

DISASTER STRIKES

UNFAMILIAR NAMES

Pliny - Plin-ee

Pompeii - Pom-pay

Tacitus - Tass-i-tus

Vesuvius - Ves-oo-vee-us

In the first century AD, in the period of the Roman Empire, Vesuvius had been dormant for hundreds of years. The mountain was green as farmers grew fig and olive trees on the slopes of the volcano and the local people had become used to the tremors of earthquakes from time to time.

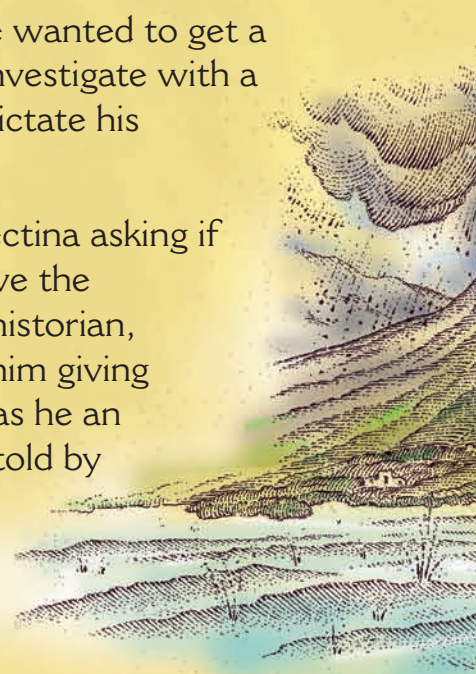
In the summer of AD 79 there had been more rumbling than usual but in the town of Pompeii and in the whole area surrounding the volcano, most people went about their daily business.

One of them, a boy called Pliny, was 17 at the time. When the volcano erupted, he watched from a nearby town as the earth shook and a black cloud descended over the area. Pliny's uncle, the commander of a nearby naval port, also saw the unusual cloud forming above Mount Vesuvius. He was not content to stand by and watch. He wanted to get a closer look and set off to investigate with a scribe to whom he could dictate his observations.

Pliny



As he was leaving, he received a message from his friend Rectina asking if he would help her. So he set out with several ships to observe the volcano and try to rescue the people. Years later, Tacitus, a historian, was collecting information about the event. Pliny wrote to him giving a vivid account of what he had seen and heard. Not only was he an eye-witness to the disaster, but Pliny also heard the stories told by survivors, some of whom had been rescued by his uncle. The following is an extract from Pliny's letter to Tacitus:



As my uncle was leaving the house, he was handed a message from Rectina, whose house was at the foot of the mountain and whose escape was impossible except by boat. She was terrified of the danger threatening her and implored him to rescue her from her fate. He changed his plans, and what he had begun in a spirit of inquiry, he completed as a hero.

He gave orders for the ships to be launched and went on board himself with the intention of bringing help to many more people besides Rectina, for this lovely stretch of coast was thickly populated. He hurried to the place which everyone else was hastily leaving, steering his course straight for the danger zone. He was entirely fearless, describing each moment of the eruption to be noted down exactly as he observed it. Ashes were already falling, hotter and thicker as the ships drew near, followed by bits of pumice and blackened stones, charred and cracked by the flames.

Then, suddenly they were in shallow water, and the shore was blocked by the rubble from the mountain.

For a moment my uncle wondered whether to turn back, but when the helmsman advised this, my uncle refused, telling him that Fortune stood by the courageous ...

translated from Latin

Later in his letter to Tacitus, Pliny records that his uncle died in the eruption.

