POMPEII: INTERPRETING THE PAST

Archaeologists and historians investigate the past and use the evidence they uncover to interpret how people lived. Experience with Claudia the horror of a volcanic eruption. Follow her story as Pompeii is destroyed and her family trapped, and be there when she is recovered by archaeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli almost 1800 years later.

What do you know about ARCHAEOLOGY?

In pairs, decide whether these statements are TRUE or FALSE. Briefly explain your answers and compare them with others in the class.

1. Whatever archaeologists find belongs to them.
2. The main aim of archaeologists is to discover treasures from the past.
3. Archaeology is about digging up people, not things.
4. The eruption of Mt Vesuvius in AD 79 was 100,000 times more powerful than the atomic bomb that wiped out Hiroshima in 1945.

learn ABOUT
- the skills of an archaeologist
- Pompeii as an archaeological site
- the study of the past
- types of historical sources.

learn TO
- interpret sources
- evaluate documents
- communicate using a storyboard for a movie.

sample page only
My name is Claudia Terentius Neo and I lived in Via di Mercurio in Pompeii. We were having a wonderful summer that year until disaster struck. It began as just another beautiful day; the sea was crystal green and the wind, blowing from the north, kept us cool. The crowd in the market haggled over prices and we could smell all sorts of delicious food.

‘What’ll we have for lunch?’ I asked Corelia, my 13-year-old daughter.

A slight tremor shook the ground, rattling the plates. We hardly noticed; it was just another of the many rumbles felt recently. Little did we know these rumbles were coming from the belly of Vesuvius, our beloved mountain, green almost to the summit with fig and olive trees. But now it was about to wake from a long, long slumber.

Vesuvius had given us signs that it was waking: more tremors than usual, foul-smelling water in the pipes, springs mysteriously sucked dry, water in the aqueduct slowing to a trickle and fountains with no water at all. But we didn’t recognise the signs for what they were. The day before, we’d had a holiday in honour of Vulcan, the god of fire, and we thought the holiday crowd must have used too much water. We were wrong and were about to pay for our ignorance.

Just before 1 p.m. on that summer’s day, just as Corelia and I were about to eat some grilled octopus, Vesuvius erupted with a huge roar, shooting a column of lava and ash high into the air. We sat there stunned, watching the enormous column hang in the air like a gigantic umbrella pine. Then suddenly the crowd panicked.

‘Vulcan is going to destroy us,’ people shouted. I grabbed Corelia’s hand and fled from the market, almost tripping on the wheel rut in the road. We raced through the narrow streets to our house. My five-year-old, Marcus, was sitting in the front room with Grandma, his eyes filled with terror.

‘Let’s go!’ I shouted.

‘No,’ said Grandma calmly. ‘We should wait until Terentius gets back. Vulcan will calm Vesuvius again, you’ll see. We’ll be safe here. Wait for Terentius.’

Grandma was usually right. I looked at Corelia and Marcus, both staring at me. My husband Terentius, who owned a bakery, was down at the port buying flour. He would know what to do. Besides, he had told me just this morning that Biria, the sibyl, predicted our town would become famous throughout the world. She said that people of every tongue would still be visiting us in a thousand years or more.
What are sources?

Eruption
Vesuvius shot lava at 1500 kilometres an hour, 33 kilometres high into the air. Its thermal energy was 100 000 times that of the Hiroshima atomic bomb in 1945.

In Pompeii, the eruption sounded like two sharp bangs. In Rome, 200 kilometres away, it was heard as a thud. In Capua, 30 kilometres away, it sounded like a continuous crack of thunder. In Misenum, which was closer, there was no sound at all.

Sources
How do we know that Vesuvius erupted at 1 p.m. on the 24th of August AD 79? Did these things really happen? Were there really 20 000 people in the town and did they panic as described in the story? How do we know what life was like in Pompeii 2000 years ago?

To answer these questions, historians rely on two types of sources: primary and secondary. A primary source is evidence from the time of the event, such as an eyewitness account, an object or building, or even skeletal remains. A secondary source is evidence after the time of the event, such as books or reports by people not present during the event. Historians examine both these types of sources to interpret what has happened.

Sources that are written are called literary sources; sources that are objects are called non-literary sources.

Describing a key event: Pompeii
1  a What disaster had struck Pompeii?
   b List the signs that showed something terrible was about to happen.
   c Explain why most people failed to take notice of such warnings from nature.

2  Read the information above. In pairs, suggest why the sound of the eruption differed from place to place.

Using a visual source to record features of Pompeii
3  Look at Source 1.
   a Using the scale, calculate the distance in a straight line:
      i from Vesuvius to Pompeii
      ii from Vesuvius to Misenum
      iii from Vesuvius to Herculaneum.
   b Work out why more ash and pumice fell on Pompeii than on any other town on the first day of the eruption.

4  a To understand the past, it is important to put ourselves in the shoes of someone of the time. To do this we must forget what our world is like today and imagine a very different world.
   In pairs, select three of the following words that you feel best describe the feeling of the people on the day of the eruption in Pompeii. Explain your choices.
      petrified, angry, horrified, anxious, nervous, confused, worried
   b Imagine what the experience of the eruption would have been like for the people of Pompeii. Explain why the eruption caused so much panic.

Identifying sources
5  Read Sources.
   a Explain the difference between primary and secondary sources.
   b Give examples from the story of three pieces of information that would have been based on primary sources. Explain why they are important to our understanding of the event.
'Okay, let’s wait for papa, but get some things together in case we have to leave quickly.’

Corelia grabbed a few precious items, including a bag of gold coins, jewellery and a tiny statue of her favourite god, Vesta, while I held Marcus trembling in my arms. I looked up at the portrait of Terentius and me at our wedding.

‘Please, Terentius, please get here soon.’

Outside, we could hear screaming, but the ominous rumble of Vesuvius soon drowned out mere human voices.

Gradually, the wind blew the column of ash, dust and pumice towards the town, turning day into night. The pumice solidified into a light airy rock. It fell like black hail, thundering on our roof as brilliant bolts of jagged red lightning arced through the dark sky. Marcus screamed.

Through the window I saw people fleeing in blind panic, clutching their children to them. I wish we had gone too. We waited and waited, but Terentius didn’t come back. The darkness, the thundering cracks of eruptions and lightning, the shaking earth tremors terrified us as we sheltered inside. Was this the end of the world? Would Jupiter protect us?

Suddenly Corelia went white and cried out, ‘Mama! Brutus is still tied up outside.’ Brutus was our pet dog.

I watched helplessly as Corelia sank to the floor and started to cry. She crawled slowly across to the door, but it wouldn’t budge. She knew then that there was nothing we could do.

Terentius was fighting his way from the port, moving against the tide of people rushing to escape the nightmare. Some screamed, some sobbed, but most silently pushed on past him with a determined look in their eyes. He thought his family would be safe in their house because its walls and roof were solid. He fought through the crush of people at the Marina entrance gate and stumbled into town, past the basilica, past the Temple of Venus. It was so dark he could hardly make out the buildings. He hunched forward as the rain of pumice stung his face, filling his mouth and nostrils with ash and dust. He tripped over a body and fell face down into the warm pumice. Exhausted, he rested for a moment with his forehead on his arm. Just a few minutes, he thought, just to get my breath back. But Terentius never got up.

* * *

During the night, Pompeii was covered in two metres of pumice and ash. Only two thousand of us remained. Herculaneum to the west was untouched. The next day was a very different story.
What are sources?

Examples of non-literary sources
- skeletons (bones, teeth, skulls of people)
- artefacts (anything made or used by people), which may include:
  - smaller things such as tools, pots, jewellery or artworks such as mosaics, sculpture, paintings
  - larger things such as houses, temples or tombs

Examples of literary sources
- letters, either personal or official
- graffiti
- plays, poems or stories
- inscriptions on coins, tombstones or buildings

Source 1

Many years after the eruption of Vesuvius, the covered bodies decayed, leaving a hollow with just the skeleton inside the layer of pumice and ash. Modern archaeologists poured plaster into the hollows and were able to recreate a replica of the bodies.

activities

1 a What caused day to turn into night, and what effects do you think this may have had on the people?
   b List the ways in which the people of Pompeii responded to their fear of the eruption.
   c Why do you think Terentius never got up?

Using a range of primary and secondary sources
2 a Referring to the information above on literary and non-literary sources, create a table of three columns. In the left-hand column, write down the items listed below. In the middle column, identify whether it is a literary or non-literary source. If you feel an item can be more than one type of source, explain why you think so.
- ancient inscription on a tomb saying how much someone was admired
- the walls of a circular stadium that could seat around 20,000
- graffiti on the stadium wall naming and describing gladiators as heroes
- swords, shields and helmets found inside the stadium
- the skeleton of a dog in the street
- coins showing the head of Vespasian, who became emperor of Rome in AD 69

Evaluating historical sources for meaning, point of view, values and attitudes
b All these sources were found by archaeologists at Pompeii. Working in pairs, suggest what historians could interpret from them about life in Pompeii. Write your answers in the right-hand column of your table.
3 Look at the painting on the opposite page.
   a What type of source is this and which part of the story does it relate to? What information can you get from it?
   b Suggest what Claudia would have felt as she looked at the painting.

Evaluating a source for meaning
4 Look at Source 1.
   a What type of source is this and what part of the story does this relate to?
   b In pairs, list the information archaeologists can gather about a person from a plaster cast of their body.