

# Eruption of Mount Vesuvius

By Pliny the Younger (AD 61-113)

*"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 two branches, I imagine because it was thrust upward 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. Sometimes it looked white, sometimes blotched and dirty, according to the amount of soil and ashes it carried with it."*

*"The carts that we had ordered brought were moving in opposite directions, though the ground was perfectly flat, and they wouldn't stay in place even with their wheels blocked by stones. In addition, it seemed as though the sea was being sucked backwards, as if it were being pushed back by the shaking of the land. Certainly the shoreline moved outwards, and many sea creatures were left on dry sand. Behind us were frightening dark clouds, rent by lightning twisted and hurled, opening to reveal huge figures of flame. These were like lightning, but bigger..... It wasn't long thereafter that the cloud stretched down to the ground and covered the sea. It girdled Capri and made it vanish, it hid Misenum's promontory. Then my mother began to beg and urge and order me to flee however I might, saying that a young man could make it, that she, weighed down in years and body, would die happy if she escaped being the cause of my*

death. I replied that I wouldn't save myself without her, and then I took her hand and made her walk a little faster. She obeyed with difficulty, and blamed herself for delaying me.

Now came the dust, though still thinly. I look back: a dense cloud looms behind us, following us like a flood poured across the land. "Let us turn aside while we can still see, lest we be knocked over in the street and crushed by the crowd of our companions." We had scarcely sat down when a darkness came that was not like a moonless or cloudy night, but more like the black of closed and unlighted rooms. You could hear women lamenting, children crying, men shouting..... It grew lighter, though that seemed not a return of day, but a sign that the fire was approaching. The fire itself actually stopped some distance away, but darkness and ashes came again, a great weight of them. We stood up and shook the ash off again and again, otherwise we would have been covered with it and crushed by the weight. I might boast that no groan escaped me in such perils, no cowardly word, but that I believed that I was perishing with the world, and the world with me, which was a great consolation for death. At last the cloud thinned out and dwindled to no more than smoke or fog. Soon there was real daylight. The sun was even shining, though with the lurid glow it has after an eclipse. The sight that met our still terrified eyes was a changed world, buried in ash like snow."

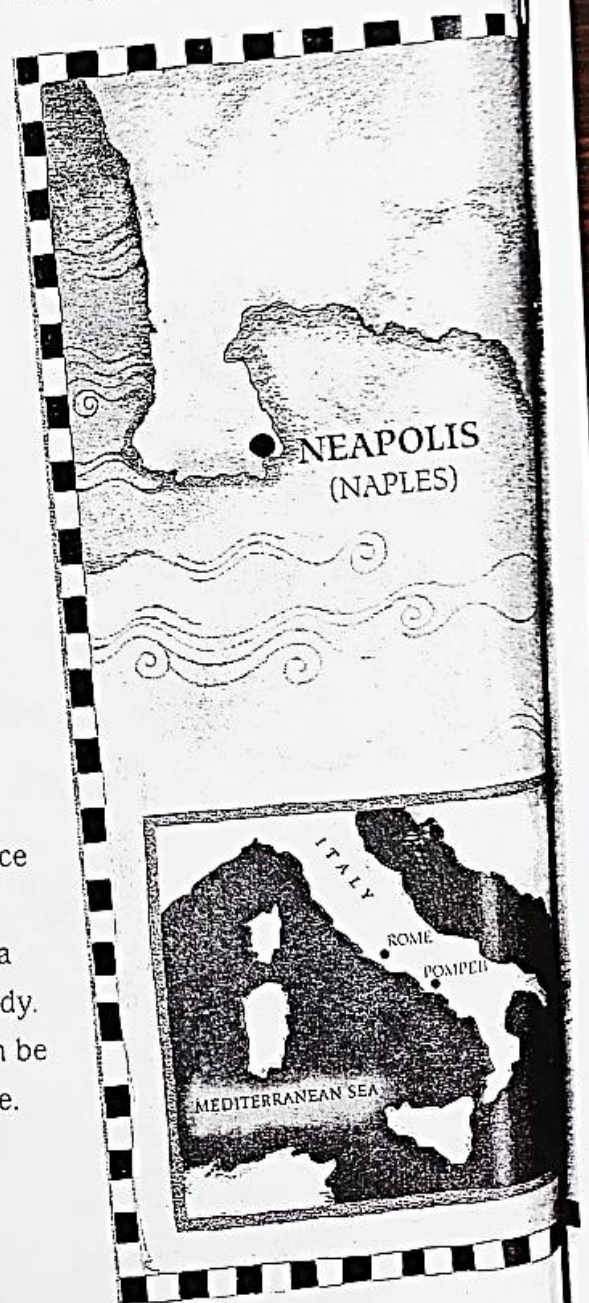


## THE STORY OF POMPEII

Before the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, Pompeii was a busy, beautiful Roman city where about 15,000 people lived. In those days, during the ancient Roman Empire, Vesuvius appeared green and peaceful, but on August 24 in A.D. 79, a great mushroom-shaped cloud rose from its top and, to everyone's surprise, the volcano began to erupt. In nearby Pompeii, day became as dark as night. Showers of ash and stone fell, covering streets and houses. Within a few hours rooftops started to collapse, and many people fled. The next morning, clouds of poisonous gases and ash poured down from the volcano, suffocating those who had stayed behind.

When the dust had settled, Pompeii and its lovely surroundings, including the neighboring city of Herculaneum, had disappeared beneath a blanket of ash, pumice, and lava. The city had become like Sleeping Beauty's castle. Trees and plants grew over it. As time passed, people remembered the city of Pompeii, but they forgot exactly where it had been. Pompeii slept for nearly 1,700 years, until, in 1748, excavators began to find its remains. Temples, theaters, baths, shops, and beautifully painted houses were uncovered, along with skeletons of the victims, sometimes in family groups. Soon Pompeii became famous, and people came from far and wide to see it. They were amazed at what they saw.

In 1863 the archeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli decided to try an experiment. He noticed that where a body had lain in the ash, it had left hollows in the shape of the body that had once been there. He poured plaster into one body space and waited for it to set. When the ashes around it were removed, he found that he was left with a plaster cast in the exact shape of the victim's body. Since then, many casts have been made and can be seen in Pompeii—sad reminders of the city's fate.





Vesuvius has not erupted since March 1944, but the volcano is not dead—only sleeping. Like all volcanoes, it has given the land around it rich soil that is easy to farm. As in Roman times, the people of modern-day Italy have built their homes there, and towns and villages crowd the shores of the Bay of Naples. One day Vesuvius will erupt again, but now, with modern scientific instruments checking the volcano each day, it is hoped that no more lives will be lost.

Pompeii is not yet fully excavated, but its uncovered remains help us see what a Roman city really looked like and how the Romans lived, worked, and played.

