Pompeii’s Destruction

Buried in Lava and Ash

Violent Eruption Captures a Roman City in Time

by Moises Diaz, age 13

One of the worst volcano eruptions in history occurred in Italy in AD 79, when Mount Vesuvius erupted. As the tip of Mount Vesuvius blew off, ash flew through the air and lava destroyed the prosperous Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Pompeii was only fifteen kilometers from Mount Vesuvius, which put the city right in the path of destruction. The victims of Pompeii died from the poisonous gases, and the city was destroyed after being covered in ash meters deep. Although 2,000 inhabitants died from the massive debris or choked on the ash and sulfuric gas, as many as 20,000 people from Pompeii survived.

Herculaneum was a city named after the prestigious hero Hercules and was a retreat for wealthy citizens. When Vesuvius erupted, the winds were blowing in a direction opposite of Herculaneum, protecting the city from ash.
But the flow of lava devastated the city and killed thousands of people. When the lava finally cooled, it created a layer of rock some 15 meters thick.

Two days after the incident, survivors of the volcanic eruption returned to loot their cities. In Pompeii, many valuables were stolen because the ash was easy to sift through. In Herculaneum, on the other hand, survivors had trouble looting because the lava had turned to solid rock.

After the lootings, no one bothered to return to Pompeii until 1748 when excavation teams discovered the city. What they found was a city full of stunning art, luxurious baths, and green gardens. The city’s inhabitants consisted of Oscans, Etruscans, Pelasgians, Samnites, and Romans.

Pompeii is one of the greatest archaeological sites in the world because the city is so well preserved. The artifacts, art, and bodies of Pompeii citizens were well preserved by the ash that covered the city thousands of years ago. The site allows visitors and historians a view of what life was like in AD 79 when time was captured as a result of Mt. Vesuvius’s ash.

[Source: The Atlas of the Ancient World, Lost Cities]