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978-1-108-01395-6 - Pompeiana: The Topography, Edifices, and Ornaments of Pompeii

William Gell and John P. Gandy

Excerpt

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POMPEIANA.

THE City of Pompeii, distant about fourteen miles from Naples, stood originally upon a rising ground, overlooking a fertile plain, which stretched on one side towards Nola, and on the other to Nuceria and Stabia.

The eminence is at present much increased, by the mass of volcanic matter poured upon this ill-fated city by Vesuvius; for while the cinders, which fell upon the fields, have been either decomposed and carried away by subsequent rains, or have only caused an encroachment on the sea; the walls and habitations of the city

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have served to retain within their circuit all that was discharged upon the spot by the volcano, so that the extent of the buildings is very distinctly marked by the hill formed of pumice and the gradual accumulation of vegetable earth which covers it.

Pompeii was however always upon a height, as the ascent by the street of the tombs sufficiently proves; and the apparent elevation of the city above the sea, must have been anciently much the same as at present; for, as the soil is generally raised but little higher than the top of the lower stories of the houses, the upper apartments and the public buildings might have nearly equalled the trees which now clothe the summit: this eminence seems to have been formed at some very remote period, and is connected with the foot of Vesuvius, from which it may be considered as a sort of promontory stretching into the plain.

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It is surprising, that with such a testimony of former devastations as the city of Pompeii before their eyes, and the frequent recurrence of similar ravages, the people of the country should have ventured to erect two large and populous villages three miles nearer the crater of Vesuvius, especially as they invariably evince the greatest alarm when the mountain exhibits any symptoms of an approaching eruption.

An idea has prevailed, that the sea once washed the walls of Pompeii; but though it is said that rings have been found, to which it has been supposed vessels were anciently moored, close to the ruins; yet there seems great reason to believe, that the trade of Pompeii was carried on, as Strabo intimates, by means of the river Sarno, which yet runs a clear, deep, and navigable river, approaching within a quarter of a mile of the site of the city; the situation rendering it a con-

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venient emporium for the commerce of the cities of Nola, Nuceria, and the produce of the fertile plain south of Vesuvius.

In the Peutingerian tables, the distances of the neighbouring towns are thus stated :

Neapolis to Herculaneum	. XI
Herculaneum to Oplontis	. VI
Oplontis to Pompeii	. . III
Pompeii to Nuceria	. . XII
Oplontis to Stabia	. . . III
Stabia to Pompeii	. . . III

Pompeii is thus made twenty miles distant from Naples; and if no better guide than these very inaccurate tables was consulted, it is not surprising that its true site should have been unknown, even to Cluverius; though a very slight examination of the spot, where a considerable quantity of Roman brickwork was always

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visible, ought to have enabled him to ascertain it: a peasant who sinking a well in his garden found some fragments of marble, by accident brought to light *Herculaneum*, which, buried under accumulated beds of lava, to the depth of above sixty feet, might possibly have remained for ever undiscovered, whereas the ruins of *Pompeii* might have been observed by any traveller along the road.

No one, however, could have suspected how rich a mine of antiquities existed here, until a labourer, in the middle of the last century, found, in ploughing, a statue of brass; which circumstance being reported to the government, was one of the causes which led to the first excavations; and subsequently the accidental discovery of the temple of *Isis*, while some workmen were employed in the construction of a subterraneous aqueduct for the use of the manufactory of arms at *Torre dell' Annunziata*, contributed not a little to

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confirm the expectations which had been excited. Since that period the operations have always been carrying on, with more or less activity, so that by degrees the whole will be cleared. In the mean time, notwithstanding the great attention which has been bestowed on the preservation of the monuments first found, they are beginning to suffer from the effects of that exposure which has taken place since their second birth. In the short space of time which has elapsed since their discovery, the alternations of winter and summer have generally effaced the paintings, and in many instances entirely stripped every trace of stucco from the walls: the winter months, though mild in comparison with the same season in the north of Europe, are generally accompanied by torrents of rain, which gradually insinuating itself between the bricks and the plaster, loosens and forces off, first indeed small portions, but eventually detaches

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the whole ; so that, we are not permitted to hope that the theatres, houses, or temples, constructed as they are of the most perishable materials, can remain for the satisfaction of posterity : and although in this point of view, it may be considered fortunate for the succeeding generation that the operations proceed so slowly ; still too much cannot now be done to preserve the memory of what exists. The fortifications however, which are in some parts built with solid blocks of stone, may yet remain for many centuries, as the doric temple would have done, had it not been destroyed by external force ; whereas a short period must suffice to destroy every vestige of the rest of the city, which is built of bricks and rubble work, without any pretension to durability or excellence of construction. The streets are curiously paved, with irregularly shaped pieces of black volcanic stone well put together, and generally exhibiting the tracks of

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wheels. The town was originally founded upon an ancient bed of lava, though there exists no record of an earlier eruption than that which destroyed it.

The gates of the city now visible, are five in number; they are known on the spot, by the names of the gate of Herculaneum or Naples, the gate of Vesuvius, the gate of Nola, that of Sarno, and the gate of Stabia: but as these names have been applied since the discovery of the ruins, they must be considered merely as modern appellations; since neither the ruins themselves, nor any existing authority, afford any document for determining their ancient designations.

There may have been other openings of less consequence, communicating with the great street by little passages, which descend to the walls in a part now covered by the rubbish of the excavations; and from the gate of Stabia to that of Naples, a space nearly equal to half the circum-

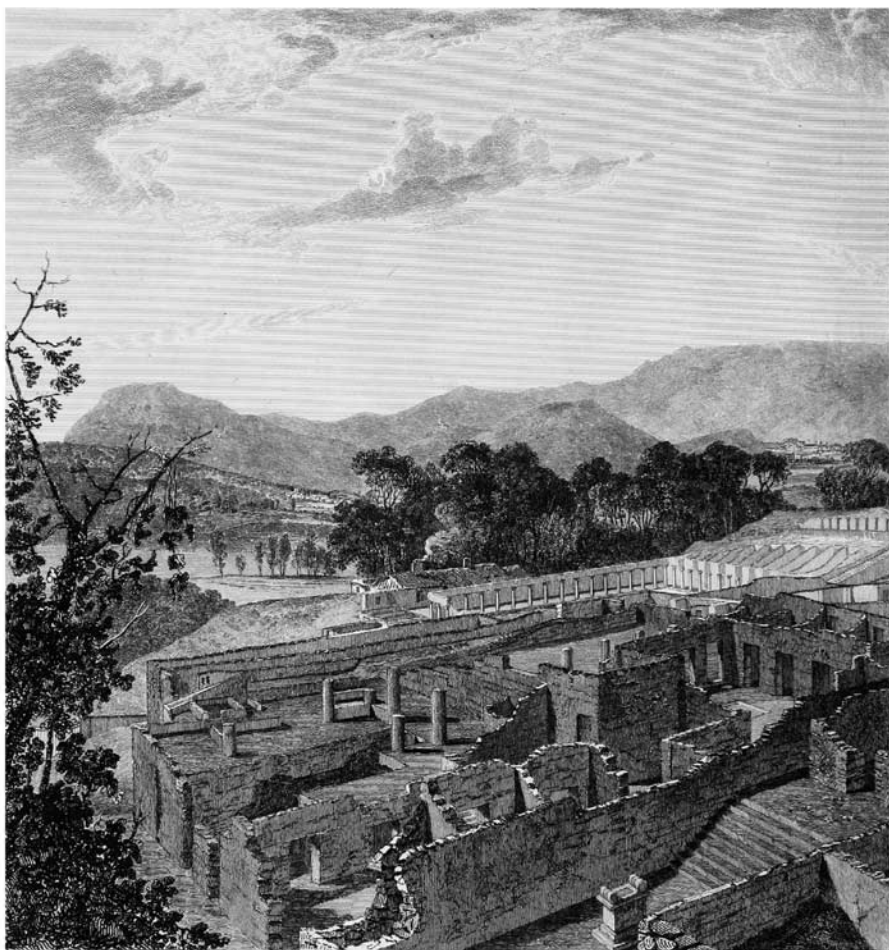
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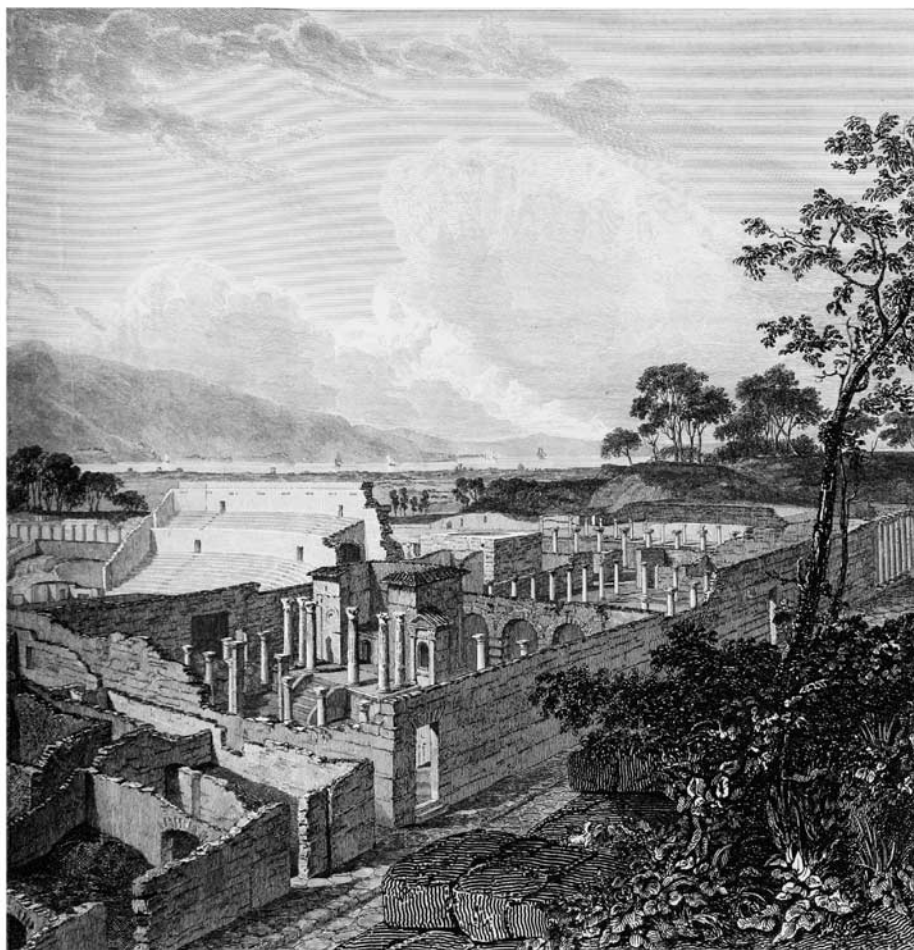
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