

The Destruction of Pompeii, 79 AD - Wrath of the Gods

A young man named Pliny the Younger wrote letters describing his experience during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius while he was staying in the home of his Uncle, Pliny the Elder. A few years after the event, Pliny wrote a letter to a friend describing the eruption. Vesuvius obliterated Pompeii, killed his Uncle and almost destroyed his family. At the time, Pliny was eighteen and living at his Uncle's villa in the town of Misenum. We pick up his story as he describes the warning raised by his mother:

"My uncle was stationed at Misenum, in active command of the fleet. On 24 August, in the early afternoon, my mother drew his attention to a cloud of unusual size and appearance. He climbed up to a place which would give him the best view of the phenomenon. 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, I imagine because it was thrust upwards by the first blast and then left unsupported as the pressure subsided, or else it was borne down by its own weight so that it spread out and gradually dispersed. In places it looked white, elsewhere blotched and dirty, according to the amount of soil and ashes it carried with it.

My uncle ordered a boat to be made ready. 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 new movement and phase of the portent to be noted down exactly as he observed them. 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. For a moment my uncle wondered whether to turn back, but when the helmsman advised this he refused. This wind was in my uncle's favor, and he was able to bring his ship in.

Ashes were already falling, not as yet very thickly. I looked round: 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.

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. People cried for their own fate or that of their relatives, and there were some who prayed for death in their terror of dying. Many sought the aid of the gods, but still more imagined there were no gods left, and that the universe was plunged into eternal darkness for evermore.

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, there was the danger of falling pumice stones. However, after comparing the risks they chose the latter. As a protection against falling objects they put pillows on their heads tied down with cloths. My uncle tried to escape by sea, but he could not because he found the waves still wild and dangerous.

Then the flames and smell of sulphur which gave warning of the approaching fire drove the others to take flight and roused him to stand up. He stood leaning on two slaves and then suddenly collapsed, I can only imagine the dense fumes choked his breathing by blocking his windpipe. When daylight returned two days later, my uncle's body was found intact and uninjured, still fully clothed and looking more like sleep than death.

References: Allen, G.B. (editor), Selected Letters of Pliny, (1915); Maiuri, Amedeo, Pompeian Wall Paintings (1960); Radice, Betty (translator), The Letters of The Younger Pliny (1969).