INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER I

THE SITUATION OF POMPEII

From Gaeta, where the south end of the Volscian range borders abruptly upon the sea, to the peninsula of Sorrento, a broad gulf stretched in remote ages, cutting its way far into the land. Its waves dashed upon the base of the mountains which now, rising with steep slope, mark the eastern boundary of the Campanian Plain—Mt. Tifata above Capua, Mt. Taburno back of Nola, and lying across the southeast corner, the huge mass of Monte Sant’Angelo, whose sharply defined line of elevation is continued in the heights of Sorrento.

This gulf was transformed by volcanic agencies into a fertile plain. Here two fissures in the earth’s crust cross each other, each marked by a series of extinct or active volcanoes. One fissure runs in the direction of the Italian Peninsula; along it lie Monti Berici near Vicenza, Mt. Amiata below Chiusi, the lakes of Bolsena and Bracciano filling extinct craters, the Alban Mountains, and finally Stromboli and Actea. The other runs from east to west; its direction is indicated by Mt. Vulture near Venosa, Mt. Epomeo on the island of Ischia, and the Ponza Islands.

At three places in the old sea basin the subterranean fires burst forth. Near the north shore rose the great volcano of Rocca Monfina, which added itself to the Volscian Mountains, and heaping the products of its eruptions upon Mons Massicus,—once an island,—formed with this the northern boundary of the plain. Toward the middle the numerous small vents of the Phlegrean Fields threw up the low heights, to which the north
shore of the Bay of Naples—Posilipo, Baiae, Misenum—is
indebted for its incomparable beauty of landscape. Finally,
ear the south shore, at the intersection of the fissures, the
massive cone of Vesuvius rose, in complete isolation—the
only volcano on the continent of Europe still remaining active.
Its base on the southwest is washed by the sea, while on the
other sides a stretch of level country separates it from the

![Map of Ancient Campania](image)

mountains that hem in the plain. On the side opposite from
the sea, however, Vesuvius comes so near to the mountains
that we may well say that it divides the Campanian plain into
two parts, of which the larger, on the northwest side, is drained
by the Volturro; the small southeast section is the plain of the
Sarno.

The Sarno, like the Umbrian Clitumnus, has no upper course.
At the foot of Mt. Taburno, bounding the plain on the north-

![Vesuvius as seen from Naples](image)

east, are five copious springs that soon unite to form a stream.
Since 1843 the river has been drawn off for purposes of irri-
gation into three channels, which are graded at different levels;
the distribution of water thus assured makes this part of Cam-
pania one of the most fertile districts in Italy. In antiquity the
Sarno must have been confined to a single channel; according
to Strabo it was navigable for ships.

In Roman times three cities shared in the possession of the
Sarno plain. Furthest inland, facing the pass in the mountains
that opens toward the Gulf of Salerno, lay Nuceria, now Nocera.
On the seashore, where the coast road to Sorrento branches off
toward the southwest, was Stabiae, now Castellammare. North
of Stabiae, at the foot of Vesuvius, Pompeii stood, on an eleva-
tion overlooking the Sarno, formed by the end of a stream of
lava that in some past age had flowed from Vesuvius down
toward the sea. Pompeii thus united the advantages of an
easily fortified hill town with those of a maritime city. "It
lies," says Strabo, "on the Sarnus, which accommodates a
traffic in both imports and exports; it is the seaport of Nola,
Nuceria, and Acerrae."

A glance at the map will show how conveniently situated
Pompeii was to serve as a seaport for Nola and Nuceria; but
it seems hardly credible that the inhabitants of Acerrae,
which lay much nearer Naples, should have preferred for their
marine traffic the circuitous route around Vesuvius to the Sarno. However that may have been, Pompeii was beyond doubt the most important town in the Sarno plain.

Pompeii formerly lay nearer the sea and nearer the river than at present. In the course of the centuries alluvial deposits have pushed the shore line further and further away. It is now about a mile and a quarter from the nearest point of the city to the sea; in antiquity it was less than a third of a mile. The line of the ancient coast can still be traced by means of a clearly marked depression, beyond which the stratification of the volcanic deposits thrown out in 79 does not reach. The Sarno, too, now flows nearly two thirds of a mile from Pompeii; in antiquity, according to all indications, it was not more than half so far away.

In point of climate and outlook, a fairer site for a city could scarcely have been chosen. The Pompeian, living in clear air, could look down upon the fogs which in the wet season frequently rose from the river and spread over the plain. And while in winter Stabiae, lying on the northwest side of Monte Sant' Angelo, enjoyed the sun for only a few hours, the elevation on which Pompeii stood, sloping gently toward the east and south, more sharply toward the west, was bathed in sunlight during the entire day.

Winter at Pompeii is mild and short; spring and autumn are long. The heat of summer, moreover, is not extreme. In the early morning, it is true, the heat is at times oppressive. No breath of air stirs; and we look longingly off upon the expanse of sea where, far away on the horizon, in the direction of Capri, a dark line of rippling waves becomes visible. Nearer it comes, and nearer. About ten o'clock it reaches the shore. The leaves begin to rustle, and in a few moments the sea breeze sweeps over the city, strong, cool, and invigorating. The wind blows till just before sunset. The early hours of the evening are still; the pavements and the walls of the houses give out the heat which they have absorbed during the day. But soon—perhaps by nine o'clock—the tree tops again begin to murmur, and all night long, from the mountains of the interior, a gentle, refreshing stream of air

flows down through the gardens, the roony atriums and colonnades of the houses, the silent streets, and the buildings about the Forum, with an effect indescribably soothing.

How shall I undertake to convey to the reader who has not visited Pompeii, an impression of the beauty of its situation? Words are weak when confronted with the reality. Sea, mountains, and plain,—strong and pleasing background,—great

masses and brilliant yet harmonious colors, splendid foreground effects and hazy vistas, undisturbed nature and the handiwork of man, all are blended into a landscape of the grand style, the like of which I should not know where else to look for.

If we turn toward the south, we have at our feet the level plain of the Sarno, in antiquity as now—we may suppose—not checkered with villages but dotted here and there with groups of farm buildings, surrounded with stately trees. Beyond the plain rises the lofty barrier of Monte Sant' Angelo, thickly wooded.

Fig. 3.—View from Pompeii, looking south.
in places, its summit standing out against the sky in a long, beautiful profile, which, toward the right, breaks up into bold, rugged notches; the side of the mountain below is richly diversified with deep valleys, projecting ridges, and terraces that in the distance seem like steps, where among vineyards and olive orchards stand two villages fair to look on, Gragnano and Lettere, so near that individual houses can be clearly distinguished. Further west the plain before us opens out upon the sea, while the mountains are continued in the precipitous coast of the peninsula of Sorrento. Height crowds upon height, with villages wreathed in olive orchards lying between. Here the hills descend in terraces to the sea, covered with vegetation to the water’s edge; there the covering of soil has been cast off from the steep slopes, exposing the naked rock, which shines in the afternoon sun with a reddish hue that wonderfully accords with the dark shades of the foliage and the brilliant blue of the sea. Further on the tints become duller, and the sight is blurred; only with effort can we distinguish Sorrento, resting on cliffs that rise almost perpendicularly from the line of the shore. Further still the outline of the peninsula sinks into the sea and gives place to Capri, island of fantastic shape, whose crags rising sheer from the water stand out sharply in the bright sunlight.

But we look toward the north, and the splendid variety of form and color vanishes; there stands only the vast, sombre mass of the great destroyer, Vesuvius, towering above the city and the plain. The sun as it nears the horizon veils the bare ashen cone with a mantle of deep violet, while the cloud of smoke that rises from the summit shines with a golden glow. Far above the base the sides are covered with vineyards, among which small groups of white houses can here and there be seen. West of us the outline of the mountain descends in a strong, simple curve to the sea. Just before it blends with the shore there rise behind it distant heights wrapped in blue haze, the first of moderate elevation, then others more prominent and further to the left. They are the heights along the north shore of the Bay of Naples—Gaurus crowned with the monastery of Camaldoli, famous for its magnificent view; the cliffs of Baiae, the promontory of Misenum, and the lofty cone of Epomeo on the island of Ischia. So the eye traverses the whole expanse of the Bay; Naples itself, hidden from our view, lies between those distant heights and the base of Vesuvius.

But meanwhile the sun has set behind Misenum; its last rays are lighting up the cloud of smoke above Vesuvius and the summit of Monte Sant’ Angelo. The brilliancy of coloring has faded; the weary eye finds rest in the soft afterglow. We also may take leave of these beautiful surroundings, and inquire into the beginnings of the city which was founded here.