Richard Scully, "Entry on: Doctor Who (Series, S04E02): The Fires of Pompeii by Russell T. Davies, Brian Minchin, James Moran, Colin Teague", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Daniel A. Nkemleke. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/87. Entry version as of November 21, 2026.

Russell T. Davies , Brian Minchin , James Moran , Colin Teague

Doctor Who (Series, S04E02): The Fires of Pompeii

United Kingdom (2008)

TAGS: Divination Eruption of Vesuvius Latin (Language) Pompeii Roman History Roman Religion Spartacus





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General information	
Title of the work	Doctor Who (Series, S04E02): The Fires of Pompeii
Studio/Production Company	British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2008
First Edition Details	April 12, 2008
Running time	50 min
Date of the First DVD or VHS	2 June 2008 (DVD – Doctor Who: Series 4, Volume 1) [Region 2]
Genre	Science fiction, Television series, Time-Slip Fantasy*
Target Audience	Crossover
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Creators



Russell T. Davies , b. 1963
(Producer)

Russell T. Davies is a British "showrunner", television writer and creator of the new *Doctor Who* in 2005 (revived on the BBC after a hiatus of sixteen years), *The Sarah Jane Adventures* (*Doctor Who* spin off series aimed at children) and *Torchwood* (*Doctor Who* spin off series aimed at adults).

Davies was born in Swansea, Wales in 1963. In interviews he describes how his parents were classics teachers and he grew up “in a house full of books” with “stories of Greek mythology” and Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (see here, accessed: June 3, 2018) and *Welsh Economic Review* 19.1 (2007): 24–25.

Davies’ career in television writing and production started in children’s television at the BBC in the late 1980s, before working on adult drama for ITV, including soap opera *Coronation Street* and period drama *The Grand*. From the late 1990s he has created a number of series featuring gay characters including *Queer As Folk*, *Bob & Rose, Cucumber* and *Banana*. He was awarded the OBE in 2008 for services to drama.

Bio prepared by Amanda Potter, Open University, amanda.potter@caramanda.co.uk



Brian Minchin

Script Editor

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James Moran , b. 1972
(Screenwriter)

James Moran (1972-) is an English screenwriter for television and film. Born in York, he won a scriptwriting competition run by the American-based (NBC/Universal Pictures) Sci Fi Channel for his short film *Cheap Rate Gravity* (2002), which was his first produced work. Moran then penned the six-part TV drama *The School*. The serial-killer feature film *Severance* (2005), and *Cockneys vs Zombies* (2012), were followed by a thriller – *Tower Block* (2012) – and some uncredited work on the horror movie *The Borderlands* (2014). Moran also worked for television, and his debut was in the first series of *Doctor Who*'s spin-off *Torchwood* (for which he wrote the episode *Sleeper*, 2008); and then co-wrote (with *Showrunner* Russell T Davies) *Day Three* of the 2009 *Children of Earth* storyline. Following his involvement in *Torchwood*, Moran was approached by Davies to pen a Roman history-themed episode for *Doctor Who* itself, having originally been inspired to include a Pompeii story while watching the BBC/TLC docu-drama *Pompeii: The Last Day* (2003). Moran struggled with the task, but was assisted by Davies, who insisted on the inclusion of multiple Latin language-based jokes a la the *Asterix* comic books (Davies' mother had been a teacher of Latin). Moran decided to utilise the main characters from the *Cambridge Latin Course* textbooks as his supporting cast. Following-on from *Doctor Who*, Moran wrote for ITV's *Primeval* (2009), BBC One's *Spooks* (2008) and *Spooks: Code 9 (*2008), NBC's *Crusoe* (2008), and the CBBC children's shows *The Sparticle Mystery* (2015) and *Eve (*2015). Moran maintains a blog and a Facebook page.

Bio prepared by Richard Scully, University of New England, rscully@une.edu.au

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Colin Teague (Director)

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Additional information

Casting	David Tennant – The Doctor, Catherine Tate – Donna Noble, Peter Capaldi – Caecilius, Tracey Childs – Metella, Phil Davis – Lucius, Sasha Behar – Spurrina, Francesca Fowler – Evelina, Lorraine Burroughs – Thalina, Victoria Wicks – High Priestess, Francois Pandolfo – Quintus, Karen Gillan – Soothsayer, Phil Cornwell – Stallholder.

Summary

‘The Fires of Pompeii’ was typical of the revived, 21st-century series of *Doctor Who* (1963–1989; 2005–present) with its abandonment of educational themes for ‘pure’ science-fiction, and pseudo-historical storytelling. Filmed using the same sets as the 2005–2007 HBO/BBC Two series *Rome*, the episode attempted to present the same level of historical accuracy of costuming and set-design, while taking liberties with scripting. Aspects of Roman religion and myth – the soothsayers and augurs, the Sibylline Books of prophecy, and the household gods of the Iucundus family (Lares and Penates) – are included, but the supernatural events of the story are revealed to be due to more ‘worldly’ (if alien) influences: a species of silicone-based creature known as the Pyroviles (who inhabit the mantle of the Earth, and who are composed of magma and stone). The TARDIS crew (The Doctor and his companion, Donna Noble) must thwart the Pyroviles’ attempts to use Earth as a base for future galactic conquest (a la the Roman Empire itself), defeat the aliens’ human agent – the Augur, Lucius

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Petrus Dextrus – and navigate the ongoing conflict between the male-led prophetic ways of augury, and the female-led prophetic culture of the Sibyls. The Doctor is confronted with a hard choice: the only way to defeat his enemies and save the Earth (and the galaxy) is to *cause* the AD 79 eruption of Vesuvius, thus destroying Pompeii and killing all its inhabitants. The moral dilemma is partially mitigated by the Doctor's actions in saving the lives of Lucius Caecilius Iucundus and his family.

Analysis

'The Fires of Pompeii' is a significant example of early-21st century British television drama. Watched by 8 million viewers during its initial broadcast (and an additional million or so on catch-up services and other media), the episode is a notable example of a science fiction appropriation of Classical myth, and history. The time travelling theme of the program was a handy device for justifying the incursion into Roman history; and the Doctor and his companion serve as useful avatars for the audience-members as they are introduced to and familiarised with the historical and mythical context of the storyline (or, rather, reacquainted with matters with which they may already have been; with Latin language and Roman history still being widely-taught in the British education system in the 2000s). The appearance of those humans who have been infected by Pyrovilian aspects (Lucius Petrus Dextrus and the Sibyl) is deliberately reminiscent of the plaster-casts made by Giuseppe Fiorelli (1823–1896) of Pompeiian citizens. The episode is also significant, inter-textually, as key characters (and even the chief setting) are adapted directly from Book I of the *Cambridge Latin Course* (first published in 1970, it has sold over 3.5 million copies, and is used by 85% of the Latin-teaching schools in the UK). Adaptations of humorous tropes from *Asterix* and other contexts (such as the 1960 Stanley Kubrick film *Spartacus*) also make the episode a key point-of-contact for different appreciations and understanding of Roman history and Classical myth. The positioning of the filming in precisely the same context as the production *Rome* (2005–2007) points to some interesting postmodern questions of authenticity and inter-textuality. Indeed, the episode also contains knowing references to the Doctor's prior encounters with the Classical world ('The Romans' and 'The Myth Makers', 1965).

Divination Eruption of Vesuvius Latin (Language) Pompeii Roman

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	History Roman Religion Spartacus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Humour Intertextuality Learning Travel

Further Reading

Harmes, Marcus K., *Doctor Who and the Art of Adaptation; Fifty Years of Storytelling,* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014, esp. pp. 68 ff.

Hobden, Fiona, "History Meets Fiction in *Doctor Who*, “The Fires of Pompeii”: a BBC Reception of Ancient Rome on Screen and Online", *Greece & Rome*, 56.2 (2009): 147–163.

Johnston, John J., "The Fires of Pompeii", *The Essential Doctor Who (from the Makers of Doctor Who Magazine)*, 8 – Adventures in History, June 2016, 18–19.

Keen, Anthony G., "It's about Tempus: Greece and Rome in “Classic” Doctor Who", in David C. Wright, Jr., and Allan W. Austin, eds., S*pace and Time: Essays on Visions of History in Science Fiction and Fantasy Television*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010, 100–115.

Keen, Anthony G., "Sideways Pompeii! The Use of Historical Period to Question the Doctor's Role in History", in Ross P. Garner, Melissa Beattie, and Una McCormack, eds., *Impossible Worlds, Impossible Things: Cultural Perspectives on Doctor Who, Torchwood, and The Sarah Jane Adventures,* Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010, 94–117.

Addenda

Production Costs & Box Office Success:

Recorded viewers: 8.1–8.5 million at time of broadcast (consolidated figure: 9.04 million).

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Peter Capaldi – who played Caecilius in 'The Fires of Pompeii' – was later cast in the title role of the series – the Doctor, in his Twelfth incarnation – from 2013–2017. Karen Gillan – who played one of the Sibylline priestesses– also reappeared in Doctor Who (as Amy Pond, companion to the Eleventh Doctor, 2010–2013).

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