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2,000-year-old tortoise and its egg discovered beneath workshop in Pompeii

Unusual find comes to light during excavations of an area that was devastated by an earthquake 17 years prior to the eruption of Vesuvius

By Nick Squires ROME

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The 2,000-year-old remains of a tortoise have been [found in the ruins of Pompeii](#), showing that the ancient Roman town was home not only to merchants, soldiers and slaves, but wild animals as well.

The well-preserved remains of the female tortoise, along with a single egg it had laid, were found beneath the clay floor of what was once a workshop along one of the main streets of the town, which was engulfed by the [eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD79](#).

Archaeologists believe the tortoise was not killed by the eruption, but died several years earlier, its body then preserved forever by the layers of pumice and ash that rained down on Pompeii when Vesuvius erupted.

The animal, identified as a Hermann's Tortoise, a species native to southern Europe, most likely died of natural causes.



An archaeologist excavates the remains of the tortoise | CREDIT: EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

The fact that a tortoise was laying its eggs in a workshop might seem strange, but Pompeii at the time was going through a period of dramatic transition.

The town had been hit by a powerful earthquake in AD62, after which there was an intense period of rebuilding.

The workshop may have been abandoned as a result of the quake, providing a quiet refuge for the tortoise as it looked for a place to dig a hole and lay its eggs.

“This was a critical period in the history of Pompeii,” Gabriel Zuchtriegel, the director of the archaeological site, told The Telegraph.

“It was a situation in which wild animals like this tortoise found space in which to live. Probably the workshop was not occupied, or at least was not in intensive use, at the time.

“This little story is just one piece of a giant mosaic in the life of Pompeii in which the city was undergoing huge transformation. It was changing economically, socially and demographically. People were moving away, others were moving in, others were rebuilding their homes. Pompeii was a huge construction site as it recovered from the earthquake.”



Gabriel Zuchtriegel, director of the archaeological site, with the remains of the tortoise | CREDIT: Shutterstock

The tortoise is not the first animal to have been found in the ruins of the town. There is a famous plaster cast of a watchdog that suffocated to death during the eruption – it was unable to escape because it was tethered by a leash.

The remains of the dog, frozen in a twisted posture as it writhed in agony, were discovered in 1874.

In 2018, archaeologists found the remains of three horses in a villa belonging to a Roman general or high-ranking magistrate.

“The whole topic of animals in Pompeii is something we want to look at more closely,” said Prof Zuchtriegel. “Until now, the extraordinary frescoes and mosaics and statues that have been discovered have attracted all the attention. The idea now is to look at Pompeii as an entire ancient ecosystem.”

The tortoise was found during excavations conducted by scholars from Oxford University, the Free University of Berlin and the Oriental University of Naples.



Archaeologists also found the remains of a luxurious Roman villa | CREDIT: Shutterstock

They also found the remains of a sumptuous villa or domus, decorated with mosaics and painted walls, which was built in the first century BC.

After the earthquake, the huge villa was largely demolished to make way for a large public baths complex, the Stabian Baths.

“There was non-stop building and confidence in the future,” said Monika Trumper, a German archaeologist.

“No one had any idea whatsoever of the catastrophe which would strike Pompeii just a short while later.”

Dario Franceschini, Italy’s culture minister, said: “Excavations underway at Pompeii continue to reveal important new finds, confirming the extraordinary richness of a place that fascinates the whole world.”

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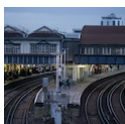
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