

Pompeii

TYRRHENIAN SEA

Marine port

Marine Gate

Sarno baths

Temple of Apollo

Temple of Jupiter

Herculaneum Gate

House of the Tragic Poet

House of the Faun

House of the Vettii

Vesuvian Gate

Villa Regina

Central baths

Building of Eumachia

Stabian baths

Forum

Temple of Isis

Theater

Fullonica of Stephanus

Garum shop of Umbricia Fortunata

House of Julia Felix

Nola Gate

Sarno Gate

Amphitheater

Large palaestra

Nuceria Gate

Stabiae Gate

Commercial port

RIVER SARNO

MOUNT VESUVIUS

AQUA AUGUSTA

In the autumn of AD 79 the volcano Vesuvius erupted, destroying the nearby town of Pompeii. The town was buried in layers of ash and pumice. Archaeologists have gradually excavated about two-thirds of the site. The remarkably well-preserved remains we can see today give us a unique glimpse into the lives of ancient Romans.

Pompeii was about 125 miles southeast of Rome, in the region of Campania. It was located on a low hill of volcanic rock at the estuary of the River Sarno. In ancient times the city was close to the sea, but the coast has since moved further out. The precise site of Pompeii's port is still unknown, but it was likely to have been at the mouth of the River Sarno. There may have been a smaller harbor near the Marine Gate.

The major cities of Campania were Neapolis (modern Naples), Capua, and Puteoli (modern Pozzuoli). Puteoli was the hub for Rome's trade with the East. In comparison, Pompeii was small and unimportant; nevertheless, it was a thriving commercial center. It had a population of roughly 12,000–15,000 with an additional 12,000 or so in the surrounding countryside.

The town can be traced back to at least the sixth century BC, when the city walls were built. It became a Roman colonia in about 80 BC, when veterans were settled there, and the people of Pompeii were given Roman citizenship.

Our story is set just a few years after a severe earthquake in AD 62 or 63 damaged many of the buildings in Pompeii. The historian Tacitus recorded:

Because of an earthquake, a large part of the busy town of Pompeii in Campania collapsed.

The region was subject to frequent earthquakes, and the inhabitants must have been used to minor earth tremors.

Nevertheless, the severity of the AD 62 earthquake meant that at the time of our stories much of Pompeii was a building site, with houses and other buildings being repaired and rebuilt. It was also a time of opportunity for anyone willing to take the risk of investing in the town.

This plan shows Pompeii as it was in AD 79 at the time of its destruction by the eruption of Vesuvius. Many of the streets and buildings would have been unchanged in the interval. Pompeii, like many Roman towns, was laid out on a grid system, dividing it into blocks. The names of the gates and houses are modern. In Roman times most of the streets probably did not have names.