

3.8 What was life like in Pompeii?

Background: On August 24, 79 AD, the Roman city of Pompeii was buried with ash and pumice by the eruption of nearby Mount Vesuvius. Its ruins, near the modern day city of Naples, were not uncovered until 1748. It is now a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the most popular tourist attractions in Italy and Europe. For those who can't travel there in person, there are a number of on-line tours on the Internet.

Exploring Pompeii helps us understand what daily life was like during the Roman Empire during the first century AD and the architecture of the period. It also packs some surprises. Pompeii was relatively affluent and it was a port city. Merchants and sailors with available money were constantly traveling in and out. There were a number of brothels or *lupanare*, perhaps as many as twenty-five, where poor and enslaved women satisfied the physical needs of men from different social classes. The best known of the brothels is located near the center of town not far from the Forum and the public baths. The walls of brothels are decorated with sexually explicit pictures and comments by customers. Much of the city is decorated with artwork that depicts human phalluses.



Mt. Vesuvius towers over the ruins of Pompeii.

Instructions: British historian Mary Beard has written about life in Pompeii based on studies of the ruins (<http://arltblog.wordpress.com/2008/09/13/extract-from-mary-beards-pompeii-book>, accessed November 8, 2018). Three excerpts follow. The question we need to consider as teachers is how realistic should be our depiction of everyday life in the ancient world. We often focus on work and on enslavement. But what if a major occupation of enslaved women was as sex workers?

A. “Roman sexual culture was different from our own. Women, as we have seen at Pompeii, were much more visible in the Roman world than in many other parts of the ancient Mediterranean. They shopped, they could dine with the men, they disposed of wealth and made lavish benefactions. Yet it was still a man’s world in sex as it was in politics” (233).

B. “Power, status and good fortune were expressed in terms of the phallus. Hence the presence of phallic imagery in almost unimaginable varieties all round the town. This is one of the most puzzling, if not disconcerting, aspects of Pompeii for modern visitors. There are phalluses greeting you in doorways, phalluses above bread ovens, phalluses carved into the surface of the street and plenty more phalluses with bells on and wings” (233).

C. “Sexual fidelity to a wife was not prized or even particularly admired. In the search for pleasure, the wives, daughters and sons of other elite men were off-limits (and crossing that boundary might be heavily punished by law). The bodies of slaves and, up to a point, of social inferiors, were there for the taking. Poorer citizens, with a less-ready supply of servile sexual labor, would no doubt use prostitutes instead” (235).