

ESCAPE FROM POMPEII

THE UNTOLD ROMAN RESCUE

SENIOR
HIGH
SCHOOL
RESOURCE
BOOKLET

He hurried to the place which everyone else was hastily leaving, steering his course straight for the danger zone. He was entirely fearless, describing each new movement and phase of the portent to be noted down exactly as he observed them. Ashes were already falling, hotter and thicker as the ships drew near, followed by bits of pumice and blackened stones, charred and cracked by the flames: then suddenly they were in shallow water, and the shore was blocked by the debris from the mountain.

Pliny the Younger, *Letters* VI 16



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Escape From Pompeii is developed by the Australian National Maritime Museum in association with Expona and Contemporanea Progetti. Images courtesy of Australian National Maritime Museum.

OVERVIEW

After the devastation of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, it is hard to believe that any trace of Pompeii could survive. Amazingly however, archaeologists have been uncovering this city for the last 200 years so we know an incredible amount about the people who lived here almost 2000 years ago.

Most of the written information about Pompeii comes from the Roman writers Pliny the Elder and his nephew, Pliny the Younger. Pliny the Elder was the commander of Rome's navy, which had a base at Misenum, about 30km across the bay from Pompeii. It was he who led the sea rescue mission after receiving a plea for help from a friend living at the base of Mount Vesuvius. He died at the port of Stabiae during the rescue attempt and in his will adopted Pliny the Younger.

He was also a naturalist and writer, and his recently completed natural history works covered topics such as the geography of the Campania region, where Pompeii and Herculaneum were situated, which was perfect for growing a number of crops, and the rivers and harbours there that supported trade.

Pliny the Younger was 18 years old at the time of the eruption and was at Misenum with his mother when Vesuvius erupted. He was an eye-witness to the events of that day but did not write an official account of the events at Pompeii until approximately 25 years later when he penned a letter to the Roman historian Tacitus, in which he detailed the events of the eruption, the rescue attempt and the virtues of his Uncle's actions.

Pliny the Elder and Pliny the Younger's writings appear throughout the exhibition as a commentary on life in Pompeii and the surrounding region [The Elder], and an account of the eruption and a view of the attempted rescue mission by the Roman navy [the Younger].



How am I to describe the coast of Campania, a fertile region so blessed with pleasant scenery that it was manifestly the work of Nature in a happy mood? Campania has a wealth of different kinds of forest, breezes from many mountains, an abundance of wheat, vines and olives, splendid fleeces produced by its sheep, fine-necked bulls, numerous lakes, rich sources of rivers and springs that flow over the whole region. Its many seas and harbours and the bosom of its lands are open to commerce, while even the land eagerly runs out into the sea as if to assist mankind.

INTRODUCTION

Keep these focus questions in mind as you move around this part of the exhibition:

☞ *What are primary sources and why are they important?*

☞ *Why is the geography of Pompeii important?*

As well as artefacts from the 1st century AD, today we will be looking at objects and stories from the years before the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius. This is to provide a historical context to the factors that had contributed to the development of Pompeii by 79AD.

Warships would have been a common sight for the people of Pompeii as the naval base was just across the bay at Misenum. Here they are used as a decorative motif on a frescoed wall. One ship moves toward colonnaded maritime building and another appears wrecked in the foreground. It was warships such as these that Pliny sent on the rescue mission.



>> **Fresco, warship crowded with soldiers
Pompeii, 62–79 AD**

This fresco is from the Temple of Isis at Pompeii.

What might this information tell you about life in Pompeii?

>> **Wall Fresco of buildings by the water
Pompeii, 62–79 AD**

This fresco gives a good impression of what the buildings along the Bay of Naples may have looked like. It shows buildings by a river with a harbour beyond.

How useful are artworks from particular periods as sources?

MAKING AN EMPIRE

Keep these focus questions in mind as you move around this part of the exhibition:

☞ *What does 'empire mean?'*

☞ *Why was maritime power important to the Roman Empire?*

☞ *Why was access to the sea important to Pompeii?*

Rome became a maritime power at the Battle of the Aegates Islands in 241 BC where they defeated the North African Carthaginian Empire. They won by adopting and adapting their enemy's maritime technologies and strategies, their ability to keep building and manning fleets even after huge losses and by never giving up.



>> Watch the Battle of the Aegates Islands animation

What are some interesting observations you can make about this battle?

>> **Ballista ball, siege of Pompeii, stone, 89 BC**

Stone balls like this were fired onto the decks and sides of enemy ships to do serious damage. This one was fired into Pompeii when the city rebelled against Rome in 89 BC.

How long before the eruption did this occur?

What does this artefact tell you about Roman warfare technology at the time?

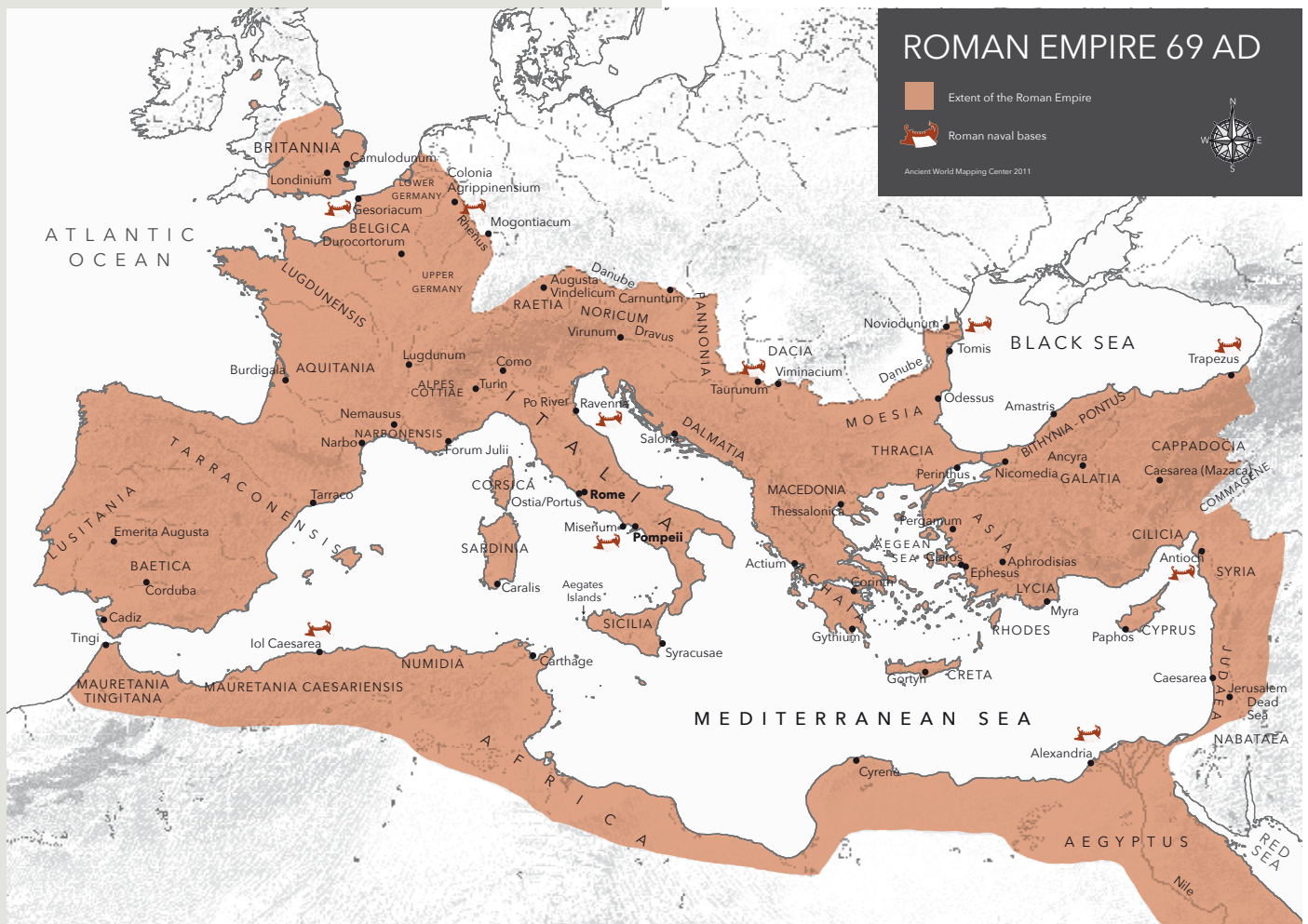
>> **Rostrum stud, bronze Pompeii, 1st century AD**

The rostrum was like a beak on the front of a ship, usually lined and armed with bronze spikes to punch holes into the sides of enemy ships. The rostrum became a symbol of victory and maritime domination. Captured rostra decorated speakers' platforms at Rome "like a wreath crowning the Roman nation" as Pliny puts it.

Can you make a connection to how we use the term 'rostrum' today?

A smaller one was used as a household item in Pompeii – read the label in the next showcase to find out more.

Think about what insights this information might suggest.



When Mt Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD., Rome was the most powerful empire in the world, extending as far as modern England, the border between modern day Iraq and Iran, and into northern Africa. At its height, the Roman Empire had a geographic stake in up to 48 modern-day countries.

>> Look at the map of the Empire in 69 AD.

Can you see why Rome's control of the sea lanes was vital to Pompeii's development?

By 79 AD, the only naval force in the Mediterranean was Rome's. Pliny the Elder was in command of the largest and most important fleet in the Roman Empire, at Misenum, even though he had no naval experience.

At the time of the eruption Pliny received a plea for help from his friend Rectina, a wealthy woman with a villa near Vesuvius, and realised that escape by sea was the best hope for people trapped in the city. He sent out the largest warships in his fleet, the quadriremes, which were 39 metres long and four metres wide. They were powered by 232 oarsmen, arranged two on each oar, with two levels of oars on each side like a bireme. Oar power made the ships highly manoeuvrable, ideal for the tricky situation Pliny was sending them into. Pliny would have used sails to get the ships across the bay as close as possible to the erupting volcano.

There are no details about how many ships were sent. However, this was an emergency situation with limited time, so Pliny would have recruited whoever was available, so ships may have sailed with reduced crew numbers.



Marble relief of a Roman trireme. Image © Claudio Garofalo
© Ministero dei Beni Culturali e del Turismo –
Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

ANCIENT GLOBALISATION

In this section, keep these questions in mind:

- ☞ *What do we mean by the term globalisation?*
- ☞ *What was the effect of trade on Pompeii?*
- ☞ *How has Roman globalisation given us primary sources to add to our knowledge of Pompeii?*

The Navy guaranteed the safe movement of goods, people and ideas across the Mediterranean and other seas on a scale that had not been seen before. A politically and economically unified world, with the absence of warring fleets and pirates lead to an unprecedented trade boom.

>> See if you can find the military diploma of Lucius Camellius Severus. This was found near Misenum – think about why was this object so important to its owner.

>> **Lamp, monkey dressed as a gladiator
Pompeii, bronze, 1st century AD**

Apart from cooking, olive oil was used as a fuel for lighting. A linen or cotton wick was placed in it. The oil is slow burning, does not produce smoke or soot and will not burn if spilled. The central hole is for the oil, the other is for the lighted wick. Old oil burns best!

>> **TO DISCUSS BACK AT SCHOOL**

Why present a gladiator as a monkey – what might this tell us about gladiators in Pompeii? Find out more about the gladiator school there.



>> **Mosaic of fish and ducks, Pompeii, 1st century AD**

Part of a larger floor decoration.

What can this mosaic tell us about Pompeii?

As well as the subject matter, consider the type of artwork and where it was originally situated.



Lent by the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

Feeding Rome

>> **Four amphorae from Pompeii, ceramic, 79 AD**

Amphorae were large terracotta pots used to transport and store goods across the Empire. What might be the modern day equivalent?

As we walk through, think about what information we can gather from the amphorae found in Pompeii.

>> **Greek Wine Amphora.**

Amphorae transported and stored mainly liquids, as in the case of this Greek wine amphora. Although wine was made in Italy, they imported wine from Greece, Crete, Gaza and Rhodes.

>> **Campanian Wine Amphora.**

Found in Pompeii, Pompeian wine amphorae have been found in North Africa, Southern France and Spain.

>> **African Garum Amphora.**

Although Pompeii was famous for its fish sauce or 'garum' this amphora came from Africa.

>> **African Olive Oil Amphora.**

Italy is strongly associated with olive oil and produced great quantities. However, other colonies such as Africa and Spain also exported olive oil to Italy.



Consider the goods Roman garrisons posted overseas would have wanted.

What do people who live in a foreign country for long periods like to have with them?

>> **Statue, Hermanubis, Baiae marble, 1st century AD**

This statue depicts Hermanubis, a combination of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Anubis – both guides to the souls of the dead.

What might the idea of blending religions tell us about Roman culture?

Lent by the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei

Living It Up

By examining the ruins of Pompeii it is obvious that it was a class-based society. The wealthy not only wanted to show off the quality of their food and wine, but also the decoration and furnishing of their houses and gardens as well as the jewellery and ornaments of the owners.

For jewellery, Pompeians preferred gold. Jewellery had the added benefit of being portable (gold jewellery was taken by people fleeing the eruption). As we walk through, consider what insights these luxury items provide about Pompeian society.

>> Metal Safe/Strongbox

This was known as an arca and was a lockable strongbox used to store money and valuables. It was often kept in the atrium, the public area of the house, as a display of wealth and power. This one is decorated with a worshipper offering a sacrifice at an altar to the cult statue of a god.



>> Clear glass dish, Pompeii, 1st century AD

Pliny records that there was no material more pliable and adaptable than glass. The highest value was placed on colourless, transparent glass as it mimicked rock crystal.

>> Fresco, outdoor drinking party, Pompeii, 1st century AD

Here we see two couples reclining on benches under an outdoor awning. A woman drinks behind them with her female companion. The glass bowl to mix the wine rests in a metal tripod to the right. Cups could be of silver or glass, more likely glass which was more popular with the wealthy at this time than silver or gold.

'History repeats!' What hypotheses about Pompeian society can you suggest from looking at the fresco?

>> Water tap, Pompeii, metal, 1st century AD

Water channelled from aqueducts into private villas was used in the garden for ornamental pools and fountains. This tap allowed water to be switched on and off.

>> Gold Necklace with Isis Fortuna pendant.

Not only were goods imported from other cultures, Romans incorporated other religions into their own pantheon. This necklace combines the Egyptian goddess, Isis, with an Italian goddess, Fortuna.

What English word comes from the Roman goddess' name? For what might people have prayed?

THE ERUPTION OF VESUVIUS

In this section, keep these questions in mind:

👉 *How did the eruption of the volcano lead to the preservation of Pompeii*

👉 *Is it ethical to make and show casts of dead human beings?*

👉 *How has science contributed to our understanding of Pompeii?*

Ignoring the Warning Signs

>> Reproduction of Frieze showing Earthquake destruction in Pompeii.

In 62 AD a major earthquake struck Campania, a prelude to the 79 AD eruption. This frieze from Pompeii depicts the temple and statues in the town's Forum (main centre) swaying wildly. Many sections of the town were still being repaired or cleared when Vesuvius erupted.

Attempting the Rescue 79 AD

As Pliny got closer to Pompeii, rafts of pumice and a rising seabed prevented him from landing where he intended. He ordered his ship to sail past Pompeii to Stabiae, further along the Bay of Naples but a strong wind prevented any ships from leaving.

Pumice and ash had rained down on Pompeii since midday and by late afternoon balconies and roofs were breaking under the weight. Around 1.00am the volcanic cloud started to collapse, sending a pyroclastic surge of superheated hot gas and ash into close by Herculaneum, killing everyone instantly.

Around 8.00 am, another surge swept into Pompeii killing those who had not fled. It was probably this surge that caused panic at Stabiae. Pliny got up to run but collapsed and died. There is no evidence that inhabitants along the Bay of Naples were rescued by the Navy. The attempt had failed.

>> **Make your own notes or create a diagram on how the eruption unfolded**

Understanding the Casts

These are replicas; they do not contain bodies. The original plaster casts are too fragile to travel. Also, museums worldwide are questioning the suitability of displaying human remains. How did these people die? For the approximately 100 people whose body outlines were preserved, current research indicates they died of thermal shock, and some suffered head injuries from falling rocks or collapsing buildings. At up to 250°C, heat from the pyroclastic surge killed people, but did not burn away the victims' flesh. The

fine ash from the surge hardened quickly around the body, creating a void once the flesh had decomposed.

Based on the numbers of bodies found and the estimated populations of Pompeii and Herculaneum, many people probably did get out in time. In 1863, Guiseppe Fiorelli made casts by filling the void with plaster then removing the outside layer. Since then, 103 body casts have been made, including a dog and pig.

>> Copy of a cast of a pig, Villa Regina, Boscoreale

What do the casts of the dog and the pig add to our view of life in Pompeii?

>> Copy of Cast of a Woman

This is a copy of a cast made in 1875. It shows the victim with her clothes forced up around her waist from the force of the pyroclastic surge.

>> Copy of a cast of two victims, Pompeii

>> Copy of a cast of a man, Pompeii

Look at the casts in front of you. Can you suggest reasons for their positions?

Did you notice the warning label at the entrance? There is much debate on the ethics of displaying human remains. What are some of the issues?

What do these objects and their stories add to our understanding of the victim's fate?

What about these cast copies? Even though they do not contain human remains, they still capture people at their time of death. What do you think?

>> Isis Fortuna good luck statuette, silver, Pompeii, 1st century AD

This good luck charm was found with the body of a girl in Pompeii.

>> Two keys, one bronze, one iron, Pompeii, 1st century AD

Some of the victims took keys in the hope of returning to their valuables locked in strongboxes.



To think about:

Mount Vesuvius has not erupted since 1944, but it is still one of the most dangerous volcanoes in the world. Some experts believe that another Plinian eruption is possible in the near future. Can you imagine the catastrophe, since almost 3 million people live within just over 30km of the volcano's crater! Could Pompeii be buried again?



Pompeii with Vesuvius in the background.
Photo by Patrick Greene



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Then the flames and smell of sulphur which gave warning of the approaching fire drove the others to take flight and roused him to stand up. He stood leaning on two slaves and then suddenly collapsed, I imagine because the dense fumes choked his breathing by blocking his windpipe which was constitutionally weak and narrow and often inflamed. When daylight returned on the 26th – two days after the last day he had been seen – his body was found intact and uninjured, still fully clothed and looking more like sleep than death.

Pliny the Younger, *Letters* VI 16

*What are your impressions of
Pliny the Younger's account?*

>> Estelle Lazer video

Estelle Lazer's work in Pompeii is mentioned in the syllabus. Her contribution has helped revise many previously held theories about the people of Pompeii. Watch the video during your free time!



Diorama by Geoff Barnes and Roger Scott
Additional figures by Bob Metcalfe

Take time to look at the diorama of the naval base at Misenum. It is a busy scene – a moment in time before a catastrophe. Look closely at what is going on in each scenario.

*What overall impression do you get about
the effects of sea trade and shipping?*

*Take a photo of a scene you think depicts
something interesting.*

Maritime Archaeology

Much of what we know about Pompeiian society comes from shipwrecks in the area which carried goods to and from the city, particularly amphora. The discipline of Maritime Archaeology is a mid-20th century science which expanded dramatically due to the development of SCUBA diving.

To think about at home:

👉 *Watch the film, what new technologies are helping explore underwater archaeological sites?*

👉 *How might investigating an underwater site differ from a land excavation?*

Source Task

You have 20 minutes to complete this task.

Select ONE artefact from EACH SECTION of the exhibition we have covered (3–5 items all up).

You may walk back through the exhibition to find your artefacts. You may use cameras to take photos.

Answer the THREE questions for each artefact:

- Type of Source:
Description, provenance.
- Reliability/Value of artefact:
Why are we using it?
- Perspective:
How many different 'stories' can the artefact yield?

ARTEFACT: Description, date, location	RELIABILITY/VALUE: Who? Purpose? Bias?	PERSPECTIVE: Types of stories

To do at home: 👉 *Attach a photograph of what you consider an interesting or useful artefact from your list.*