

**ROMAN EMPIRE (27  
BCE - 476 CE):  
POMPEII: VILLA OF THE  
MYSTERIES**



# ROMAN EMPIRE (27 BCE - 476 CE): POMPEII: VILLA OF THE MYSTERIES

## Description

Through an examination of both primary and secondary sources on the subject, including various types of visual media in addition to electronic and written sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain what happened to Pompeii and Herculaneum as a result of the Vesuvius eruption of 79 CE, what archaeologists found when they unearthed the Villa of the Mysteries, what the different frescoes depict in the villa, and what the scenes depicted in the paintings might be able to tell modern visitors about Roman society in the first century CE.

## Subjects

Art / Art History, World History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Pompeii Ruins
- Herculaneum Ruins
- Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii
- Archaeological Museum, Naples

## Essential Questions

- What was Pompeii? What do we know about the ancient Roman town?
- What is the Villa of the Mysteries? Why are its frescoes important? What do its friezes depict?
- What can the Villa of the Mysteries tell modern visitors about 1st century CE Roman society?

## Academic Summary

### Letter of Pliny the Younger to Tacitus, approx. 100 CE

My dear Tacitus,

... He [Pliny the Elder] was at Misenum in his capacity as commander of the fleet on the 24th of August [sc. in 79 AD], when between 2 and 3 in the afternoon my mother drew his attention to a cloud of unusual size and appearance. He had had a sunbath, then a cold bath, and was reclining after dinner with his books. He called for his shoes and climbed up to where he could get the best view of the phenomenon. The cloud was rising from a mountain-at such a distance we couldn't tell which, but afterwards learned that it was Vesuvius. I can best describe its shape by likening it to a pine tree. It rose into the sky on a very long "trunk" from which spread some "branches." I imagine it had been raised by a sudden blast, which then weakened, leaving the cloud unsupported so that its own weight caused it to spread sideways. Some of the cloud was white, in other parts there were dark patches of dirt and ash. The sight of it made the scientist in my uncle determined to see it from closer at hand.

On 24 Aug 79 CE (year 832 AUC under the old Roman calendar), Mount Vesuvius, a large stratovolcano less than 10 miles east of modern Naples, erupted, spewing molten rock, ash and fumes high into the air. Pyroclastic flows followed the initial blast, sending clouds of gas and ash with temperatures approaching 2000 degrees into the surrounding towns and cities. The catastrophe lasted a full two days as the volcano belched over and over in a series of eruptions. Wind currents and topography carried most of the destruction west and south. Anything in its way was destroyed: people, animals, vegetation and even towns. Although exact numbers will never be known, an estimated 16,000-20,000 people lost their lives during the eruption. The most famous of these people lived in the ancient Roman port city of Pompeii.

From what archeologists have been able to discern from the evidence available, by the time of the eruption in 79 CE, Pompeii was a bustling Roman port city specializing in trade and tourism. The city boasted a population of perhaps 20,000 people (including perhaps as many as 5,000 slaves). From the evidence collected, it appears as though most of the free citizens were commoners (plebeians), but there was also a small and important group of wealthy patricians.

The only ancient sources on the famous eruption come from Pliny the Younger, who wrote two separate letters on the subject to the Roman historian Tacitus. Unfortunately, the two letters were written approximately 25 years or so after the eruption. Pliny the Younger also wrote them with a purpose. The letters tell the tale of Pliny the Elder, a Roman naval commander who perished trying to rescue survivors from Pompeii. Pliny the Younger was Pliny the Elder's nephew, and the letters show a distinct family bias. For centuries, Pompeii and Herculaneum lay buried, undisturbed and forgotten. In 1599, while digging an underground channel to divert the Sarno River, workers came across the ancient walls in Pompeii, but they were simply reburied. In 1738, workmen digging foundations for a summer palace for the King of Naples discovered

Herculaneum. Ten years later, in 1748, international excavations in the area rediscovered Pompeii. Since then, excavations have been ongoing in both towns. Unfortunately, due to looting and questionable archaeological practices from past generations, many of the artifacts from the ancient city are no longer available to the public. Pompeii's center today is almost devoid of the art wonders it once contained, but thankfully other houses and buildings have been found over the last century that contain wonders of the ancient world. One such house is the Villa of the Mysteries. Located a short distance to the northwest of Pompeii, on the road to Herculaneum, the house was discovered in 1909 and finally unearthed by 1930. Since it lay on the outskirts of the old city, experts believe the villa was probably home to an aristocratic (patrician) family. Undoubtedly shaken and damaged by a sizeable earthquake that rattled the area in 62 CE, it appears that work on the compound was still in progress when the mountain decided to suspend construction forever. Archaeologists and historians believe that only a very wealthy aristocratic family could have continually rebuilt the complex over and over in the wake of such natural tragedies. Unfortunately, the eruption of 79 CE proved to be too much for the villa's owners.

When the structure was finally uncovered, archeologists were amazed as what they found. First of all, the complex is massive, covering multiple modern city blocks. Inside the structure, the archaeologists and excavators found brightly colored frescoes on almost every wall. In one of the main rooms, dubbed the "Room of the Mysteries" the largest and most colorful frescoes in all of Pompeii were found. These frescoes included scenes that appear to depict some sort of ritualistic experience, possibly for the cult of Dionysus (or Bacchus, as the Romans called him), the god of wine and ecstasy, although there is a great deal of disagreement as to how to interpret many of the individual frescoes. What experts do agree upon is that the Villa of the Mysteries contains perhaps the best-preserved frescoes of any structure in the ancient city. The scenes are also some of the only ones depicting pre-Christian religious rites from the Roman age. Were the villa's owners part of a mystery cult? Many of the women in the scenes seem to be in positions of power. What does this say about the status of women in Roman society? Were noble women treated as equals in their own way? Perhaps the frescoes are simply artistic decorations put up on the walls by a wealthy family. No one knows for sure. These and other questions gave the villa its name. Much, though not all, of the ancient city has been excavated, and work continues to this day. Many of the original artifacts that survived the eruption, including such mundane items as carbonized loaves of bread that were found in ancient ovens, original mosaics from the houses, and casts of people and animals caught in and killed by the pyroclastic clouds, have been removed from the ancient site and can now be seen in the Archaeological Museum in Naples (this practice of removing the art from ancient sites is no longer accepted). This includes perhaps the most famous, and infamous, images and artifacts found at Pompeii: those of an erotic nature. Excavations have unearthed almost 50 buildings across the city where it is believed that prostitutes plied their trade. Many of the common homes had erotic images and artifacts. Historians have debated for centuries as to the significance of such findings. Was Pompeii representative of Roman society in the first century, or was it unique as a port city catering to sailors from different part of the empire? Theories abound, but no one knows for sure.

What is certain is that the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum are the best-preserved examples of ancient Roman life we have today. Unfortunately, the sites themselves are showing severe deterioration due to exposure to the natural elements and foot traffic. In 2010, the “House of the Gladiators” collapsed, probably due to water issues after heavy rains in the area. In an effort to save the site for future generations, parts of Pompeii are now closed to visitors, and an estimated 1/3 of the city remains buried. Even the Villa of the Mysteries and its frescoes are a concern to conservators. Unfortunately, over the last 75 years, repeated applications of wax (put on in an effort to save the frescoes) have yellowed and darkened the paintings. Since 2013, there has been a serious scientific and painstaking new attempt to clean and preserve the priceless treasures. Work will continue for many years as scientists fight the elements and time. Through an examination of both primary and secondary sources on the subject, including various types of visual media in addition to electronic and written sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain what happened to Pompeii and Herculaneum as a result of the Vesuvius eruption of 79 CE, what archaeologists found when they unearthed the Villa of the Mysteries, what the different frescoes depict in the villa, and what the scenes depicted in the paintings might be able to tell modern visitors about Roman society in the first century CE.

### **Objectives**

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain what happened to Pompeii and Herculaneum as a result of the Vesuvius eruption of 79 CE.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain what archaeologists found when they unearthed the Villa of the Mysteries and what the different frescoes in the villa depict.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain what the scenes in the Villa of the Mysteries might be able to tell modern visitors and scholars about Roman society in the first century CE.

## Procedure

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What is archaeology? Why is it important? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of documents and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Pompeii's Villa of the Mysteries (20 min)
- Video – Pompeii's Villa of the Mysteries (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the articles and sources on the Villa of the Mysteries, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles and sources before class.
- Suggestion: All students should have access to pictures of the frescoes found at the villa.
- Group Activity – Socratic Seminar: Villa of the Mysteries – What do the frescoes mean? (15 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment / DBQ – Essay: Explain in detail what happened to Pompeii and Herculaneum as a result of the Vesuvius eruption of 79 CE, what archaeologists found when they unearthed the Villa of the Mysteries, what the different frescoes depict in the villa, and what the scenes depicted in the paintings might be able to tell modern visitors about Roman society in the first century CE.
- Alternate Assessment – Students should create a wall frieze depicting a scene from their home and / or culture. What scenes might they want to capture for posterity? Advanced art students might even try their hand at creating a fresco themselves using wet plaster and paint.

## Extension

### On tour: Ancient Ruins of Pompeii

While on tour in Italy, students will visit the ruins of Pompeii where they can see for themselves the best example of an ancient Roman city in all its splendor. Wear comfortable shoes, as walking through the city can at times be hard on the feet. Also, bring extra bottles of water (please remember to take your trash with you), as the city can be dusty during dry spells. Many student groups take a group picture at the Temple of Jupiter in the main forum, getting a shot with the ever-present Vesuvius looming in the background. Suggestion: make sure to take time to get a drink from the big citrus stand by the main entrance, where you'll see a huge assortment of local lemons and blood oranges displayed (see image below). The drinks are amazing ... or perhaps it's the setting. No matter. Enjoy them both.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- <http://faculty.cua.edu/pennington/pompeii/plinyletters.htm>  
Letters of Pliny the Younger to Tacitus about Pompeii (primary source) – from Ken Pennington, Professor of Ecclesiastical and Legal History at the Catholic University of America (Washington, DC)
- <http://raichel.org/articlesRaichel/Art-Research/N-vases.htm>  
The Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii (website) – from the Dr. Raichel Le Goff, Art History Research Associate and Lecturer at the School of Architecture and Built Environment at the University of Newcastle (Australia). Dr. Le Goff, an expert on the art and architecture of Pompeii has compiled an outstanding website on the villa. It contains descriptions, photos and videos. Highly recommended for all students.
- <http://faculty.cua.edu/pennington/pompeii/PompeiiinFlames.html>  
Pompeii (website) – from Ken Pennington, Professor of Ecclesiastical and Legal History at the Catholic University of America (Washington, DC). This is Professor Pennington's main site on Pompeii. It contains great photos and information on the ancient city. Highly recommended for all students and teachers.
- [www.art-and-archaeology.com/timelines/rome/empire/vm/villaofthemysteries.html](http://www.art-and-archaeology.com/timelines/rome/empire/vm/villaofthemysteries.html)  
Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii (website)
- [www.archaeology.org/issues/124-1403/features/1813-pompeii-saving-the-villa-of-the-mysteries](http://www.archaeology.org/issues/124-1403/features/1813-pompeii-saving-the-villa-of-the-mysteries)  
Saving the Villa of the Mysteries: Beneath the Surface of Pompeii's Most Famous House (web article) – from the Archaeological Institute of America. This article details the current conservation and preservation efforts taking place in the villa. Highly recommended for AP / Advanced students.
- <https://ujdigispace.uj.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10210/7253/MacDonald.pdf?jsessionid=68DA11F71C471C9442A8844BAF078537?sequence=1>  
The Frescoes in the Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii (academic paper) – by Elaine Rosemary Macdonald, graduate student in Latin and Greek Studies at the University of Johannesburg. This 2010 paper, written by Ms. Macdonald as a minor dissertation, at about 80 pages, is well-written and is a great resource for AP / Advanced students and teachers who are looking for a deep analysis of the frescoes found at the villa.
- [www.pompeiiinpictures.net/RV/villa%20mysteries%20plan.htm](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.net/RV/villa%20mysteries%20plan.htm)  
Pompeii in Pictures: Villa of the Mysteries (website)
- [www.authorstream.com/Presentation/tomgriffith-146392-pompeii-education-ppt-powerpoint/](http://www.authorstream.com/Presentation/tomgriffith-146392-pompeii-education-ppt-powerpoint/)  
Pompeii and Herculaneum (PowerPoint)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in

Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.

- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPfhyti7qqc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPfhyti7qqc)  
Pliny the Younger describing Mt. Vesuvius eruption in 79 AD (video) – 3-minute video appropriate for all classes.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEzDiejb1a0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEzDiejb1a0)  
Villa of the Mysteries (video). This 10-minute video, by the art history department at Khan Academy, provides a good overview of the villa and is appropriate for all classes.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RwEljPnwPZ4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RwEljPnwPZ4)  
Interpreting the Villa of Mysteries (video)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=esWCJaDIC6Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=esWCJaDIC6Y)  
Pompeii Live – History Documentary (video). This 90-minute video from the British Museum is probably too long for most in-class showings, but it is well worth watching. It takes viewers on a tour around Pompeii while the narrator discusses the eruption of 79 CE. A great resource for all students and teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4mg0j7Uzsg0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4mg0j7Uzsg0)  
Pompeii Rediscovered (video) – from the History Channel. This 30-minute video gives a great overview of Pompeii, its people and the eruption of 79 CE. Highly recommended for all students.

### **Background Information**

- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pompeii>  
Pompeii – Wikipedia article
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Villa\\_of\\_the\\_Mysteries](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Villa_of_the_Mysteries)  
Villa of the Mysteries – Wikipedia article
- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dionysus>  
Dionysus – Wikipedia article
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pliny\\_the\\_Elder](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pliny_the_Elder)  
Pliny the Elder – Wikipedia article
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pliny\\_the\\_Younger](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pliny_the_Younger)  
Pliny the Younger – Wikipedia article
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eruption\\_of\\_Mount\\_Vesuvius\\_in\\_AD\\_79](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eruption_of_Mount_Vesuvius_in_AD_79)  
Eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79 – Wikipedia article
- [www.passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/italy/rome\\_heading\\_south](http://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/rome_heading_south)  
On the Road: Rome, Heading South – from Passports Educational Travel
- [www.passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/italy/pompeii\\_sorrento\\_and\\_capri](http://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/pompeii_sorrento_and_capri)  
On the Road: Pompeii, Sorrento and Capri – from Passports Educational Travel

### **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/ancient-rome-rape-of-the-sabine-women](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/ancient-rome-rape-of-the-sabine-women)  
Ancient Rome – Rape of the Sabine Women
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/ancient-rome-romulus-and-remus](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/ancient-rome-romulus-and-remus)  
Ancient Rome – Romulus and Remus



- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/roman-republic-punic-wars](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/roman-republic-punic-wars)  
Roman Republic (509 BCE – 27 BCE) – Punic Wars
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/roman-empire-nero-and-the-great-fire-64CE](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/roman-empire-nero-and-the-great-fire-64CE)  
Roman Empire – Great Fire of Rome 64 CE
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/roman-empire-pompeii-eruption](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/roman-empire-pompeii-eruption)  
Roman Empire – Pompeii and Herculaneum 79 CE
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/roman-empire-pompeii-villa-of-the-mysteries](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/roman-empire-pompeii-villa-of-the-mysteries)  
Roman Empire – Pompeii: Villa of the Mysteries
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/roman-empire-pax-romana](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/roman-empire-pax-romana)  
Roman Empire – Pax Romana
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/roman-britannia](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/roman-britannia)  
Roman Britannia – An Overview
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/roman-britain-hadrians-wall](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/roman-britain-hadrians-wall)  
Roman Britannia – Hadrian's Wall
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/roman-gaul-gallic-wars](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/roman-gaul-gallic-wars)  
Roman Gaul – The Gallic Wars: Caesar's Greatest Triumph

### Key Terms

- Conservation
- Dionysus (Bacchus)
- Fresco
- Herculaneum
- Mystery of the Villas
- Patrician
- Plebian
- Pliny (Elder and Younger)
- Pompeii
- Pyroclastic cloud
- Vesuvius

