

## Daily Life in Roman Society

Notes for  
Table Talk  
not to hand in.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Using information in Chapter Six, of *Echoes from the Past*, fill in the following chart.

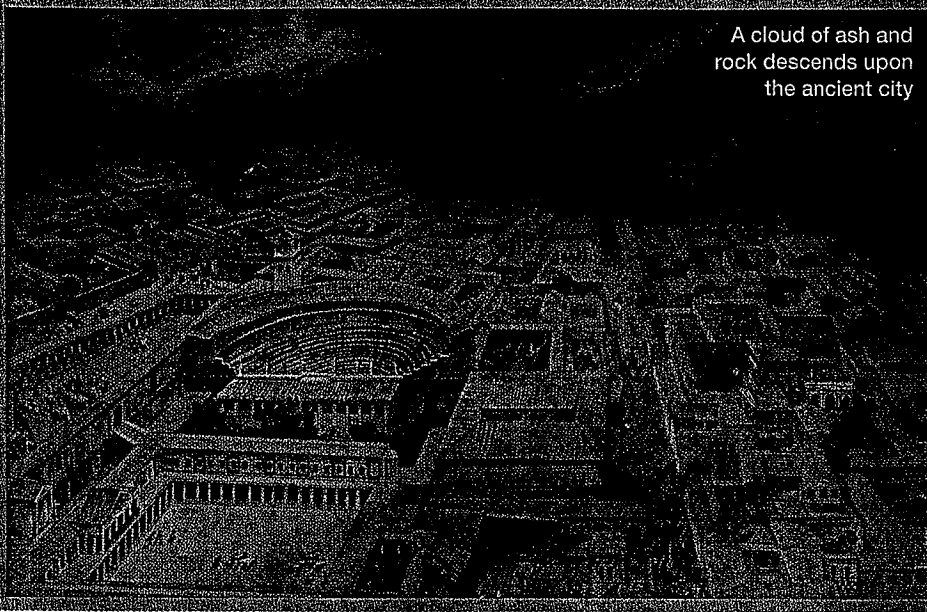
Group	Description of Role in Society
Men	
Women	
Children (Boys)	
Children (Girls)	
Slaves	
Dress	
Food/Customs/ Manners	

# Ashes to ashes, dust to dust

Almost 2000 years ago, an entire city was destroyed

Pompeii nestled at the base of Mount Vesuvius and, because of its agricultural fertility, it had a large population of around 20,000. The volcano erupted in AD 79, completely destroying Pompeii and its sister city Herculaneum in an eruption thought to have lasted two days. Buried under ash and pumice, Pompeii wasn't discovered again until 1700 years later, but its excavation has revealed extraordinary details of life in the Roman Empire. Vesuvius has erupted many times but has remained quiet for more than half a century, much to the relief of the three million people currently living nearby.

A cloud of ash and rock descends upon the ancient city



## A is for artists at work

Painters and decorators did a roaring trade in Pompeii, transforming dark and often pokey interiors with a lavish coat of paint. In one house a team of decorators was interrupted by the eruption mid-brush stroke, scattering as the ash fell and abandoning their tools, 50 pots of paint and a bucket of fresh plaster precariously balanced up a ladder. The assistants had been busy slapping on the plaster and washes of colour, while the masters had drawn out the design in rough sketches and were painting the figures and fine detail.



## B is for banking

The Romans didn't have cheques or credit cards, but there were money lenders, the banks of the day. The most famous Pompeian banker is Lucius Caecilius Jucundus. Some of his records and receipts, stashed away in the attic of his house, give an idea of his business activities. 'Banker' is actually a bit of a euphemism – he was mainly an auctioneer profiting on both sides of the transaction, charging the seller a commission and then lending money to the buyer at a healthy rate of interest.

GETTY X2, AKG-IMAGES X3, THE ART ARCHIVE X4

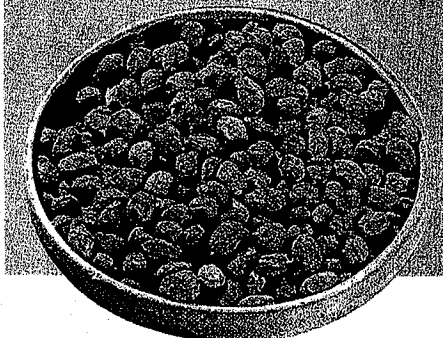
## C is for café culture

The latest estimate reckons that there were about 200 cafés and bars in the town altogether – about one for every 60 residents. A counter usually ran along the street to catch the passing trade, selling cheap takeaway food from large jars. Wine was stacked up behind it and there were tables in a back room for dining. In a reversal of today's society, the rich ate at home while the poor, living in tiny quarters with no facilities, relied on café food.

## D is for diet (and dormice)

Rich Pompeians did occasionally eat dormice. Or so a couple of strange pottery containers – identified by ancient writers as dormouse cages – suggest. Elaborate banquets were a rarity and just for the rich. The staples were bread, olives, beans, eggs, cheese, fruit and vegetables (Pompeian cabbages were particularly prized) plus some tasty fish. Meat was less in evidence, and was mainly pork. This was a relatively healthy diet. In fact, the ancient Pompeians were on average slightly taller than modern Neapolitans.

This bowl of olives was found preserved under volcanic ash



## E is for education

One of the puzzles of Pompeii is where the kids went to school. No obvious school buildings or classrooms have been found. It's likely that teachers took their class to some convenient shady portico and did their teaching there. A series of paintings in the Forum seems to show exactly that happening – with one poor miscreant being given a nasty beating in front of his classmates. And the curriculum? To judge from the large number of quotes from Virgil's *Aeneid* scrawled on Pompeian walls, the young were well drilled in the national epic.

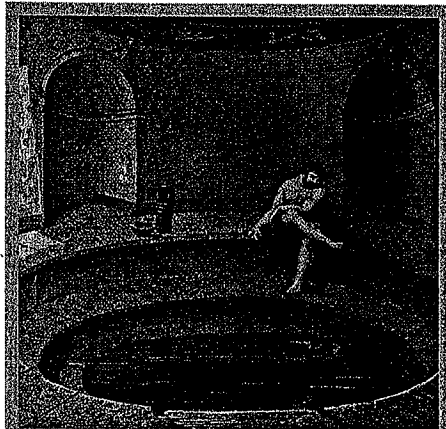


## F is for faith communities

The official religion sponsored solemn sacrifices and raucous festivals celebrating Jupiter, Apollo, Venus and the Roman emperor, who was to all intents and purposes a god himself. But alongside this, happily coexisting so far as we can tell, were all kinds of other religions. One of the most impressive sights at Pompeii is the little temple of the Egyptian goddess Isis. We have evidence, too, for Jews and worshippers of Cybele, known as the Great Mother. There is no clear sign of any Christians, but in one house an ivory statuette of the Indian goddess Lakshmi has been found.

## G is for garum

No Roman cooking was complete without garum – a disgusting concoction of rotten fish. A more generous interpretation sees it as a version of the spicy fish sauces that are part of modern Thai cooking, and it was popular in Pompeii, which had at least one garum shop.



## H is for hygiene

Pompeii boasted at least six public bathing complexes – some owned by the city council, some by private enterprise operations. Only a few of the very richest houses had their own facilities. The vast majority of the population would have exercised, scraped down, sweated and taken a dip in one of the communal establishments. As you might imagine, they were hotbeds of germs and infection. The plunge pools had limited water circulation, no chlorination and must have been full of human effluent. Ancient doctors recommended not going to the baths with an open wound.

## I is for illness

Illness struck the young hard. Over half of Pompeii's children would die by the age of ten, while the telltale marks left by childhood infectious diseases are clearly visible on the teeth of many of the victims of the eruption. But the good news was that if they survived into adolescence, ancient Pompeians could expect to live a life not much shorter than our own. For those who fell sick, the doctors would attempt a diagnosis and cure equipped with many of the same instruments – from tweezers to gynaecological specula – that you might expect to find in a modern medical surgery.

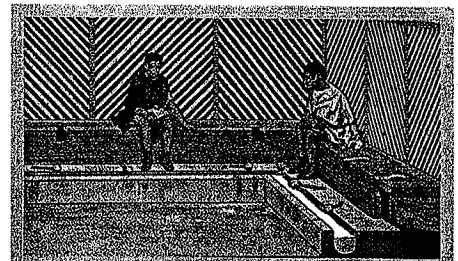
## J is for job seekers

Dozens of trades and professions were found at Pompeii: carpenters, actors, surveyors, gem-workers, architects, inn keepers, perfume-sellers, laundry men. There was even a “public pig keeper”. Occasionally there was big money to be made, but mostly these were low-profit-margin occupations, and many of those involved were slaves or ex-slaves. And if you didn't have a job? In a world without social care, those without means of support simply died.



## K is for kitchens

Even in the grandest houses, Pompeian kitchens could hardly have cooked up a banquet. They are mostly small, dark and equipped with just a hearth and a place to boil a few pots. However, plenty of elaborate kitchen utensils survive, from egg poachers and vast cauldrons to mousse moulds and huge sieves. For banquets, we must imagine preparations extending beyond the kitchen. One written account talks of a slave shelling peas on the front step. Large joints of meat would have sizzled away on portable braziers, perhaps in front of the guests.



## L is for lavatories

The usual place for a Pompeian loo was the kitchen. Hygiene aside, it presumably doubled up as a convenient waste disposal unit. A few had shafts that dropped down into a running water supply, though rich Pompeians were more interested in using piped water to run ornamental fountains than to make their ablutions more efficient. Many went directly into cesspits, and the remains of these are a favourite target of archaeologists to find out what really went in and out of Pompeian stomachs.

## M is for mains drains

Why are there so many stepping stones in Pompeii's streets? The answer is simple. There were hardly any public drains to take rainwater and sewage out of the city. Most water, and a lot else, no doubt, flowed out through the streets, which must have become rather unsavoury rivers in a downpour.

## N is for nightlife

When the night fell in Pompeii, it was very dark indeed. The thousands of oil lamps discovered can hardly have made much impact on the gloom. All the same, the bars kept on serving. Some hung welcoming lamps over their front doors. One striking example is in the shape of a pygmy with an enormous phallus, lights dangling from every extremity. A group of friends signing themselves ‘the late drinkers’ left their message on a Pompeian wall. Sign writers too were busy in the dark. A man called Celer posted up an advertisement for a gladiator show, “written,” it says, “by the light of the Moon”. Add to this the noise of all the guard dogs barking, the horses bellowing and the odd wakeful, honking pig – it was probably pretty noisy as well as dark after hours in Pompeii!



**O** is for one-way streets

How did two carts pass in a Pompeian street? A few of them were wide enough for two-way traffic, but the vast majority were definitely single track. Reversing would be next to impossible with a horse-drawn cart, never mind all the stepping stones in the way. One solution was to ring a warning bell, or send a boy ahead to clear the way. However, by studying the wheel ruts and the scrapes made by wheels hitting the curbs as they rounded corners, some archaeologists now think that a one-way street system was in operation.



The wines from this shop weren't - always so fine

**P** is for premier cru

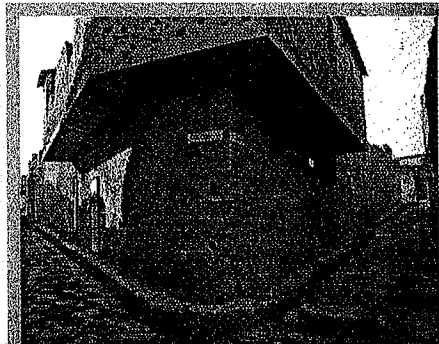
One of the best-known products of the land surrounding Pompeii was wine. The excellent Roman premier cru Falernian came from nearby. And one amphora of Pompeian wine was prized enough by someone that it found its way to England - probably as a gift or a souvenir, rather than by any kind of a flourishing wine trade with the northern provinces. But much of the really local wine was bottom-of-the-range. One Roman writer complained that it gave you a hangover till midday.

**Q** is for quality of life

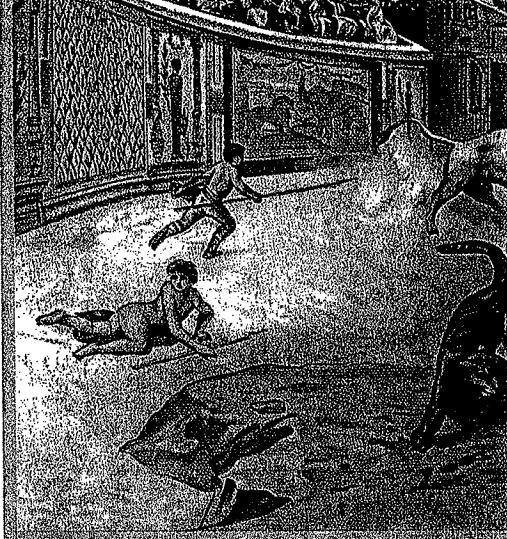
Life was comfortable for the wealthy, living in large - albeit often rather dark - houses, with gardens and shady colonnades. One house in the centre of the town was as big as some of the palaces occupied by the kings of the ancient world, and a few spectacular multi-storey properties on the western side of the town enjoyed marvellous views over the Mediterranean. For the slaves and the poor, however, things were bleak. They lived in cramped service quarters or in single rooms above their shop or workshop with not much more space than a family would need simply to sleep.

**R** is for real estate

Land was the main source of wealth in Pompeii. Every owner of a grand house in Pompeii would have had a country property too, growing vines or olives, or grazing sheep. Not many of these properties have been found, but the country burial ground of one well-known Pompeian family has been discovered, next to what is presumed to be their country house. And a magnificent estate, which may have belonged to the family of Nero's wife Poppaea, survives at Oplontis, a few miles from the town.

**S** is for sex workers

The ancient brothel (above) - a rather grim corner property with five cubicles, a series of erotic paintings and a lavatory - is visited more now than it was in the Roman world. That said, hundreds of bits of graffiti from satisfied Roman customers survive on its walls, as well as a learned post-coital quotation from Virgil. But sex was almost certainly for sale in all kinds of other parts of town: in bars or seedy one-room lodgings. For the rich, sex was a service provided by slaves.

**T** is for theatre-goers

Pompeii had two theatres and one amphitheatre. The amphitheatre (the earliest to survive anywhere in the world) featured occasional gladiator shows and wild beast hunts. No less popular were the theatrical performances such as plays, mimes and ancient pantomime - a combination of music and dance that is the ancestor of modern ballet, rather than Britain's traditional Christmas entertainment. Fan clubs supported particular artistes, proclaiming their enthusiasm on the walls of the town. "Come back soon, Anicetus".

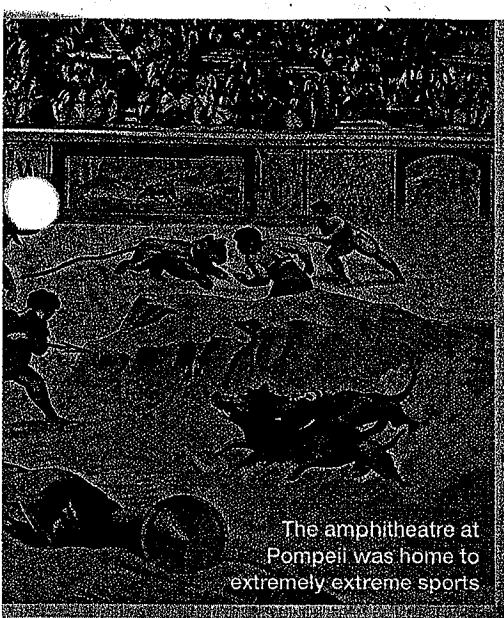
**U** is for upstairs, downstairs

What happened in the upstairs of many of the city's houses is another big Pompeian puzzle. Many houses had upper floors, but most were destroyed by the force of the eruption. The telltale surviving stairways, leading up from the ground floor, give away their presence even when all other trace has gone. There are all kinds of guesses about how these quarters were used - perhaps they were areas for storage, slave dormitories or rental apartments for lodgers.

**V** is for voting

Pompeian men went to the polls each year to vote for four officials to take charge of town business: a senior pair, called the two men for delivering justice, and a junior pair of *aediles* - officials who took care of markets, city property and streets. Slogans painted on the city's walls indicate where support lay, for example, "The bakers are supporting Caius Julius Polybius". While negative campaigning of the "Don't vote for kind was not the custom, slogans like "The slackers say vote for Polybius" probably amounted to much the same.

# INFOSHEET



The amphitheatre at Pompeii was home to extremely extreme sports

## W is for writing on the wall

Pompeian walls, outside and sometimes inside, were covered with notices and graffiti. These included adverts for shows and electoral campaign posters, as well as personal messages of every sort: "Please, no shitting here", "Successus the weaver's in love with Iris and she doesn't give a toss", "A bronze jar has gone from this shop – reward for its return". How far the ability to read and write spread through Pompeian society is a matter of dispute. Some historians put it as low as 20 per cent of the adult males, but the sheer prevalence of writing and the simple everyday information conveyed by it (including price lists) suggests that it was considerably higher.



## X is for xenophobia

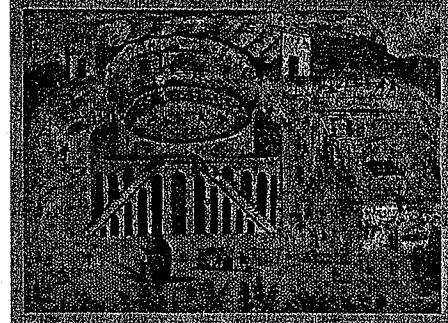
Pompeii was a surprisingly cosmopolitan town. With graffiti in Hebrew, bones from the Far East, Egyptian statues, and traces of exotic spices, interaction with other nationalities clearly took place. That did not mean that the locals completely embraced foreign cultures. A favourite theme in painting, for example, was the imaginary life of pygmies on the Nile, who were depicted getting up to anything from cannibalism to group sex.

## Y is for job culture

Antisocial behaviour was as much a feature of ancient life as it is today, with problems such as binge-drinking and sports hooliganism. The most infamous case of the latter occurred in AD 59, when a riot broke out in the amphitheatre between Pompeians and visitors from nearby Nuceria. In part this was a clash between home and visiting supporters. But Tacitus, the Roman historian who describes it, refers darkly to "illegal gangs". The upshot was a complete ban on gladiatorial games in the town for ten years.

## Z is for zoo

Where did the Pompeians find (and keep) all the animals they needed for the beast hunts? The truth is that the animals in the arena were often not quite as fierce as we might like to think. There were more wild boars and goats rounded up on the local hillside than the lions and tigers of our imagination. So, no zoo. But a few tame exotic creatures did perform in the streets or were kept as pets. Archaeologists have identified the bones of a monkey among the animal remains.



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## 3 FIND OUT MORE

- ▶ *The Fires of Vesuvius: Pompeii lost and found* by Mary Beard (Belknap Press, 2008)
- ▶ *Pompeii: public and private life* by Paul Zanker (Harvard University Press, 1999)
- ▶ [www.pompeiiites.org](http://www.pompeiiites.org)  
Website of the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei, the organisation who look after the city

Vesuvius gazes calmly down on visitors to this unique site



## Visiting Pompeii

Millions of visitors each year journey back in time at one of Italy's most popular attractions

The highlight of Pompeii is walking the streets. Try to find a deserted side street – it's still possible even with the crowds of visitors – and, clichéd as it is, you'll feel as if you're back in the Roman world. Don't miss the Villa of the Mysteries, just outside the town walls, for a really impressive painting (though touched up in the early 20th century, rather more than is usually admitted). The brothel still does a roaring trade and is worth a look, too!

