

# Lost Cities: Pompeii, preserved by disaster, risks ruin all over again

By Emily Mann, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.10.16

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TOP: The Roman city of Pompeii, Italy, in October 1997. Marc DEVILLE/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images. BOTTOM: The Forum, interior of the basilica with the facade of the courthouse in the background, DeAgostini/Getty Images; Tourists look at a body cast in December 2010, ROBERTO SALOMONE/AFP/Getty Images; Tourists visit the ruins of a kitchen at the archeological site, Giorgio Cosulich/Getty Images.

*Editor's Note: Of all the lost cities in the world, ancient Pompeii is the most "found." The volcanic eruption that destroyed the Roman city also froze it in time. But now, 2,000 years later, it is alive with people who threaten its existence all over again.*

## **A Popular Tourist Attraction**

From the great stone amphitheater in Pompeii, Italy, you get a good view of the waves of tourists. They move toward the forum, the center of the city, where some take a look at the public baths, which offered pools for bathing and rooms for private meetings. The 2,000-year-old wall decorations of warriors and couples get the attention of visitors. Yet the visitors are rushed in one entrance and out the other with barely enough time to take pictures.

For thousands of years, Pompeii had been a lost city. However, knowing that the giant amphitheater was the site of a rock concert a few nights earlier makes Pompeii a lost city that has become one of the most found.

How Pompeii was lost is famous. Almost 2,000 years ago, the violent eruption of Mount Vesuvius, over two days in the year A.D. 79, buried the city in volcanic lava and ash. What happened to Pompeii has been the subject of novels, poems, stage plays, movies and television programs.

## **The Darkest Night**

There is only one written account of the volcano's eruption, which was written by Pliny the Younger. He had just finished lunch with his uncle, Admiral Pliny the Elder, one sunny afternoon near the Bay of Naples. To the west, 15 miles away, they saw an immense cloud rising in the shape of an umbrella. The pumice and ash shot up some 20 miles into the sky and then began to collapse, pouring down on surrounding fields and towns.

As roofs crashed down, most people made a run for it with pillows strapped to their heads as protection from the showers of rock. Waves of burning 600-degree Fahrenheit ash and poison gases brought instant death to the people of Pompeii.

The sixth and largest blast from the volcano forced the 17-year-old Pliny and his mother to run. As they ran, they saw the shoreline disappear as a giant tsunami rushed in. Then the clouds of ash turned day into the blackest night.

Meanwhile, Pliny the Elder, driven by his duty as an admiral, sailed off to Pompeii. On shore, he got a closer look. He died trying to save as many people as he could. His body was found three days later on the beach. Pliny the Younger wrote that he looked like a man who was just sleeping.

## **Digging For Victims**

All the victims of Pompeii slept under the ash for almost 1,700 years. In 1748, archeologists began to dig down into the city that lay beneath Mount Vesuvius. What they found was eerie. It seemed that the dead were alive, yet frozen in time. One was sitting on a couch, another standing near his mule, another was raising her hands to the sky.

Between the rows of clay pots on display in the forum, the diggers found an empty space in the hardened volcanic ash. It looked like the figure of a man crouched in fear with his hands covering his face. These human remains were discovered by Amedeo Maiuri, Pompeii's chief archaeologist from 1924 to 1961.

Some on Maiuri's team poured plaster into the empty space left by the body. The figure was called the "muleteer," or mule man, because bones of a mule were nearby.

More than 100 plaster casts of bodies that tried to survive the deadly ash have been made. So far, around 1,150 bodies have been found.

## **Experts In Search Of Information**

Mary Beard has written a best-selling book and done two television documentaries about Pompeii. She uses modern-day X-rays and scans to help explain daily life in the towns around Vesuvius. These places were not big Roman cities, but more like small, country towns. Between 10,000 and 20,000 people lived in towns like Pompeii.

In the ruins of Pompeii, archaeologist Sophie Hay searches for information about the everyday experiences of people in the Roman lower classes that included soldiers, street traders and slaves. She finds old loaves of bread burned to a crisp, and tools used by workmen and doctors. There are doormats spelling out "beware of the dog," and even graffiti on the walls proclaiming that "Antiochus hung out here with his girlfriend Cithera" and "Epaphra, you are bald!"

"A small problem gets larger if you ignore it" was written on the wall of a church. With Vesuvius just off in the distance, it seemed to predict something would happen. At the time, Pliny wrote about small earthquakes in the area, but he was ignored.

Since the devastation, the volcano has erupted more than 30 times. The last time was in 1944.

## **Saving Pompeii**

Vesuvius remains one of the world's most dangerous volcanoes, with millions of people living near it. Yet the more urgent threat to Pompeii is not the volcano. Weather, heavy rains and thousands of tourists cause great damage. Many buildings and monuments have been wearing down and collapsing.

The Italian government and the European Union have created the Great Pompeii Project to save the city. In 1997, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) listed Pompeii as a World Heritage Site. This means that Pompeii is a place that has "Universal Cultural Value" to the world. But today, UNESCO warns that Pompeii might be placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger.

Last year the EU threatened to stop paying for more work on the buried city. Many felt the workers were moving too slowly. Work is now progressing more quickly. New problems, however, are coming from people who believe the digging is causing more harm than good.

Beard wants new digging to stop. "One-third of the town is underground, and that is where it should stay, safe and sound, for the future," she says. "In the meanwhile, we can look after the other two-thirds as best we can, delaying its collapse as far as is reasonable."

Another expert on Pompeii, Paul Zanker, has said that there is a need for "archaeologists to return to previously excavated parts of the city with new research questions in mind, and I think this is the best advice: to reassess what we can learn from what is already visible, rather than excavate untouched parts of the city and add to the issue of conservation."

Many people worry that the city of Pompeii could be lost again on the way to being found.

## Quiz

- 1 Which two sentences from the article contain central ideas of the article?
1. *Almost 2,000 years ago, the violent eruption of Mount Vesuvius, over two days in the year A.D. 79, buried the city in volcanic lava and ash.*
  2. *These human remains were discovered by Amedeo Maiuri, Pompeii's chief archaeologist from 1924 to 1961.*
  3. *Last year the EU threatened to stop paying for more work on the buried city.*
  4. *Many people worry that the city of Pompeii could be lost again on the way to being found.*
- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 2 and 3
- (C) 3 and 4
- (D) 1 and 4
- 2 How does the section "Experts In Search Of Information" support a central idea of the article?
- (A) It demonstrates that the people of Pompeii had no time to escape from the hot ash and lava.
- (B) It demonstrates that Pompeii is in danger of being destroyed by too many visitors.
- (C) It shows that Pompeii is valuable because of what it can tell us about life at that time.
- (D) It shows that many people have become interested in going to Pompeii for vacation.

3 Read the paragraph below from the section "Saving Pompeii."

*Beard wants new digging to stop. "One-third of the town is underground, and that is where it should stay, safe and sound, for the future," she says. "In the meanwhile, we can look after the other two-thirds as best we can, delaying its collapse as far as is reasonable."*

How do the words "delaying" and "collapse" affect the tone of the sentence above?

- (A) They convey the sense that scientists can save the city if they work quickly.
- (B) They convey the sense that destruction of the city is unavoidable.
- (C) They convey the sense that scientists are no longer interested in studying the city.
- (D) They convey the sense that the city will survive for many more years in the future.

4 Read the sentence below from "Saving Pompeii."

*Another expert on Pompeii, Paul Zanker, has said that there is a need for "archaeologists to return to previously excavated parts of the city with new research questions in mind, and I think this is the best advice: to reassess what we can learn from what is already visible, rather than excavate untouched parts of the city and add to the issue of conservation."*

What is the BEST definition of the word "excavate" based on the information in the article?

- (A) to bury for protection
- (B) to dig up for study
- (C) to preserve in plaster
- (D) to promote for tourism