Pompeii

The Life of a Roman Town

Mary Beard

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Extract

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INTRODUCTION

Life interrupted

In the early hours of 25 August 79 CE, the rain of pumice falling on Pompeii was easing off. It seemed a good moment to leave the city and make a bid for safety. A straggling group of more than twenty fugitives, who had been taking shelter within the walls while the dreadful downpour had been at its worst, took a chance on one of the eastern gates of the city, hoping to find a way out of range of the volcanic bombardment.

A few others had tried this route some hours before. One couple had fled, carrying just a small key (they presumably hoped one day to return to whatever it locked – house, apartment, chest or strong box) and a single bronze lamp (Ill. 1). This can hardly have made much impact against the darkness of the night and the clouds of debris. But it was an expensive and fashionable object, moulded in the shape of a black African head – a hint of the (to us) disconcerting forms of ingenuity we shall often come across in Pompeii. The pair didn't make it. Overwhelmed by the pumice, they were found in 1907 where they had fallen, next to one of the grand tombs which lined this road, like others, out of the city. They collapsed, in fact, next to the lavish memorial to a woman who had died perhaps fifty years before, Aesquillia Polla, the wife of Numerius Herennius Celsus. Just twenty-two years old (as we can still read on the stone), she must have been less than half the age of her rich husband, a member of one of Pompeii's most prominent families, who had served as an officer in the Roman army and had twice been elected to the highest office in the city's local government.

The layers of pumice had built up to several feet by the time the other group

1. Small lamps in the shape of human heads (or feet) were fashionable in the first century CE. Here the oil was poured into the hole in his brow and the flame burned at his mouth. Including the petals which form the handle, it is just 12 centimetres long.

decided to risk escape in the same direction. Walking was slow and difficult. Most of these fugitives were young men, many carrying nothing with them, either because they had nothing to bring or because they could no longer get to their valuables. One man had taken the precaution of arming himself with a dagger, in an elegant sheath (he had another sheath with him too, empty, because he had perhaps lost or lent the weapon it had held). The few women in the group had rather more. One carried a little silver statuette of the goddess Fortuna, 'Good Fortune', sitting on a throne, plus a handful of gold and silver rings – one with a tiny silver phallus attached by a chain, as a lucky charm perhaps (and another object we shall often meet in the course of this book). Others had their own little store of precious trinkets: a silver medicine box, a tiny base to hold a (missing) statuette and a couple of keys, all stuffed into a cloth bag; a wooden jewellery case, with a necklace, ear-rings, silver spoon – and more keys. They had also brought what cash they could. For some just a bit of loose change; for others, whatever they had stashed away at home, or the takings of their shop. But it was not much. All in all, between the whole group there was barely 500 *sesterces* – which is in Pompeian terms about what it cost to buy a single mule.

Some of this group got a little further than the earlier couple. Fifteen or so had reached the next grand memorial, twenty metres further down the road, the tomb of Marcus Obellius Firmus, when what we now know as the 'pyroclastic surge' from Vesuvius wiped them out – a deadly, burning combination of gases, volcanic debris and molten rock travelling at huge speed, against which nothing could survive. Their bodies have been found, some mixed up with, even

2. The plaster casts made from the bodies of the victims are constant reminders of their humanity – that they were just like us. This memorable cast of a man dying, with his head in his hands, has been placed for safe-keeping in a site storeroom. He now seems to be lamenting his own imprisonment.

apparently still clutching, branches of wood. Maybe the more agile amongst them had taken to the trees which surrounded the tombs in a hopeless attempt to save themselves; more likely the surge which killed the fugitives also brought the trees crashing down on top of them.

The tomb of Obellius Firmus itself fared rather better. He was another Pompeian grandee, who had died a few decades earlier, and long enough ago for the sides of his monument to be used as a local message board. We can still read here the advertisement for some gladiatorial shows, and plenty of scrawlings by some tomb-side dawdlers: 'Hello Issa, from Habitus', 'Hello Occasus, from Scepsinianus', and so on (Habitus' friends apparently replied with a large phallus and testicles, and the message 'Hello Habitus from your mates everywhere'). Up above, the text of the formal epitaph of Obellius Firmus declared that his funeral had been paid for by the local council, to the cost of 5000 *sesterces* – with an extra 1000 *sesterces* being added by some other local officials for incense and 'a shield' (probably a portrait on a shield, a distinctive Roman type of memorial). These

3. Someone's precious possession? This squat little figurine made out of red amber from the Baltic was found with one of the unsuccessful fugitives. Just 8 centimetres tall, it was perhaps meant to represent one of the stock characters from Roman mime, popular entertainment in Pompeii (p. 256) .

funeral expenses were, in other words, well over ten times what the whole party of fugitives had managed to gather together for their flight to safety. Pompeii was a city of poor and rich.

We can trace many other stories of attempted flight. Almost 400 bodies have been discovered in the layers of pumice, and nearer 700 in the now solid remains of the pyroclastic flow – many of these recaptured vividly at the moment of their death by the clever technique, invented in the nineteenth century, of filling the space left by their decomposing flesh and clothes with plaster, to reveal the hitched-up tunics, the muffled faces, the grim expressions of the victims (Ill. 2). One group of four, found in a street near the Forum, was probably an entire family trying to make its escape. The father went in front, a burly man, with big bushy eyebrows (as the plaster cast reveals). He had pulled his cloak over his head, to protect himself from falling ash and debris, and carried with him some gold jewellery (a simple finger-ring and a few ear-rings), a couple of keys and, in this case, a reasonable amount of cash, at almost 400 *sesterces*. His two small daughters followed, while the mother brought up the rear. She had hitched up her dress to make the walking easier, and was carrying more household valuables in

a little bag: the family silver (some spoons, a pair of goblets, a medallion with the figure of Fortuna, a mirror) and a small squat figurine of a little boy, wrapped up in a cloak, his bare feet peeking out at the bottom (Ill. 3). It is a crude piece of work, but it is made out of amber, which must have travelled many hundreds of kilometres from the nearest source of supply in the Baltic; hence its prize status.

Other finds tell of other lives. There was the medical man who fled clutching his box of instruments, only to be overwhelmed by the lethal surge as he crossed the *palaestra* (the large open space or exercise area) near the Amphitheatre, making for one of the southern gates in the city; the slave found in the garden of a large house in the centre of town, his movement surely hampered by the iron bands around his ankles; the priest of the goddess Isis (or maybe a temple servant) who had parcelled up some of the temple's valuables to take with him in his flight, but had not gone more than 50 metres before he too was killed. And then, of course, there was the richly jewelled lady found in one of the rooms in the gladiators' barracks. This has often been written up as a nice illustration of the penchant of upper-class Roman women for the brawny bodies of gladiators. Here, it seems, is one of them caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, her adultery exposed to the gaze of history. It is, in fact, a much more innocent scene than that. Almost certainly the woman was not on a date at all, but had taken refuge in the barracks, when the going got too rough on her flight out of the city. At least, if this *was* an assignation with her toy-boy, it was an assignation she shared with seventeen others and a couple of dogs – all of whose remains were found in the same small room.

The dead bodies of Pompeii have always been one of the most powerful images, and attractions, of the ruined city. In the early excavations during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, skeletons were conveniently 'discovered' in the presence of visiting royalty and other dignitaries (Ill. 4). Romantic travellers gushed at the thought of the cruel disaster that had afflicted the poor souls whose mortal remains they witnessed, not to mention the more general reflections on the perilous fragility of human existence that the whole experience prompted. Hester Lynch Piozzi – the English writer who owed her surname to her marriage to an Italian music teacher – captured (and lightly parodied) these reactions, after a visit to the site in 1786: 'How dreadful are the thoughts which such a sight suggests! How horrible the certainty that such a scene might be all acted over again tomorrow; and that, who today are spectators, may become spectacles to travellers of a succeeding century, who mistaking our bones for those of the Neapolitans, may carry them to their native country back again perhaps.'

4. Celebrity visitors to Pompeii had excavations re-staged for their benefit. Here, in 1769, the Emperor of Austria surveys a skeleton found in a house, now known after him as 'The House of Emperor Joseph II'. The lady of the party reacts with more obvious interest.

In fact, one of the most celebrated objects from the first years of digging was the imprint of a woman's breast found in a large house (the so-called Villa of Diomedes) just outside the city walls in the 1770s. Almost a century before the technique of making full plaster casts of the body cavities had been perfected, the solid debris here allowed the excavators to see the full form of the dead, their clothing, even their hair, moulded into the lava. The only part of this material they managed successfully to extract and preserve was that one breast, which was put on display in the nearby museum, and quickly became a tourist attraction. In due course it also became the inspiration for Théophile Gautier's famous novella of 1852, *Arria Marcella*. This features a young Frenchman who, infatuated with the breast that he has seen in the museum, returns to the ancient city (in an unsettling combination of time travel, wishful thinking and fantasy) to find, or to reinvent, his beloved – the woman of his dreams, one of the last Roman occupants of the Villa of Diomedes. Sadly the breast itself, despite all its celebrity, has simply disappeared, and a major hunt for it in the 1950s failed to reveal any hint of its fate. One theory is that the battery of invasive tests carried out by curious nineteenth-century scientists eventually caused it to disintegrate: ashes to ashes, as it were.

The power of the Pompeian dead has lasted into our own age too. Primo Levi's poem 'The Girl-Child of Pompei' uses the plaster cast of a little girl, found clutching her mother ('As though, when the noon sky turned black / You wanted to re-enter her'), to reflect on the fate of Anne Frank and an anonymous schoolgirl from Hiroshima – victims of manmade rather than natural disasters ('The torments heaven sends us are enough / Before your finger presses down, stop and consider'). Two casts even play a cameo role in Roberto Rossellini's 1953 film, *Voyage to Italy* – hailed as 'the first work of modern cinema', though a commercial disaster. Clinging to each other, lovers still in death, these victims of Vesuvius serve as a sharp and upsetting reminder to two modern tourists (Ingrid Bergman – then herself in a faltering marriage to Rossellini – and George Sanders) of just how distant and empty their own relationship has become. But it is not only human victims who are preserved in this way. One of the most famous, and evocative, casts is that of a guard dog found still tethered to his post in the house of a wealthy fuller (laundry-man-cum-cloth-worker). He died frantically trying to get free of his chain.

Voyeurism, pathos and ghoulish prurience certainly all contribute to the appeal of these casts. Even the most hard-nosed archaeologists can come up with lurid descriptions of their death agonies, or of the toll taken on the human body by the pyroclastic flow ('their brains would have boiled …'). For visitors to the site itself, where some of the casts are still on display near where they were found, they produce something like the 'Egyptian Mummy effect': small children press their noses against the glass cases with cries of horror, while adults resort to their cameras – though hardly disguising their similarly grim fascination with these remains of the dead.

But ghoulishness is not the whole story. For the impact of these victims (whether fully recast in plaster, or not) comes also from the sense of immediate contact with the ancient world that they offer, the human narratives they allow us to reconstruct, as well as the choices, decisions and hopes of real people with whom we can empathise across the millennia. We do not need to be archaeologists to imagine what it would be like to abandon our homes with only what we could carry. We can feel for the doctor who chose to take the tools of his trade with him, and almost share his regret at what he would have left behind. We can understand the vain optimism of those who slipped the front-door keys in their pockets before taking to the road. Even that nasty little amber figurine takes on special significance, when we know that it was someone's precious favourite, snatched up as they left home for the last time.

Modern science can add to these individual life stories. We can go one better than earlier generations in squeezing all kinds of personal information out of the surviving skeletons themselves: from such relatively simple calibrations as the height and stature of the population (ancient Pompeians were, if anything, slightly taller than modern Neapolitans) through tell-tale traces of childhood illnesses and broken bones, to hints of family relationships and ethnic origin that are beginning to be offered by DNA and other biological analysis. It is probably pushing the evidence too far to claim, as some archaeologists have done, that the particular development of one teenage boy's skeleton is enough to show that he had spent much of his short life as a fisherman and that the erosion of his teeth on the right hand side of his mouth was caused by biting on the line which held his catch. But elsewhere we are on firmer ground.

In two back rooms of one substantial house, for example, the remains of twelve people were discovered, the owner, presumably, with his family and slaves. Six children and six adults, they included a girl in her late teens, who had been nine months pregnant when she died, the bones of her foetus still lying in her abdomen. It may well have been her late pregnancy that encouraged all of them to take shelter inside, hoping for the best, rather than risk a hasty escape. The skeletons have been none too carefully preserved since their discovery in 1975 (the fact that, as one scientist has recently reported, 'the lower premolars [of one skull] had been erroneously glued into the sockets of the upper central incisors' is not evidence of ham-fisted ancient dentistry, but of ham-fisted modern restoration). Nonetheless, by piecing together various clues that remain – the relative ages of the victims, the rich jewels on the pregnant girl, the fact that she and a nine-year-old boy suffer from the same minor, genetic spinal disorder – we can begin to build up a picture of the family who lived in the house. An elderly couple, he in his sixties, she around fifty with clear signs of arthritis, were very likely the house owners, as well as the parents, or grandparents, of the pregnant girl. From the quantity of jewellery she was wearing we can be fairly sure that she was not a slave, and the shared spinal problem hints that she was a relative of the family by blood rather than marriage – the nine-year-old boy being her younger brother. If so, then she and her husband (probably a man in his twenties, whose head, so the skeleton suggests, had a pronounced, disfiguring and no doubt painful tilt to the right) either lived with her family, or had moved back to her home for the birth, or of course just happened to be visiting on the fatal day. The other adults, a man in his sixties and a woman in her thirties, may just as well have been slaves as relatives.

A close look at their teeth, reglued or not, adds further details. Most of them have a series of tell-tale rings in the enamel that come from repeated bouts of infectious diseases during childhood – a nice reminder of the perilous nature of infancy in the Roman world, when half those born would have died before they were ten. (The better news was that if you made it to ten, you could expect to live another forty years, or more.) The clear presence of tooth decay, even if below modern Western levels, points to a diet with plenty of sugar and starch. Of the adults, only the husband of the pregnant girl had no sign of decay. But he, again to judge from the state of his teeth, had fluoride poisoning, presumably having grown up outside Pompeii, in some area with unusually high levels of natural fluoride. Most striking of all, every single skeleton, even the children, had large build-ups – in some cases a couple of millimetres – of calculus. The reason for this is obvious. Toothpicks there may have been, even some clever concoctions for polishing and whitening the teeth (in a book of pharmacological recipes, the emperor Claudius' private doctor records the mixture which is said to have given the empress Messalina her nice smile: burnt antler-horn, with resin and rock-salt). But this was a world without toothbrushes. Pompeii must have been a town of very bad breath.

A city disrupted

Women about to give birth, dogs still tethered to their posts, and a decided whiff of halitosis … These are memorable images of normal, everyday life in a Roman town suddenly interrupted in midstream. There are plenty more: the loaves of bread found in the oven, abandoned as they baked; the team of painters who scarpered in the middle of redecorating a room, leaving behind their pots of paint and a bucketful of fresh plaster high up on a scaffold – when the scaffold collapsed in the eruption, the contents of the bucket splashed right across the neatly prepared wall, leaving a thick crust still visible today (see pp. 120–24). But scratch the surface, and you find that the story of Pompeii is more complicated, and intriguing. In many ways Pompeii is not the ancient equivalent of the *Marie Céleste*, the nineteenth-century ship mysteriously abandoned, the boiled eggs still (so it was said) on the breakfast table. It is not a Roman town simply frozen in midflow.

For a start, the people of Pompeii had seen the warning signs, hours if not days before. The only eyewitness account of the eruption we have is a couple of letters written a quarter of a century after the event to the historian Tacitus by his

friend Pliny, who had been staying on the Bay of Naples when the disaster struck. No doubt composed with the benefit of hindsight and imagination, these make it clear that escape was still possible even after the cloud 'like an umbrella pine' had appeared from the crater of Vesuvius. Pliny's uncle, the most famous victim of the eruption, only died because he was asthmatic and because he bravely, or stupidly, decided that he needed to take a closer look at what was going on, in the interests of science. And if, as many archaeologists now think, there had been a series of tremors and small earthquakes in the days or months leading up to the final disaster, those too would have encouraged people to quit the area. For it was not only Pompeii itself that was threatened and eventually engulfed, but a wide swathe of land to the south of Vesuvius, including the towns of Herculaneum and Stabiae.

Many did leave, as the tally of bodies found in the city confirms. Around 1100 have been unearthed in the excavations. We need to make allowance for those that still lie in the unexcavated part of the town (about a quarter of ancient Pompeii is as yet unexplored), and for those human remains missed in earlier excavations (children's bones can easily be mistaken for those of animals, and discarded). Even so, it seems unlikely that more than 2000 of the inhabitants would have lost their lives in the disaster. Whatever the total population – and estimates vary from about 6400 to 30,000 (depending on how tightly packed we imagine these people to have lived, or on what modern comparisons we choose) – this was a small, or very small, proportion.

People fleeing in the rain of pumice may have taken with them only what they could grab and carry. Those with more time will have taken more of their possessions. We must imagine a mass exodus from the city with donkeys, carts and barrows, as the majority of the population left, loading up as many of their household effects as they reasonably could. Some made the wrong decision, locking away their most precious possessions, intending to return when the danger had passed. This is what accounts for some of the magnificent treasures – stunning collections of silver, for example (see p. 220), found in houses in and near Pompeii. But for the most part what has been left for archaeologists to discover is a city *after* its inhabitants had hurriedly packed up and left. This may help to explain why the houses of Pompeii seem so sparsely furnished, and so uncluttered. It may not be that the prevailing aesthetic of the first century CE was a kind of modernist minimalism. Much of the household bric-a-brac had very likely been carted off by its loving owners, by the wagonload.

This speedy decampment may also explain some of the oddities of what we

do find in the city's houses. If, for example, a pile of gardening tools comes to light in what appears to be a rich dining room, it may be that – surprising as it may seem to us – that was where they were regularly kept. It may also be that in the flurry of departure, as possessions were gathered together and choices were made about what to take and what not, this is where the shovel, hoe and barrow happened to end up. Even if some of the population carried on their daily business as if tomorrow would surely come, this was not a normal city, going about its normal business. It was a city in flight.

In the weeks and months after the eruption many survivors also came back for what they had left behind, or to salvage (or loot) reusable material, such as bronze, lead or marble, from the buried city. It may not have been quite so unwise as it now seems to have locked away your valuables in the hope of getting them back later. For in many parts of Pompeii there are clear signs of successful re-entry, through the volcanic debris. Whether the rightful proprietors, robbers or treasure hunters taking a chance, they tunnelled through into rich houses, sometimes leaving a little trail of holes in the walls, as they went from one blocked-up room to the next. A nice glimpse of their activities is found in two words scratched by the main door of one grand house, which was found to be almost empty when uncovered by nineteenth-century excavators. It reads: 'House tunnelled', words hardly likely to have been written by an owner, so presumably a message from one looter to the rest of his gang, to tell them that this one had been 'done'.

We know almost nothing about who these tunnellers were (but the fact that the message, though written in Latin, was in Greek characters is a pretty clear sign that they were bilingual, part of the Greco-Roman community of South Italy which we shall explore in Chapter 1). Nor do we know exactly when they made their raid: post-eruption Roman coins have been found in the ruins of Pompeii, dating from the end of the first century CE to the beginning of the fourth. But whenever, and for whatever reason, later Romans decided to dig down to the buried town, it was a phenomenally dangerous activity, driven by the hopes of recovering substantial quantities of the family wealth, or coming away with a prize haul of loot. The tunnels must have been perilous, dingy and narrow, and in places – if the size of the holes in some of the walls is anything to go by – only accessible by children. Even where it was possible to walk more freely, in pockets unfilled by the volcanic debris, the walls and ceilings would have been in danger of imminent collapse.

The irony is that some of the skeletons that have been found are almost certainly not the remains of the victims of the eruption, but of those risking a return

5. The engraving of one of a pair of sculptured panels, almost a metre long, depicting the earthquake of 62 CE. On the left, the Temple of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva in the Forum visibly totters. On the right, a sacrifice is in progress. A bull is being brought up to the altar, while around the scene are dotted various instruments of sacrifice – a knife, bowls and offering dishes.

to the city in the months, years or centuries that followed. So, for example, in a smart room off the garden courtyard of the House of the Menander – a modern name, taken from the painting of the Greek dramatist Menander found there (Ill. 44) – the remains of a little party of three have been discovered, two adults and child, equipped with a pick and a hoe. Were these, as some archaeologists believe, a group of residents, maybe slaves, trying to batter a way *out* of the house as it became engulfed, and losing their lives in the attempt? Or was it, as others imagine, a party of looters, battering their way *in*, killed perhaps as their fragile tunnel collapsed on top of them?

This picture of a disrupted city is made even more complicated by an earlier natural disaster. Seventeen years before the eruption of Vesuvius, in 62 CE the town had been badly damaged by an earthquake. According to the historian Tacitus, 'a large part of Pompeii collapsed'. And the event is almost certainly depicted in a pair of sculptured panels found in the house of a Pompeian banker, Lucius Caecilius Jucundus. These show two areas of the city rocked by the quake: the Forum, and the area around the northern gate of the city facing towards Vesuvius. In one the Temple of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva leans alarmingly to the left; the equestrian statues on either side of the temple seem almost to come alive, the riders unseated from their mounts (Ill. 5). In the other the Vesuvian Gate takes an ominous lurch to the right, parting company with the large water reservoir on its left. This disaster raises some of the trickiest questions in the history of Pompeii. What was its effect on life in the town? How long did it take the city to recover? In fact, did it ever recover? Or were the Pompeians in 79 CE still living in the wreckage – the Forum, temples and baths, not to mention many private houses, not yet restored?

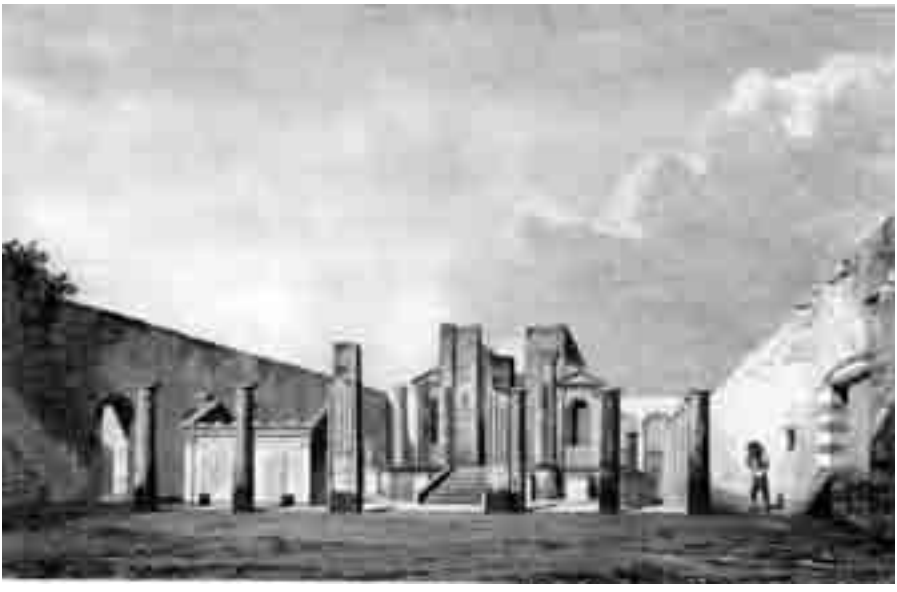
There have been theories aplenty. One idea is that a social revolution struck

Pompeii after the earthquake. Many of the traditional aristocracy decided to leave town once and for all, no doubt to family properties elsewhere. Their departure not only left the way open for the rise of ex-slaves and other nouveaux riches, but it also started the 'decline' of some of Pompeii's more elegant houses, hastily converted into fulleries, bakeries, inns and other commercial or industrial uses. In fact, that pile of gardening tools in the dining room could itself be a sign of just such a change of use: a once upmarket residence dragged dramatically downward by new occupants who had turned it into the base for a market gardening business.

Maybe so. And we may have here yet another reason to see the state of the city as anything but 'normal' when it was overwhelmed in 79. Yet we cannot be certain that all these changes were a direct result of the earthquake. Some of the industrial conversions probably happened before the disaster anyway. Some – if not many – were almost certainly part of the regular pattern of shifts in wealth, use and prestige that marks the history of any town, ancient or modern. Not to mention the hint of 'officer class' prejudices in many modern archaeologists who have so confidently equated social mobility and the rise of new money with revolution or decline.

Another big claim is that in 79 Pompeii had still not finished the long process of repair. So far as we can tell from the archaeological evidence, Tacitus' assertion that 'a large part of Pompeii collapsed' was something of an exaggeration. But the state of many of the public buildings (only one set of public baths, for example, were in fully working order in 79) and the fact that, as we shall see, so many private houses had the decorators in at the time of the eruption seems to suggest not only that the damage had been considerable, but that it had not yet been put right. For a Roman city to pass seventeen years with most of its public baths out of action, several of its main temples unusable and its private houses in disarray points either to a serious shortage of cash or to an alarming degree of institutional dysfunction, or both. What on earth was the town council doing for nearly two decades? Sitting back and watching the place crumble?

But here too everything is not as it may at first seem. Can we be certain that all the repairs going on when the eruption struck were in response to the earthquake? Leaving aside the obvious point that there is almost always a lot of building work under way in any town (the repair and construction industry is at the centre of urban life, ancient or modern), there is the 'one earthquake or more?' question which has fiercely divided archaeologists who study Pompeii. Some still stick firmly to the view that there was just one single devastating earthquake in



6. The Temple of Isis was one of the high-spots for early tourists and it inspired writers and musicians from the young Mozart to Edward Bulwer-Lytton, author of *The Last Days of Pompeii*. This engraving shows the main temple building in the centre and, on the left, the small, walled enclosure for a pool containing water used in the rituals of Isis.

62 and – yes – the city was in such a shambles that many repairs were still unfinished years later. More now emphasise the series of tremors that there must have been in the days, and perhaps months, leading up to the eruption. That is what you would expect before a major volcanic explosion, vulcanologists assure us, and it is, in any case, exactly what Pliny described: 'For many days previously,' he wrote, 'there had been earth tremors.' If there was a flurry of decorating going on, so this argument runs, then it was much more likely to be patching up the damage that had just occurred, not a belated and ill-timed attempt finally to clear up the mess of seventeen years.

As for the state of the town more generally, and especially the public buildings, here again the issue of later looting turns out to be a complicating factor. It is quite clear that in 79 some public buildings were in ruins. One huge temple overlooking the sea, and usually assumed to have been dedicated to the goddess Venus, was still a building site – though it seems as if the restoration was intended to be on an even grander scale than what it replaced. Others were very much back

in working order. It was business as usual in the Temple of Isis, for example, which had been reconstructed and richly redecorated with what are now some of the most famous paintings from the city (Ill. 6).

The condition of the Forum, however, at the time of the eruption is much more of a puzzle. One view is that it was a half-abandoned wreck, hardly restored at all. If so, it would be at the very least an indication that the priorities of the Pompeians had, to put it politely, shifted away from communal life. At worst, it would signal the complete breakdown of civic institutions, a state of affairs which (as we shall see) doesn't fit at all well with other evidence from the city. More recently an accusing finger has been pointed at post-eruption recovery parties or looters. Much of the Forum, this view holds, had been made good and indeed improved. But knowing of all the expensive marble facing that had recently been installed, the locals dug down to retrieve it soon after the city was buried, hacking it off the walls – which were left looking for all the world as if they were unfinished or simply dilapidated. The salvagers would also, of course, have been after the many expensive bronze statues which adorned this piazza.

These debates and disagreements continue to fuel archaeological conferences. They are the stuff of scholarly warfare and student essays. But however they are eventually resolved (if ever they are), one thing is absolutely clear: 'our' Pompeii is not a Roman city going about its everyday business, then simply 'frozen in time', as so many guidebooks and tourist brochures claim. It is a much more challenging and intriguing place. Disrupted and disturbed, evacuated and pillaged, it bears the marks (and the scars) of all kinds of different histories, which will be part of the story of this book, and which underlie what we might call the 'Pompeii paradox': that we simultaneously know a huge amount and very little about ancient life there.

It is true that the city offers us more vivid glimpses of real people and their real lives than almost anywhere else in the Roman world. We meet unlucky lovers ('Successus the weaver's in love with a barmaid called Iris and she doesn't give a toss' as one scrawled graffito runs) and shameless bed-wetters ('I've pissed in bed, I messed up, I haven't lied / But, dear landlord, there was no chamber pot supplied,' boasts the rhyme on a lodging house bedroom wall). We can follow the traces of Pompeii's children, from the toddler who must have had great fun sticking a couple of coins into the fresh plaster of the main hall, or atrium, of one smart house, leaving more than seventy impressions just above floor level (and so also inadvertently leaving a nice piece of dating evidence for the decoration) to the bored kids who scratched a series of stickmen at child height in the

7. There is something uncannily familiar between our own gynaecological *specula* and this ancient version from Pompeii. Though some parts of it are missing, it is clear that the 'arms' of the instrument were opened by turning the T-shaped handle.

entranceway to a suite of baths, doodling as they waited maybe for their mothers to finish steaming. Not to mention the horses' harnesses with their jangling bells, the gruesome medical instruments (Ill. 7), the curious kitchen equipment, from egg poachers to mousse moulds, if that's what they are (Ill. 78), or those irritating intestinal parasites whose traces can still be found on a lavatory rim after 2000 years – all of which help to recapture the sights, sounds and senses of Pompeian life.

Yet while details like this are wonderfully evocative, the bigger picture and many of the more basic questions about the town remain very murky indeed. The total number of inhabitants is not the only puzzle we face. The relationship of the town to the sea is another. Everyone agrees that the sea came much nearer to Pompeii in antiquity than it does today (when it is 2 kilometres away). But, despite the skills of modern geologists, exactly how much nearer is still uncertain. Particularly puzzling is that just next to the western gate of the city, the main modern visitor entrance, is a stretch of wall with what look like very obvious mooring rings for boats, as if the sea lapped almost right up to the city at that point (Ill. 8). The only trouble is that Roman structures have been discovered further west, that is towards the sea, and they could hardly have been built under water. The best way to explain this returns again to on-going seismic activity. Here – as at the

8. These look like obvious mooring rings for boats on the wall near the Marine Gate. Almost certainly the coastline changed over the last hundred years of the town's life, leaving these rings high and dry.

nearby town of Herculaneum, where the movement can be documented very clearly – the coastline and the sea-level must have changed dramatically over the last few hundred years of the town's history.

Even more surprisingly, there is debate too about the basic dates – not only the date of the big earthquake (which might just as well have taken place in 63 as 62), but also of the eruption itself. I shall be using the traditional dating of 24 and 25 August 79 throughout this book, which is what we now read in Pliny's account. But there is good reason to think that the disaster happened later in the year, during the autumn or winter. For a start, if you go back to the different medieval manuscripts of Pliny's *Letters*, you find that they give all kinds of different dates for the eruption (for Roman dates and numerals were always liable to be miscopied by medieval scribes). It is also the case that a suspiciously large quantity of autumnal fruits are in evidence in the remains and that many of the victims appear to be wearing heavy-duty, woollen clothes, hardly suitable garments for a hot Italian summer – although what people choose to put on as they make their escape through the debris of a volcanic eruption may not be a good indicator of the seasonal

9. Allied bombing in 1943 did terrible damage to Pompeii, destroying many major buildings. This shows the condition of the House of Trebius Valens after the raids. Many of the bombed buildings were so expertly rebuilt after the war that you would never guess that they had been, to all intents and purposes, destroyed again.

10. An excavation of the 1930s. Pompeian houses do not emerge from the ground in a pristine state. In fact, the force of the eruption means that they look rather as if they had been bombed. Here the painted plaster of the upper floor has collapsed into the rooms below.

weather. More clinching evidence comes in the shape of a Roman coin, found in Pompeii in a context where it could not have been dropped by looters. Specialists think that the earliest this coin could have been minted was September 79.

The fact is that we know both a lot more and a lot less about Pompeii than we think.

The two lives of Pompeii

There is an old archaeological joke that Pompeii has died twice: first, the sudden death caused by the eruption; second the slow death that the city has suffered since it began to be uncovered in the mid eighteenth century. Any visit to the site will show exactly what that second death means. Despite the heroic efforts of the Pompeian archaeological service, the city is disintegrating, weeds overgrow many of the areas that are off-limits to visitors, some of the once brilliantly coloured paintings left in place on the walls have faded to almost nothing. It is a gradual process of dilapidation, aggravated by earthquakes and mass tourism, and given an extra helping hand by the rough methods of the early excavators (though, to be honest, many of the fine wall paintings that they hacked out and deposited in the museum have fared better than those left in their original context); by Allied bombing campaigns in 1943 (Ill. 9) which wrecked several areas of the town (most visitors have no clue that considerable parts of the Large Theatre, for example, and of the Forum, as well as of some of the most celebrated houses, were almost entirely rebuilt after the war, or that the on-site restaurant was planted on one area of particularly devastating bomb damage); and by thieves and vandals, for whom the archaeological site, large and hard to police, is an enticing target (in 2003 a couple of newly excavated frescoes were prised off their wall, to be found three days later at a nearby builder's yard).

But equally the city has had two *lives*: one, in the ancient world itself; the other, the modern re-creation of ancient Pompeii that we now visit. This tourist site still tries to preserve the myth of an ancient town 'frozen in time', one into which we can walk as if it was only yesterday. It is, in fact, striking that, although Roman Pompeii lies many feet below modern ground level, the entrances to the site are laid out so that we get little sense that we are going *down* to it; the world of the ancients merges almost seamlessly with our own. Yet, look a little harder, and we find that it exists in that strange no-man's land between ruin and reconstruction, antiquity and the present day. For a start, much of it is heavily restored, and not just after the wartime bomb damage. It comes as quite a shock to look at

photographs of the buildings as they were excavated (Ill. 10), and to see in what a poor state most of them were found. Some, it is true, have been left just like that. But others have been smartened up, their walls patched and rebuilt, to hold new roofs – primarily to protect the structure and decoration, but often taken by visitors for miraculous survivals from the Roman period.

More than that, the city has been given a new geography. We now navigate Pompeii using a series of modern street names: amongst them, Via dell'Abbondanza (the main east–west thoroughfare leading directly to the Forum, named after the figure of the goddess Abundance carved on one of the street fountains), Via Stabiana (intersecting Abbondanza and leading south towards the town of Stabia), and Vicolo Storto (Twisty Lane, so-called for obvious reasons). We have almost no idea what these streets were called in the Roman world. One surviving inscription seems to suggest that what we call the Via Stabiana was then the Via Pompeiana, while referring also to two other streets (Via Jovia, that is Jupiter Street; Via Dequviaris, perhaps connected with the town council or *decuriones*) which cannot be pinpointed. But it may well be that many did not have specific names in the modern way. Certainly there were no street signs, and no system of using street name and house number to give an address. Instead people used local landmarks: one landlord, for example, had his jars of wine delivered (as we can still read round the top of one): 'To Euxinus [which translates roughly as 'Mr Hospitality'], the innkeeper, at Pompeii, near the Amphitheatre'.

We have likewise given modern names to the town gates, calling them after the place or direction they faced: the Nola Gate, the Herculaneum Gate, the Vesuvius Gate, the Marine Gate (towards the sea) and so on. In this case, we have a rather clearer idea of what the ancient names might have been. What we call Herculaneum Gate, for example, was to the Roman inhabitants the Porta Saliniensis or Porta Salis, that is 'Salt Gate' (after the nearby saltworks). Our Marine Gate may well have been called the Forum Gate, or so a few scraps of ancient evidence combined with some plausible modern deduction suggest; after all, it not only faced the sea, but it was also the closest gate to the Forum.

In the absence of ancient addresses, modern gazetteers to the city use a late nineteenth-century system for referring to individual buildings. The same archaeologist who perfected the technique of casting the corpses, Giuseppe Fiorelli (one-time revolutionary politician, and the most influential director of the Pompeian excavations ever), divided Pompeii into nine separate areas or *regiones*; he then numbered each block of houses within these areas, and went on to give every doorway onto the street its own individual number. So, in other words, according to this now

standard archaeological shorthand, 'VI.xv.1' would mean the first doorway of the fifteenth block of region six, which lies at the north-west of the city.

To most people, however, VI.xv.1 is better known as the House of the Vettii. For, in addition to that bare modern numeration, most of the larger houses at least, as well as the inns and bars, have gained more evocative titles. Some of these go back to the circumstances of their first excavation: the House of the Centenary, for example, was uncovered exactly 1800 years after the destruction of the city, in 1879; the House of the Silver Wedding, excavated in 1893, was named in honour of the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary of King Umberto of Italy, celebrated in that same year – the house, ironically, being now better known than the royal marriage. Other names reflect particularly memorable finds: the House of the Menander is one; the House of the Faun another, named after the famous bronze dancing satyr, or 'faun', found there (Ill. 12), (its earlier name, the House of Goethe, went back to the son of the famous Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who witnessed part of the excavation in 1830 very shortly before he died – but his sad story proved rather less memorable than the spritely sculpture). Very many, however, like the House of the Vettii, have been named after their Roman occupants, as part of that much bigger project of repopulating the ancient town, and of matching up the material remains to the real people who once owned them, used them or lived in them.

This is an exciting, if sometimes dodgy, procedure. There are cases where we can be sure that we have made the right match. The house of the banker Lucius Caecilius Jucundus, for example, is almost certainly identified by his banking archives, which had been stored in the attic. Aulus Umbricius Scaurus, the most successful local manufacturer of *garum* (that characteristically Roman concoction of decomposing marine life, euphemistically translated as 'fish sauce'), left his mark and his name on his own elegant property – with a series of mosaics, featuring jars of the stuff labelled with such slogans as 'Fish sauce, grade one, from Scaurus' manufactory' (Ill. 57). The House of the Vettii, with its exquisite frescoes, has been confidently assigned to a pair of (probably) ex-slaves, Aulus Vettius Conviva and Aulus Vettius Restitutus. This is on the basis of two seal stamps and a signet ring with those names found in the front hall, plus a couple of election posters, or at least their ancient equivalent, painted up on the outside of the house ('Restitutus is canvassing for … Sabinus to be aedile') – and on the assumption that another seal stamp found in another part of the house, this time naming Publius Crustius Faustus, belonged to some tenant living on the upper floor.

In many cases the evidence is far flimsier, relying on perhaps a single signet ring (which, after all, could just as easily have been dropped by a visitor as the owner), a name painted on a wine jar, or a couple of graffiti signed by the same person, as if graffiti artists always chose to write on their own home walls. One particularly desperate deduction has come up with the name of the man who owned the brothel in the town, and the high-spot for many modern as no doubt ancient visitors: it is Africanus. This is an argument based largely on a sad message scratched, by a client most likely, on the wall of one of the girls' booths. 'Africanus is dead' (or literally 'is dying'), it reads. 'Signed young Rusticus, his school mate, grieving for Africanus'. Africanus, to be sure, may have been a local resident: or so we might guess from the fact that on a wall close-by someone of that name pledged their support in the local elections to Sabinus (the same candidate who had won Restitutus' vote). But there is no reason at all to imagine that young Rusticus' expression of post-coital misery, if that is what it was, was making any reference at all to the owner of the brothel.

The end result of this and other such over-optimistic attempts to track down the ancient Pompeians and put them back into their houses, bars and brothels is obvious: in the modern imagination, an awful lot of Pompeians have ended up in the wrong place. Or, to put it more generally, there is a large gap between 'our' ancient city and the city destroyed in 79 CE. In this book, I shall consistently be using the landmarks, finding aids and terminology of 'our' Pompeii. It would be confusing and irritating to give the Herculaneum Gate its ancient name of 'Porta Salis'. The numeration invented by Fiorelli allows us quickly to pinpoint a location on a plan, and I shall be using it in the reference sections. And, incorrect as some of them may be, the famous names – House of the Vettii, House of the Faun, and so on – are much the easiest way of bringing a particular house or location to mind. Yet, I shall also be exploring that gap in more detail, thinking about how the ancient city has been turned into 'our' Pompeii, and reflecting on the processes by which we make sense of the remains that have been uncovered.

In stressing those processes, I am being both up to the minute and, in a sense, returning to a more nineteenth-century experience of Pompeii. Of course, nineteenth-century visitors to the city, like their twenty-first-century counterparts, enjoyed the illusion of stepping back in time. But they were also intrigued by the ways in which the past was revealed to them: the 'how' as well as the 'what' we know of Roman Pompeii. We can see this in the conventions of their favourite guidebooks to the site, above all Murray's *Handbook for Travellers in Southern Italy*, first published in 1853 to cater for the beginning of mass tourism (rather

than Grand Tourists) to the site. The railway line had opened in 1839 and became the favoured method of transport for visitors, and they were serviced by a tavern near the station where they could take lunch after their exertions among the ruins. This was a place of fluctuating fortunes (in 1853 it supposedly had 'a very civil and obliging landlord', by 1865 readers were recommended not to tuck in without coming to 'an agreement as to the charge beforehand with mine host'). But it was the germ of the vast industry of snacks, fruit and, especially, bottled water that now dominates the outskirts of the site.

Murray's *Handbook* repeatedly engaged these Victorian visitors with the problems of interpretation, sharing the various competing theories about what some of the major public buildings that had been discovered were for. Was the building we call the *macellum* (market), in the Forum, really a market? Or was it a temple? Or was it a combination of a shrine and a café? (As we shall see, many such questions of function have not yet been resolved, but modern guidebooks tend to deprive their readers of – they would say spare them – the problems and controversies.) They are even careful to note, along with the description of each ancient building, the date and circumstances of its rediscovery. It is as if those early visitors were supposed to keep two chronologies running in their heads at the same time: on the one hand, the chronology of the ancient city itself and its development; on the other, the history of Pompeii's gradual re-emergence into the modern world.

We might even imagine that the famous stunts in which dead bodies or other notable finds were conveniently 'discovered', just as visiting dignitaries happened to be passing, were another aspect of the same preoccupations. We tend now to laugh at the crudeness of these charades and the gullibility of the audience (could visiting royalty have been so naive as to imagine that such wondrous discoveries just happened to be made at the very moment of their own arrival?). But, as often, the tricks of the tourist trade reveal the hopes and aspirations of the visitors as much as they expose the guile of the locals. Here the visitors wanted to witness not just the finds themselves, but the processes of excavation that brought the past to light.

These are some of the issues that I wish to bring back into the frame.

A city of surprises

Pompeii is full of surprises. It makes even the most hard-nosed and well-informed specialists rethink their assumptions about life in Roman Italy. A large pottery jar

11. This Indian ivory statuette offers a glimpse of the wide multicultural links of Pompeii. Depicted nearly naked apart from her lavish jewels, is she (as is usually thought) Lakshmi, the goddess of fertility and beauty. Or is she just a dancer?

with a painted label advertising its contents as 'Kosher *Garum*' reminds us that men like Umbricius Scaurus might be looking to serve the niche market of the local Jewish community (with a guarantee of no shellfish among the now unrecognisable ingredients of that rotten concoction). A wonderful Indian ivory statuette, found in 1938 in a house now called after it 'The House of the Indian Statuette', encourages us to think again about Rome's connections with the Far East (Ill. 11). Did it come via a Pompeian trader, a souvenir of his travels? Or maybe via the trading community of Nabataeans (from modern Jordan) who lived at nearby Puteoli? Almost equally unexpected was the recent discovery of a monkey's skeleton scattered, unrecognised by earlier excavators, among the bones in the storerooms on the site. An exotic pet perhaps – or, more likely, a performing animal, in street-theatre or circus, trained to amuse.

It is a city of the unexpected, simultaneously very familiar to us and very strange indeed. A town in provincial Italy, with horizons no further than

Vesuvius, it was at the same time part of an empire that stretched from Spain to Syria, with all the cultural and religious diversity that empires so often bring. The famous words 'Sodom' and 'Gomora' written in large letters on the walls of the dining room of a relatively modest house on the Via dell'Abbondanza (assuming that they are not the gloomy observation of some later looter) give us more than an eyewitness comment – or joke – on the morality of Pompeian social life. They remind us that this was a place in which the words of the Book of Genesis ('Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven') as well as the works of Virgil must have rung a bell with at least some inhabitants.

A small-town community with – once we leave the women, children and slaves out of the equation – a citizen body of just a few thousand men, no bigger than a village or the student union of a small university, it nonetheless has a more forceful impact on the mainline narrative of Roman history than we tend to imagine. As we shall see in Chapter 1.