Down Pompeii: inside the 200-year-old treasure-hunting tunnels beneath ancient Roman city

The discovery of a network of passages made by 18th-century 'tomb raiders' sheds more light on area destroyed by volcanic eruption in AD 79

Nick Squires IN POMPEII

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They burrowed through layers of ash and pumice stone, relentlessly searching for ancient treasures by the light of candles.

Now, centuries on, archaeologists have uncovered the tunnels used by the first explorers of the Roman city of Pompeii, which was preserved by a smothering blanket of volcanic detritus when Mount Vesuvius erupted in AD 79. And they have warned that the ancient site is still menaced by tomb raiders.

The tunnels, which were gouged through walls decorated with exquisite paintings, were dug by workers who were commissioned by the Spanish Bourbon dynasty, the rulers of Naples in the 18th and 19th centuries.

They have been discovered in a vast Roman villa that has recently come to light in a newly excavated section of the town on the Bay of Naples.

Starting in 1748 and continuing into the 19th century, tunnellers dug vertical shafts into the ground and from there burrowed through the remains of the ancient city, which had been subsumed by volcanic ash and pumice when the volcano erupted.

They were satisfying the demands of the Bourbons, who developed a passion for finding ancient Roman treasures and displaying them in their palatial homes.

'They were like moles'

"They were like moles," said Alessandro Russo, one of the architects who discovered the tunnels recently. "They dug a whole labyrinth of galleries. They were very narrow and would have been illuminated only by naked flames from candles. There would have been a risk of the tunnels collapsing. It would have been dangerous work."

One of the newly found tunnels burrowed through a palatial reception room which has only recently been unearthed by Pompeii's professional archaeologists.

It traverses the vast room, which once looked out on to a colonnaded portico and ornamental garden with fountains, and then worms its way into a corner.

The passages were gouged through walls that were decorated with exquisite paintings | CREDIT: VICTOR SOKOLOWICZ

Restorers standing on scaffolding carefully scrape away the dust and grime of centuries, revealing sumptuously decorated walls. On the floor, they are uncovering beautifully preserved mosaics made of coloured marble.

As they dug, the Bourbon tunnellers used shards of ancient terracotta roof tiles to shore up the walls of the tunnel and prevent it from collapsing.

“I’ve never seen a Bourbon tunnel like this, nor the use of ceramic materials to reinforce the walls,” said Dr Sophie Hay, a British archaeologist who has worked at Pompeii for 20 years.

“It enables us to look at the history of the discovery of Pompeii, as well as that of the ancient Roman period. The tunnellers were looking for the best, shiniest pieces to put on display in their palazzi.”

Finely drawn images

Another tunnel bored through a different part of the huge villa, damaging walls that are decorated with finely drawn images of leopards, gryphons, deer and swans.

As the workers dug their way through the layers of pumice and hardened ash that had settled 1,700 years before, they had no idea what they were wrecking until it was too late.

The property is believed to have been owned by a Roman politician who evidently commanded a commercial empire in Pompeii.

Attached to it is a bakery where slaves and mules turned vast milling stones in a dimly lit chamber that would have reeked of sweat and manure. Just a few feet from the giant grinding stones, archaeologists have found a latrine where slaves would relieve themselves before having to get back to the back-breaking work of milling wheat for bread. They came from all over the empire, from Britain and Gaul to Syria and Judaea.

The discovery was made during an excavation of a section of the town on the Bay of Naples | CREDIT: VICTOR SOKOLOWICZ

The tunnellers caused enormous damage to such rooms as they blindly dug their way deeper and deeper underground, crashing through walls. They did, at least, leave the frescoes and mosaic floors in situ because they were on the hunt for more valuable treasure.

“They were looking for precious objects like statues or anything made of bronze, silver or gold,” said Raffaele Martinelli, an archaeologist working on the dig.

The legacy of the Bourbons was not all bad, said Gabriel Zuchtriegel, Pompeii’s director.

“Without the excavations carried out by the Bourbons, Pompeii would not have been brought to light. It’s difficult to judge them. It’s easy to say they caused damage, but at the time there were no established methods and no professional archaeologists. Instead, they

were largely architects or engineers who were commissioned by the Bourbons. They made errors, but we have learnt from those errors."

The Bourbon tunnellers may have been consigned to history, but there are still subterranean pilferers searching for ancient treasures.

'Tombaroli'

In Italian, they are known as "tombaroli" – tomb raiders. They tend to be locals whose homes are located on the periphery of Pompeii and sit on top of land that still conceals Roman villas not yet officially excavated.

"Today's tomb raiders use exactly the same techniques as during the Bourbon period," Dr Russo said. "It's a big problem, all around the Pompeii area. They dig tunnels beneath their homes or gardens so they are very hard to detect. You can't see them."

In 2019, the authorities discovered an illegal tunnel that led from beneath a modern house on the outskirts of Pompeii down to the remains of a large rural villa in an area known as Civita Giuliana.

When they explored the illegal dig, they came across an extraordinary find – an ancient Roman chariot with elaborate silver and bronze decorations and a stable with the remains of three horses. The chariot was known in Latin as a "pilentum", a carriage used for ceremonies such as accompanying a bride to her new home.

The unearthed chariot, known in Latin as a 'pilentum' | CREDIT: Shutterstock

"It's difficult to combat the tomb raiders because they operate over a very large area," Dr Russo said. "The good news is that it has become harder for them to sell whatever they find – there are much tighter checks on the trafficking of artefacts."

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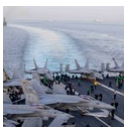

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