

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

■ BY MOTHER MARTHA

During recent years, several temporary exhibitions about Pompeii's lower classes, its women and its food, for example, have been held in Pompeii's Great Gymnasium. Instead, on March 12, the site's first permanent overview, "Casts and Organic Relics," opened in the Great Gymnasium's north and south wings.

This location is now the perfect starting point for a visit to Pompeii.

It offers chronologically a synopsis of the entire site, from the date in 79 A.D. (still-to-be ascertained) of Mount Vesuvius's eruption; Pompeii's earliest rediscoveries in 1592 and in 1748; its ever-growing popularity with northern-European tourists on the Grand Tour during the 18th century; and the present, including the excavations still ongoing. In 2024 and 2025 the site counted over 4 million visitors each year, so the administration was forced to issue nominal tickets to no more than 20,000 visitors per day.

At the press conference the day before the inauguration of "Casts and Organic Relics," both Italy's Minister of Culture, Alessandro Giuli, and the Director of Pompeii's Archeological Site, German-born Gabriel Zuchtriegel, said "Casts and Organic Relics" shouldn't be considered an exhibition, but rather a permanent memorial to the victims of perhaps not history's worst natural disaster, but certainly its most famous.

The goal here is to reconstruct the complete history of this tragedy moment by moment: in short, a freeze-frame, because Pompeii was frozen in time when Vesuvius erupted.

It's not only an account of how the Pompeians died, but also how they lived. For, in addition to memorializing a historical disaster, the message here is that life is precarious, very precious and deserves profound respect.

In 79 A.D., Pompeii had a population of some 20,000 and only approximately 1,150 bodies have so far been found on site, probably confirming the theory that most of its inhabitants had been able to escape.

In the north wing are plaster casts of the human remains of 22 of the victims

LIFE IS PRECIOUS: A FIRST-TIME OVERVIEW OF POMPEII



Pompeii in 79 AD was wealthy, with a population of 10,000-20,000. Besides architectural remains, there were many organic remains, including human and animal bodies (as in plaster casts above and below), unearthed during the excavations



in the last seconds of their lives before they died from thermal shock and suffocation. They're the most moving testimonies of this tragedy and a reminder of our own fragility and vulnerability.

Starting in 1863, the archeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli made more than 100 of these casts; the 22 here are the best preserved (the other some 80 have remained where they were created).

These 22 include a 3-year-old child, a couple embracing, and a curled-up young man with his knees pulled up to his chest and his head resting on his hands. Today, from CT scans, 3D scanning and DNA analysis, we've learned their approximate age, their sex and details about their health.

In the next section, Fiorelli's technique is explained. The victims' bodies were buried under hot ash, which rapidly solidified around them. Over time the bodies' organic tissues decomposed, leaving voids in the hardened ash. Fiorelli had the idea of pouring liquid plaster into these cavities. Once the ash was brushed away, human figures re-emerged with incredible detail: postures, expressions, even clothing.

On display in the south wing are casts of farm and domestic animals: a pig, a horse, donkeys, a pet turtle and a dog with a leash once tied to a stake.

Also here is a section about food, all charred, of course: bread, olives, almonds, fruit, beans, dates, walnuts, meat (cow, sheep, pork, chicken) bones, and clam and oyster shells, so you can learn about the Pompeians' diet.

Nearby are displays of wooden furniture: benches, chests, beds and wardrobes, as well as doors, also all now charred, tools, games especially dice, coins, jewelry, baskets, and fragments of clothes and sandals. In short, a picture of daily life.

The ticket to "Casts and Organic Relics" is included in the numerous entrance fees based on age and citizenship to the site averaging c. 20 euros for the day. The site is open daily from 8:30 AM to 5 PM from November through March and from 8:30 AM to 7:30 PM from April through October. ○