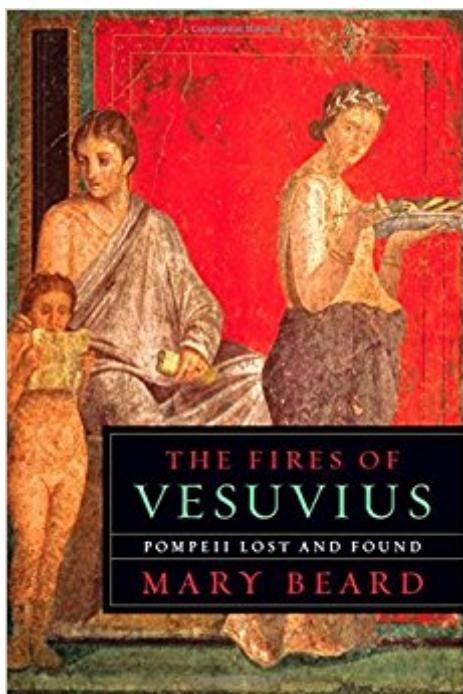


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# The Fires Of Vesuvius: Pompeii Lost And Found



## Synopsis

Pompeii is the most famous archaeological site in the world, visited by more than two million people each year. Yet it is also one of the most puzzling, with an intriguing and sometimes violent history, from the sixth century BCE to the present day. Destroyed by Vesuvius in 79 CE, the ruins of Pompeii offer the best evidence we have of life in the Roman Empire. But the eruptions are only part of the story. In *The Fires of Vesuvius*, acclaimed historian Mary Beard makes sense of the remains. She explores what kind of town it was—more like Calcutta or the Costa del Sol?—and what it can tell us about “ordinary” life there. From sex to politics, food to religion, slavery to literacy, Beard offers us the big picture even as she takes us close enough to the past to smell the bad breath and see the intestinal tapeworms of the inhabitants of the lost city. She resurrects the Temple of Isis as a testament to ancient multiculturalism. At the Suburban Baths we go from communal bathing to hygiene to erotica. Recently, Pompeii has been a focus of pleasure and loss: from Pink Floyd’s memorable rock concert to Primo Levi’s elegy on the victims. But Pompeii still does not give up its secrets quite as easily as it may seem. This book shows us how much more and less there is to Pompeii than a city frozen in time as it went about its business on 24 August 79.

## Book Information

Paperback: 384 pages

Publisher: Belknap Press; 1 edition (April 30, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674045866

ISBN-13: 978-0674045866

Product Dimensions: 1.5 x 6.2 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.3 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 59 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #61,410 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #38 in Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Archaeology #75 in Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources > Archaeology #81 in Books > History > Ancient Civilizations > Rome

## Customer Reviews

Pompeii is the most famous archaeological site in the world, visited by more than two million people each year. Yet it is also one of the most puzzling, with an intriguing and sometimes violent history, from the sixth century BCE to the present day. Destroyed by Vesuvius in 79 CE, the ruins of

Pompeii offer the best evidence we have of life in the Roman Empire. But the eruptions are only part of the story. In *The Fires of Vesuvius*, acclaimed historian Mary Beard makes sense of the remains. She explores what kind of town it was--more like Calcutta or the Costa del Sol?--and what it can tell us about the "ordinary" life there. From sex to politics, food to religion, slavery to literacy, Beard offers us the big picture even as she takes us close enough to the past to smell the bad breath and see the intestinal tapeworms of the inhabitants of the lost city. She resurrects the Temple of Isis as a testament to ancient multiculturalism. At the Suburban Baths we go from communal bathing to hygiene to erotica. Recently, Pompeii has been a focus of pleasure and loss: from Pink Floyd's memorable rock concert to Primo Levi's elegy on the victims. But Pompeii still does not give up its secrets quite as easily as it may seem. This book shows us how much more and less there is to Pompeii than a city frozen in time as it went about its business on 24 August 79. .com Exclusive: Author Mary Beard on the Ten Reasons Why the Romans Were Great Lovers--and Ten Books to Tell You How 1. Staying power Roman lovers could keep going all night (at least if we take their word for it). Ovid, the first-century-BC man about town, claims that he could perform nine times in a single night. Read all about it in his *Love Poems* (Book 3, number 7). Read: Ovid, *The Erotic Poems*, translated by Peter Green. 2. Sweet talk Roman men could make you feel so good. Mark Antony and Julius Caesar both talked their way into the heart of feisty Cleopatra. The chat-up lines of Rome's founding father Aeneas drove Queen Dido senseless. Read: Virgil, *The Aeneid*, translated by Robert Fagles. (Go straight to Book 4) 3. Body beautiful There was no flab or beer belly on these six-pack hunks. All that gym and exercise kept Greeks and Romans bronzed and trim. Read: Nigel Spivey, *The Ancient Olympics*. 4. Inventiveness Sexual positions became (literally) an art-form for the Romans--two-somes, three-somes and more. You'd better stay supple though, or those more testing acrobatics will be beyond you. Read: John Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking: Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art*. 5. Romantic agony Roman men could do anguish better than any others. "I hate and I love . . . and it hurts" as the poet Catullus succinctly wrote to his fickle mistress. Don't expect to escape a Roman affair without tears. Read: Catullus, *The Poems*, translated by Peter Green. 6. Great pick-up lines Romans knew they had to work hard at the first impressions. Ovid, in a lover's manual, gives the beginner plenty of advice on how to break the ice. Stand right next to her at a procession, and when some elaborate display goes past explain to her what it is. It doesn't matter, says Ovid, if you don't really know or make it sound plausible, to impress. Read: Ovid, *The Art of Love and Other Poems*, translated by J. H. Mozley. 7. Open minds Not many Romans were prudes.

Most men were happy to contemplate sex with women, men, or if it came to it, animals. Just so long as they were the active, not the passive partner. Read: Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, translated by E. J. Kenney.<sup>8</sup> Rough-trade Roman women went for the rough, tough sporting heroes of the ancient world. Successful gladiators became the heart-throbs of the Roman girls. Read: Catharine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome*.<sup>9</sup> In touch with their inner-selves The anxiety of Roman men was one of their more endearing features. Images of the phallus were everywhere in Roman towns but so too were images of castration and mutilation. The ancient man never took his prowess for granted. Carlin A. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*.<sup>10</sup> Not afraid to say 'I love you' The walls of the buried city of Pompeii are covered with written messages from satisfied (and a few unsatisfied) men. "Oh Chloe, I had a wonderful time, twice over in this very spot, I love you. . . ." Read: Antonio Varone, *Eroticism in Pompeii*. And, in case you are looking for the woman's point of view, try Marilyn B. Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

**Starred Review.** In a grand synthesis, one of our most distinguished classicists relates all that we know and don't know about ancient Pompeii, devastated by a flood of lava and volcanic ash from Mt. Vesuvius in A.D. 79. Beard splendidly recreates the life and times of Pompeii in a work that is part archeology and part history. She examines the full scope of life, from houses, occupations, government, food and wine to sex, and the baths, recreation and religion. In this bustling seaside town, makers of garum, a concoction of rotten seafood and salt, did a modest business, but Umbricius Scaurus marketed his product as premium garum and became one of Pompeii's nouveaux riches. Focusing on the restored houses, Beard refutes the common notion that most Romans ate their meals while reclining on a triclinium. Rather, they ate wherever they could within the home. Finally, Beard reminds us that everybody except the very poorest went to the baths, which served as a great social leveler. Beard's tour de force takes the study of ancient history to a new level. 23 color and 113 b&w illus. (Dec.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I bought this book about a month before a planned trip to southern Italy and a visit to Pompeii, so this is a review both of the book itself and the subsequent experience of visiting the actual site. The book is excellent. This isn't an dry academic treatise, but a beautifully written and very engaging

account of life in Roman times, as preserved in the provincial town of Pompeii. The introduction along makes it worth buying the book - it vividly describes what actually happened in 79 AD when Vesuvius blew, and how the town was subsequently looted, rediscovered, and bombed by the Allies in WWII. She debunks many myths and explains all the dicks and erotica that so amused my daughters when they visited. Beard can be very funny. I visited Pompeii in summer, 2015, and Beard was a good guide. In the book she's careful not to be too critical of the state of preservation of Pompeii, but it's not hard to read between the lines, and the evidence when you visit is shocking. The town is falling apart - many of the frescoes have faded completely, the wear-and-tear of millions of tourists is obvious, and many buildings are visibly collapsing. Pompeii is still incredibly impressive, especially the side streets with their wheel rutted roads and elegant buildings, but the dilapidation is glaring. I'd plan to arrive as early as possible to avoid crowds, and to move away from the main entrance area to better appreciate the size and scale of the town. We had a guide who'd been accompanying visitors for over 35 years (a guide is recommended, the town is confusing at ground-level).

This terrific and absorbing book discusses all aspects of life in Pompeii before the eruption in 79 CE. Beard synthesizes what we know of family life, making a living, entertainment, worship, ceremony, religion, civic life, etc. As an interested amateur, I have no basis for judging her conclusions, but I find them convincing if only because she is so cautious: she is skeptical about a lot of the claims made by other scholars based on what she says is scant or non-existent evidence. When she speculates, she makes explicit that is what she is doing, and when we don't know and can only guess, she says so clearly. Another reviewer was disappointed that she rejects some of the tales told by guides, but to me her insistence on relying only on the evidence or lack thereof is one of the great virtues of the book. The book is clearly written and entirely accessible to a non-scholar. Beard sometimes resorts to English demotic to great and occasionally shocking effect, both for translations and for her own observations. It is well-illustrated with both color plates and black-and-white illustrations placed in close proximity to the accompanying text and with helpful captions. (I wished on occasion that the illustrations were larger so that I could see better the detail she describes, and that cross-references to illustrations were by page number rather than illustration number.) In short, this book is among the very best popular histories (I don't intend that adjective to be denigrating, rather an acknowledgment of the book's broad appeal beyond academia) I've ever read.

I'm almost through reading this book and feel like I have visited Pompeii. Mary Beard, with out

becoming dry or boring, includes incredible details about what has been found in the remains of this ancient city and what it tells us about the people who lived there. I have always been fascinated by Pompeii and Roman archeology, and hoped to visit Pompeii some day. That may not happen, but this book has made me feel like I've been through the ruins with an excellent guide. A good additional Pompeii resource is Dr. Stephen Tuck's Teaching Company DVD lecture series on Pompeii. He includes many photographs and videos.

I only wish I had read this book a month before visiting Pompeii, rather than a month after! Mary Beard does a remarkable job of presenting historical detail on the everyday life in Pompeii without turning it dry. Loaded with photos (sadly, most are in black-and white) to make descriptions more clear, she deals with the well-known as well as the esoteric. Thankfully, she does not modestly resort to euphemisms when describing some of the more ribald artwork or words discovered throughout the city. She presents as complete a picture of Pompeii life as the average reader would ever want or need, working hard to delineate between fact, solid guess, and mere conjecture. My only complaint is the all-too-brief coverage given at the start of the book on the actual details of the Vesuvius eruption and its effects on humans; also missing is information on the archeology processes at work over the past three centuries. But that can be left to other books and other writers.

Before I traveled to Italy last week, I wanted to find a good book on Pompeii, as I knew very little about it. Beard's book hit the spot. I was able to read the majority of it on the plane ride over, and it helped me to better understand the lifestyle of the people who lived there, who really were a slice of typical Roman life during the first century. It made me appreciate my visit much more, and though I never had a chance to see a tenth of everything covered in this book (during my short visit), I am glad I had a chance to read this. Very readable, is dry in some spots but overall it really keeps moving. And the topic is just fascinating. I recommend this for those who plan to visit this lost and found city.

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