

Mount Vesuvius

A Case Study



Studyladder



Mt Vesuvius, Italy

Location: 9km east of Naples (see picture left)

Status: Active

Last Eruptive Period: 1913 - 1944

History: Eruption in 79 CE buried the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum in volcanic ash and mud.

Archaeological excavations at Pompeii have revealed a well preserved 'snapshot' of ancient life in the city. (see picture below)



The Eruption of Mt Vesuvius in 79 CE

The soil around Mt Vesuvius is very rich and good for agriculture. This is why the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum were established there. About 20 000 people lived in Pompeii and 5000 lived in Herculaneum before the eruption in 79 CE.

A seventeen year old called Pliny the Younger wrote letters to the historian Tacitus telling him about what he witnessed on that day. Much of what we know about the eruption comes from his account of the day's events.

At noon on the 24th of August 79 CE the peak of Mt Vesuvius exploded and a huge cloud of ash and pumice rose high into the sky. Most people fled, but some people stayed in the city of Pompeii, taking shelter in buildings and cellars. The city was engulfed in toxic gases, and ash and pumice rained down on Pompeii. The city was covered in 14 -17 feet (about 4 - 5 metres) of ash and rock. When the wind changed, the city of Herculaneum was also engulfed by toxic gases and the city was covered by 60 feet (about 18 metres) of mud and ash. Pliny's account said the eruption lasted 18 hours.

The cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum were abandoned and eventually forgotten. In the 18th century the first evidence of the cities was found and archaeological work on the site has continued to the current day.





Archaeologists discovered more about how the Romans built their cities. They found roads, public wells, plumbing and drainage systems. They found temples, shops and houses, some with beautifully decorated mosaic walls which were still partially intact. They found clay pots and other ordinary every day items that would have been used by people of the time.

Amazingly, archaeologists also found evidence of 2000 people who died in Pompeii. They would have died immediately from breathing in the toxic fumes. Their bodies were buried by the hot ashes and rock that covered the city. This layer of ash became solid rock once it cooled. Their remains would have broken down over time, leaving a hole in the rock where their bodies had been. Archaeologists injected plaster into the holes, making a statue of the person when the rock that encased them was removed. Some were found sheltering together in groups, trying to take cover from the ash and pumice stones hailing down on the roof above them.

The excavations at Pompeii have revealed an amazing snapshot of what life was like in a Roman city.

