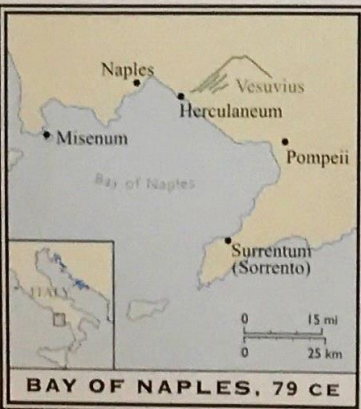


66 **PLINY THE YOUNGER, PLINY THE ELDER, AND GRAFFITI FROM POMPEII**

A CITY TELLS ITS TALE POMPEII AND THE ROMAN HOUSE

66 Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, 105 CE

plumbum = “lead” (metal)
For centuries, lead was the main metal used in plumbing. Scientists have now proved that lead poisons the blood and causes mental illness.



The Roman writer Pliny the Younger describes the city of Pompeii as “one of the loveliest places on earth.” People traveling in the first century CE to the city would have seen sheep grazing peacefully on the hillside. They would have noticed fruit trees and vineyards lining the road into town. As a prosperous market center, Pompeii had many visitors, especially traders. Sales of wool, cloth, and wine had made the city rich. It had a good supply of hotels, 20 taverns, and more than 100 bars where hot and cold wines were served until the wee hours of the morning. Pompeii also boasted temples, two theaters, a gymnasium, a gladiatorial school, an arena for games, public baths, and a public lavatory that flushed with fresh water. Nearly all Pompeian houses had indoor **plumbing**—water pipes and taps. Some families even had watering systems in their gardens.

Wealthy Pompeians ate very well. In fact, a dinner party in Pompeii was likely to be pretty fancy. The first course might be a platter of raw vegetables, olives, and sliced eggs. After this, perhaps some liver sausage would be served on top of polenta. The main course might be sweet and sour pork, rabbit served with a plum sauce, or stuffed kidneys—made with herbs, pine nuts, and fennel seed, and the fish sauce that the Romans used in almost everything. One possible dessert would be a pudding also made with fish sauce, followed by grapes, pears imported from Syria, and roasted chestnuts from Naples. Pliny the Younger and his uncle, Pliny the Elder, would have been used to fancy meals like these.

August 24, 79 CE had begun as peacefully as ever in Pompeii. There was no hint of the disaster to come. Pliny the Elder, a writer and Roman fleet commander, had spent a



Frightened people gather along the seashore hoping to escape the terrible fury of Mt. Vesuvius. English artist J. M. W. Turner painted the volcano in full eruption in 1817.

quiet morning at his sister's home in Misenum. He sat in the warm Italian sun for a while, then took a cold bath. Slaves brought his lunch, which he ate—as always—leaning against pillows, propped on one elbow. Then, well-fed and refreshed, he went back to his books. But at one o'clock, just across the Bay of Naples, the top of a mountain blew off with an ear-splitting crack, and an angry volcano tossed fire and molten rock into the air. Lava rolled down the sloping sides of Mt. Vesuvius, heading toward the helpless towns below.

After the blast, people in Misenum saw a large, strange-looking cloud rising from the top of the mountain. Pliny the Younger later remembered that his uncle “climbed up to a place where he could get a better view. . . . It looked . . . like a pine tree, for it rose to a great height. . . . My uncle . . . was handed a message from Rectina [a family friend] . . . whose house was at the foot of the mountain. . . .” The terrified woman begged Pliny to rescue her and her family.

Pliny the Elder boarded a ship and sailed toward Pompeii and Herculaneum, the very places from which

“Volcano” comes from *Volcanus* or *Vulcan*, the Roman god of fire. A volcanologist is an expert on volcanoes.

66 Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, 105 CE

everyone else was trying to escape. Although the danger was obvious, Pliny refused to turn back. A friend needed his help, so he went. He hoped that he could take Rectina and her household to safety aboard his ship.

When Pliny reached Rectina's house, he tried to reassure everyone, telling them that the danger would soon pass. But did he believe his own words? How could he? By this time, the afternoon sky was blacker than night. The house shook with every blast from the volcano. It swayed as the mountain spat fire and rock. The smells of soot and sulfur filled the air. People's eyes stung, and their throats burned.

Pliny the Elder was not only a loyal friend, he was also a very curious person. According to his nephew, he was "fearless and observed each new event and stage of the disaster, writing it all down exactly as he saw it. Ashes were already falling, hotter and thicker as the ships drew near, followed by bits of rock and blackened stones, charred and cracked by the flames."

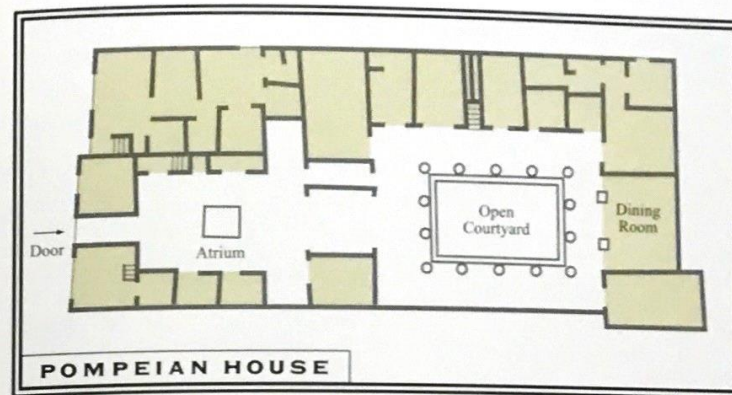
In the midst of this terrifying crisis, everyone looked to fleet commander Pliny for advice. But Pliny wasn't sure what to say. He knew that, at any moment, Rectina's house could collapse and crush everyone inside. But it was dangerous outside too. Huge rocks, ash, and boiling mud spewed from the mountain's mouth and rained on the villages below. Pliny finally suggested that everyone should stay outside, tie pillows on their heads, and be brave. After taking a nap—and snoring loudly—he lit a torch and went down to the shore with a few slaves. But to his horror, he found the sea rolling wildly, boiling with melted rock. The last escape route was closed. It was too late. On the beach, Pliny began to stagger and gasp for breath as sulfur gasses filled his lungs. Unable to get enough oxygen, he collapsed and died.

At about the same time in nearby Pompeii, poisonous fumes had killed the owners of one house as they tried to hide their treasures in a well. They tumbled into the well along with their possessions. In another part of town, the priests of Isis were having a meal of eggs and fish when the disaster struck. Their bodies were later found with the sacred statues they tried to rescue. Modestus, a baker, died

Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, 105 CE

DYING OF CURIOSITY

Pliny the Elder was one of history's most curious human beings. He was interested in *everything*. He wrote a 37-book encyclopedia in which he tried to describe and explain the entire world of nature, art, science—geography, medicine, plants, animals, minerals, farming, and ancient artists. In the preface, he wrote, "*Vita vigilia est.*" This means: "Life is being aware . . . alert."



Many small rooms surround a central courtyard in this Pompeian house plan. These homes were built for privacy and light, and the floors were often decorated with colorful mosaics.

just after putting 81 loaves of bread into his ovens. Families who had just sat down to eat were killed in their homes and in the many restaurants of Pompeii. No one knows exactly how many people died. The lava killed some; others died from fumes, rocks, and suffocating ash.

Back in Misenum, Pliny the Younger, who was 18 years old, could hear the cries of terrified people as they poured into the streets and headed out of town. In a letter that he later wrote to his friend Tacitus, Pliny said that he and his mother stayed at home as long as they could, hoping for news of his uncle's safety. He tried to stay calm by reading a book, but finally "it seemed best to leave town because the buildings were shaking all around us."

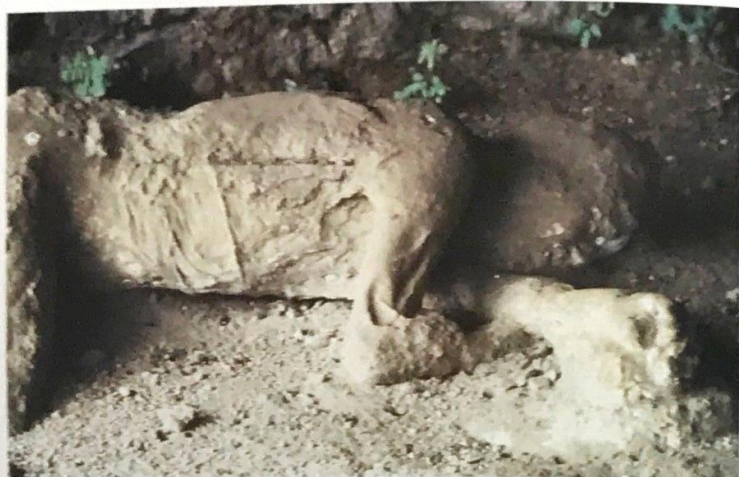
Mother and son joined the other villagers on the road. Many people begged the gods to protect them as more and more ash and rock fell around them. In his letter, Pliny the Younger described the deep darkness of that day. "Night hung over us, not like one that is overcast, without a moon, but like a room, where all the lights have been put out." He confessed that he thought the end of the world had come, that "all the world had perished with me." But at last the darkness lifted, and the sun shone through with a strange yellowish light. "Our trembling eyes saw everything changed, buried deep in ashes like snowdrifts."

Pompeians were used to the volcano's rumblings, so they probably weren't worried at first. But the smart ones soon realized that, this time, the mountain meant business!

Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, 105 CE

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This man fell to the floor of his home in Pompeii as volcanic fumes overcame and killed him. Had he believed that the danger would pass? Did he wait too long to escape?



And they ran. Scholars estimate that 80 to 90 percent of Pompeii's people escaped to safety. Within a few hours, Pompeii was hidden beneath nearly 20 feet of lava and ash.

Pliny the Elder's body was found two days later. The lava had not buried his body, and his notes were safely tucked beneath him. He had been a scientist to the very end, writing down everything he saw until the very moment of his death. Pliny the Younger later wrote a description of all that happened on that fateful day. He based his report on his uncle's notes—a firsthand account of one of Nature's worst temper tantrums: the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius.

When 19th-century archaeologists first used modern techniques to explore the ancient remains of the city, they found hollow cavities—holes—in the volcanic remains. They soon realized that these holes were where the bodies of the dead had been. The lava and ash had turned rock hard, but the corpses had decayed and disintegrated, leaving a hard, empty shell. By injecting plaster into the spaces, investigators were able to recreate the person or animal that died there. The plaster casts showed children crouching in fear, dogs running, and a woman with her three servants, desperately trying to escape with jewels and silver in their hands. Slowly and carefully, archaeologists uncovered a city caught in the moment of its death. They found 18 people

huddled in a cellar and, at the city gate, a man with a new pair of shoes. Was he perhaps a beggar who thought this was his lucky day because someone running from the city had dropped a pair of shoes?

Archaeologists have found an amazing amount of graffiti painted and scratched on the walls of Pompeii. It's as if the walls themselves want to speak and to remind us of the real people who once lived there. Among the messages are advertisements for wine (two glasses for the price of one), an apartment to rent, a sad goodbye message to someone who died, and an announcement of the show times for the next gladiatorial games. A political notice says: "Elect Gaius Julius Polybius aedile. He supplies good bread." An anonymous lover scribbled a message to his girlfriend: "Hail to you, Victoria, and wherever you go, sneeze sweetly." ("Sneeze sweetly" was a Roman way of wishing good luck.) An unhappy customer wrote on the walls of an inn: "Innkeeper, you sell us water and drink the pure wine yourself."

Someone wrote these lines—as if he knew what was soon to happen: "Nothing lasts forever. After the sun shines brightly, it sinks into the ocean. The moon that was recently full, wanes. And a strong wind often becomes a gentle breeze."

The eruption of Mt. Vesuvius destroyed Pompeii, but, in a strange twist of fate, it also saved it. The city was captured. And life as ordinary people lived it in first century CE Pompeii was held in a moment of time.

This mosaic dog from ancient Pompeii pricks his ears and bares his sharp teeth. As he crouches to attack, the words at his feet growl a warning: Cave Canem: . . . "Beware of the Dog!"

“ Graffiti from Pompeii, 79 CE

