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The Buried City of Pompeii

Jim Walker

Jim is well known to the Probs Club of Allander having given us previous informative talks on Treasure Trove and on the Antonine Wall. In this talk he described the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79, the discovery of the buried city some 1500 years later, and what excavations in the following centuries revealed about the life and times of a prosperous Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum preserved in a moment of time.

In AD 79 the writer, Pliny the Younger, was staying on Capri, an island with views across the Bay of Naples to the mighty Mount Vesuvius. The land was fertile, and had been occupied by the Romans since 89 BC. They had built Pompeii, a port city of 20,000 people. It had a wall with eight gateways and was laid in in a grid pattern with a forum and important public buildings at the centre. There were towns and villas in the surrounding countryside. At 10am on 24 August Pliny heard a loud explosion and saw that Vesuvius was erupting. Hot rocks were flung into the air together with clouds of ash. Pliny's father, a retired admiral, tried to send boats across the bay on a rescue mission but they were forced back by the rough sea. The eruption lasted for 19 hours. It was later estimated that nine billion tons of pumice rock had been ejected reaching up to 20 miles high reducing the size of the volcano by a third. Pompeii and the surrounding towns were covered with fourteen feet of ash.

Over 1500 years later in 1594 workmen rediscovered the buried town and in the mid-1700s excavations started to recover objects that could be sold, particularly to people on the "Grand Tour". In the mid nineteenth century Garibaldi stopped the looting, instigated scientific excavations and by 1863 about a third of the city had been uncovered. Work has continued, revealing much of Roman buildings and what life was like nearly two millennia ago. Around a quarter of the city has yet to be excavated.

Jim described many of fascinating features found. In the 1860s some cavities were found in the pumice ash. An inspired idea led to plaster of Paris being poured into them, that then set into the form of humans and animals that had occupied the spaces.

Brick and stone were the common building materials and streets were laid out with a central carriageway – wheel tracks were worn in it with a width similar to that of the British rail gauge. There were pavements to the side with shops opening onto them. One was a bakery that had a mule powered millstone and a wicker basket containing bread baked on the morning of the eruption. A wine shop had a rack for snacks and a bowl for tips with coins still in it; there was a back room where it appears gambling took place. The city was well provided with thirty-five brothels; some with graphic illustrations showing the services on offer. Though it had been a port, the site is now over a mile from the coast.

The city had its own water supply with aqueducts feeding a vast reservoir from which pipes fed water to five bath houses and forty-two water fountains. Some larger villas had their own connections to the mains with valves, and were very grand with elaborately painted plaster walls and mosaics. Plastered brick columns were made to look like marble and flue tiles were built into the walls for central heating.

AD 79 was an election year in Pompeii for the Council – 3000 slogans have been found painted on various walls. Entertainment featured highly with a large theatre seating 5000 people and 1500 in a smaller one. The amphitheatre held 20,00 spectators; could be flooded for boat displays.

Though nearer to Vesuvius, the city of Herculaneum did not suffer much from the fall of ash on 24 August but the following night the side of the volcano split open. A pyroclastic flow of hot gases and ash swept through the city, vaporising people and animals almost instantaneously. Like Pompeii, Herculaneum was buried for many centuries before being rediscovered and partially excavated.

In summary Jim gave us a clear description of the disaster of the eruption and a fascinating snapshot of life as it had been in Roman times.

Stephen Rodgers