

Ancient Fanfiction: Pliny the Elder

By Celine Baumbach

Just as I was about to head back to the library, the earth shook. Again. For days now the earth's unrest had kept us awake at night and troubled us further during the day — sometimes shaking hard enough to topple furniture, sometimes just barely perceptible. This tremor had to be the strongest yet.

The door to the library burst open. “Uncle! You have to see this!”

My nephew and namesake looked bewildered. He rushed back the way he had come, and I followed, his wild excitement catching.

Pliny leaned out of the window, pointing as I joined him. “Look!”

Below the window stretched the sea, ships twinkling dark blots against the clear water. In the distance, Stabiae and Pompeii were barely visible at the other side of the gulf. But none of that was what had caught his attention: a black cloud was forming over Mount Vesuvius, spreading slowly across the sky.

“The mountain is burning,” he said.

I couldn't speak for a moment. I knew the writings about the mountain, but I hadn't believed them. Vesuvius was nothing like Etna. It hadn't burned in centuries, so surely the accounts must have been false.

But they weren't.

I found myself looking back down at the boats. They were slowly moving away from the shore, fleeing. I could only imagine the chaos on the streets of Pompeii and Stabiae. Outside of the villa, Misenum still seemed quiet, but it would only be a matter of time.

I put a hand on Pliny's shoulder. “I'm going to take a closer look. Do you want to come?”

He shook his head, and I didn't argue. Terror almost made me freeze, but I had always been a man of action and this was important.

I left the library, calling for my steward, Livius. I ordered him to get a light vessel ready, so that I could sail closer to see what was going on. Then I grabbed what I would need to record the trip and made my way out of the house.

I found my sister outside, watching the horizon with alarm. “What is going on?” she asked, eyeing the satchel I carried.

“I’m leaving for Pompeii. I *need* to see this up close.”

“You can’t be serious! Vesuvius is burning, people are fleeing and you want to go there?”

I gestured at the ever growing cloud. “Just look at it! This is momentous! What I write about this moment will be of scientific value for centuries to come, so I need to be as exact as possible!”

She opened her mouth to say something else, when Livius arrived back from the port.

“Sir!” he called, pressing a short piece of parchment into my hands. “This just arrived from Pompeii. Lady Rectina is worried the fire will spread down to her villa, and she doesn’t have a ship to leave.”

I passed the note on to my sister, then turned to Livius. “Ready the galleys, we must leave at once. We’ll try to save as many as we can while we’re there to observe.”

Instagram Quote:

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Twitter (<= 240 characters):

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Article:

<https://www.ancient.eu/pompeii/>

Follow up post:

In 79 CE the volcano Vesuvius near Pompeii erupted, an event documented in detail by Pliny the Younger, nephew of Pliny the Elder. The older Pliny died during the event as he tried to save a family friend and as many others as he could, but the younger survived and later wrote to the historian Tacitus describing his experiences and those of his uncle. Before his death, Pliny the Elder was well known as a writer, natural philosopher and naval commander in the Roman Empire.

Image:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giovanni_Battista_Lusieri_-_Eruption_on_Vesuvius_by_night_-_1793.jpg

Video images:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vesuvius_erupting_at_Night_by_William_Marlow.jpg

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/jsigeology/31212166178> (Photo by James St. John, Pompeii & Mt. Vesuvius)

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pompeii_and_Vesuvius_-_Italy_-_panoramio.jpg

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giovanni_Battista_Lusieri_-_Eruption_on_Vesuvius_by_night_-_1793.jpg