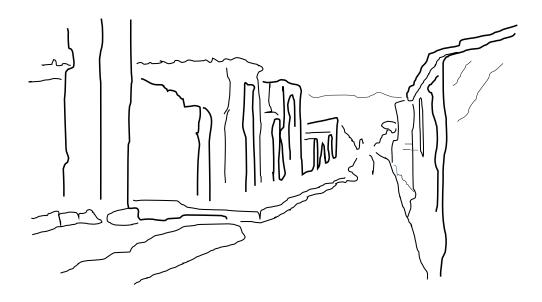# Entering Early Christianity via Pompeii

A virtual guide to the world of the New Testament

by Peter Oakes & Benedict Kent

This learning resource is intended for members of the public and for students interested in early Christianity and the New Testament. It uses the remarkable remains of Roman buildings at Pompeii to reconstruct the social world of early Christian communities. Peter Oakes is Professor of New Testament at the University of Manchester. These materials are based on his extensive research on Pompeii and early Christianity and the publications that have come out of it. Benedict Kent has a PhD in New Testament Studies from the University of Manchester.

Feedback: These materials are available for free download. The one thing we ask is for users to consider providing feedback to help us understand how the resources are being used, how useful they are, and how they could be improved. Please follow the links at the bottom of our homepage to complete our short online questionnaire after using the resource. It's even more valuable to us if you can complete both our 'before' and 'after' questionnaires. If materials have been used as part of a study group, we'd also welcome feedback from group leaders.

Come again: We're also interested in the benefits this material might have for users. If you'd like to return in the future and tell us about any effects the learning has had, we'd love to hear about it. Follow the relevant link at the bottom of our homepage to leave a comment.

Additional resources: For a guide to Pompeii, downloadable maps and many further valuable resources about all the key sites in the region, visit the official Pompeii web-site, http://pompeiisites.org/en/. For house summaries, visit AD79. For extensive photo collections of the houses, visit pompeiiinpictures.com.

Finding your way around

What did early Christian groups look like? What did it mean to belong to one? Where did they meet and how did they organise themselves? Although there is no clear evidence that Christian groups established themselves in Pompeii, the town's houses provide rare insight into what life was like for early Christians.

> *What can Pompeian houses tell us about the context of the New Testament?*

Get linked up to a virtual Pompeii

Each chapter in this guide uses a different group of houses in Pompeii to imagine what life was like for Christians gathering in these kinds of spaces. If you have access to the internet then you'll able to click the in-text hyperlinks for additional photos, maps and diagrams and for additional activities. Some links will take you to specific images, others will take you to a gallery of images you'll need to explore.

The insula of the Menander

We use the domestic spaces within the insula of the Menander as our main examples but links will take you to images of other buildings for you to investigate at your leisure. An *insula* (lit. 'island') is a street block, often made up of numerous smaller residences: houses, apartments, workshops and service spaces. House codes (eg. I. 10.4) refer to a particular district (I), an *insula* (10), and a street entrance (4).

Character cards

Personified social-types can help to guide our imaginations and raise new questions as we explore Pompeii's buildings. Use the character cards to consider how a first-century person might feel in a particular space and how they might respond to advice from a Christian leader. If you are working as a group, you might like to distribute these characters among you and read through them before discussion.

Ancient Christian texts

We will be using extracts from a letter written by the apostle Paul to worshippers of Jesus in Roman Corinth (1 Corinthians) to understand life in the early churches and the social pressures their members faced. The communities reflected in 1 Corinthians were mainly made up of Gentiles (Greeks, Romans and others) with some Jewish members. They likely represented a cross section of non-elite society and many of them, including Paul himself, were probably craft-workers (cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:9).

Making sense of Roman Pompeii

Buried by the volcano: Pompeii is particularly relevant to understanding the world of the New Testament because the city was destroyed by Vesuvius in AD 79 (=79 CE), right in the period when NT texts were being written. The city gives us dateable evidence and vast amounts of it. Pompeii was 'frozen in time' – you can see grass that was mown that morning! There are complications. In years before the eruption there were earthquakes and many houses were not in normal use in 79, including some still being repaired. In years after the eruption, people dug into the site and removed property from many rooms. However, the places buried by Vesuvius still give us by far the fullest evidence for first-century life.

Society and households: Like towns throughout the Mediterranean world, an elite few percent ran Pompeii and owned almost all the property. Every part of the other 95%+ was also full of hierarchies. Many relatively well-off traders and others had long-term 'patronage' relationships with members of the elite, exchanging favours of various kinds. Similar types of dependency ran on down through the levels of society. Even the household was a hierarchy in terms of gender, age, power and, especially, slavery – present in even fairly modest craftworker families. Freeing of urban slaves was common (often at an *old* age such as 30!) but most freed slaves stayed somewhat bound to their former owners—another form of patronage.

Temples and worship: Like other ancient peoples, Greeks and Romans gathered at temples to make offerings and to perform hymns, prayers and vows. Smaller altars around the city were used to gain favour for the inhabitants of the street. Shrines inside houses were attended by the whole *familia* to ensure protection. In light of these practices, Christ-groups appear rather unusual. Their worship involved singing, prayer and teaching but not physical temples, altars or sacrifices – only a regular communal meal. It was remarkably 'low tech'.

Eclectic housing: In Pompeii, many opulent houses are found surrounded by a variety of smaller spaces. Elite, non-elite and poor lived side-by side or on top of each other, with the latter two groups providing the workforce, rental incomes and luxury goods for the former.

The insula of the Menander

Green = the elite House of the Menander

Red = a small workshop

Blue = a house of a cabinet-maker

Purple = a bar and rooms

Some useful Latin terms

amphora	jar for transportation
familia	an entire household–not just the people related to each other
fauces	narrow front entrance to the Roman house
impluvium	pool for collecting rainwater in the atrium
insula	common archaeologist's term for a street block, often made up of smaller residences
lararium	shrine to the household gods (called *lares*), often beside other gods
lares compitales	gods of the crossroads
lares familiares	gods of the household
macellum	meat market
officina	workshop
pater familias	father of the household
popina	bar or cookshop
porticus	covered walkway
taberna	small shop
thermopolium	cookshop
triclinium	dining room

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Images

Finding your way around

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- P46 (1 Corinthians 2:3–2:11; 2:11–3:5) by Alastair Haines - University of Michigan, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4248177

Making sense of Roman Pompeii

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- Map of the Insula of the Menander, adapted from Ling 1997, fig. 24 (drawn by S. Gibson, J. S. Gregory, R. J. Ling, D. Murdoch), with thanks to Roger Ling for permission to reproduce this plan