Herculaneum

In the Shadow of Mount Vesuvius

by amalficoasting.org

When Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 A.D., the Roman seaside town of Herculaneum was engulfed by volcanic material along with Pompeii and the surrounding area. Until the 18th century, it was buried under a layer of volcanic material more than 50 feet thick.

The mythical origin of Herculaneum is linked to Greek hero Hercules, who supposedly founded the town while returning from a trip to Spain. In reality, the city probably had an Etruscan origin, like Pompeii, and then by the 5th century BC was controlled by the Samnites.

Starting at the end of the Roman Republic, the entire coast near Herculaneum became the site of villas of the local Roman nobility (the most famous is the Villa of the Papyri).

In the Augustan period, the city underwent a general revival, with the restoration of the walls, and the construction of the aqueduct, two spas, the Theatre, the "Basilica", the Gymnasium and the temples in the southern area.

It was then that the city reached a population of about 4 to 5 thousand people.

In 79 BC, when Mt.Vesuvius erupted, Herculaneum was first hit by a steamy, toxic intensely hot cloud, then buried by subsequent pyroclastic flows. The lava, in semi-liquid state commingled with mud, penetrated everywhere, then solidified into the compact block that allowed the extraordinary preservation of the town.

In 1709, local workers hired by the Austrian general, Count Elbeuf, discovered the wall of the stage of the theater.

In 1738 by order of King Charles of Bourbon proper excavations began.

In 1750 the suburban Villa dei Papiri, or Villa of the Papyri (#44 on the map) was discovered. It was surrounded by a garden closed off by porticoes, but with an ample stretch of vegetable gardens, vineyards and woods that led down to a small harbor. Built on four levels of terraces on the sloping site, it was one of the most luxurious houses in all of Herculaneum and Pompeii with its treasure of sculptures (now in the National Museum of Naples) and the villa’s library with a collection of papyrus (now in the National Library of Naples).

In 1927 a systematic digging campaign lead to the unearthing of a large part of the city with entire neighborhoods and many public buildings such as the Decumanus Maximus and the Forum, which was the center of economic, social and political life.

The Thermal Baths (#26 Men's Baths, #27 Women's Baths) were built probably in the age of Caesar and then rearranged in the early Augustan period (10 B.C.) due to the greater availability of water from the construction of the Serino aqueduct. Smaller and less refined than those of Pompeii, they have the same arrangement of the rooms and the traditional division into male and female sections.

South of the Baths is the the Casa a Graticcio (#35), or House of the Opus Craticium, which consists of a wooden frame filled by stones. It was an effective way to erect residences for middle and lower class citizens of Herculaneum. This residence, inhabited by several families who lived together, is the best preserved example of such structure.

Following the alley that runs...
Terrazza di M. Nonio Balbo, or
Terrace of M. Nonius Balbus (#2)
Climbing the ramp against the walls brings you into a large rectangular piazza, in front of the complex of the Suburban Baths. Here stands the funeral altar, covered with marble, which by decree of the local senate was dedicated to the senator M. Nonius Balbus, praetor and proconsul of the provinces of Crete and Cyrene, tribune of the plebes in 32 BC and partisan of Octavian, the future ‘Augustus’ (27 B.C.-14 A.D.). M. Nonius Balbus did good service towards the city of Herculaneum by restoring and building many public buildings: at least 10 statues were erected in his honor, and great honors bestowed upon his death, recalled in the long inscription engraved on the side of the funeral altar facing the sea. On the marble base next to the funeral altar was the armored statue of M. Nonius Balbus himself, also made of marble: the head was found during the early excavations, while the large fragment of the bust was recovered in 1981.

Area Sacra, or Sacred Area (#4)
The western sector of the South Terrace, supported by heavy vaulted structures, is occupied by a Sacred Area contain-
ing various rooms and two temples side by side, dedicated to Venus and four divinities, respectively. Here, as recalled by an inscription, the board of Venerii held its meetings. Two mythological frescoes were detached from the first vaulted room after entering the Sacred Area; the second was instead the source of two headless statues of women in togas, and a marble ara dedicated to Venus by a libertus of the Marii family. Architectural terra-cottas from a previous renovation have also been found in the area.

Sacello di Venere, or Sacellum of Venus (#5)
Completely restored after the earthquake in 62 A.D. by Vibidia Saturninus and his son A. Furius Saturninus, this small temple is dedicated to Venus. It is preceded by a marble-covered altar, and had a vestibule (pronaos) with grooved and stuccoed tufa columns, now stacked nearby; the vaulted cell contains the remains of frescoes with a garden motif: in the painted panel to the left of the entrance we can recognize a rudder, an attribute of Venus-Fortuna who guided sailors.

Sacello dei Quattro Dei, or Sacellum of Four Gods (#6)
Restored after the earthquake in 62 A.D., the temple is dedicated to four divinities, as evidenced by the lovely archaistic reliefs, perhaps from the Augustan period (27 B.C.-14 A.D.), originally fastened to the front side of the podium standing at the back of the cell. These depict Minerva, Neptune, Mercury and Volcano, all divinities related to the world of manufacture, trade and crafts. The floor of the pronaos (vestibule) and the Corinthian columns are made of cipolline marble. Part of the wooden structure of the roof was recently recovered, dragged onto the beach below by the force of the eruption.

Casa del Rilievo di Telefo, or House of Relief of Telephus (#7)
With the adjacent House of the Gem, it formed a complex that may have belonged to M. Nonius Balbus, and is the second largest in Herculaneum (1800 square meters). Built in a scenic position, on the slope leading down to the marina, the house was built on three levels and held a rich collection of sculptures of the neo-Attic school, including the relief with the myth of Telephus, son of Hercules (mythical founder of the city). The structure current dates from the Augustan period (27 BC-14 A.D.), and was remodeled after the earthquake in 62 AD. The atrium is similar to a peristyle, with columns supporting the rooms of the upper floor, as in certain Greek houses. Between the columns hang the plaster casts of the marble oscilla found here (discs or masks, generally in a Dionysian theme, used to ward off evil).

Casa del Gran Portale, or House with Large Portal (#14)
The name derives from the half-columned portal, with brick lintel and cornice, built after the earthquake in 62 A.D., which reused the Hellenistic tufa capitals symbolizing Victory. The dwelling, whose unusual layout comes from an expansion of the building at the expense of the peristyle of the adjacent 'Samilnite House', has the remains of grooved tufa columns and two pilasters with half-columns still encased in the walls, in their original position. Worthy of note within the dwelling are the 'fourth style' frescoes; the small courtyard to the left of the entrance that gave the illusion of a
ing into the dynamics of upward mobility. Their ‘board’, dedicated to worshiping the emperor Augustus, held its meetings in the area of the Forum, where all political, religious and commercial life took place. This is a building with a quadrangular layout, with walls separated by blind arches and four central columns. Later, a cell was built aligned with the entrance, which partly retains its original floor and wainscoting covered with marble, and ‘fourth style’ frescoes: on the left wall is depicted the entrance of Hercules in the Olympus, accompanied by Jupiter, in the form of a rain- bow, Juno and Minerva; the one on the right alludes instead to the battle between Hercules and the Etruscan god Acheloo. In the back, to the right of the sacellum, is the caretaker’s room in opus craticium, whose skeleton was found lying on the bed. An inscription now placed on the wall reminds us that the building, dedicated to Augustus (27 B.C.-14 A.D.) while still living, was built by the brothers A. Lucius Proculus and A. Lucius Iulianus, who offered a luncheon to the members of the municipal senate and the Augustals on its inauguration day.

Casa dei Due Atri, or Double Atrium House (#25)
The lovely façade on the gate has a terracotta Gorgon mask against the evil eye. There was an upper floor extending for the length of the house, with light provided by two atria: one, in front of the entrance, tetrastyle (with its roof supported by four columns); the other, farther inside, with impluvium and two well-heads, which also acted as a garden. Note the small window in the façade, one of which still has its original ironwork.
Casa Sannitica, or Samnite House (#31)
This dwelling, built in the 2nd century B.C., originally occupied a large area. Its currently visible appearance is the result of changes made over time. The residence at first ceded its garden space to the adjacent house, then, after the earthquake in 62 A.D., the rooms on the upper floor were separated from the house and rented out, creating an independent entrance. The lovely view frames the portal topped by tufa capitals supporting the wooden architrave: the entrance is decorated in ‘first style’, with a coffered ‘second style’ ceiling. The Hellenistic-style atrium, with walls painted over in ‘fourth style’, is crowned at the top by an arcade closed on three sides by false columns, with one open side. The floor is dotted with white tiles, while that of the tablinum is adorned with a rosette of diamond shapes centered around a round copper tile. During the final remodelling, the impluvium was covered with marble and a room painted with a green background, with the painting depicting the rape of Europa.

Casa dell’Alcova, or House of the Alcove (#32)
The house is actually two buildings joined together. As a consequence of this it is a mixture of plain and simple rooms combined with some highly decorated ones. The atrium is covered, so lacks the usual impluvium. It retains its original flooring of opus tesselatum and opus sectile. Off the atrium is a biclinium richly decorated with frescoes in the fourth style and a large triclinium which originally had a marble floor. A number of other rooms, one of which is the apsed alcove after which the house was named, can be reached via a hall which gets its light from a small courtyard.

Casa dell’Atrio a Mosaico, or House of the Mosaic Atrium (#33)
The house occupies an area of over 1200 sq.m. much of which, like the adjoining Casa dei Cervi, or House of the Deer, taken over by a large peristyle garden and a string of richly decorated rooms overlooking the sea. What distinguishes this house from its neighbor is its spectacular atrium.
At the rear of the atrium is a room of unusual size and form. A series of square pillars on the north and south sides of the room divide it in the pattern of a nave and two side aisles, while above the pillars rises a second story with clerestory windows reminiscent of the classical basilica layout. This room is considered a rare example of an Oceus Aegyptius or Egyptian dining room based on Vitruvius’s description. Given its position, it must have been used as a public reception area, deliberately evoking the public setting of the basilica.
On the south side of the atrium is a door which opens onto the north portico of the large peristyle, with additional rooms along its eastern and southern sides. In the center of the eastern side is a large exedra, which extends out into the garden with a small terrace.

Casa del Tramezzo di Legno, or House of the Wooden Partition (#36)
The entrance to this dwelling is flanked by two masonry seats and a waiting room. The conventional name derives from the wooden partition, a folding gate that shields the atrium, to maintain privacy. The partition has profiled panels with rings and supports for hanging oil-lamps.
The floor of the large atrium is decorated with white tiles, dating from the most ancient stage of the residence. The marble covering of the impluvium tub, the wall paintings and the geometric mosaic of the room to the right of the entrance date instead from a restoration from approximately the mid-1st cent. A.D.

**Casa del Genio, or House of the Genius (#39)**
To the north of the House of Argus lies the House of the Genius. It has been only partially excavated but it appears to have been a spacious building. The house derives its name from the statue of a cupid that formed part of a candlestick. In the centre of the peristyle are the remains of a rectangular basin.

**Casa di Argo, or House of Argus (#40)**
The second house in insula II got its name from a fresco of Argus and Io which once adorned a reception room off the large peristyle. The fresco is now lost, but its name lives on. This building must have been one of the finer villas in Herculaneum. The discovery of the house in the late 1820s was notable because it was the first time a second floor had been unearthed in such detail. The excavation revealed a second floor balcony overlooking Cardo III. Also wooden shelving and cupboards. However, with the passing of time, these elements have now been lost.

**Casa di Aristide, or House of Aristides (#41)**
The first building in insula II is the House of Aristides. The entrance opens directly onto the atrium, but the remains of the house are not particularly well preserved due to damage caused by previous excavations. The lower floor was probably used for storage.

**Casa dello Scheletro, or House of the Skeleton (#42)**
The front of the building was first explored by an archaeologist who found a skeleton on the upper floor. The current layout combines three existing houses in an elongated shape, of which the central one has a covered atrium. The nymphaeum to the left of the entrance has the back wall covered with lava and a mosaic-covered frieze. A mosaic lararium is also present in a small courtyard, protected by a metal grate. A few rooms have floors in sectile opus and frescoed walls.

**Casa dell’Albergo, or House of the Hotel (#43)**
It is the largest, and probably was the richest, private building in the southern part of town and the only one in Herculaneum to have a private thermal bath suite.

**Terme Suburbane, or Suburban Baths (#46)**
Built between the walls of the town and the sea in the early 1st century A.D., this bath complex is one of the best preserved anywhere. The half-columned portal with typanum leads into the vestibule with impluvium, bordered by 4 columns; water sprays into the circular fountain. The vestibule opens to the right, through a corridor, onto a waiting room and to the praefurnium (oven). The bathing rooms as such include the frigidarium (cold bathing room), with a floor of white marble slabs and frescoes in fourth style, the tepidarium, with a floor of slate slabs and stuccoes on the walls depicting warriors, the caldarium (hot bathing room), with walls decorated in 4th style. In this room one can see the impression of the labrum (tub for ablutions) in the volcanic material that came in through the window. The eastern sector of the bath complex includes an apsidal room, with a ‘pool’ heated using the ‘samovar’ system (a receptacle placed in the center of the room, below which the fire was lit directly), and the laconicum (steam bath room), with a black mosaic floor on a white background.