**The eruption of Mount Vesuvius**

**TIMELINE AND EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNT**

Pliny the Younger was 18 at the time of the eruption, and his letters to the Roman historian Tacitus are the only surviving eyewitness accounts of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. After his father’s death, Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (aka Pliny the Younger) was raised by his uncle Pliny the Elder, who was commander of the naval fleet at Misenum. When Mount Vesuvius started to erupt, his uncle left to rescue friends in Pompeii, but died after sailing to Stabiae. Left behind with his schoolwork, the younger Pliny had a front porch view of the eruption, 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 honor.

**24 August 79 AD**

**8 a.m.** A series of small explosions 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.”*

**1 p.m.** Vesuvius erupts suddenly and with great force. A cloud of volcanic materials soars high above the mountain. Within 30 minutes, the 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 the cloud rises, the volcanic material (hardened lava called 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 blocked 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 stone, 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.** Hot mudflows of volcanic debris mixed with steam spill from the volcano and run down the slopes, choking the town of Herculaneum. Ash, lapilli and pumice continue to rain down on Pompeii; becoming as deep as the top levels 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 heavy and begins to collapse. The column cascades to earth, sending superheated ash and gases roaring 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 slows, but the sun is still not visible because of the massive ash cloud. 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 crawl over the deep layer of ash.

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

**6.30 – 7:30 a.m.** The third pyroclastic surge, the strongest yet, reaches Pompeii from the north but is held back by the town’s wall.More 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 that 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, along with a storm of fire and lightning. The town’s tallest structures are burned, knocked over and buried. 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 deep. 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.”*

*Adapted from Melbourne Museum’s A Day in Pompeii exhibit*

Name\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. Why are Pliny the Younger’s writings about the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius so important to us today?
2. If the residents of Pompeii had left right when Vesuvius started erupting, do you think could they have been saved? Why do you think they decided to stay as long as they did?
3. The soil of the area around Pompeii was very fertile for growing crops. What do you think made the soil so good for growing food?
4. Today many people live near volcanoes (for example, Seattle Washington is surrounded by half a dozen volcanoes). Why do people choose to live near these places, even though we know what happened to Pompeii?

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