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# Pompeii

WORKSHEET A

On August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 79 A.D., in a room in western Italy, Pliny the Younger was busily noting down details of the phenomenon he was witnessing across the bay from where he was staying. For the past couple of days Mount Vesuvius had been making ominous noises and issuing a black plume of smoke from the crater at its centre. This plume of smoke drifted over the town of Pompeii, which lay eight kilometres south of the foot of the mountain. The people of Pompeii were aware of the threat from the volcano and most of the 20,000 citizens were frantically packing their personal belongings and moving quickly out of town.

Pliny the Younger's uncle (Pliny the Elder) made several trips across the Bay of Naples with a flotilla of fishing boats to help those in need.

The next day, Vesuvius erupted. Pliny the Younger described the huge, dark cloud, resembling a pine tree, coming out of the mouth of the mountain (later estimated by scientists to have reached 32 km in height). After that, a cloud of ash, gas and rock poured down the sides of the mountain onto the surrounding towns and villages. As the volcano erupted, there were several earth tremors which caused the sea to be sucked away and then thrown back with force, a phenomenon known these days as a tsunami. Day turned to night and even though Pliny the Younger and the other villagers were 30 kilometres from the eruption, they were forced to flee as rock and sheets of ash fell on them. They survived but Pliny the Elder was less fortunate; overcome by carbon dioxide fumes, he died on the shores of the Bay of Naples, trying to save the lives of those trapped in the seaside towns.

More than 2,000 people from Pompeii died and in all, the disaster claimed more than 3,500 victims. Thanks to Pliny the Elder many lives were saved and thanks to Pliny the Younger a record of the entire event exists in precise detail. Nevertheless, after the dust had settled, Pompeii lay buried under 23 metres of rock and ash for more than 1,400 years, believed by all to have been lost forever.

In 1599 an architect named Fontana was digging a new course for the River Sarno when he discovered Pompeii. It is rumoured that he was so embarrassed after finding some of the famous erotic paintings that he promptly re-buried them and mentioned nothing further. It was another 150 years before any serious excavations were made at Pompeii. Some startling discoveries were made which, in 1748, German archaeologist Johann Wincklemann brought to the attention of the world. The ash that covered Pompeii had mixed with rainwater and formed a hermetic seal over it, freezing it in time. As the seal was removed, a snapshot of Roman life in the 1<sup>st</sup> century began to emerge. The mosaics, paintings and statues were perfectly preserved and even evidence of 'street' Latin was found on the city walls which, when cleaned, revealed carved graffiti. One mosaic at the entrance of a house declared 'Cave canem', which means 'Beware of the dog', while another optimistically read 'Salve lucru', meaning 'Welcome money'.

These days the foothills of Vesuvius are fertile; the famous wine Lachryma Christi is produced here. There are around three million people living in and around the area but they, like their ancestors before them, are playing a risky game. Vesuvius is not dead, it's only taking a nap. There have been more than 36 eruptions since 79 A.D., claiming many more lives. The last big eruption was in 1944 but nobody knows when the next will be.

