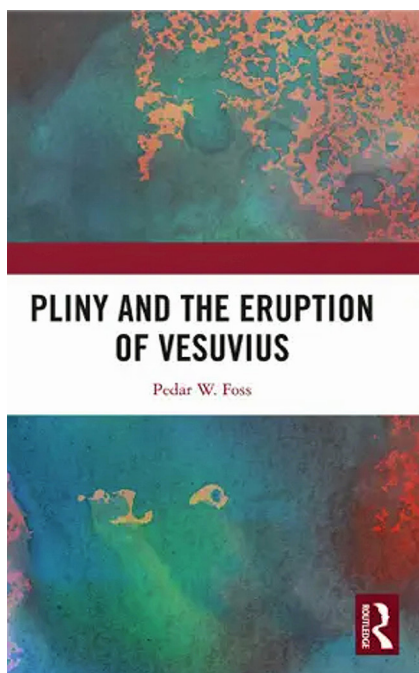


Pliny and the eruption of Vesuvius, by Pedar W. Foss, 2022. Routledge, 1st edition; 334 pages. Hardback: price £136.00, e-book: price £39.99; ISBN: 978-0415705462.



I am filled with excitement as I embark on this review, for it delves into the profound subject of the Vesuvian eruption of 79 AD – a topic that has been the focus of my scholarly devotion for over two and a half decades. My expertise, grounded firmly in the realm of volcanology, is complemented by the unique perspective brought by Pedar Foss, a distinguished Professor of Classical Studies at DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana (USA). He lends his expertise to the meticulous recovery and analysis of the words penned by the central figures of this historical event. My journey, marked by collaborative excavations with archaeologists and an immersive reading experience of this book, has steadfastly reinforced my belief in the critical value of interdisciplinary cooperation. This collaboration is essential for unveiling the comprehensive insights into the complex tapestry of events that transpired during the Vesuvian eruption, an event that unfolded over two millennia ago. The narrative of

this eruption has been preserved for us through two letters authored by Pliny the Younger, a pivotal figure within the pages of this book. In these epistles, he shares with the Roman historian Tacitus a vivid account of the circumstances leading to the demise of his illustrious uncle, Pliny the Elder – an equally essential character in this narrative. Pedar Foss conducts a meticulous critical and philological review of the two letters. His aim is to offer a reference text that is free from the numerous variations introduced over time through repeated transcriptions and interpretations. The book is expertly structured into five chapters. The initial three chapters provide detailed accounts of the two Plinys, the two letters, and the events of the two days during the eruption. Following these, the fourth and fifth chapters delve into the narratives found within the first and second letters, exploring the stories of both Plinys. Foss introduces two figures who are almost homonymous: the elder, Gaius Plinius Secundus, and the younger, Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus. Plinius the Elder is renowned for his monumental work, ‘Natural History’, and held prestigious administrative positions, including the command of the Roman fleet near Misenum, a region within the Campi Flegrei caldera, 30km west of Vesuvius. In a gesture of familial care, Plinius the Elder hosted his orphaned nephew, deprived of a father, at his headquarters in Misenum, ensuring him a proper education. In the year 79 AD, Vesuvius awoke from centuries of dormancy with a cataclysmic, explosive eruption. At first, it seemed unbelievable to the scholar Pliny that he could actually get close and witness the effects of the eruption. An episode recounted through the words of his young nephew sheds light on the contrasting temperaments of the two Plinys. When Pliny the Elder invited his nephew to accompany him on a voyage towards the active volcano, Pliny the Younger, exercising caution and prudence, declined. He suggested that it might be wiser to stay home and pursue his studies – a decision that perhaps spared him from untimely demise and allowed

him, years later, to recount the events of those fateful days. Pliny the Younger, often regarded as a pioneer of volcanology, displayed a mixture of concern and prudence, imparting valuable lessons on how to approach the unpredictable nature of certain volcanoes. The central focus of the book revolves around two epistulae (letters) originally composed on papyrus scrolls. These letters underwent a transformation from scroll to codex, subsequently multiplied through countless copies. This proliferation introduced variations and amendments to Pliny's words. The methodology employed to reconstruct and restore this rich tradition is known as 'stemmatology.' It entails crafting a genealogy, akin to a family tree, starting from the pristine archetype and branching outwards. The genealogical diagram spanning five pages depicts intricate, colorful lines, interweaving and diverging – a complex web that spans from the year 100 to 2021. I shall not delve deeper into the intricacies of this methodology. Instead, my focus turns to the presentation of novel interpretive findings. One of the central points of debate orbits around the precise date of the eruption. While the year is firmly established as 79 AD, corresponding to the first year of Emperor Titus's reign, the oldest and most reliable manuscripts contain the phrase "nono kal Septembres," signifying the ninth day before September – equivalent to August 24th. Multiple sources, including epigraphic (inscriptions), numismatic (coins), archaeobotanical (plant remains), and archaeoclimatological (climate-related) data, both corroborate and challenge this date. After a comprehensive evaluation of all available evidence, Foss asserts that August 24th is the most credible date. In the book's final two chapters, the narrative painstakingly retraces the experiences of the two Plinys by translating their accounts from Latin. Pliny the Elder embarked on a perilous journey with his fleet towards the Vesuvian coastline, driven by the urgent need to rescue his friend Rectina. However, as he drew closer to the coast, insurmountable obstacles loomed, compelling him to alter his course, steering southward to reach a more accessible shore at Stabiae. It was there that his dear friend Pomponianus awaited aid. Tragically, despite his heroic efforts to reach safety, the relentless force of the volcanic eruption reached even the distant shores of Stabiae. It was at this point that Pliny the Elder met his peaceful end, described as "more like a sleeper than a dead man".

Epistulae 6.20 poignantly narrates the escape of Pliny the Younger from the eruption. Even as the

earthquakes intensified in frequency and strength, he tenaciously pursued his studies. It was only upon the counsel of a trusted friend of his uncle that he contemplated the necessity of evacuation. As he and other evacuees embarked on their flight, they found themselves on the fringes of a pyroclastic current – a formidable force that may have the one that claimed his uncle's life. This pyroclastic current raced inexorably toward the Phlegrean coastline, enveloping and concealing those who sought escape within its billowing mass. Pliny the Younger have survived. Despite the letter's thorough description, it's important to note that no volcanologist has been able to pinpoint a distinct pyroclastic layer within the Campi Flegrei region that can be unequivocally linked to the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. This raises questions about the impermanence or transient nature of the geological record in regions that are both active and densely populated. It also raises doubts about the feasibility of establishing hazard map boundaries solely based on geological observations in such areas.

This meticulously revised version of the volcanic event description enriches the text with valuable insights and considerations. These insights can be thoroughly scrutinized through modern field archaeology and volcanological reconstructions, particularly when applying data derived from archaeological sites like Pompeii and Stabiae. Upon re-examination of Pliny's manuscripts, several seminal discoveries have emerged. These findings predominantly revolve around two salient facets: the precise locations of Pliny's and Pomponianus' villas and the intriguing possibility that Pliny the Elder may have borne witness to the impact of the first pyroclastic density current upon Herculaneum.

In conclusion, *Pliny and the eruption of Vesuvius* is an indelible masterpiece, in my estimation, representing the pinnacle of literary achievement in the realm of the iconic Vesuvian eruption. The author's ingenious fusion of linguistic scrutiny of Pliny's letters with a rigorous exploration of archaeological and volcanological dimensions paints an enthralling portrait of the eruption's unfolding events. It stands as a remarkable testament, akin to a voyage through the annals of history, and I extend my heartfelt congratulations for rendering this remarkable narrative accessible to all.

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