

Discover History talk on Pompeii

Just under 50 joined us for this month's entertaining talk from Paul Harding of Discover History. This month he was going to tell us about the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79 and the effects on the local area including Pompeii. How was he going to get a link to Worcester into this I wondered!

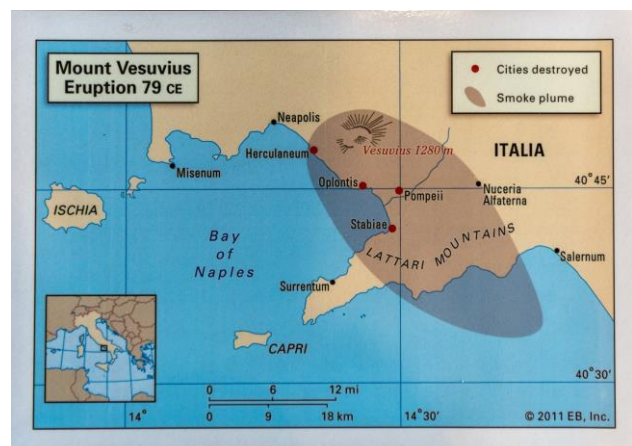
The archaeologists know a lot about Pompeii and Herculaneum as there were many descriptions of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79, including that from Pliny the Younger, wrote several letters about his observations on the build up to the eruption, the event, and its aftermath. Current thinking is that his descriptions were fairly accurate based on current known knowledge of volcano theory. This is backed up by the archaeological findings and discovery. Mount Vesuvius is still an active volcano, and the last eruption was in 1944.



Pliny the Younger was in Misenum and wrote his letters with pen and ink on paper, like image here, the ink was made of charcoal and oil and the paper used was the finest papyrus. As it was his letters to people there are no dates and although we know it was in AD 79, we do not know when during the year.

In the weeks before the eruptions strange happenings were taking place, such as the air in the Bay of Naples had a funny sulphurous smell. There were a series tremors, which the locals were not bothered about as it was the Gods letting them know they were around. There were regular earthquakes. It was said that animals started to act funny, which we now know does happen. The sea was sucked out of the Bay and then came back.

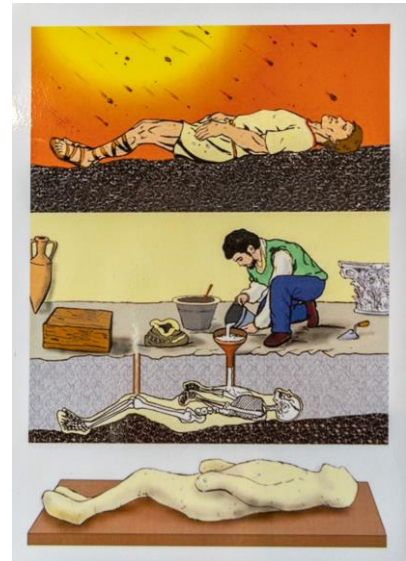
Steam or cloud, the shape of a pine tree came out of the top followed by tremors and ash coming out of the volcano. Pliny's description of the eruption allowed historians to accurately work out how far it covered as can be seen in this map. The ash was laying on the roads and buildings, the ash was followed by a layer of pumice, ranging from grit sized to large rocks. Some of the poorer homes the roofs could not cope with the weight and collapsed. The poor started to move towards the sea, a vast number of bodies were found at the water side. Pliny could see that people were wearing pillows on their heads to protect themselves from the ash and rocks.



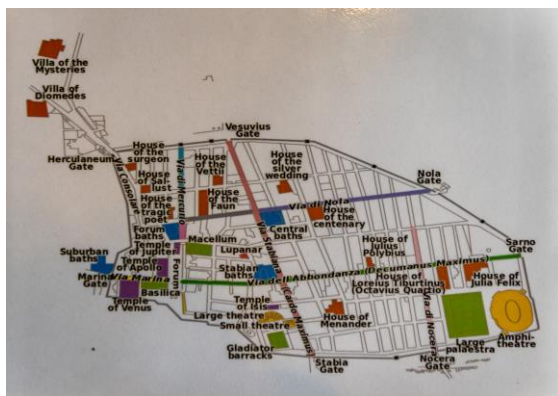
Pompeii was an important port at the time and a Roman fleet was in the Bay. About 15,000 to 20,000 people lived and died in Pompeii. After the eruption the Romans tried to rescue people but found there was 8 to 10 meters of ash and lava covering the town, so they gave up.

This was followed by the pyroclastic flow, which killed most people in seconds due to the incredible heat. A skull has been found with a carbonised brain inside it where the person was instantaneously killed by the flow

An engineer in the 16th century was putting in water pipes when he found the homes intact under the larva. By the 18th century people were getting interested in the history and Pompeii was added to the Grand Tour that the rich undertook. An Italian antiquarian, in the late 19th century, who was developing the science of archaeology, systematically dug down, using 500 people, to look for the signs of the city, which he realised was the city of Pompeii that was destroyed by Mount Vesuvius. He found voids in the buildings, and he poured plaster in to see what was there and he found the people and animals that had died and decayed over the years leaving a void in the shape of the person or animal.



Now some of the buildings have been uncovered and they are being destroyed at a rapid rate by people taking pieces, weathering, and graffiti. In the future they may find better ways of preserving the archaeological remains.



When the people fled, they took with them their money and jewellery but in archaeological terms the greater interest is what was left in the houses as this gives the historian a fantastic glimpse into everyday Roman life. On the map of the discovered areas of Pompeii there are several properties that are named after what was found in the house, such as the House of the Surgeon, where they discovered lots of surgical tools.

Willis Bund was a long-term member of the Worcester Archaeological Society, and he went to Pompeii and brought back a few items, which are in the City Museum. So, there is a tenuous link to Worcester to end on.