

Pliny's letters about the eruption of Mount Vesuvius

A man named Pliny the Younger described what happened during the disaster in two letters that he wrote to his friend, Cornelius Tacitus. The following passages explain what Pliny saw and include extracts (written in red) from his letters.

The eruption started on 24th August. Pliny's mother spotted an enormous cloud rising from the mountains across the bay and pointed it out to Pliny's uncle.



'It was not clear at that distance from which mountain the cloud was rising (it was afterwards known to be Vesuvius); its general appearance can best be expressed as being like an umbrella pine, for it rose to a great height on a sort of trunk and then split off into branches...'

Pliny's uncle, Pliny the Elder, was in charge of the fleet of ships within the Bay of Naples. He ordered the ships to be launched so he could look more closely at the cloud and rescue people trying to escape.

'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 debris from the mountain... Meanwhile, on Mount Vesuvius, broad sheets of fire and leaping flames blazed at several points, their bright glare emphasised by the darkness of night.'

When Pliny's uncle and his crew docked at the bay at Stabiae, they sheltered in the house of a friend while the eruption continued.

'...The buildings were now shaking with violent shocks, and seemed to be swaying to and fro as if they were torn from their foundations. Outside, on the other hand, there was the danger of falling pumice stones...'

Pliny's uncle, his crew and his friends tried to flee back to their ships to escape. Reaching the beach, Pliny's uncle collapsed and died from the effects of the poisonous gas released from the volcano.

Meanwhile, Pliny the Younger was at home with his mother in Misenum as the effects of the eruption spread across the bay. They decided to try to escape.

‘Ashes were already falling, not as yet very thickly. I looked around: a dense black cloud was coming up behind us, spreading over the earth like a flood. “Let us leave the road while we can still see,” I said, “or we shall be knocked down and trampled underfoot in the dark by the crowd behind.” We had scarcely sat down to rest when darkness fell, not the dark of a moonless or cloudy night, but as if the lamp had been put out in a closed room.’

As they travelled on, panic and terror spread amongst the people.

‘You could hear the shrieks of women, the wailing of infants, and the shouting of men; some were calling their parents, others their children or their wives, trying to recognize them by their voices... ashes began to fall again, this time in heavy showers. We rose from time to time and shook them off, otherwise we should have been buried and crushed beneath their weight.’

Pliny the Younger survived the eruption and wrote about his experiences a few years later. His letters survive and are the only eyewitness account of the eruption.