then buried under approximately four to six metres of volcanic **debris**, where it would remain hidden and largely forgotten for over 1,500 years.

Rediscovery and Excavation

Pompeii was rediscovered by accident in 1748 during construction work commissioned by the King of Naples. As workers dug into the earth, they uncovered streets, buildings, and **artefacts** in an astonishing state of preservation. The volcanic ash had acted as a time capsule, sealing the city at the exact moment of its destruction. Bread was found still in ovens. Wine jars sat on tavern counters. Political graffiti, love messages, and everyday **inscriptions** covered the walls — offering an unfiltered glimpse into the thoughts, humour, and daily concerns of ordinary Roman citizens.

Perhaps the most haunting discoveries were the plaster casts of the victims. When archaeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli took charge of the excavations in 1863, he developed a **technique** of pouring liquid plaster into the hollow spaces left in the ash where human bodies had decomposed. The result was startlingly detailed casts that captured the final moments of the victims — a mother shielding her child, a man covering his face, a dog straining against its chain. These casts transformed Pompeii from an archaeological site into a deeply human **tragedy**.

What Pompeii Reveals About Roman Life

Pompeii is often described as the most important archaeological site in the world, not because of grand **monuments** — though it has theatres, temples, and a forum — but because of its extraordinary preservation of *everyday* life. Excavations have revealed a sophisticated urban society with paved streets, running water, an advanced **sewage** system, public baths, fast-food restaurants (*thermopolia*), and a complex social hierarchy that included wealthy **merchants**, freed slaves, and gladiators.

The walls of Pompeii are covered in **graffiti** — thousands of inscriptions ranging from election endorsements and advertisements to personal insults, love declarations, and philosophical reflections. These writings, far more than any formal historical text, reveal the authentic voice of Roman citizens: their wit, their anxieties, their **vanity**, and their humanity. In Pompeii, history is not written by the powerful — it is scratched into walls by ordinary people.

Pompeii Today: Preservation and Peril

Today, Pompeii is a UNESCO World Heritage Site visited by approximately 2.5 million people each year. However, the site faces serious **conservation** challenges. Exposure to weather, tourism, and inadequate funding have caused significant **deterioration**. Walls have collapsed, frescoes have faded, and some areas have been closed to the public for safety reasons. The Italian government and international organisations have invested hundreds of millions of euros in restoration, but the sheer scale of the site — only about two-thirds of which has been excavated — makes **comprehensive** preservation an enormous challenge.

Meanwhile, Vesuvius remains an active volcano. Approximately three million people live in its danger zone today. Scientists monitor the mountain constantly, but the question is not *whether* Vesuvius will erupt again, but *when*. The story of Pompeii is not merely ancient history — it is a warning about the power of nature and the **vulnerability** of human civilisation.

3 Key Vocabulary

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
slogans	short, memorable phrases used in advertising or politics	Political slogans were freshly painted on Pompeii's walls.
eruptions	sudden, violent outbursts, especially of a volcano	Vesuvius produced one of the most catastrophic eruptions in history.
explosion	a sudden, violent release of energy	The eruption began with an enormous explosion.
eyewitness	a person who has personally seen something happen	Pliny the Younger provided the only surviving eyewitness account.
pyroclastic	relating to fragments of rock and gas ejected by a volcanic eruption	Pyroclastic surges swept down the mountain at 700 km/h.
suffocation	death caused by lack of air or inability to breathe	Victims were killed by thermal shock rather than suffocation.
debris	scattered pieces of waste or remains; rubble	The city was buried under metres of volcanic debris.
artefacts	objects made by humans, especially ones of historical interest	Workers uncovered artefacts in an astonishing state of preservation.
inscriptions	words carved, written, or engraved on a surface	Everyday inscriptions on walls revealed the thoughts of ordinary citizens.
technique	a particular way of doing something, especially one involving skill	Fiorelli developed a technique of pouring plaster into hollow spaces.
tragedy	an event causing great suffering, destruction, or sadness	The plaster casts transformed Pompeii into a deeply human tragedy.

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
monuments	structures of historical importance or artistic value	Pompeii is important not just for grand monuments but for everyday life.
sewage	waste water and human waste carried away through a system of pipes	Pompeii had paved streets, running water, and an advanced sewage system.
merchants	people involved in trade; those who buy and sell goods	Pompeii's social hierarchy included wealthy merchants and freed slaves.
graffiti	writing or drawings made on walls in public places	Thousands of graffiti inscriptions cover the walls of Pompeii.
vanity	excessive pride in or admiration of one's own appearance or achievements	The inscriptions reveal the wit, anxieties, and vanity of Roman citizens.
conservation	the preservation and protection of cultural or natural heritage	The site faces serious conservation challenges.
deterioration	the process of becoming progressively worse	Weather and tourism have caused significant deterioration.
comprehensive	complete and including everything that is necessary	Comprehensive preservation of the entire site is an enormous challenge.
vulnerability	the quality of being easily harmed, damaged, or attacked	Pompeii is a warning about the vulnerability of human civilisation.

4

Useful Collocations

volcanic eruption · archaeological site · ancient civilisation · time capsule · historical preservation · natural disaster · Roman Empire · cultural heritage · plaster cast · excavation site · thermal shock · ash cloud · World Heritage Site · urban planning · daily life · active volcano

5

Reading Comprehension

1. What type of volcanic event killed most of the remaining inhabitants of Pompeii?

- a) A slow lava flow
- b) Pyroclastic surges — superheated clouds of gas and rock travelling at extreme speed ✓**
- c) A massive earthquake
- d) Flooding caused by heavy rain

2. Why is Pliny the Younger important to our understanding of the eruption?

- a) He invented volcanology
- b) He provided the only surviving eyewitness account of the eruption ✓**
- c) He led the evacuation of Pompeii
- d) He was the mayor of the city at the time

3. What did Giuseppe Fiorelli's plaster cast technique reveal?

- a) The chemical composition of the volcanic ash
- b) Detailed impressions of victims' final moments, captured in the spaces left by decomposed bodies ✓**
- c) The original colours of Pompeii's buildings
- d) How Roman concrete was manufactured

4. Why is Pompeii considered so historically important?

- a) Because it contains the largest Roman temple ever found
- b) Because the volcanic ash preserved everyday life in extraordinary detail ✓**
- c) Because it was the capital of the Roman Empire
- d) Because it is the oldest city in Europe

5. What do the graffiti on Pompeii's walls tell us?

- a) Only official government announcements
- b) The authentic voices and daily concerns of ordinary Roman citizens ✓**
- c) Instructions for evacuating during volcanic eruptions
- d) Religious texts written by priests

6. What modern threat does the text identify regarding Vesuvius?

- a) That the volcano has been permanently deactivated
- b) That approximately three million people live in its danger zone and it will erupt again ✓**
- c) That the Italian government plans to demolish the archaeological site
- d) That climate change has made eruptions impossible

7. What conservation challenges does the site face today?

- a) Too few visitors to justify preservation funding
- b) Weather damage, tourism impact, and inadequate funding causing significant deterioration ✓**
- c) Volcanic activity is threatening to bury the site again
- d) Local residents are building homes on top of the ruins

6**Vocabulary Exercise — Fill in the Blanks**

eruptions · eyewitness · pyroclastic · debris · artefacts · technique · graffiti · conservation · deterioration · vulnerability

1. Vesuvius produced one of the most catastrophic volcanic _____ in recorded history.
2. Pliny the Younger provided the only surviving _____ account of the destruction.
3. _____ surges of superheated gas and rock killed everyone who remained in the city.
4. Pompeii was buried under metres of volcanic _____ for over 1,500 years.
5. Workers uncovered streets, buildings, and _____ in an astonishing state of preservation.
6. Fiorelli developed a _____ of pouring plaster into the hollow spaces left by victims' bodies.
7. Thousands of _____ inscriptions on the walls reveal the daily lives of ordinary Romans.
8. The site faces serious _____ challenges due to weather, tourism, and limited funding.
9. Exposure to the elements has caused significant _____ of the ancient structures.
10. Pompeii is a powerful reminder of the _____ of human civilisation to natural forces.

7**Answer Key****Vocabulary Exercise Answers**

1. eruptions
2. eyewitness
3. Pyroclastic
4. debris
5. artefacts
6. technique
7. graffiti
8. conservation
9. deterioration
10. vulnerability

8**Grammar Focus — Key Structures in the Text**

B2 Grammar: Narrative Past, Participle Clauses & Dramatic Inversion

Past simple for narrative: The eruption **began** around noon with an enormous explosion.

Past perfect for background: Bread **was found** still in ovens. Wine jars **sat** on counters.

Participle clause: **Buried under metres of ash**, the city remained hidden for 1,500 years.

Dramatic inversion: **Not until 1748** was Pompeii rediscovered — by accident.

Emphatic it-cleft: **It is** not the monuments that make Pompeii important — **it is** the preservation of everyday life.

9 Speaking & Writing Tasks

Speaking Task

Discuss these questions with a partner or your teacher:

- If you could visit any ancient city preserved like Pompeii, which one would you choose and why?
- The text says Pompeii's graffiti reveals 'the authentic voice of Roman citizens.' What do you think our graffiti, social media posts, and text messages would tell future archaeologists about us?
- Should archaeological sites like Pompeii be open to mass tourism, or should access be restricted to protect them? What is the right balance?
- Three million people live near Vesuvius today. Should governments force people to relocate from known danger zones?

Useful Phrases for Discussion

What makes Pompeii so fascinating is that it preserves not just buildings but the texture of everyday life.

The text provides a vivid illustration of how quickly a thriving civilisation can be destroyed by natural forces.

I was particularly struck by the detail about Fiorelli's plaster casts — they make the tragedy intensely personal.

It could be argued that the real value of Pompeii lies in what it teaches us about ordinary people rather than emperors and generals.

Writing Task

Write a structured opinion essay (180–230 words) on the following topic:

"Archaeological sites like Pompeii are too important to be left open to mass tourism. Access should be strictly limited to preserve them for future generations." To what extent do you agree?

Your essay should include an introduction with a thesis, arguments for and against, and a conclusion with your opinion. Use vocabulary from the text.

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