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UNCOVERING

BURIED TREASURE

It is tempting to think of treasures as being hidden and found on purpose – perhaps buried by rich kings or pirates and then discovered years later by treasure hunters using maps, clues and evidence. But often, valuable things are simply lost, dropped, buried, sunk or swept away by chance. And many of the most incredible finds are chance, too. For the Boscoreale treasure, it was a little of both. Deeply buried during a volcanic eruption, it was lost for 1,800 years until a farmer found some pottery. This gave him a clue that something special could be lying beneath his land.



Italy

HIGH-CLASS LIVING

THE ANCIENT ROMANS who lived in villas like the one found at Boscoreale were wealthy and cultured, and liked to show it. They appreciated fine foods and wines. They also liked art and commissioned beautiful paintings and pottery, and had ornaments and tableware crafted from silver and gold. Many of these items were discovered in the ruins of Pompeii and Boscoreale.

FUNERARY MASK *A mask made of silver and bronze for a Roman's funeral*

Many people were overcome by poisonous fumes.

Gas and ash spewed out of the volcano.

Dash and stash
As thick ash rained from the sky, the master of the house scrambled to the cellar to hide the family valuables. But he never returned.

VESUVIUS ERUPTS

This villa is in Boscoreale, an ancient Roman town on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius, close to Naples and Pompeii in southern Italy. In AD 79, Vesuvius erupted explosively, burying the city of Pompeii and nearby towns and villages under thousands of tonnes of burning rock and ash. Caught by surprise, more than 150,000 people died within 48 hours of the eruption.

Running for their lives
Centuries after the eruption, the remains of many who tried to escape were found in the streets and houses of the region, preserved as "empty spaces" in the hardened ash. Among them were servants from this villa.

Most people took just a few possessions.

Blissfully unaware
This woman may have taken a sleeping draught and slept through the eruption. Her remains were found on the bed, as if she were dozing.

TREASURE TO FIND

The hoard found by de Prisco included a wide variety of utensils, such as bowls and cups made of silver and gold, hundreds of coins and priceless jewellery.



Skeletons of Greek poets

Silverware
This silver goblet is decorated with the skeletons of Greek poets and philosophers. An inscription on it says: "enjoy life while you can, for tomorrow is uncertain".



Pearl threaded on gold wire

Jade set into gold filigree

Roman finery
Among the treasures were many fine jewels, such as necklaces fashioned from threaded balls of gold or made of woven gold inlaid with precious stones.



Silver salver
The Boscoreale treasure included a massive hoard of silver plates. Romans used these in addition to coins for trade and barter. This finely crafted silver salver was probably a decoration or presented as a gift.

Storing valuables
In nearby Pompeii, several strongboxes were discovered, some containing their Roman owners' most prized treasures. Signor de Prisco was probably hoping to find something like this at Boscoreale, but his discovery was even more valuable.



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AMAZING DISCOVERIES

In the 19th century, people were more interested in collecting treasures than in preserving the area, recording their finds and learning from their discoveries. Often no information was kept at all and much damage was done. The finder of the treasure at Boscoreale, Vincenzo de Prisco, was very quick to dispose of his valuable finds for money and it is only because they were bought by a museum that we know anything about them at all.

THE SEARCH BEGINS

People living near Vesuvius knew all about the wonderful discoveries at Pompeii, so when a farmer found some ancient pottery on his land, he knew this could mean something special.



Storage jars
An amphora found at the site confirmed that ancient Romans had lived here. Amphorae are double-handled jars commonly used by the Romans for storing water or wine.

1 In 1876, Signor Pulzella unearthed part of an ancient villa in one of his fields. He wanted to explore further, but this meant digging on his neighbour's land and the neighbour refused to allow it.



Pottery remains were found when workmen began excavations for a wall.

– EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT –

FIND OR FORGERY?

THERE HAVE BEEN THOSE *who have questioned the authenticity of the Boscoreale treasures. Some argue that the artefacts were forged by modern-day silversmiths, and planted beneath the villa for Signor de Prisco and his workers to discover.*

But to this, I say "nonsense". It was I, Monsieur André, who received these treasures for the Louvre Museum. I personally saw the ash that caked the fragments and unmistakable signs of wear caused by centuries of burial beneath the earth. I have been restoring precious works of art for more than 40 years, and in all that time I was never so convinced that a find was genuine.

MONSIEUR ANDRÉ, EXPERT RESTORER OF ROMAN ANTIQUITIES



Decorative back of a Roman mirror

2 In 1894, landowner Vincenzo de Prisco, aware of the previous occupant's discovery, began a search, hoping to find something of value. His workmen unearthed the remains of the villa, but no treasure. They were about to give up when a spade hit something that sounded hollow. They had stumbled upon a trapdoor in the floor of what had once been the villa's wine-pressing room.



3 One of de Prisco's workmen ventured through a trapdoor and found the remains of a man sprawled on top of a large collection of valuable jewellery, coins, cups and plates.



Glass bottles
The ancient Romans were skilled glassworkers, and many glass bottles were found at Boscoreale. They were used as drinking vessels, ornaments or containers for perfume or oil.



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ALL IS REVEALED

Like many other archaeological sites of the 19th century, Boscoreale was, at first, clumsily excavated and looted. However, more recent work, using meticulous modern archaeological methods, has revealed something far more valuable than treasure. Properly conducted digs at Boscoreale and nearby sites have provided insight into the lives of the people of Boscoreale. With careful searching, frescoes, ornaments and cooking utensils were found, many of them beautifully preserved by their burial in volcanic ash.

Artefact store

All objects and fragments are brought here to be cleaned, labelled and kept safe until sent away for analysis.

CLEANING TREASURES

WHEN VALUABLE ARTEFACTS are found after centuries buried underground, they are often almost unrecognisable. They can be tarnished and dull, and may be stuck together with earth or ash or by corrosion. Pure gold does not spoil and only needs careful cleaning, but other metals, especially alloys, often have to be treated with a variety of chemicals to remove corrosion. Because chemicals may also cause damage, new conservation techniques are being developed, such as the use of lasers and other hi-tech equipment.



GOLD RINGS *Gold usually remains bright and shiny even after centuries underground or underwater.*

Site office

This is the control centre for the entire site. Here, archaeologists store specialist equipment, consult the dig plan, review progress and decide how to proceed.



Wall paintings

Windowless rooms were often decorated with painted scenes that reveal much about the lives and wealth of the original owners.



Clues to the past

The hot ash fell, then solidified on the people fleeing the eruption. Their bodies were burned away, leaving empty spaces. Archaeologists fill these with plaster to reveal the shape of the dead person.



Uncovering mosaics

Many of the priceless floor mosaics uncovered at Boscoreale were remarkably well preserved – their colours still vibrant after almost 2,000 years beneath the earth. But uncovering, removing and cleaning them was laborious work.

Every particle of soil is sifted for clues.

To ensure safety, fences are erected around the entire site.

Special measuring tools are used to accurately survey the whole area.

Sites are marked out into a grid pattern and every centimetre is minutely examined.

Overseeing work

Every stage of the dig is carefully mapped out and managed, so that no artefacts are missed and no structures are damaged when unearthed.

The positions of all finds are carefully recorded on a plan.

A plaster cast is made of a body "space".



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