

# **ANCIENT HISTORY: POMPEII/HERCULANEUM**

## **Pompeii and Herculaneum**

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Excavated artefacts, skeletal remains and buildings from Pompeii and Herculaneum are now confronted with the issue of conservation. If they are not conserved, future generations' knowledge of these two unique sites will decrease until the point of no knowledge at all. Natural and human effects as well as a lack of funding hinder possible conservations. At the beginning of excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum, conservation was not the main priorities. Yet as time progresses and ethics change, the issue of conservation is now one of the top priorities.

Excavated items at Pompeii and Herculaneum prove to be difficult to conserve since being exposed to natural elements causes them to deteriorate and even collapse. The oldest and largest open-air museums are vulnerable to the uncontrollable and unpredictable nature of weather. Weather such as wind and rain erode buildings. Heavy rain causes water infiltration and this seems to be the immediate cause of the collapse of the House of the Gladiators in November, 2010. Also, since Herculaneum and Pompeii are deemed to be coastal towns, sea breeze is also a major contribution to its slow deterioration. Works of art were highly preserved by the volcanic ash but since they have excavated, natural and unnatural lighting fade frescoes, paintings, mosaics and statues. However, simple conservation ideas such as the detailed reproduction of the Alexander Mosaic in the House of the Fun replacing the original appear to be successful. Even now, plants still continue to grow in the Campania region as a result of its fertile soil. These plants, generally weeds, have the tendency to ruin the façade of houses and main buildings. They also grow in between bricks and cracks of original residential homes and earlier restoration attempts. The idea of conservation cannot be successful if artefacts and buildings remain open since archaeologists have no control over natural elements.

Another contributing factor to the issue and possible futility of conservation is human activity and ignorance. A. E. Cooley claims that these excavations were used to "gain prestige for the present". This purpose had an enormous impact on the execution of excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum during the early eighteenth century. The looting of 'valuable' materials caused irreparable destruction and a dramatic loss of artefacts which could have contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of residents of these two towns. Conservation is not a possible remedy for mistreated artefacts and buildings of Pompeii and Herculaneum's early days of excavation. After Maiuri's retirement in 1961, the significance of conserving Pompeii and Herculaneum has finally been acknowledged. However, the effect of tourism, vandalism and theft continues. Tourism is dubbed 'the second death' of Pompeii and Herculaneum. This is because tourists, either intentionally or unintentionally, cause a considerable amount of damage to these sites. Intentional damages include vandalism and theft. However, tourism is also the major source of income which allows archaeologists to conserve Pompeii and Herculaneum. Without a steady income, conservation cannot occur.

Although tourism is the main source of income for Pompeii and Herculaneum, Italian and international organisations also contribute funds for conservation projects. It was not until 1997 that the Italian government passed a law which allowed for all money raised from tourists visiting Pompeii and Herculaneum to be directly channelled to assist conservation. This legislation significantly aided those who wished to conserve these historical sites which are listed on UNESCO World Heritage sites. UNESCO is an international agency of the United Nations which provides some funding to its protected sites. Yet, funding is limited in comparison to the endless list of maintenance and conservation needs. However since these domestic and international funds have only been recently obtained, it has been claimed to be too late to conserve buildings and artefacts which have been ruined for a lengthy period of time.

This inevitable issue appears to be complex and problematic since natural and human elements impede the aim to conserve Pompeii and Herculaneum for future generations. It is highly stressed by respected academics, such as Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, that these two historic towns should be protected to deter, or at least delay, the modern collapse of Pompeii and Herculaneum.