How different was Herculaneum from Pompeii?

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Archaeological finds support the claim that, out of the five cities destroyed by the eruption of Vesuvius (Herculaneum, Pompeii, Stabiae, Oplontis and Villa Boscoreale, a hunting reserve), Herculaneum was probably the wealthiest. Pompeii was buried by just 4 meters of mostly volcanic debris, whereas Herculaneum was buried in 20-25 metres of volcanic ash. This resulted in Herculaneum remaining untouched until its discovery in 1709 by Prince D’Elbeuf, who started digging in the area of the theatre. After Pompeii’s discovery, however, no one excavated in Herculaneum for about a century. This was because Pompeii was easier to excavate. Excavations resumed in Herculaneum in the early 20th century, but even today nearly 80 percent of the site remains unexplored. Unlike Pompeii, Herculaneum is one of the few ancient towns in which the upper floors of the houses were preserved. (Another town in which 3-storey buildings survived — again, because of the eruption of the nearby volcano — is the much earlier town of Akrotiri on the island of Santorini, Greece, which dates to 1620 BC.) Today, two modern cities lie on top of the unexcavated part of Herculaneum: Portici and Ercolano: the latter’s previous name (Resina) was changed in 1969 to recall the ancient town.

According to mythology, the monster Cacus, son of Vulcan, stole Hercules’ cattle. When Hercules managed to find the cavern where Cacus had hidden the cattle, Cacus resisted and Hercules killed him. To commemorate his victory, Hercules founded Herculaneum at the same place. The cult of Hercules was the most popular in the town, though Apollo and Venus were also worshipped. The Oscan tribe of southern Italy established the town of Herculaneum at the end of the 6th century BC, but later the Samnites tribe took over the town. The name was probably given by Greek traders, who named it Ἡράκλειον (town of Hercules). In 89 BC Herculaneum became a Roman municipium, a self-governing town.

When the 79 AD eruption of Vesuvius begun, the volcanic material produced mainly affected Pompeii, Stabiae, Oplontis and Villa Boscoreale because of the southeast wind that was blowing at the time. Situated on the western side of the volcano, Herculaneum received only minor quantities of ash during the first phase of the eruption, a fact that gave the city’s inhabitants time to leave. Therefore, for a long time it was believed that the people of Herculaneum — numbering just 5,000 compared to the 15,000 inhabitants of Pompeii — had managed to escape the town. However, in 1981 numerous skeletons were discovered near the seashore. So far about 400 skeletons have been unearthed in 12 arched chambers used as boat houses near the shore of Herculaneum. Scientific examination of 80 of these human remains revealed that the structure of these chambers, although providing shelter, did not prevent their deaths, which occurred from fulminant shock, causing the evaporation of their bodies. Their skeletons suffered thermally induced contraction about a second after their death. The temperature of the sudden heat wave was about 480°C. A recent study states that “exposure to at least 250 °C surges even at a distance of 10 kilometres from the vent was sufficient to cause the instant death of all residents, even if they were sheltered within buildings”. Archaeological excavations have shown that a rapid succession of six flows and surges [different layers of hot ash] buried the city’s buildings, but at the same time preserved most of the structures from collapse. Since 1997, the archaeological site of Herculaneum — along with the archaeological sites of Pompeii and a third destroyed city, Torre Annunziata — is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
Villa of the Papyri

The most famous excavated villa at Herculaneum is the “Villa of the Papyri”, which took its name from the approximately 1,800 papyri found in the only library surviving intact from antiquity.

The villa was accidently rediscovered in 1738 during the opening of a well, and for several years people tunnelled through the villa to remove works of art. The tunnellers threw away carbonised blocks of earth, thought to be charcoal. Only after the discovery of the library in 1752 was it realised that they were actually discarding the remains of books. Using a computerised technique, the ink was made legible and hundreds of lost works of Greek philosophy — including half of Epicurus’ entire opus, which had been missing for 2,300 years, and some Roman poetry — were retrieved and could be read for the first time. In the past, several attempts to unroll numerous scrolls caused numerous ones to be damaged. An alternative technique, using X-rays, was tried in 2009, but the carbon-based inks that the Roman writers used made the text invisible to the scans. Today, the majority of the scrolls that have been discovered are stored at the National Library in Naples. In the 1990s excavators determined that, during the eruption, slaves working in the villa had been trying to carry crates of books to safety. Meanwhile, other first-time discoveries continue on the site: in 2006 the first complete painted statue ever found, the bust of an Amazon warrior, was unearthed from near the Basilica.

In 1970, Jean Paul Getty, who was the wealthiest person in the world at the time, decided to build a museum in Malibu, California, modeled after the Villa of the Papyri. Due to the J.P. Getty endowment, it soon became the wealthiest private museum in the world. In 2006 the museum spent $275 million to renovate the villa in order to house the antiquities collection alone, while the rest of the collections were kept at the Getty Centre. Soon after that, more than 41 antiquity masterpieces that had been exhibited at the Getty were proven to have been looted and smuggled from Italy and Greece, and were repatriated to their countries of origin. Today, hundreds of antiquities in Getty’s copy of the “Villa dei Papiri” (the Getty Villa) are lacking a clear, legal collecting history, and remain under close investigation by foreign governments.
References

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