

Life Among the Ruins of Pompeii

Tall tales of Pompeii's lost Roman lives form part of a long history of sensationalism.

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Detail from 'The Death of Pliny the Elder', 79 AD, coloured engraving, c. 1880 © Getty Images.

Early in 2020 a team of Italian scientists caused an international sensation by identifying a skull dug out of the volcanic debris of Vesuvius as that of Pliny the Elder. DNA analysis showed that the skull was of a man in his fifties of Italian origin. Originally excavated nearly a century ago, the skeleton was richly adorned with gold necklaces and bracelets. The location of the remains, near the ancient shoreline of Stabiae, fits the record of the naturalist and statesman's death. At the time of the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, Pliny was approximately 56 years old and living in Misenum as the commander of the Roman fleet. According to the letters his nephew, Pliny the Younger, wrote to the historian Tacitus some decades later, Pliny had taken a boat to Stabiae to help some friends trapped by falling ash and to observe the volcanic activity from a closer vantage point. Trapped by the receding waters of the Bay of Naples and, by most accounts, asthmatic and rather overweight, Pliny died of asphyxiation before escape was possible. The skull, then, could belong to Pliny – but it could equally belong to any other man of his age who failed to escape the eruption. For the purposes of the researchers who undertook the study of the remains and, more to the point, for the interest of the wider public, finding the remains of Pliny the Elder is a lot more exciting than finding a random man. It makes a better story.



A conversation between women. Fresco from Pompeii, first century AD © Luisa Ricciarini/Bridgeman Images.

The Roman ruins of Vesuvius – Pompeii, Herculaneum and the villas associated with Stabiae, near to the city of Naples – are places that evoke strong reactions precisely for the manner in which they were destroyed and thus preserved. There is a reason that Pompeii hosts nearly three million visitors a year and has attracted attention

from scholars and tourists alike since its rediscovery more than two centuries ago. It is hardly surprising, then, that the city and the finds associated with it, whether human, animal or material, have been the subject of stories. At best, these stories are exaggerated or ascribe an idea or theory to an artefact that cannot be proven. At worst, they are completely fabricated. In a sense this is a means to attract attention beyond the narrow scope of academic research by garnering the kind of interest that leads to media coverage, impressing funding bodies and enticing more tourists to come to Pompeii. Consider the tantalising story of the man killed in the eruption by a large stone block that circulated a few years ago: images flooded the internet of the skeleton crushed beneath the stone, sparking a whole host of jokes. Once archaeologists finished their study of the bones, this method of death was found to be a complete fallacy. The stories, however, survived.

Sensational

Sensationalising ancient remains found in the region of Vesuvius – whether Pliny the Elder’s apparent skull, the ‘sorcerer’s treasure trove’, death by projectile block, the so-called master and slave, or, most recently, the soldier who is presumed to be a member of Pliny’s rescue party – is not a creation of modern media but a far older practice and one often employed by those working directly on the site. Half-truths and exaggerations have been circulating since excavations first began in the 18th century. As tourism to Pompeii changed from the Grand Tour of elite European gentlemen to drawing in the wider public, storytelling about the city also evolved, ranging from the sensational to the experiential to the fantastical, as both travelogues and Pompeii-based fiction rose in popularity. In many ways, the three intertwined and became interdependent, creating narratives that were at once based in both fact and fiction.



Ruins of Pompeii, by Alfred de Curzon, 1866 © Bridgeman Images.

Consider, for example, the story of the noble soldier maintaining his post at the Herculaneum Gate throughout the eruption of Vesuvius. This story originated with the supposed discovery of a skeleton with armaments in a small structure with benches next to the city gate, first excavated in 1763. It is mentioned by William Gell in his *Pompeiana* (1817-19), the first comprehensive English language publication on the excavated ruins of the city. Gell described a human skeleton ‘of which the hand still grasped a lance’ found in an arched recess with seats. Repeated to any visitors to the Street of the Tombs by local guides, the ‘soldier’ drew greater attention in 1834 when he was featured in Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s novel *The Last Days of Pompeii*. As the protagonists of the book flee the city, they pass the man who was ‘motionless at his post ... stood amidst the crashing elements’. The image evoked by Bulwer-Lytton was immortalised in the painting *Faithful Unto Death* by Edward John Poynter (1865), while Mark Twain wrote about it in his travelogue *The Innocents Abroad* (1869): ‘We never read of Pompeii but we think of that soldier; we can not write of Pompeii without the natural impulse to grant him the mention he so well deserves.’ But the fact is that there was no sentry box at the Herculaneum Gate, rather a tomb that contained benches built into the curtain of the city wall by a freedman named Marcus Cerrinius Restitutus in the mid first century AD. More to the point, the daily excavation records show that no skeleton was found anywhere near it. One possible explanation is that a skeleton with some armaments was excavated elsewhere in the city around the same time as the tomb and that the different sets of finds were merged to create a single story.

Cultural resurrections

The conflation of archaeology and a particular narrative is quite a common feature among the ruins of Pompeii. Tour guides still tell visitors that the many phalluses found in the street point the way to the brothel (no), or that the paintings in the brothel served as a kind of menu (also no). The plaster casts of human remains have inspired many stories told both by guides and by writers of historical fiction. Indeed, Bulwer-Lytton is said to have been inspired by the imprint of a female breast found in the hardened ash of the Villa of Diomedes, leading him to develop the character Julia, who was something of an ancient femme fatale in his novel. In the book, her final appearance is in the cellar of the house where she plans to wait out the eruption, leading the reader to conclude that it is the impression of her breast found when the villa is excavated in 1771. The character of Julia is not a real person, but her father, Marcus Arrius Diomedes, did live in Pompeii – his tomb is close to the villa that bears his name. A figure like Diomedes is central to many of the works of fiction created in and about Pompeii: he lends authority to the narrative by having existed, but so little is known about him that he can be moulded into anything the author desires. It is no surprise that this father and daughter have appeared in other novels as well.



An Exedra, by Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 1871 © Christie's/Bridgeman Images.

Names taken from inscriptions and graffiti are also used in paintings. Laurence Alma-Tadema's *An Exedra* (1869) is an imagined scene of wealthy Pompeians engaged in conversation on the bench tomb of a priestess named Mammia, while their young slave sits on a curb and waits for them. He wears a tunic, identifying him as the property of the Holconii family, who were prominent figures in Pompeii in the Augustan period. The use of real names lends an air of credence and authenticity to what is an otherwise imagined representation of antiquity. Alma-Tadema was also known for copying actual artefacts found in Pompeii and Herculaneum. He used the collections of what is now the Naples Archaeological Museum to flesh out his paintings of Roman subjects – not just Pompeian – with real items forming the backdrop. Painting, then, became another means for developing the narrative of the ancient city. Alfred de Curzon's *Dream Amid the Ruins of Pompeii* (1866) depicts a number of melancholy figures in the ruins of a Pompeian house as Vesuvius begins to erupt in the background. The juxtaposition of the ruins with the current inhabitants of the city witnessing the eruption is an entirely imagined scene, reminiscent of the Romanticism that took hold in the later part of the 19th century when style of writing and painting changed to record what one felt, rather than what one saw. On some level, this approach helps to rectify the double significance of Pompeii as both a society wiped out in a horrific fashion and the resurrection of that society through the excavation and study of the remains. It is this paradox that Charles Dickens referred to as 'the strange and melancholy sensation of seeing the Destroyed and the Destroyer making this quiet picture in the sun'.

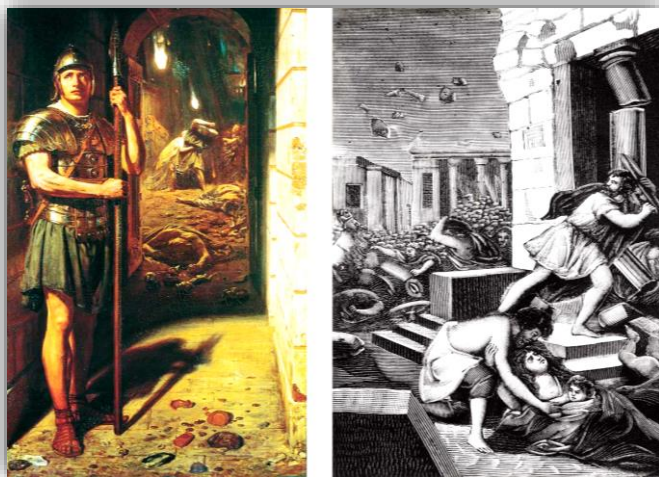
A silent city

What Bulwer-Lytton, Alma-Tadema and others did was create a coherent narrative out of the crumbling ruins of Pompeii, giving tourists, scholars, artists and guides a framework within which to make sense of the site. This is perhaps best illustrated by the gothic novelist Mary Shelley. She published the accounts of her travels to Pompeii in two volumes in 1844, as *Rambles in Germany and Italy in 1840, 1842 and 1843*. She first visited Pompeii in 1818, finding the site largely unimpressive and depressing. But in 1843, when she returned to the city after reading *The Last Days of Pompeii*, she wrote:

We have visited Pompeii. A greater extent of the city has been dug out and laid open since I was there before, so that it has now much more the appearance of a town of the dead. You may ramble about and lose yourself in the many streets. Bulwer, too, has peopled its silence. I have been reading his book, and I have felt on visiting the place much more as if really it had been once full of stirring life, now that he has attributed names and possessors to its houses, passengers to its streets. Such is the power of the imagination. It can not only give 'a local habitation and a name' to the airy creations of the fancy and the abstract ideas of the mind, but it can put a soul into stones, and hang the vivid interest of our passions and our hopes upon objects otherwise vacant of name or sympathy.

In other words, Shelley's experience of visiting Pompeii was transformed by a story. Her idea that Bulwer-Lytton 'peopled its silence' is important: she is evidence that we connect more with people who have some sort of form, an ordered place in the world, that can be identified in some manner, than we do with an ambiguous set of remains – whether architectural or human.

This method of using narrative to people the silence of the ancient city is not solely employed by writers of fiction or travelogues, but is also regularly adopted by historians and other scholars. The Italian epigrapher Matteo Della Corte, responsible for documenting inscriptions in the middle of the 20th century, is known for his propensity to create narratives and assign residences for people through a very loose interpretation of the texts he found. Biographies, characteristics and behaviour are ascribed to those for whom plaster casts or skeletons remain. The classicist Mary Beard does this in her book on Pompeii, as do Ray Laurence and Alex Butterworth. A slightly different approach to storytelling is taken by Jeremy Hartnett, whose book, *The Roman Street*, uses short vignettes of imagined activity and interaction of characters in order to illustrate the evidence of how daily life played out in the ancient street.



Left: Faithful Unto Death, by Edward John Poynter, 1865 © National Museums Liverpool/Bridgeman Images. Right: 'The Destruction of Pompeii'. Illustration for *The Last Days of Pompeii* by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, engraving, 19th century © Bridgeman Images.

The desire to create a narrative around the remains of Pompeii is probably far more about the human desire for a connection than it is about the truth that can be gleaned from actual evidence. Pompeii, and by extension the other Vesuvian sites, is capable of activating two of the strongest human concerns: the existential anxiety about the fate of humankind and the cultural concern for our collective past. We know who Pliny the Elder was. We can imagine his curiosity to see the volcanic eruption and desire to help a friend, regardless of the danger to himself. A skull belonging to an unnamed man does not evoke the same reaction. The story becomes necessary, even if untrue. The story makes the past real. As the 19th century diplomat and historian François-René de Chateaubriand said: 'Rome is only a vast museum, but Pompeii is antiquity come to life.'

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