



PLINY THE YOUNGER

This scholar watched the eruption cloud from across the Bay of Naples, where he was staying with his uncle, Pliny the Elder.

The great eruption of Vesuvius

PERHAPS THE MOST FAMOUS ERUPTION of all time shook Mount Vesuvius near Naples in Italy in 79 CE. When the long-dormant volcano erupted on 24 August, the residents of the Roman towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum were caught unawares. Hot ash and lapilli rained down on Pompeii for hours until it was buried several metres deep. Many people escaped, coughing and stumbling through the darkness of the ash cloud. Those caught in the town were overwhelmed by a sudden powerful blast of ash and gas (a pyroclastic surge, p.16). The apocalyptic events were described in detail by Pliny the Younger. His famous letters

to Tacitus are the first known eyewitness account of a volcanic eruption. The buried towns were virtually forgotten until excavations began in the 18th century. The digs have since unearthed a priceless archeological and geological treasure, two thriving Roman towns frozen in the moments of their destruction.



BLOWING IN THE WIND

The wind blew Vesuvius' ash cloud south onto the town of Pompeii. Herculaneum, to the west of the volcano, was hardly touched by falling ash. But the pyroclastic flows and surges (p.16) that followed flowed downhill in all directions, covering both towns.



BEWARE OF DOG

This floor mosaic from a Pompeii entranceway was meant to warn off intruders. A similar mosaic says *cave canem* – Latin for "beware of the dog".



Modern Italian bread

BURNT TO A TOAST

This carbonised loaf of bread was one of several found in the brick oven of a bakery. The baker's stamp can still be seen, nearly 2,000 years after the day the bread was baked.



Flour mill made of lava, a tough rock also used to pave streets



Portrait of a poetess or princess, detail of a floor mosaic found at Pompeii



Fresh figs, still grown on the slopes of Vesuvius



Bowl of carbonised figs



Bowl of preserved eggs



SNAKE CHARM

Fine gold and silver jewellery, some set with emeralds, was found in the buried town. This hollow bracelet in the shape of a coiled snake is made of thick gold. Certain styles were abundant. Over 80 copies of one kind of earring were found, suggesting mass production of popular models.



Fresh walnuts



Bowl of carbonised walnuts

Carbonised food

Organic compounds like wood, bone, and food contain carbon. Normally they would burn when heated. But in some circumstances, the hot ash and gas stopped oxygen from combining with the carbon, so that the compounds turned to charcoal instead. This process, called carbonisation, left the fine details of many foodstuffs perfectly preserved in the fine ash.



PANIC IN THE STREETS

The large theatre (the open, semi-circular building) and the gladiator's gymnasium (in front of the theatre) can be seen in this artist's impression of the destruction of Pompeii. In the crowded streets, stragglers are running for their lives from the menacing black clouds.

DEATH OF PLINY THE ELDER

In one letter, Pliny the Younger wrote of his uncle and another official fleeing with "pillows tied upon their heads with napkins; and this was their whole defence against the storm of stones that fell around them. It was now day everywhere else, but there a deeper darkness prevailed than in the thickest night... my uncle ... raised himself up with the assistance of two of his servants, and instantly fell down dead; suffocated, as I conjecture, by some gross and noxious vapour... his body was found entire... looking more like a man asleep than dead."

