

When Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 A.D., at least 3,000 of Pompeii's some 15,000 inhabitants were killed, buried under continuous waves of 700° ash-containing toxic gas. The deceased were either the wealthy who didn't want to abandon their valuables or the poor and slaves with nowhere else to go.

A fascinating new exhibition, "The Other Pompeii, Ordinary Lives in the Shadow of Mount Vesuvius," is now being held in the Great Gymnasium in Pompeii's archaeological park until December 15, 2024. For the first time ever, an exhibition delves into the daily lives of the city's less affluent classes: artisans, shopkeepers, ex-slaves, who accounted for 50% of the population, and slaves from Syria, Jerusalem, Africa, Northern Europe, and Greece — an additional 30%.

Almost all the 300 artifacts, on display for the first time, come from the site's storerooms. They're divided into seven aspects of daily life: childhood; food and nutrition; family; clothing and accessories; leisure time and entertainment; commerce; and ending with religious faith, death, and the afterlife.

Survival during pregnancy, childbirth, infancy and childhood were precarious for Pompeii's lower classes and slaves. Infanticide and abandonment at birth were legal and the mortality rate during the first year of life was 30% to 40%. Around 50% of those who survived infancy didn't reach their 10th birthday. On display in "Infancy" are marble statues and a fresco of happy small children playing with their pet ducks, but these artworks purposefully contrast with numerous marble or stone burial markers, known as *columellae*, of a stylized anthropomorphic shape inscribed with the name and age of the dead child.

The centerpiece of "Food and Nutrition" is a long table with charred food remnants: loaves of bread flanked by grains, legumes, carobs, walnuts, pomegranates, figs, egg shells, and fish and animal bones.

Slaves were kept on a rationed, high-energy diet and largely subsisted on bread, legumes, vegetable soups, and only occasionally dried fruits and olives. However, the lower and middle classes had access to local fish and chicken eggs, the quantity depending on their finances.

In addition to the central table on display here are terracotta crockery and glassware as well as two frescoes, one depicting fish and eels, the other a rooster and exotic fruits, foods eaten only by the wealthy.

FIRST EXHIBITION ABOUT POMPEII'S LOWER CLASSES AND SLAVES

Slaves, devoid of all rights, were considered tools and shackled if they rebelled. On display in "Servile Family" are reproductions of slaves' rope mattresses, shackles, and an inscribed gold serpent-shaped arm-band (probably a gift from a master to his favorite slave).

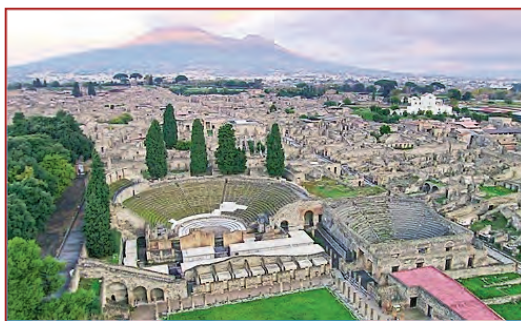
"Clothing and Beauty Care" displays several plaster casts of the dead, some still clothed (*photo*). Slaves and the lower classes had only one *tunicatus populus*, usually made of burlap, and weren't allowed to wear above it the toga reserved for the elite. The most common tunic was the *hesomide*, which reached only halfway down the thigh and was stopped at the waist by a belt. Several of the plaster casts are wearing wool tunics, so Mt. Vesuvius probably erupted during the autumn, not in summer, as commonly believed. Also shown here are charred textile fragments, jewelry, combs, tweezers, and bronze mirrors.

The centerpiece of "Entertainment and Leisure Time" is a large terracotta mask worn by male actors (actors, like gladiators, were often slaves). The citizens of Pompeii in their free time enjoyed the public baths. Slaves were able to accompany their masters to the baths, and could enjoy the waters and treatments. Gambling was a widespread local "sport" practiced at all social levels (confirmed by the large number of dice and their shakers).

Board games were also popular, with many on display. During the main celebration of the year, the *Saturnalia* in mid-December, social norms between free Pompeiians and their slaves were relaxed and even, for one day, inverted.

In "Travel and Commerce," a model wooden boat filled with *amphorae* symbolizes the importance of maritime travel for commerce. Wall panels show the main trade routes in the Mediterranean and the types of merchandise carried on these trade routes to and from Pompeii. Exports included terracotta pottery. Imports included wine from Asia minor and Greece, oil from North Africa, *garum* (a fermented fish sauce used as a condiment in the cuisines of Phoenicia, ancient Greece, Rome, Carthage and later Byzantium) from Sicily and Spain, and dried fruit from the Middle East. Slaves from many different regions and cultures were also imported.

Among the lower classes, Pompeii's most popular cults honored Dionysus and Isis, represented here by many small home-shrines' statues. Associated with commerce and agriculture, these cults centered around the promise of a better life on earth as well as after death and subsequent cremation, pagan Pompeii's predominant funerary rite. ○



Theaters of Pompeii with Mt. Vesuvius in the background

Left, *Columellae* or burial markers for children; a table displaying food remnants; a plaster cast of a corpse showing clothing; and a glass burial urn

