

The eruption of Mount Vesuvius

TIMELINE AND EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNT

Pliny the Younger

The letters of Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (known as Pliny the Younger) to the historian Tacitus are the only surviving eyewitness account of the 79 AD eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

After his father's death, Pliny was raised in the household of his uncle, Pliny the Elder, who commanded the naval fleet at Misenum on the Bay of Naples.

Pliny the Younger was 18 at the time of the eruption. His uncle died at Stabiae after sailing to the rescue of friends. Left behind with his schoolwork, the younger Pliny watched the horror of Vesuvius unfold, finally fleeing with his mother as the surge clouds approached Misenum.

So accurate was Pliny's account that this type of volcanic eruption is now called 'Plinian', in his honour.

24 August 79 AD

8 a.m. A series of small emissions from Mount Vesuvius.

For several days past there had been earth tremors which were not particularly alarming because they are frequent in Campania; but that night the shocks were so violent that everything felt as if were not only shaken but overturned.

Pliny the Younger – who observed the eruption from Misenum, beyond Naples

1 p.m. Vesuvius erupts suddenly and with great force. A cloud of volcanic materials soars high above the mountain, spreading out in the shape of a flat topped pine tree. Within 30 minutes, the surging dark cloud rises some 14 km above Vesuvius. Ash drifts over Pompeii.

... a cloud of unusual size and appearance...being like an umbrella pine, for it rose to a great height on a sort of trunk and then split off into branches ...

3 p.m. Vesuvius spews its contents higher and higher. As it rises, the volcanic material — mostly fragments of hardened lava (lapilli) — cools and then hails down on Pompeii. Most residents flee, although some seek shelter or stay behind to guard their property. Volcanic debris begins to clog the River Sarno and the port, making them impassable to ships. Seismic shockwaves shake the area.

... there was a danger from falling pumice stones ... as a protection against falling objects they put pillows on their heads tied down with cloths ...

We also saw the sea sucked away ... so that quantities of sea creatures were left stranded on dry sand.

5 – 6 p.m. Chunks of pumice, as big as 50cm, plummet from the cloud. Streets and roads are buried deep under the accumulated pumice, lapilli and ash, and the roofs of Pompeii buildings begin to collapse under the weight. The dense cloud now rises about 25km above Vesuvius, obliterating the sun. Darkness, broken only by flashes of lightning, adds to the terror of fleeing inhabitants.

25 August 79 AD

1 – 2 a.m. Scalding mudflows of volcanic debris mixed with steam spill from the volcano and down the slopes, choking the town of Herculaneum. Ash, lapilli and pumice continue to rain down on Pompeii; the debris now rising as high as the upper storeys of buildings. It bursts through windows, doors and roofs, trapping and suffocating those hiding within.

Soon great flames and vast fires shone from many points on Mount Vesuvius, the gleam and light made more vivid by the night time shadows.

4 a.m. The volcanic plume above Vesuvius, now 30 km high, grows too heavy and begins to collapse. The column cascades to earth, sending superheated ash and gases roaring in turbulent waves, called pyroclastic flows, down the volcano's slopes. The first flow reaches Herculaneum, killing any inhabitants who still remained.

5 a.m. Strong earthquakes continue to shake the whole area. A second, even hotter surge further buries Herculaneum. At Pompeii, the rain of pumice eases, but darkness prevails as the massive ash cloud hides the rising sun. Some survivors try to flee their hiding places and escape the town. But it is hard to breathe in the ash-clogged air, or to walk – or even crawl – over the deep layer of volcanic fallout.

We were followed by a panic-stricken mob of people wanting to act on someone else's decision.

6:30 a.m. The third pyroclastic surge, the strongest yet, reaches Pompeii from the north but is held back by the town's wall.

6.30 – 7:30 a.m. A series of powerful surges overcome the walls and sweep over the town in massive waves of toxic gas and burning, smothering ash. Pompeii's remaining inhabitants are killed instantly and the city is buried. Most who die at Pompeii perish in this phase of the eruption.

... my mother implored ... me to escape ... I refused to save myself without her, and grasping her hand forced her to quicken her pace.

8 a.m. The most destructive surge hits Pompeii, preceded by a storm of fire and lightning. The town's tallest structures are burned, toppled and buried. The same surge reaches Stabiae and even as far as Naples. Luckily for Pliny the Younger, the surge loses momentum before it reaches Misenum, though the town is engulfed in a dense cloud of ash.

Volcanic activity, electrical storms and mudslides continue for several days. By the time the eruption ends, Vesuvius's summit has collapsed, leaving a crater 200 m lower. The entire region is annihilated — towns, vegetation, livestock, people. Only the tops of the highest walls remain unburied to show where Pompeii stood.

Finally, the cloud lifted and vanished in a sort of smoke or fog ... the sun even reappeared, but pale, as when there is an eclipse ... the landscape looked changed and covered by a thick blanket of ash, as if it had snowed.

MEDIA RELEASE



A Day in Pompeii will be on display at Melbourne Museum from 26 June to 25 October 2009. For more information visit museumvictoria.com.au or phone 13 11 02.

The Melbourne Winter Masterpieces series is now firmly established as a must see cultural event. This year *A Day in Pompeii* will join *Salvador Dalí: Liquid Desire* at the National Gallery of Victoria to make Melbourne an unmissable cultural destination. Melbourne Winter Masterpieces is a Victorian Government initiative that brings outstanding exhibitions from around the world exclusively to Melbourne, and in its first five years has attracted more than 1.34 million people.

A Day in Pompeii is presented in association with the Soprintendenza Speciale per I Beni Archeologici di Napoli e Pompei (SAP). Adults \$20, concession \$14, children \$12, family \$54 (all tickets include entry to Melbourne Museum).

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