

## ON THE SLOPE OF VESUVIUS

### A Buried Roman Town Gives Up Its Dead

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THESE WERE SIGHTS not to be forgotten: An ancient Roman lady emerging from a tomb of volcanic rock, her hand glorified still, after 1,903 years, by the shine of gold rings set with gemstones (left). \* A few feet away, an armed skeleton sprawling face down on the pumice-covered sand of a onetime beach. One end of a boat's hull breaking the surface and, beside it, perhaps the dead helmsman. In nearby chambers, a dozen, two dozen, maybe more, of the dead-skeletons in anguished poses, a truly pathetic scene.

And smaller things: bronze and silver coins, an ingenious combination-lock money box that still held two coins (below right). They speak of headlong flight for life, of grabbing the valuables on a dead run.

But the cruel end came swiftly for these citizens of the small seaside town. Herculaneum was blasted and buried under more than 60 feet of ash by the same stupendous eruption of Mount Vesuvius on August 24 and 25, A.D. 79, that destroyed and entombed its famous neighbor, Pompeii.

After 1709, when a well digger broke through to an underground theater, the buried town was quarried for art objects. Bronze and marble statues, wall paintings, mosaics, and furniture were hauled out through shaft and tunnel and carted away to museums and palaces, helping to foster two centuries of neoclassicism.

In the last century archaeologists began to remove the huge blanket of volcanic debris, revealing streets in a square pattern, spacious houses, and, most recently, the old beachfront. A Roman benefactor, probably a wealthy proconsul, had built out from the town wall a large public bath. A temple and another religious building are joined to it with two terraces that are supported at beach level by arches.

During excavation of the bath, groundwater seeping into the dig became a problem. Italy's Ministry of Public Works provided funds for trenching along the old beach, and there, under the arches, Herculaneum began to yield its hidden dead.

The discoveries are overwhelming; few other complete skeletons of ancient Romans survive. And the work is just beginning.

LIKE PASSANGERS from a time capsule, the newly found dead of Herculaneum bring with them tales of everyday life during the Roman era. The low-sugar diet of the times helped keep teeth as sound as those in the skull displayed by Giuseppe Maggi, director of the excavations (below).

The modern town of Ercolano (facing page), a suburb of Naples, stands on top of the river of ash that buried the old town. Today greenhouses spread over the rich soil and surround the great pit where the Roman town lies revealed. While nearby Pompeii has received much of the tourist attention, Herculaneum also gives the visitor a genuine sense of daily life in a small town.

Built on the lower slopes of Mount Vesuvius, background, with a prospect of the Bay of Naples, it must have been a pleasant place to live for its 4,000 people. Although Herculaneum had known war and, in A.D. 62, a shattering earthquake, the home of its wealthy were spacious, lighted by atria, and beautified by gardens.

Since not more than ten human skeletons had been found earlier in the years of digging, scholars assumed that most of the population had been able to escape to safety.

Thus, when the remains in the chambers beneath the terraces and on the beach came to light, it was both a shock and a surprise.

The Roman beach level lies in the immediate foreground, hard against the wall of the mud that marks the limit of excavation. The present shore of the bay is 500 yards away.

With their belongings from archaeological prize of incalculable value. But they were in danger of deterioration as the wet mud in which they were entombed shortly began to dry.

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC responded to a call for assistance. (See President's Report, page 820.) As a result, Sara Bisel, an expert in ancient bones, soon arrived at Herculaneum and began a five-week crash program in which she excavated, bone by bone, 26 skeletons (below left).

Washed, dried, and dipped in an acrylic resin solution (below right), the bones harden, ensuring time for study and reconstruction. In a museum built beside the site in 1980, Dr. Bisel will re-create the drama of the final moments, but it is a drama whose last act is far from being played out.

"EVEN THE GODS wish they had not the power," cried the poet Martial after Mount Vesuvius exploded, sending its billowing tower of ash and pumice 12 miles into the Mediterranean sky. For 18 hours a drizzle of ash darkened the world, accumulating eight inches at Herculaneum and burying Pompeii under nine feet.

Many fled but others stayed on, awaiting rescue by ship, hoping the worst was over. But the worst, on the following morning, was an event of supreme horror. A blazing hot stew of pumice, ash, and gas drawn down by gravity from the vast column in the sky, fell like a waterfall toward the town.

Just ahead of it at 60 miles an hour roared a black comet of ash, gas, and rock. It took no more than five minutes for this awesome angel of death to reach, blast, overwhelm, and obliterate Herculaneum.

Among the victims trapped on the beach (above) was an armed man, slammed to each on a sword and scabbard that were buried with him (above right). A gold coin in his purse commemorated Emperor Nero, who died in A.D. 68 (facing page).

A woman, whose skeleton was badly shattered, appeared to have been blown onto the beach from the terrace. She was found near a third victim. The woman with the gold rings died in the archway.

A boat was flipped keel up by a turbulent sea and dry-docked- an incredible find from the Roman times, with its hull nearly intact (right).

How many more dead are there? Dr. Maggi speculates that the beach may be a cemetery for hundreds more.

THE KILLER STILL STANDS in the door of a public bath (above)-part of the hot ashflow that inundated Herculaneum, left in place as testimony to the power of the event. The surge and the wave of pyroclastic matter burst through the double-paned window that once looked out to sea (right, top), flung the heavy marble basin across the room (bottom), and peppered its bottom with broken glass (center). The view from the window today is of the lower part of the 80-foot mud wall that still blankets the old seashore.

Nearby and on a lower level (opposite), another chamber revealed what Dr. Maggi calls "a masterpiece of pathos"-the skeletons of six adults, four children, and two infants in embraces of protection, agony, and death. The urgent effort to preserve the skeletons for reconstruction is being funded by the Society. As digging proceeds, Herculaneum will surely yield other scenes from its last moments, an unforgettable tragedy in the life of Mediterranean man.