

The background of the entire page is a photograph of Mount Vesuvius, a large volcano with a prominent crater, rising from the sea. The sky is a pale blue. In the foreground, the dark, choppy water of the sea is visible, with a small boat containing two people in the lower right. Dark, rocky shorelines are visible at the very bottom of the frame.

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1892 years ago, within the space of a very few catastrophic hours, Pompeii and Herculaneum were overwhelmed by Mount Vesuvius and buried deep down in the earth. But they were not destroyed. Beneath the massive covering which overlaid them, they were preserved, as they would never have been had the disaster not occurred. The peculiar conditions established by ash and mud were such that even the smallest and most fragile objects of daily use have survived. And so that August day, when that whole busy world came to a stop, can be reconstructed in tens of thousands of details, far more completely than any other day that ever happened throughout the whole course of the ancient world. And the many years of existence and development that had gone before the eruption can be reconstructed too. No mirror of the past could possibly be more vivid than the reflection offered us by Pompeii and Herculaneum ; a visit to the two places is an experience that can be paralleled nowhere in the world. In that strange vacuum, its emptiness underlined by innumerable signs of long-arrested activity, life and death seem to be on particularly intimate terms. The smiling countryside all round makes the universal marks of ferocious destruction peculiarly horrifying. Even the least philosophical of tourists visiting these sites cannot quite escape unfashionable reflections about good and evil, and how they often come together. But he will also not be able to help enjoying himself. For it is another paradox that this apocalyptic scene gives a remarkable amount of pleasure, as it has done for two centuries and more ; I shall mention some of the visitors' reactions in the course of this book. Part of the pleasure derives from a certain feeling of intimacy and recognition: from the realization that these two places, even if grand in certain ways, were very ordinary in others. It is also reassuring, somehow, to see how small they were. We follow the old convention and call them 'cities', and so I have called this book 'Cities of Vesuvius', but the population of both together did not exceed 25,000.



Much of their charm, then, lies in this golden mediocrity. However, a good deal also lies in a less cosy reflection, for we are very rapidly forced to conclude that these modest dimensions left room for an infinitely larger number of beautiful things than would be found in almost any town of similar size today. The presence of so many fine paintings, mosaics and sculptures makes one wonder where these tastes came from ; and to speculate how far, in this respect, Pompeii and Herculaneum resembled, or differed from, the wider Graeco-Roman world around them. This is an aspect on which some of the books about these towns tend to leave their readers relatively unsatisfied, and I have therefore dwelt on it a little more than usual; though not too much, I hope, because the two sites themselves and the objects that have come from them provide material, even without any such attempts at comparison, which is worth many lifetimes of study. And indeed those who have written on Pompeii and Herculaneum ever since the exciting days of their first rediscovery, and particularly the men who have devoted years to their investigation on the spot, must come first and foremost in the list of the acknowledgements I have to make. A selection of the more recent works is gratefully included in a list at the end of this book. I also want to express my thanks to Mr Werner Forman for his indispensable collaboration as photographer, to Mr D.E.L. Haynes and Mr Hugh Honour for the benefit of their valuable advice, to Miss Kathy Henderson, Mrs Sandra Bance and Mr Oliver Walston of Messrs Weidenfeld and Nicolson for their editorial organization and aid, and to my wife for her help at every stage of the book.



In western Italy, upon the Tyrrhenian Sea, lies the uniquely inviting land of Campania. This coast, starting a hundred and forty-five kilometres south-east of Rome and extending downwards beyond the bay of Naples, gave ancient Rome its first good sea-front, its first window upon the Mediterranean, its first idea of becoming a world state. And behind the coast, stretching back to the Apennine range, is a plain which is incredibly favoured by nature. Traversed by two fairly important rivers and fanned by moist south-westerly winds, this territory of spongy volcanic earth, rich in phosphorus and potash, enjoys relatively mild and short winters, and the soil retains enough of the abundant seasonal rainfall to escape ill-effects from three months of summer drought. 1 Campania is alien to the desiccated Italian south - and alien to the modest conceptions of visitors from northern lands. In ancient times, when this was the chief granary of the peninsula, some districts already produced as many as three grain crops every year, in addition, often enough, to a catchcrop of vegetables as well. There were none of the oranges and lemons that can be seen now,² but olives and vines grew plentifully, and indeed many of Italy's principal olive groves were in Campania. Walking out of Pompeii today one can see fields bearing vines, fruit-trees and beans at one and the same time. And so it was in antiquity. An extraordinary variety of crops gave constant cover to the fields throughout the year, and yields were perhaps as much as six times higher than the average for the Italian peninsula. And above the plain, for example in the Montes Lactarii (Lattari) at the southern end of the bay, the mountains pastured many thousands of sheep.



Long before the Romans came, this inviting land had attracted immigrants and invaders. Already in the eighth century bc the Greeks chose Cumae, on the coast just north-west of the bay, for their earliest settlement upon the mainland of Italy. During the two centuries that followed, Cumae exercised widespread control throughout the area, finally becoming one of the main suppliers of grain to other parts of the peninsula. Naples itself, Neapolis, had been settled by Greeks before 650, to judge from reported finds. And then before the end of the sixth century another Greek city was founded next door; this was Dicaearchia, later Puteoli and now Pozzuoli, which in all fields except culture, and particularly in all matters relating to imports and exports, remained more important than Neapolis for hundreds of years. Puteoli lay 11 kilometres to the west of Neapolis, and the much smaller town of Pompeii was 22 kilometres south-east of Neapolis, almost adjoining the same coast. No doubt even before the Greeks there had been a native Italian (Oscan) fishing and agricultural village or small town on this site, though if so we do not know for how long.



But in due course a great peninsular power sprang up, and overwhelmed all local interests. Its centre was in Etruria, north-west of Rome, where the Etruscans, organized in loosely federated city-states, profited by what they had learnt from Greek and oriental cultures to build up formidable military and industrial vigour. When this strength was at its height, their armies broke through southwards into Campania, where they founded (or refounded on the site of an earlier Italian township) the leading city of the entire fertile lowlands. This was Capua (S. Maria Capua Vetere), which lay 27 kilometres north of Neapolis and was the place that gave Campania its name. 6 Recent excavations on the site of Capua suggest that Etruscan penetration had begun by c. 650. Then, later on - apparently towards the end of the following century - they extended their domination over the greater part of the Campanian plain. This brought them into contact with the Greeks; and Cumae became the Etruscans' chief outlet to Greek commerce. In 524 bc and again in 474, they attacked the city, but were rebuffed. Nevertheless it seems probable that, during some period between those dates, the Etruscans controlled Pompeii. Or at all events they had trading contacts there, for fragments of Etruscan inscriptions have been noted on black vases found beneath the Temple of Apollo. It is also likely that they came to Herculaneum invading from Clusium and other inland Etruscan cities.



These were tough hill-men - peasants and herdsmen - who came from fortified strong-points on the grey, landlocked, limestone plateau high up in the centre of the peninsula behind the plain. The language they spoke, a cousin of Latin, was called Oscan after earlier immigrants they supplanted in Samnium and Campania - the people who had lived at Pompeii and Capua before the Greeks and Etruscans arrived, and who had given Pompeii its name.⁷ It was inevitable that the Samnites in their turn, as they began to exploit the strength of their own manpower and seek room for expansion, should covet these lowlands which were so much more fertile than their own fastnesses. Freed from the Etruscans - though their influence lingered on here and there - 'Oscan' Campania had formed itself into a separate federation of towns under the leadership of Capua, probably in 445 bc. But the Samnites descended upon Capua and took it by surprise in 423. Next, their covetous gaze turned to the Greek settlements along the coast. It was a good moment to attack them, since the mainland of Greece itself was too deeply immersed in the Peloponnesian War, between Athens on the one side and Sparta and Corinth on the other, to send any help. Consequently, the Greek colony of Cumae fell to the Samnites in 421-420, and its ancient important role was ended for ever. Very soon afterwards nearly all the other towns along the coast must have fallen into Samnite hands, Pompeii and Herculaneum among them; even Neapolis became a bicultural Greek and Samnite city. Soon, three Samnite Leagues were in existence - one in Samnium proper, one in Campania, and one in Lucania to the south-east. The Samnites largely imposed their own brand of the Oscan tongue upon these regions, but when, in the fourth century bc, they started to write it down, they employed for the purpose an adaptation of the Greek alphabet of Cumae. In addition, as they settled along the coast, they absorbed much of the Greek flair for business, which hitherto, in their former Samnite home country, had remained beyond their grasp.



The summit of Vesuvius is less than ten kilometres from Pompeii and less than seven from Herculaneum. The mountain belongs to a great chain of volcanoes—active, dormant or apparently extinct - stretching all the way from southern Tuscany down to Sicily and the adjoining Liparaean islands (Lipari), which were otherwise known, in ancient times, as Aeolian or Vulcanian. Mount Roccamonfina, north-west of Capua, has been silent for a very long time. The volcanoes still active today, or in recent years, are Vesuvius, Etna (Aetna) in Sicily, and Stromboli (Strongyle) in the Liparaean group. Vulcano (Thermessa Vulcani), another Liparaean island, was in eruption as short a time ago as 1890, and seven years earlier Mount Epomeo on Ischia erupted and destroyed a neighbouring town.



That island, known to the ancients as Pithecussae and Aenaria, lies off the north-western extremity of the Bay of Naples. Opposite to it on the mainland, behind Pozzuoli (Puteoli), extends the volcanic region known as the Phlegraean Fields (Campi Flegrei). It contains thirteen low craters, some filled with water, and there is an abundance of hot, bubbling springs and scalding blasts of steam. The eruptive activity of this very fertile region is apparently defunct - it is technically known as a 'volcanic wreck' - but on the very day on which these words are being written the newspapers have reported considerable anxiety because the gradual process of 'bradyseism', slow-motion volcanic earthquake, has recently and ominously raised the level of the Phlegraean mainland : the ground on which Pozzuoli itself is built has risen more than three-quarters of a metre during the last six months. Simultaneously the coast-line of Ischia has sunk; and a series of minor earth tremors have been felt.



When Spartacus led his rebellion of gladiators, he had established himself and his men in this crater, from which they later escaped by descending through unguarded cracks in its rim. They got down on twisted ropes of vine-branches, for Vesuvius (or Vesevus as people sometimes called it) no longer, as in earlier days, consisted of a dense forest famous for wild boars, but was covered all over with smiling vineyards. Virgil mentions these vines upon the slopes, as well as olives and good plough-land and grazing. 2 A painting which has survived from the House of the Centenary at Pompeii presumably indicates the approximate appearance of the mountain in the mid-first century ad, with vines growing up to a high level. This and two other paintings, now destroyed but copied before their destruction,³ seem to show clearly enough that there was only one peak at the time (Monte Somma), not the two which exist today.



The heaving of the ground and reeling and crashing of statues, arches, columns and facades is shown naively but graphically on two reliefs which the Pompeian banker Lucius Caecilius Jucundus put up on the private shrine (lararium) of his house, perhaps in order to commemorate his own escape. The philosopher Seneca, who in his youth had written a study of earthquakes, gives a brief but interesting description of the upheaval of ad 62, mentioning that a whole flock of six hundred sheep was killed by the fumes. 5 Temples were destroyed, a large reservoir gave way, country mansions had to be abandoned, and a number of people went mad. But the towns were so prosperous and resilient that reconstruction rapidly went ahead.

However, the earthquake was ominous for the future, because it represented an abortive attempt by Vesuvius to blast out an open vent. Seventeen years later, on 24 August ad 79, the barrier was penetrated, and the mountain burst into eruption

