

ERCOLANO

Introduction

Founded by the Oscans or by the Etruscans, *Herculaneum* was later conquered by the Greeks, the Samnites, and finally by the Romans, in 89 B.C., becoming a *municipium* in the same year, and quickly a privileged residential stay for the Roman aristocracy. Nothing today allows us to understand, in an area whose topography has been completely modified by volcanic eruptions, the original physiognomy of this site which occupied a promontory situated on the coastal road, at the foot of Vesuvius. Already hit by the earthquake of 62, the city was submerged in 79 by an avalanche of mud whose solidification ensured the exceptional preservation of the perishable materials found there: wood, papyrus, vegetable fibres, etc. It was thought, until a recent date, that its inhabitants, better advised than their Pompeiian neighbours, had left the city before the eruption of the volcano. Instead, excavations carried out at the end of the 20th century revealed the presence of hundreds of bodies along the shore: those inhabitants who, trying too late to escape from the city, found themselves in front of a stormy sea and perished asphyxiated in the large deposits that flanked the beach.

History

Herculaneum, urbanised according to an orthogonal scheme in the 1st century BC, covered a much smaller area than Pompeii: little more than 12 hectares, of which only one third has been so far excavated; the rest is still under the present town of Ercolano. Originally situated on the sea, the city is surrounded by walls built during the 2nd century. The archaeological remains currently visible pertain to seven blocks containing about forty houses, some of which are lavishly decorated with wall paintings and mosaics, which differ from those of Pompeii due to the absence of an *impluvium*; the most luxurious of them, built on terraces, took advantage of the panoramic view of the sea. Among the public monuments, a small part of a basilica dating back to the Augustan age, which has three rows of columns and an apse at the back, with a rich set of statues, has been brought to light; the Suburban baths, from the Republican age, the baths of the Forum, from the Julio-Claudian age, and the northeast baths, partially brought to light in 1990; part of a gymnasium, preceded by a monumental entrance; the college of the Augustales, built during the Augustan period; a sacred area occupied by two temples, one dedicated to Venus, the other to the four gods, Minerva, Mercury, Neptune and Vulcan, protectors of trade and craftsmanship. In fact, the city has restored numerous buildings including bakeries, taverns and shops connected with the most varied activities. Still buried outside the archaeological area, the theatre of the city, in which numerous statues have been found, could accommodate about 2,500 spectators. On the outskirts of the city, the excavation of the Papyrus villa, only a small area of which has so far been brought to light, has allowed for the discovery of numerous bronze and marble statues, as well as, in the ruins of its library, of more than 1,700 papyri, both Greek and Latin, found sealed inside wooden boxes.

Rediscovery and restoration

Like Pompeii, *Herculaneum* was found by chance, in 1709, during the construction of a well that led to the discovery of its theatre. However, the excavations, made extremely difficult due to the depth of the ruins, buried at a depth of more than 15 m, did not begin until 1738, on the order of the King of Naples, and continued until 1780. At that time, the excavations were mainly carried out inside underground tunnels, some of which are still passable today, and were mainly aimed at the discovery of precious objects, jewels, marbles, sculptures or paintings; a new season of research took place from 1823 to 1875, no longer through tunnels, but with the aim of bringing to light the ruins of the buildings. The first systematic research, however, was carried out by Amedeo Maiuri from 1927 to 1958, who brought to light the four hectares of the city's residential buildings that can be visited today. Since the beginning of 1960, excavations have followed one another on the site almost uninterruptedly, together with important restoration work on the ruins brought to light, but many important monuments of the city remain buried: the Forum with its temples, the *macellum*, as well as a large part of the town and its necropolis. The Villa dei Papiri, found by chance in 1760 under more than 25 m of volcanic material, was only partially explored; excavations were resumed there at the end of the last century. The excavated area of *Herculaneum* - but not the whole town - was added in 1997, together with Pompeii and Torre Annunziata, to the UNESCO World Heritage List, for a complete extension of 98 hectares.