

Missing persons

volcano = the fire of
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summer residence = the country house

The ancients had no word for volcano. They had no conception of the molten rock that occasionally welled up to the surface beneath them; nor did they know that the city of Rome sat among the relics of past volcanoes, from the crater lakes of Bracciano and Bolsena, to the north, to the Castelli Romani, to its south, where emperors and, later, popes had their summer residences. They had no idea of the volcanic activity further south that would later make the Bay of Naples a vulcanologist's laboratory. It was the gradual movement of the earth's surface (technically, bradyseism) around Puteoli (modern Pozzuoli) that gave the first clue to theorists of tectonics – when the traces of marine molluscs on the columns of the Temple of Serapis there showed that dry land had been plunged underwater in historical times. Then there is Vesuvius, whose rich volcanic soil produces the wine *Lacryma Christi*, the tears of Christ. In antiquity, the fertile plain of Campania attracted various groups of migrants – Greeks, then Italians from the interior and, eventually, from Rome itself – who over the last centuries BCE created some of the wealthiest cities in the western Mediterranean basin.

Vesuvius was relatively quiet in this period, despite frequent earth tremors and a major earthquake in 62 CE. But none of these warnings could prepare the inhabitants of Pompeii, Herculaneum and their surroundings for the Big One, the eruption that took place over a few days in 79 CE, either in late August (the conventional date, followed by Stephen L. Tuck in *Escape from Pompeii*) or a couple of months later (as Jess Venner in *The Lost Voices of Pompeii* prefers). The Campanian coast was then peaceful and prosperous, dotted with luxurious resorts patronized by some of the wealthiest citizens of the young Roman Empire, with their grand villas and rich townhouses full of art and sculpture – as well as papyri and writing tablets. Even strait-laced Roman moralizers such as the first emperor, Augustus, slipped off to Campania to relax in Greek charm – like Mar-a-Lago combined with Monaco and Dubai. The destruction wrought by the volcano was a high-profile disaster, attracting the immediate (but largely

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ineffective) attention of the young emperor, Titus, as it devastated the homes of some of the richest members of the Senate. Think Pacific Palisades, but without the emergency services.

Since then, Vesuvius has slumbered uneasily. There were eruptions in the late second century and through the third, and one in 472 CE is well documented. A series of catastrophic events began in the seventeenth century that only quietened in the early twentieth century. Pompeii and Herculaneum, the “Vesuvian cities”, have been the object of excavations since the origins of archaeology in the middle of the eighteenth century. Excavations today tend to be more limited in scale, but increasingly high-tech, while sophisticated syntheses make increasing sense of every aspect of the cities, from their traffic patterns and sensory environments to their flora and fauna.

It has always been tempting to treat Pompeii in particular as a time capsule, an ancient urban world caught in amber. As both Tuck and Venner make clear, the reality was far messier. Tuck begins with simple questions: how many died, who survived, what happened to them? Venner seeks to bring to life the biographies of a few representative individuals – not just the wealthy villa owners and civic magistrates – and to reconstruct their experience just before the eruption. These are very different projects, but they share a clear-sighted realism that is a world away from Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s romanticized *The Last Days of Pompeii*, published in 1834 (during a period of intense volcanic activity on Vesuvius), or even Robert Harris’s *Pompeii* (2003), which ends with the two protagonists escaping the pyroclastic flows by walking out of town through an aqueduct (don’t try this at home).

Tuck is looking for missing persons – not the dead, but those who escaped from the disaster. The grotesque traces of bodies, preserved by plastercasts made from the cavities they left behind as their flesh decomposed, are well known. But so far, just over 1,000 of those have been recovered. Rough estimates of how many people lived within the walls circle around 20,000. So, what happened to the rest?

There is some circumstantial evidence. The boats, both at Pompeii and

Herculaneum, are gone. Some people presumably attempted to escape by sea. The stables, too, were mostly empty. Some would have fled by road, on cart or in carriages. Most strikingly, perhaps, almost all the strongboxes in the towns' houses were found empty. Some may have been emptied not as their owners fled, but after the eruption, while Pompeii was not an immediate no-go area. It is now clear that some inhabitants returned, and a few dug down through the ash and pumice in the weeks before it hardened, no doubt looking for valuables, whether their own or those belonging to the dead. But efforts of that kind cannot account for the fact that nearly 98 per cent of household shrines had been emptied of their gods. Like Aeneas fleeing a burning Troy in Virgil's epic, the inhabitants of Pompeii had carried their gods away with them, along with their children and aged parents.

It is likely that many Pompeians escaped, but most of them did not go far. Much of Tuck's book is a forensic search among the tombstones of neighbouring communities for names that suggest an origin in Pompeii. Roman citizens had complex names, and the "tribes" to which they were allocated (sometimes recorded in their full name) were often associated with different geographical areas. This fact makes Tuck's procedure feasible. But it is an inexact science. As he points out, communities such as Pompeii, Puteoli and Herculaneum were close to each other, and had many connections before the eruption. A Pompeian name in Puteoli might reflect a refugee from the town or a descendant or former slave of a refugee. (The enslaved, when freed, took on two of their former owner's names.) Equally, it might simply reflect movement generated by marriage or business, or even personal conflict. It didn't necessarily take a volcano to make a small Roman town feel like a hostile environment and encourage migration. Despite these difficulties, Tuck cautiously builds up a plausible picture of escapees blending into the communities that surrounded their former homes. Imperial and municipal authorities did their best to help; but that best was not much. Good neighbours in surrounding towns probably did more to save the people of Pompeii.

The everyday lives of these people are the focus of Venner's book. Recovering

the people has taken hard work. In addition to the names of the dead (and those who buried them) recorded on tombstones, Pompeii preserves formal electoral notices painted on the street walls (naming candidates and their supporters), and graffiti ranging from the poetic to the obscene, even records of the petty sales and loans that kept families and small businesses alive. Venner combines all this with an intimate knowledge of the environment of the excavated city, evoking its smells and sounds, populating the ruins with objects, images and (her special expertise) gardens. She has reconstructed the lives of seven Pompeians, combining close analysis of the evidence with disciplined use of an expert's imagination (a process of "critical fabulation"). Gaius Cuspius Pansa is one of these, a city magistrate whom we can know as well as any figure in Pompeii. She also includes the wealthy, independent Julia Felix and her women friends, who pass the Bechdel test in ways no woman described in Latin literature ever did. The enslaved, however, left lighter footprints, so Venner's "Petrinus" is constructed from the fragments of many more scantily attested individuals. The results are more evocative than those of Tuck's quantifications, but inevitably less secure.

Venner is more pessimistic than Tuck about the fates of some of those who managed to get out of the city alive. Escaping the fires of Pompeii was just the first step, and a long way from reaching the safety of even a nearby town. Some bodies have been found beyond the walls, sheltering in farms or simply waiting for a rescue that did not come.

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