

Herculaneum and Pompeii: Two Sides of the Same Coin

The cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii shared a single fate as archaeological sites sealed within hours of each other by the same eruption—specifically the “Peléan” phase of the eruption of Vesuvius. Despite that unifying factor, the archaeological contexts of the two cities were strikingly different. Herculaneum was buried under about eighty feet of volcanic mud that hardened to the consistency of cement, the result of successive pyroclastic flows resulting from the collapse of the column of matter ejected from the volcano in its earlier, “Plinian,” phase. Pompeii, on the other hand, was buried by about twenty feet of ash and pumice that rained down on it during the “Plinian” phase, and then sealed by a thinner layer of mud during the final phase of the eruption. Because of the difference in archaeological contexts, excavation was notoriously difficult at the site of Herculaneum and relatively easy at the site of Pompeii. Conversely, because the ancient ground level of Herculaneum lay so many feet beneath the modern surface of the city of Portici, the king of Naples, who quickly established his legal right to the antiquities, did not have to bother with private landowners there in the same way he did at the site of Pompeii. The differences between the two sites and the respective cities soon became apparent. One offered privacy and encouraged secrecy; the other was remote from the capital and relatively unprotected. In many ways the differences that existed between the two sites complemented each other. Herculaneum was all but impossible to represent due to its comparative lack of architecture; Pompeii had an abundance of architectural and landscape features. Herculaneum appeared to be devoid of an ancient population; Pompeii produced a constant stream of buried bodies. Although Herculaneum excited the whole of Europe when it was first discovered, it was Pompeii that eventually accommodated streams of travelers. The uncovering of an entire ancient city and its immediate environment was first attempted at

Pompeii during the “French decade” (1805-15). This challenge was later taken up by Giuseppe Fiorelli with assistance from Vittorio Emanuele II (from 1860 onward). The same Fiorelli also attempted to bring the ruins of Herculaneum into the open air on the model of the Pompeian excavations. Thanks to Fiorelli and Amedeo Maiuri, who continued excavations at both sites from 1927 to 1963), Herculaneum has emerged as a second Pompeii.