



Introduction

Pompeii: The life, death and rediscovery of a Roman town (HPAH5078/HPAH6078)

Content warning

- As people died and were partially conserved during the eruption you may see images of skeletal remains or plaster casts of dead people and animals.
- Some of the iconographic imagery from Pompeii, Herculaneum and other sites can be very graphic.
 - Images of sexual organs and sexual acts.
- Some of the language, especially found in graffiti, can be very “obscene” or potentially offensive (from a modern vantagepoint).





Living in the shadow of Vesuvius

- Vesuvius part of a series of volcanoes along the Tyrrhenian coast.
 - Eruptions before and since AD 79, e.g., ca. 1800 BC.
- Did people know it was a volcano?
 - Diodorus Siculus (“ancient fires”); Strabo (“ash coloured and unfruitful”); Pliny the Elder (no mention).
 - “It is moreover said that in former times fires under Vesuvius existed in abundance, and thence evolved flames about the fields. Thus, that which we call sponge-stone, or Pompeian pumice-stone, burnt from another species of stone, appears to be acted on by fire so as to possess a quality of this sort.” – Vitruvius *On Architecture* 2.6.2.
- House of the Centenary (IX.8.6) – Bacchus and Vesuvius

The eruption of Vesuvius: understanding events

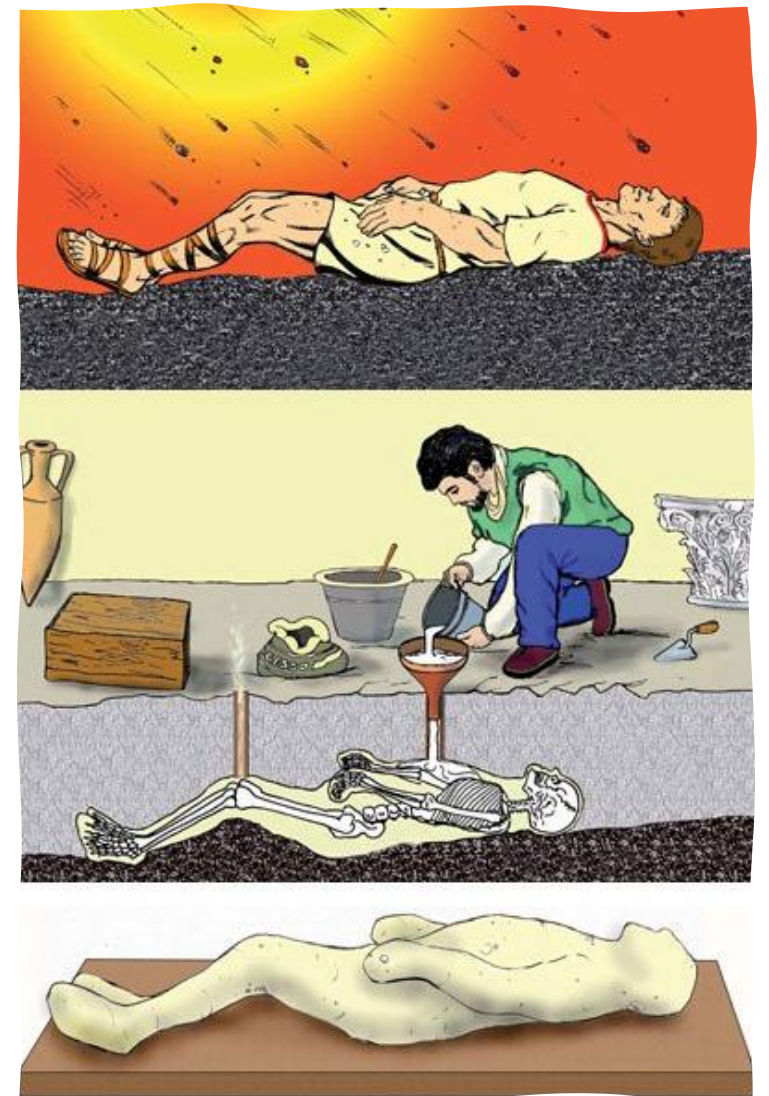
- Accounts of events (that do or did exist):
 - Letters of Pliny the Younger (to Tacitus); *Tacitus Histories*; Cassius Dio.
- Study of the stratigraphy by vulcanologists, geologists and archaeologists.
 - Events over a two-day period: ash, pumice, rocks and pyroclastic flows.
 - pyroclastic flows: fast paced surges of ash and tephra; collapse of eruption column.
- Controversies over dating:
 - Traditional date of the eruption: 24th August, AD 79.
 - Revisionist dates: later in autumn (September to November).





Scale of the catastrophe, relief efforts and cultural memory

- Challenge of knowing how many survived or died.
 - Herculaneum, waterfront; Pompeii, inside buildings and on the streets.
- Relief efforts by Titus (Suet. *Tit.* 8.4; Cass. Dio 66.24).
 - Suet: “He chose commissioners by lot from among the ex-consuls for the relief of Campania; and the property of those who lost their lives by Vesuvius and had no heirs left alive he applied to the rebuilding of the buried cities.”
 - Refugees headed to place like Nola, Neapoli, Surrentum and Capua.
- Martial *Ep.* 4.44; *Statius Silvae* (book 4): “Nor does the summit yet cease its deadly threat...”

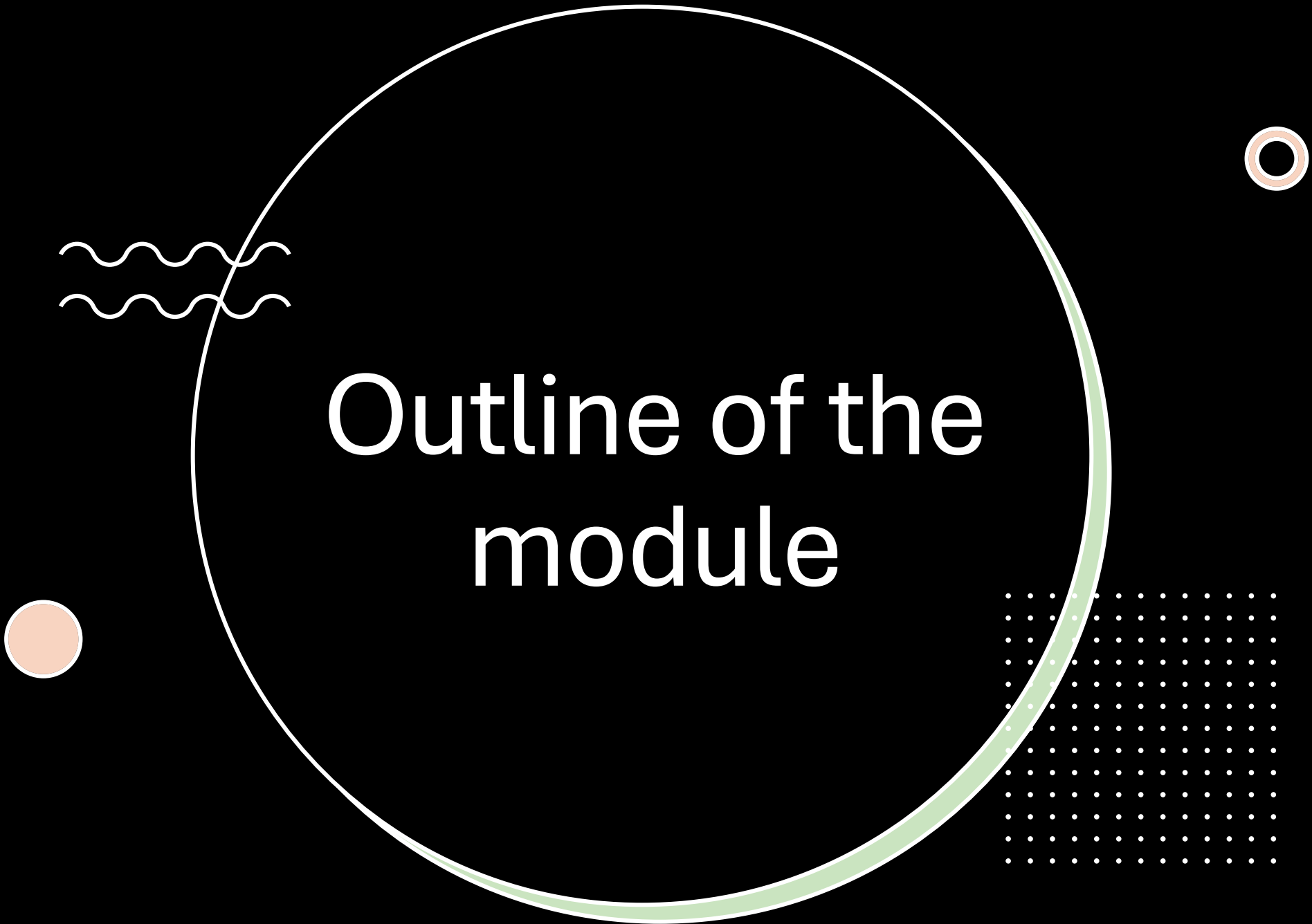


Plaster casts of bodies



Pompeii and Herculaneum: preserved for posterity?

- “Furthermore, it buried two entire cities, Herculaneum and Pompeii, the latter place while its populace was seated in the theatre.” – Cassius Dio 66.23.3.
 - Problems with the “time capsule” idea:
 - Events over 18 hours; damage to buildings; variable range of organic remains; later scavenging; and quality of early-modern excavations.
- Other sites in Campania:
 - Ca. 140-150 villas and farms.
 - Murecine, Oplontis and Stabiae.



Outline of the module

Themes of the module

Thematic in focus:
centred around people's
lives, daily habits, beliefs
and practices (social and
cultural history).

How we can tie together
literary, epigraphic,
iconographic, material
and scientific evidence to
understand the past.

The reception of Pompeii.

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Death of the town People of the town (especially the poor and enslaved) Entertainment	Sexuality Art / iconography Politics and public spectacles	Economic life Bathing [Take Home Exam]	The last days of Pompeii [Presentation assignment] The reception of Pompeii and modern heritage

Approaches to the module



Short contextual – thematic lectures (questions encouraged!).



Task-based and discussion-oriented seminars.



Preparatory readings available on Moodle.

Portfolio – element 1

- Round table discussions (across the 4 weeks).
 - Worth 12% for level 5, 8% for level 6.
- Four discussion sessions [i.e., 3/2% per session].
 - Participation based.
- Short comments and analysis of chosen building or site – discussed in class (ca. 3-5 minutes) and posted on Moodle (ca. 200-300 words).
- Choices on Moodle.

	Focus
1	History of building/site – domestic, business, public or political activity
2	Iconography and architecture – notable features
3	Material culture, epigraphy and organic remains
4	State or preservation or damage – efforts at conservation and further study

- Take Home exam (choice of 4 questions, pick 1):
 - 1200 words for level 5; 1500 for level 6.
 - 10 am to 6 pm on the 9 January 2026.
- A time-pressured essay (prose-style), with footnotes and a bibliography/reference list included at the end.
- Official questions revealed on the day itself, but advanced notice will be given of the 4 main themes + some suggested readings.
- Work can be done wherever you feel most comfortable.

Portfolio – element 2



Portfolio – elements 3 and 4

- **3:** poster presentation [28% at L5, 24% at L6]
 - If possible, in the immersive room.
 - Building on element 1 – a critical overview of your chosen building site.
 - Mixture of imagery and text.
 - 10 minutes followed by questions.
 - Date of presentation: 15/1/26.
- **4:** analytical report [35% at L5, 40% at L6]
 - 2000 and 2500 words respectively.
 - Building upon research done in earlier elements. Formally addressing issues raised in element 1.
 - As with an ordinary essay, ensure clear engagement with source material and scholarship.
 - Deadline: 18/1/26



Any questions?