

Pompeii

Pompeii was an ancient Roman city, built on the slopes of a volcano called Mount Vesuvius. In the year 79 A.D., Mount Vesuvius suddenly erupted. The debris from the volcano destroyed Pompeii and buried the city under tonnes of ash. This text is full of information about Pompeii.

A Typical Roman City

In the first century A.D., Pompeii was a thriving port city. It had a population of between 10,000 and 20,000 people, and it was a popular holiday destination for people who lived in Rome.

Like other Roman cities, Pompeii had a central square, known as a forum, where markets were held and the city's business was conducted. The city also had temples to Roman gods, including Jupiter and Apollo; theatres where plays and concerts were held; and a huge amphitheatre where people went to see sports and other entertainments, such as gladiator games and chariot races. And aqueduct brought fresh water into the city, supplying public fountains and baths. Some wealthy citizens have running water in their homes.



Disaster Strikes

According to Pliny the Younger, a Roman administrator who wrote about the eruption of Vesuvius, on 20th August 79 A.D., the people of Pompeii felt some small earthquakes. Tremors like these were common in the area, so people weren't too worried, even when the quakes became more frequent over the next few days. Because people didn't realise that these earthquakes were an early warning sign of a volcanic eruption, they were taken completely by surprise when, around midday on 24th August 79 A.D., Mount Vesuvius erupted. The volcano sent a huge cloud of rock, ash and poisonous gas into the air, and Pompeii was completely buried by up to 25 m of debris. The eruption happened so quickly that very few people had time to escape, and thousands lost their lives.

A Lost City Rediscovered

Pompeii had disappeared under a thick layer of volcanic rock and ash, and the city was gradually forgotten. It lay almost entirely undisturbed for more than sixteen centuries, until archaeologist began excavating the site in the 1700s. They were amazed to discover that the city had been frozen in time by the volcano. Instead of decaying, buildings, paintings, mosaics, everyday objects and even human remains had all been preserved and all the layers of volcanic debris. As a result, the city provides an incredibly detailed picture of what life was like in the Roman Empire.

Written by Catherine Heygate.

Question 1

In your own words, explain the purpose of an aqueduct.

Question 2

Use the information in the text to identify two similarities between life in a Roman city and what do you know about life in Britain today.

Question 3

How do we know about what happened in the days before Mount Vesuvius erupted?

Question 4

How did the people of Pompeii feel about the earthquakes that happened between 20th and 24th August 79 A.D.? Why did they feel like this?

Question 5

Why is Pompeii important for our understanding of daily life in the Roman Empire?

Question 6

Do you find the subheadings in this text helpful? Explain your answer.