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Studies

ANCIENT HISTORY

ROMAN ATTITUDES AND RESPONSES TO THE ERUPTION OF MOUNT VESUVIUS

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Abstract: The eruption of Mount Vesuvius is one of the most pivotal points in world history, for since we have learned so much through what once mainly lied underneath its fallout, we can piece together much of Roman life – at least, in a city like Pompeii. In this article, the fallout of the eruption in a social and cultural setting is analysed, through the nature of the ancient sources, and the expositions inherent and current in modern scholarship. We shall see that the response to the eruption, and the damage caused, was multifarious to some degree, but also multifaceted, in that human responses from culture to subculture are never entirely the same – nor society to substrata. Even between individuals, reactions can occur that are different, however similar. Thus, it shall be shown that what went before informed what went after, and the thoughts and feelings of people influenced how they responded on that day in AD 79.
Keywords: *Vesuvius, Pompeii, Herculaneum, Roman Poets.*

INTRODUCTION

The eruption of Mount Vesuvius is pivotal in that it tells us so much. The fallout from that eruption almost encased places like Pompeii and Herculaneum, leaving them for us to study, and ponder, and then study again. Many aspects and facets of the life and death of the cities of Vesuvius have been researched, noted, and published. However, the general human response, so far as the extant ancient sources allow us to penetrate, remain largely unexplored in a study such as this – until now. In what follows, is an analysis and synthesis of the ancient sources through the lens of modern scholarship, and the author's own specialised lens, as well. Throughout it, one shall be able to appreciate, and thereby, disseminate how, in fact, many of the Romans of the time of the eruption responded to this cataclysmic event, and why they arguably had done so, almost two thousand years ago.

It shall be shown, using primary and secondary evidence, that many of the ways and mannerisms of the Romans post-eruption were informed by how they thought of Vesuvius, volcanoes, and nature in general, in the years leading up to the destructive force that was Vesuvius in AD 79. Many died, but many lived, and word spread about how this volcano – which many thought of simply as a mountain – blew apart and covered an area in molten and heated debris that was once a thriving part of the Bay of Naples area.

Human thoughts and feelings, and human relationships, will be shown to be the main informers of the general response immediately after the

eruption took place, as reflected in the ways people reacted with poetry, or geography, in mind, for example. True, not everyone around the Vesuvius region was a devotee of Virgil or Ovid, but still, knowledge their poetry contained influenced how people saw and related to volcanoes, like Etna and Vesuvius, which in turn, influenced how people responded to the volcanic eruption generally, at least, in part. We may not know all the details, and yet one thing is sure: this article provides a new and fresh window into a world that is well-known to historians – but it is a window that has seldom been detailed in an article such as this, until now.

THE GEOLOGICAL SETTING OF MOUNT VESUVIUS

There are a total of 29 volcanoes and volcanic districts throughout Italy, including Sicily and its islands, and of these 13 are considered to have been extinct by Augustus' principate. Of these extinct volcanoes are the Sabatini Volcanic District in central Italy to Rome's north-west, which peaked from 510 thousand to 449 thousand years ago in its volcanic activity;[1] and the Alban Hills Volcanic District to the south-east of Rome, which peaked in its eruption activity 600 thousand years ago, although its last eruption took place 25 thousand years ago.[2] Other volcanic districts in Italy include the Euganean Hills (Veneto), the Somma-Vesuvius District (Campania), the Vulsini Volcanic District (Latium), the Monte Vulture Volcano (Basilicata), as well as Mount Etna and the nearby Sicilian island of Pantelleria.[3]

Mount Vesuvius in Campania is still active, having erupted repeatedly in the last 10 thousand years. In fact, from the Early Bronze Age to the year AD 472 there have been 10 major eruptions there, including its most famous eruption in AD 79.[4] Archaeologists conducting excavations throughout the Eastern Campanian Plain – the region most often hit by fallout from Vesuvian eruptions - have discovered that since the Early Bronze Age, eruptions of this volcano occur at roughly 1 hundred-to-1-thousand-year intervals on average.

However, due to the richness of the soil around Mount Vesuvius – a result of its volcanic nature – locals have for millennia used the region's soils for agriculture, and the volcanic rocks that litter it as building materials. But because of the region's sustained human presence, Vesuvian eruptions thereby greatly affect the growth and decline of human settlements in this zone as they have since prehistoric times.[5]

CASSIUS DIO AND PLINY THE YOUNGER: A BRIEF PERUSAL

When some may contemplate the eruption of AD 79, think of Pliny the Younger' eye-witness account, and the mental images of scenes in Pompeii or Herculaneum during the course of that eruption. Many would also consider what scenes of the mind Cassius Dio put into words – ones of chaos, apparent madness, and illogical panic. In Dio's words, throughout Pompeii, Herculaneum and other parts around the Bay of Naples:

> *'Therefore, they fled, some from their houses into the streets, some from outside indoors; from the sea inland and from there to the sea, since in their confusion they thought that wherever they were not was safer than where they were.'*[6]

Yet, when we look at Pliny the Younger's eye-witness account of the AD 79 eruption from Misenum, across the Bay of Naples from Herculaneum and Pompeii, which he wrote for the historian Tacitus, about 25 years after the event, as opposed to Dio's account, written by a non-witness over a century later, amidst the confusion many people actually took thoughtful care and responsibility for themselves and their loved ones. They didn't act mad or illogically in the main, but sought preservation of life, and not just their own self-preservation either, but also the welfare of others in their families. As Pliny eye-witnessed during the eruption:

> *'You could hear women screaming, babies wailing, men shouting: some were calling out for their parents, others for their children, others for their spouses, and trying to recognise their voices; some lamented their own misfortune, others that of their relatives.'*[7]

No doubt these events transpired, for good reason. People wanted to save loved ones, including themselves.

VESUVIUS: VOLCANO OR MOUNTAIN

Mount Vesuvius had always been a setting for the playing out of human relationships. To many among us, the idea of conducting human relationships in the shadow of such a dangerous a volcano may seem strange. By the Late Republic and into the Early Empire, the Romans believed Vesuvius to be an extinct volcanic mountain like those many others scattered through Italy. In the 30sBC, Diodorus Siculus states that Vesuvius:

> *'...formerly poured forth fire like Etna in Sicily: but now the mountain is called Vesuvius and shows many signs of having burnt in ancient times.'*[8]

Throughout the first century BC, Vitruvius also remarked about Vesuvius, that:

[1] SOTTILI/PALLADINO/ZANON 2004, 361.
[2] PALLADINO/GAETA/MARRA 2001, 347; FUMICIELLO/GIORDANO/DE RITA 2003, 43.
[3] ANTONELLI/LAZZARINI 2010, 2081.
[4] DI VITO/CASTALDO/DE VITA/BISHOP/VECCHIO 2013, 132.
[5] LAFORGIA/BOENZI/AMATO/BISHOP/DI VITO/FATTORE/STANZIONE/VIGLIO 2009, 101-107; DI VITO/CASTALDO/DE VITA/BISHOP/VECCHIO 2013, 133.

[6] Dio. 66. 23.
[7] Pl. *Ep.* 6. 20. 14.
[8] Diod. 4. 21. 5.

'...the conflagrations that arose long ago and have been plentiful beneath Mount Vesuvius, and from there spewed forth fire over the fields.'[9]

Under Augustus and Tiberius, Strabo also remarked:

'...one would deduce that this area [around Vesuvius] was once on fire and held craters of fire, and that it was extinguished when the fuel failed.'[10]

To many Romans, Vesuvius simply looked like a mountain. According to the geographer Strabo, from afar, Vesuvius looked like a mountain and had a summit that looked in the main, innocently, 'flat'.[11] To quote Strabo:

'Above these places lies Mt. Vesuvius... As for the summit, a considerable part of it is flat...'[12]

More than anything else, Strabo describes the Vesuvian region as fertile and of striking physical beauty. Strabo states:

'...save for its summit, [Vesuvius] has dwellings all round, on farm-lands that are absolutely beautiful...'[13]

This impression of Vesuvius lasted well into the first century, Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History* published just two years prior to the AD 79 eruption, also praised Vesuvius' soils as fertile and beautiful, and the vineyards all around it as sacred to Bacchus:

'How am I to describe the coast of Campania, a fertile region so blessed with pleasant scenery that it was manifestly the work of Nature in a happy mood?... In its hollows begin the vine-bearing hills and the celebrated effects of the juice of the vine, famous the world over, and, as writers of old have said, the venue of the greatest competition between Bacchus and Ceres.'[14]

The House of the Centenary in Pompeii that depicts Mount Vesuvius itself, with vineyards all along its slopes, together with Bacchus standing nearby; and in this painting atop Mount Vesuvius is a relatively craggy, plateau, like that which Strabo described. Like Strabo's and Pliny's description of 'vine-bearing hills' all-around Vesuvius. Most likely, Strabo, Pliny, and the artist who painted this work in the House of the Centenary were not cognisant of the fact that Vesuvius had a crater summit, and had only seen Vesuvius from a distance.[15]

This theme of the fertility and fecundity of Vesuvius' slopes and surrounding environs lasted even after the AD 79 eruption. In Martial's *Epigrams*, published around AD 80, the picturesque vineyards along Vesuvius' slopes captured the poet's imagination:

'Vesuvius, once latticed with vine shade,
With grapes from which the richest wine was made –
This is where Bacchus had his favourite haunt
And Satyrs could their wildest dances vaunt.'[16]

However, if most Romans thought of Vesuvius as a harmless mountain with a harmless flat or flattish summit, others who knew Vesuvius better knew very well that there was an actual volcanic crater at its top. Appian tells us that in 73 BC, Spartacus and his supporters secretly based themselves in Vesuvius' crater at the start of their uprising. According to Appian, Spartacus:

'...equipped himself and his companions with staves and daggers seized from travellers and took refuge on Mount Vesuvius where he allowed many runaway domestic slaves and some free farm hands to join him.'[17]

According to Plutarch, at the time of Spartacus' rebellion, Vesuvius' summit sat atop precipitous cliffs which rose steeply above its lower slopes, and these too are much like those we see rising from Vesuvius' slopes up to its plateaued summit in the painting from the House of the Centenary. Plutarch also states that there was only one narrow track leading up the cliffs to the summit from the slopes below, a track that doesn't feature at all in this painting. This probably accounts for why Strabo, Pliny, and the painter of the image of Mount Vesuvius in the House of the Centenary never recorded anything about the crater inside Vesuvius' peak – getting up there was just too difficult! But these cliffs didn't stop Spartacus. When the Roman praetor Clodius besieged Spartacus atop Vesuvius, taking up a position along its singular walking track to the top, Spartacus' soldiers abseiled down the cliffs, attacked Clodius' position, routed his soldiers, and captured their camp.[18]

THE ROMAN AUGUSTAN POETS AND THEIR LINKS WITH MOUNT VESUVIUS

But even if the Romans had known Vesuvius to still be active, the Augustan poets show us that many Romans probably wouldn't have avoided living their lives far away from its surrounds anyway. In fact, most Romans were extremely relaxed about potential eruptions. Mount Etna,

[9] Vitr. 2. 6. 2.
[10] Str. 5. 4. 8.
[11] Str. 5. 4. 8.
[12] Str. 5. 4. 8.
[13] Str. 5. 4. 8.
[14] Pl. *NH*. 3. 40, 60.
[15] BUTTERWORTH/LAURENCE 2005, plate 15.
[16] Mart. 4. 44.
[17] App. 1. 116.
[18] Plut. *Cr*. 9.

for instance, wasn't seen by Romans as a threat to life. We have seen how many Romans saw Vesuvius as a setting for relationships. The Augustan poets Horace, Virgil, Propertius and Ovid, saw Etna as a convenient metaphor and a source of poetic inspiration to illustrate the relationships that existed amongst human beings and amongst the gods. In Horace's works, natural disasters have obvious and marked effects upon the human condition; however, these occur simply like changing seasons, without detracting from nature's overall beauty and allure. This belief Horace was keen to nurture among his audience, in order to encourage 'more ethics, less pathos', as Alessandro Barchiesi has put it.[19] Thus, Horace disagreed with the claim made in Virgil's *Aeneid* that the earth was just a medium for imperialism, and he continued in this disagreement throughout his poems. In his *Epistles*, published in 19BC, for example, the land is a 'glorious country', where a person can 'live in accordance with nature'.[20] Perhaps more in keeping with the Virgil's *Georgics*, Horace praised country-living as deeply moralistic. He would remain entirely convinced that such a lifestyle made him improve as a human and moral being, even in the face of further natural disasters.[21]

Not surprisingly, as a lover of nature, thanks to its beneficial effects upon his temperament and mood, Horace viewed the eruptions of Mount Etna as metaphors of burning love – a sentiment that many Romans, Italians, and others around the empire might have ascribed to the burning eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79, especially if they were fans of Horace's poetry – as distasteful or inappropriate as it may have seemed to some at the time. In his *Epodes*, published around 30BC, Horace lyricised:

'O land and sea, I burn
As Hercules once burned when smeared
With the black blood of Nessus. Hotter far
I burn than Etna's flowing flame in Sicily.
You are a crucible of Colchian drugs
Reducing me to ashes to be blown in vicious winds.'[22]

Numbers of Romans and other peoples may have quoted these very lines upon learning that Vesuvius had erupted, even though it caused irreparable damage, for weeks, or maybe more.

This theme of explosive, volcanic, heated love would also be adopted by Ovid, who in 19 BC would also use the setting of Etna as a familial scene and wax eloquent on his desire for a lover that burned like Etna's flames, thus:

'I am on fire and wasted like a burning
Field with its grain turning to ashes
In the east wind's blast. The fields where you are now,
On the slopes of Typhoeus' Etna,
Phaon, are far away but not less subject
Than I to the flames that come by storm.'[23]

It is, however, generally agreed that Ovid's works stand closer in line with Virgil's *Aeneid* than Horace's. Take, for example, Ovid's *Heroides*, published around 18 BC. The *Heroides* draw inspiration from the same subjects as the *Aeneid*, and incorporate into its stance those in the *Aeneid* on nature. Throughout the *Heroides*, heroines of Greek and Roman antiquity seem to echo the *Aeneid*'s theme that the natural world is a stage, although beautiful and cause for celebration of the erotic, for conquest and other public human achievements. Thus, Penelope writes to Ulysses that the geographical site of Troy is the location of Greek military victory,[24] while Phyllus writes to Demophon that Athens is a physical location for human education.[25] Moreover, Phaedra to Hippolytus writes that Minos is a site for familial human ties and law,[26] while Hypsipyle writes to Jason that Thessaly is a tangible region of peace for humans and the golden fleece.[27] Laodamia likewise writes to Protesilaus about Thessaly, stating that it is a great centre for religion in which at times every altar can be seen smoking with incense.[28] Other letters supposedly by heroines also associate physical places with human endeavours. Thus, Ariadne writes to Theseus that on her island there exist only memories of her betrayal by Theseus, and that the island's lack of agriculture and other forms of humanly produced works and infrastructure mark it as a deplorable island.[29]

Thus, in this work Ovid is in partial keeping with the *Aeneid*'s idealised, civilised-cum-imperialist, claims by rulers over the earth. Moreover, in Dido's letter to Aeneas, Ovid retraces Aeneas' visit to Carthage, like Virgil does too in the *Aeneid*, completing it with the story that a greater, all-conquering, city would one day be founded by Aeneas' descendants – and that city is to be Rome, according to Ovid and Virgil. Both of these poets claimed, Rome would be built upon geographical ranges of features that would, in time, produce an imperialist population that would outdo even Carthage, which is what Rome eventually did do, with the benefit of hindsight that even Ovid and Virgil had in their Augustan day. Therefore, Ovid and Virgil regarded the earth not as a living being, nor as a haven, nor even as a conducer of moral rectitude, which is what Horace believed it was, but as a scorned, unlikable, geographical setting, fit for only vocation and pastime, including of imperial conquest. Arguably, this sentiment would have had a legacy for many years to come among enthusiasts of Ovid's poetry, and many Romans and others could very well have cited Ovid by referring to the eruption of Vesuvius, after it occurred, as

[19] Hor. *Epist*. 1. 16; *Ars P.* 60-72; BARCHIESIS 2007, 158; LAIRD 2007, 142.
[20] Hor. *Epist*. 1. 10. 12-17.
[21] JOHNSON 2010, 320-321, 332-333. See also, MOLE 2002, 141-157, esp. 157.
[22] Hor. *Ep*. 17. 29-34.
[23] Ov. *Her*. 15. 9-14.
[24] Ov. *Her*. 1. 3.
[25] Ov. *Her*. 2. 108-112.
[26] Ov. *Her*. 4. 79-80.
[27] Ov. *Her*. 6. 1-2.
[28] Ov. *Her*. 13. 134-137.
[29] Ov. *Her*. 10. 6-11.

another passing anomaly in life – life imbued only with work, rest and play – but with hardly any serious concerns. At least, that was the ideal.[30]

Ovid considered himself very much an 'Augustan' poet, throughout his career.[31] Like Virgil, and to an extent Augustus through his architecture, Ovid utilised traditional Greek and Roman myths, traditions, and poetic devices to present to his listeners and readers an Augustan cultural message for mass consumption: that the culmination of classical European civilisation is to be found in his own times, especially in the city of Rome, under the overarching aegis of the emperor, Augustus.[32] It could even be said that Ovid was a 'quintessential' Augustan figure in this respect - one whose obsession with Augustus even made him aspire to rival Augustus' own greatness, through his own obvious poetic talents.[33]

Virgil, on the other hand, detailed his story of Aeneas throughout the *Aeneid*, as the forefather of the Roman state, and the focal ancestor of the emperor Augustus. Thereby, Roman myth and tradition are pepped-up and propped-up throughout Virgil's narrative of Aeneas' life as totally Augustan, and thereby, by implication they are projected upon Augustus as fulfilments and culminations of Rome's glorious religion and institutions.[34] However, that projection was not solely of Virgil's invention. For, it clearly served Augustus' political purposes as well, and that indicates something, at least, of at least some collaboration between the patron Augustus, and his poet, Virgil. Augustus himself repeatedly drew attention to how Rome's illustrious mythical and historical past, which ultimately led to the city of Rome's fulfilled destiny under his own imperial leadership.[35]

In fact, Augustus utilised similar forms of plotting throughout his other literature, art, and architecture, in order to propel his political legitimacy exponentially, and to prompt the enthusiasm of Romans so they would get behind his vision of Rome's present and future, under his autocratic, yet benevolent rule.[36] The *Ara Pacis*, for instance, portrays symbols of Rome's mythological past together with Augustus' own imperial family, and nearby, a giant sundial and obelisk from Egypt declare to the entire world that Rome, under its mighty emperor Augustus, equal the apogees and zeniths of other great world civilizations, surpassing them only in terms of its emperor. Accordingly, Virgil's intertwining of the ancient past with Augustus' rule accorded well with Augustus' own political message about himself and others.[37] If the message was to be a success, Augustus had to be unassailable. Consequently, the *princeps* had himself and his family appear in contemporary art as Olympian deities, complete with associated and gloriously embellished heroic stories, not to mention divine and human attributes that were purposed to galvanise Roman thoughts and feelings of nostalgia for the past, whilst still providing Augustus with the personal sacrosanctity he sought. By drawing upon such themes, Virgil attributed to him sacrosanctity as well, throughout the *Aeneid*.[38]

Propertius, however, brings the convergence of human and divine relationships together at Mount Etna. In his third book of the *Odes*, published in 21 BC, Propertius reminds us that the nature god Bacchus knew that Etna's blasts had a hand in bringing on his own mother's labour pains:

> *'I'll live the rest of my life through you and your horns, Bacchus,*
>
> *And be known as poet of your power.*
>
> *I'll tell how Etna's bolt brought on your mother's labour,*
>
> *Of Indian armies routed by Nyséan dances…'*[39]

Scores of Romans would have remembered these verses, or come across them, in the months and years following the great blasts of the AD 79 Vesuvian eruption, fondly, humorously, or remorsefully, in terms of child labour and the god Bacchus.

However, the romance and the nostalgia of the seeping blasts of Mount Etna would have lasted long into the night, figuratively speaking, in Roman memories. Ovid, while in exile in Tomis on the Black Sea, himself reminisced that his time spent admiring the volcano with his friend Macer was indeed, extremely memorable. In Ovid's very own words:

> *'You and I saw the sky agleam with Etna's flame,*
>
> *Vomited forth by the giant lying beneath the mountain…'*[40]

Forensic archaeologists have found the remains of around 1,150 bodies throughout Pompeii. Many of these were found in small groups of outside the Herculaneum Gate and the Vesuvius Gate.[41] It is estimated that huge numbers of bodily remains still lie under the ground's surface near the ancient roads, villas, and open fields leading out of the city, where they had died trying to escape the eruption, just as Pliny the Elder and others from Stabiae tried to do, as recounted by his nephew Pliny the Younger.[42] Thus, who did try to escape the eruption in some way, did so with loved ones – most of the bodies found by archaeologists in the 19th and 20th centuries near or on their way to Pompeii's exit-gates were found in small groups of men, women and children – reflective of the romance, nostalgia, and no doubt love, that many locals around Vesuvius felt for each other, perhaps partly on account of Ovid's poems. According to bone analysis of the remains of victims found in and around

[30] Ov. *Her*. 7. 17-22; 196-206.
[31] Ov. *Trist*. 2; BARCHIESI 1997, 29; HARRISON 2002, 91.
[32] GALINSKY 1989, 69-89; GALINSKY 1996, 261-269, 360; HARDIE 2002, 35; BARCHIESI 2002, 199.
[33] GALINSKY 1999, 107-110; TARRANT 2002, 20.
[34] KENNEDY 1997, 146.
[35] KLEINER 2005, 219.
[36] FAVRO 2005, 254.
[37] YAVETZ 1990, 17; WALLACE-HADRILL 2005, 78.
[38] KLEINER 2005, 202, 221; GRIFFIN 2005, 318-319; YAVETZ 1990, 12-13.
[39] Prop. *Od*. 3. 17. 19-21.
[40] Ov. *Ex Pont*. 2. 10. 23-24.
[41] PATRICELLI/CIARALLO 1998, 75-123; LAZER 2007, 607.
[42] Pl. *Ep*. 6. 16. 16-20; DE CAROLIS/PATRICELLI 2003, 87, 95; BUTTERWORTH/LAURENCE 2005, 299, 305.

Pompeii so far, most were old, infirm, young, or female – which may mean they were slower to escape, or it could simply mean that many of Pompeii's male inhabitants were either employed or conscripted into the fishing or naval services and were, in the main, away from town on assignment or commission, at the time of the eruption. Many would have wanted, no doubt, to have been with their families back in Pompeii.[43]

The ethnic blend of people at Pompeii in ancient times was mixed. According to Strabo, there were Oscans, Etruscans, Pelasgians, Samnites, and Romans living there.[44] In support of this statement, official Oscan and Greek inscriptions have been found at Pompeii.[45] Even though inscriptions may be indicative of cultural contact, rather than explicit racial presence at Pompeii,[46] metrical skull analysis at both Pompeii and Herculaneum indicate that the cranium samples, at the very least, were heterogeneous in their ethnicity, and were not entirely homogenous at all.[47]

At Herculaneum too, archaeological studies conducted there by Bisel,[48] and Capasso,[49] show that of the 296 bodies found in that town (which was much smaller than Pompeii), some 237 were discovered in the barrel vaults under the Suburban Quarter by the seafront where they may have awaited a speedy rescue by boat.[50] Among the skeletons of those 237 victims of the AD 79 eruption inside these so-called 'boat sheds' at Herculaneum, were likewise families and households, because among them were men, women and children. The rest of the skeletal bodies were found upon the ancient city's contemporaneous beachfront.[51]

Other Pompeians took to hiding from the eruption rather than fleeing, seeking refuge within buildings.[52] In the House of Menander, the House of the Sailor, the Villa of the Mysteries, and the theatre and palaestra area, the gladiatorial barracks, as well as a number of other sites within Pompeii, human remains have been discovered by archaeologists, victims of the eruption of AD 79. The large numbers of groups of men, women and children who tried to hide from the fallout in houses suggests they did so with people they were familiar with, and possibly stayed prayed for deliverance.[53]

The remains of certain devotees of Isis found in the temple of Isis in Pompeii, suggest that they probably remained there, in prayer, until before sunrise, in the hope that Isis would rescue them from the volcanic darkness and bring them into the dawn of a rejuvenated sun, as their cult taught. These would, no doubt, have been killed by the first pyroclastic flow from Mount Vesuvius. As for those who stayed behind at the temple of Isis in Pompeii, they probably prayed for the preservation of the town, with one another, as fellow-devotees of the goddess. So, as in life, in death, those who lived in Pompeii, Herculaneum, and around the Bay of Naples, thought of loved ones and human relationships, just as Pliny's eye-witness account of the scene in Misenum strongly suggests.[54]

In consideration for others, in the very throws of the eruption, Pliny the Elder sought to bring comfort to those who panicked with the realisation that Vesuvius was in fact an active volcano, not an ordinary mountain. According to the younger Pliny, his uncle told others in a panic that the smoke and fire billowing from Vesuvius were caused by simple bush and building fires, thus:

> *'My uncle, to soothe their fears, kept saying that these were fires abandoned by country folk in their panic and villas that were burning through being left uninhabited.'*[55]

However, the elder Pliny's designation of fire was probably motivated not just out of kindness to calm people down. Suetonius states that under Claudius' rule, a fire brigade was established in nearby Puteoli – a deployment that Pliny would have known about.[56] The elder Pliny may have calculated that by the declaration, and the spreading of the word, that there was a fire on Vesuvius, he might vouchsafe the Puteoli fire brigade's help in the rescue effort, around the Bay of Naples, that his nephew states he was in the very act of organising and carrying out.[57]

VOLCANOES, GODS, AND GIANTS

Many Romans' attitudes to Vesuvius and other volcanoes went beyond just the human realm. Quite often throughout the *Aeneid*, Virgil coldly denigrates the land and sea down to a level of vehicle for the empire, and in so doing reveres the political *status quo* under Augustus.[58] But this is radically different to his outlook in his *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, written earlier. R. Alden Smith argues that this should not surprise us, since Virgil often shifted like loose volcanic topsoil dust from one poetic genre to another. Still, such a radical change in outlook on Virgil's part was not always pronounced.[59] Standing somewhat closer to the *Aeneid* is perhaps the poetry of Tibullus, who outwardly expressed through verses that Rome's imperial destiny lay over benign, exploitable, and tangible, physical earth. For Tibullus, who published his extant poetry around the year 19 BC, Rome was 'fated to rule the earth', and that the earth was the mere physical setting for an empire of minds and hearts.[60] But that is arguably where similarities between the *Aeneid* and Tibullus end – at least in regard to the natural

[43] NICCOLUCCI 1882, 1; LAZER 2007, 609.
[44] Str. 5. 4. 8.
[45] CORTI 1951, 208; WARD-PERKINS 1980, 15, 33; LAZER 2007, 613.
[46] RODRIGUEZ-ALMEIDA 1993, 95-106; LAZER 2007, 613.
[47] On Pompeii, see LAZER 1994, 269-277; LAZER 1997, 102-120. On Herculaneum, see BISEL 1991, 4; BISEL/BISEL 2002, 451-475.
[48] BISEL 1983, 6-7; BISEL 1986, 11-23; BISEL 1987, 123-129; BISEL 1988, 207-218; BISEL 1991, 1-20.
[49] CAPASSO 1999, 277-288; CAPASSO 2000, 1344-1346; CAPASSO 2001.
[50] DE CAROLIS/PATRICELLI 2003, 99-101.
[51] BISEL 1991, 1; DE CAROLIS/PATRICELLI 2003, 56-72; LAZER 2007, 607.
[52] DE CAROLIS/PATRICELLI 2003, 93.
[53] FIORELLI 1860-1864, 196-212; BUTTERWORTH/LAURENCE 2005, 300-302, 304-308.
[54] FIORELLI 1860-1864, 171-172, 177, 182-183, 188; BUTTERWORTH/LAURENCE 2005, 297, 299.
[55] Pl. *Ep.* 6. 16. 13.
[56] Suet. *Cl.* 25.
[57] Pl. *Ep.* 6. 16. 9-10.
[58] STAHL 1990, 176-178, 210-211.
[59] SMITH 2011, 73.
[60] Tib. 2. 5. 57-60.

world and its dangers, like volcanic eruptions. Unlike Virgil, Tibullus saw war as 'horrible', 'savage', 'grisly', and providing a quick path to death.[61] However, Tibullus appreciated that war was necessary at times – and a topic he and others could legitimately compose verse on.[62]

However, for many Augustan poets, Mount Etna and Mount Vesuvius were settings of battles between the gods and giants of ancient myth. In his *Georgics*, published around the year 29BC, the great Augustan poet Virgil portrayed Mount Etna as the mythologised prison and abode of the giant Cyclopes, who caused its eruptions while entombed beneath the earth there after defeat in battle against the gods and their armies, by heating up the lava of the volcano with his more-than-human blacksmithing and smelting skills:

> *'As when the Cyclopes from malleable ore*
>
> *Work lightning bolts, some with ox-hide bellows*
>
> *Suck and blow the air, others dunk the screaming bronze*
>
> *In a cistern; Etna groans beneath its anvilled charge;'*[63]

Virgil developed these themes further in the *Aeneid*, published around 10 years after the *Georgics*. In this epic, Virgil portrays the area around Vesuvius, as well as Etna, as invested with numerous gateways to the underworld. Just as the Sibyl oracle located there exudes 'breath that streamed out of that black throat and up into the vault of heaven' like thermal fumes from a volcano or volcanic district,[64] so too do the fumes of Vesuvius suggest the presence of the fiery doors to the underworld in its vicinity.[65]

Yet, in the *Aeneid*, Etna and the Sicilian volcanoes are still populated by the giants Cyclopes, Vulcan and others, entrapped beneath them by Jupiter and the Roman gods.[66] For Virgil, Etna's and Vesuvius' divine credentials were not self-exclusive. Thus, what Virgil arguably saw in Etna, he was ready to project upon Vesuvius. Ovid would go on to adopt these themes in his *Metamorphoses*, published around AD 8. As in Virgil's works, in this poem Ovid portrayed every volcano as the abode of one or several giants, or titans, as their punishment for fighting against the Roman gods. Thus, the gods, using thunderbolts, defeated the giants in battle. Thereupon, the gods threw mountains, like Etna and Vesuvius, onto the giants in order to effectively entomb them.[67] But of all the volcanoes of the world, it is Mount Etna that is given greatest importance in this regard. It entombed the giants Cyclops and Typhon and its eruptions and lava flows are the fiery vomit projected by Typhon in his anger.[68]

These myths and poems found popularity throughout the Roman world. Even the sober historian Diodorus Siculus seems to have accepted such myths as historical, adding them to his *History* with another mythological story, also common at the time, as evidenced in Silius Italicus' epic late first century AD poem *Punica*, that Heracles fought the giants around Mount Vesuvius in a battle with the help of the gods, and with those gods' help killed the giants in the region. According to the *Punica*, the Carthaginian general Hannibal received this information, and other details about the Vesuvian area, when he toured it using Capua as his base, during the Second Punic War (218-201BC).[69] That, according to Diodorus, accounted for why Vesuvius was extinct, for the giant trapped under it had died.[70] Nor was Diodorus alone in this belief. Later on, Isidore and Servius would both claim that Pompeii had received its name from the Roman triumphal procession (*pompa*) that Heracles celebrated on that site after his victory over the giants there.[71]

Virgil's and Ovid's popularity over the next century was so immense, that in AD 61, the anonymous mid-first century author of the epic epicurean poem *Aetna*, alludes to these poets and their claims that:

> *'...that Aetna is the home of a god, that the fire gushing from her swollen jaws is Vulcan's fire.'*[72]

Nor is it entirely surprising, therefore, that, according to Pliny the Younger's recollections, during the AD 79 eruption, many as Virgil and Ovid might have done:

> *'...many raised their hands to the gods.'*[73]
>
> And, as Cassius Dio states:
>
> *'Some thought the giants were rising in revolt...'*[74]
>
> No doubt, others at the time thought so too.

EPICUREAN VIEWS OF VOLCANIC ACTIVITY AT VESUVIUS AND BEYOND

But, many other Romans, especially from Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things* in 55 BC, discarded religious and mythological beliefs and opted for Epicurean philosophical ones. One such belief was that the earth has a divine soul and being, and is in constant, steady decline – dying in fact – like any other living being.[75] Natural disasters were thus seen by Lucretius and other Epicureans as signs of the earth's decline to eventual death.[76] Therefore, Lucretius, like many other Romans on account of his poetry, held that volcanic activity ought to be revered as the divine movements of a divine earth, nearing the end of its temporal existence. For Lucretius, and for many other Romans, when this earth is in the throes of a volcanic eruption, these are the acts of a living and restless god, whose craters are like a living being's 'jaws'. As Lucretius described Mount Etna:

[61] Tib. 1. 10. 1-6.
[62] Tib. 1. 1. 1-6.
[63] Virg. *G.* 4. 170-173.
[64] Virg. *A.* 6. 241-242.
[65] Virg. *A.* 6. 549-542.
[66] Virg. *A.* 8. 416-428.
[67] Ov. *Met.* 1. 151-160; 10. 148-152; 14. 1-5.
[68] Ov. *Met.* 5. 346-353; 13. 876-877; 14. 2-4.
[69] Sil. *Pun.* 12. 108-57; MUECKE 2007, 73-91.
[70] Diod. 4. 21. 5-7.
[71] Isid. *Etym.* 15. 1. 51; Servius, *Commentary on Virgil's Aeneid,* 7. 662.
[72] *Aetna*, 29-31. On this epic poem, see GOODYEAR 1965; GOODYEAR 1984, 344-363; HINE 2012, 316-325.
[73] Pl. *Ep.* 6. 20. 15.
[74] Dio. 66. 23.
[75] Lucr. 2. 342-352; 1150-1153; 1173-1174; 3. 1077-1078.
[76] Lucr. 1. 469-470.

'Now I'll set forth the reason from time to time fires breathe

Out of the jaws of Etna...

Crucibles of Etna this fire sparks and breathes its blast...

Sicilians call the summit a 'krater', to denote

'Mixing bowl' – the part we call the mountain's mouth or throat.'[77]

This theme was further developed throughout the Augustan period. In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid portrays Pythagoras philosophising the causes and nature of volcanic activity, drawing heavily upon the Epicurean beliefs current in Ovid's day.

According to these, volcanic eruptions could be caused by three means: firstly, that since earth is a living being it must breathe, and volcanic craters serve this purpose; secondly, the breath and winds trapped within volcanoes sometimes produce friction which results in lava and eruptions; and thirdly, that inflammable matter such as bitumen and sulphur catch fire within volcanoes which the earth spits out through eruptions. Thus, volcanoes are seen as part of the living planets. Therefore, they could, in accordance with these beliefs, die, never to live again. As Ovid expressed:

'...when the earth no longer supplies any food or richness

To nourish the flames (as time has exhausted all her resources),

And when devouring nature is thus deprived of the fuel

It needs, unable to bear starvation, she'll starve her volcanoes.'[78]

This view would continue well into the 1st century AD. In *Aetna*, an Epicurean work, the anonymous poet strongly criticises the myths that poets such as Virgil and Ovid described involving volcanoes. In fact, he's scathing. In criticism of Virgil and Ovid, the writer of the *Aetna* proclaims:

'Let none be deceived by the fictions poets tell –

that Etna is the home of a god, that the fire gushing from her swollen jaws is Vulcan's fire,

and that the echo in that cavernous prison comes from his

restless work.'[79]

In place of myths, the *Aetna* suggests in very Epicurean terms, that under the earth run currents of fire and air as veins do through any living creature, carrying fire and air as its own life-giving blood, which erupt from chasms when their pressure become too great:

'As in a living creature veins run through the whole body with wandering course,

along which passes every drop of blood to feed life for that selfsame organism,

so the earth by its chasms draws in and distributes currents of air [and fire].[80]

That some of these Epicurean beliefs were held by some of the inhabitants living around Vesuvius leading up to the AD79 eruption is likely. According to Pliny the Younger's account, all throughout Misenum many people were to be seen espousing the Epicurean view maintained by Lucretius that the earth was dying, with a zeal like that of the *Aetna*'s, apparently criticising and correcting others who believed the poetic myths about volcanoes like Vesuvius. As Pliny states:

'...many raised their hands to the gods; more still concluded that there were no gods and that this was the world's final and everlasting night.'[81]

This observation is confirmed also by Cassius Dio, who states that there were to be seen in the area many running about shouting that the earth and all that is in it were in the throes of its final death:

'Some thought the giants were rising in revolt... Others thought that the whole universe was being consumed by chaos or fire.'[82]

Perhaps behind these seemingly erratic cries, lie the Epicurean belief of a finality for the earth, and the zeal that many other Romans, like the author of the *Aetna*, strongly guarded and used to correct those Romans who were more religiously-minded, or intent on extending temporal, human, Empire forever.

JEWS

After the eruption was over and the fallout had settled, a charcoal etching was written on a wall of House 26, Insula 1, of Region 9, at Pompeii:

'SODOM GOMOR[RAH]'[83]

This may have been etched by a Jew educated in Genesis. This fits well with the idea of divine punishment on the Vesuvian region, from the fourth book of the Jewish inspired, and most probably written, *Sibylline Oracle*:

[77] Lucr. 1. 639-640; 6. 681-692; 701-702.
[78] Ov. *Met*. 15. 340-355.
[79] *Aetna*, 29-32.
[80] *Aetna*, 98-101.
[81] Pl. *Ep*. 6. 20. 15.
[82] Dio. 66. 23.
[83] *CIL* IV 4976; National Museum at Naples, Inv. n. 114323.

'But when, some day, fire escapes from an underground fissure in the land of Italy and reaches the expanse of the heavens, it will destroy many towns and men with its flames, and much dense ash will fill the great sky, and drops will fall from heaven like red ochre, then know the wrath of the heavenly God, on those who destroyed the blameless race of the pious [i.e. the Jews]'.[84]

In the late-second century, Tertullian of Carthage echoed these same sentiments, and gloated over the destruction of Pompeii as a Sodom/Gomorrah-like demonstration of God's power over evil.[85] For Tertullian, and other Jewish and Gentile Christians around the Roman Empire, this sentiment may have had partial origins in their reading of the Book of Revelation, which hailed the destruction of Babylon – which Peter equated with Rome – as something worthy of praise:

'Hallelujah!

The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever!'[86]

This sentiment may have extended all the way back to the immediate aftermath of the eruption of Vesuvius, among Jews, Christians, and other marginal groups around the empire.

But not all Jews or Christian would have responded so gloatingly. Those familiar with at least some of the teachings of Jesus, would have known the story of Jesus and his disciples recorded in the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus approaches a pagan town in Samaria (perhaps not too unlike Pompeii), which he wished to enter with his disciples. However, since he and they were on their way to Jerusalem, the Jewish capital, they were rejected from entering. 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?' the disciples led by James and John asked. Jesus said no, and he led them away, and they walked on to another village nearby, which welcomed and accepted the group, wholeheartedly.[87]

Moreover, Peter, while staying in Rome or Italy, described a 'she' – most likely a church, or *the* church, of Rome – as in Babylon, and one deserving of greeting and friendship. Peter states:

'She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greeting, and so does my dear son Mark.'[88]

Thus, while many Jews and Christians gloated over Pompeii's fate, and the fate of the other Vesuvian cities, towns, and villas to the directly east of the Bay of Naples, that were either buried or destroyed by the volcanic eruption of AD 79, many would have been sorrowful and quietly, and patiently, remorseful – using tact to approach and console their neighbours, friends, and family members shocked and stressed by the famous ordeal that was the natural disaster on that year. In this regard, therefore, they were much like their pagan fellow-inhabitants of the Roman Empire.

HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS AND THE IMPERIAL RESPONSE

For many people, Mount Vesuvius had been the setting for the playing out of human relationships in the years, months, and days leading up to the volcanic eruption of AD 79. Indeed, we see the interplay of familial and other human relationship in the experiences of Pliny the Younger's at Misenum during the eruption itself. While Vesuvius was in the throes of eruption, Pliny and his mother were urged to leave Misenum by a Spanish friend of his uncle Pliny the Elder, on the grounds that Pliny's uncle would want both of their lives preserved. When the mother begged the young Pliny to leave ahead of her because he was fit and had a better chance of escape than her, old and slow as she was, Pliny refused to leave her and dragged her along more quickly instead.[89]

According to Suetonius, after this catastrophe, the emperor Titus expressed more concern for the locals of Campania than that which was suited to a typical emperor, showing deep paternal care and kindness for children. After the eruption had died down, Titus visited the site, passing edicts and distributing gifts of largesse to survivors to help them rebuild.[90] Again, he visited the region in AD 80, this time appointing two ex-consuls to supervise the restoration of the region, part of their job being to allot to survivors the properties of those who had lost their lives in the eruption and had no heirs to inherit those properties, and another part to dispense money to locals to help the rebuilding process.[91] Unlike Nero, Titus did not impose contribution funds upon Italy and the provinces, but according to Dio, he attempted to restore 'all the damaged regions from funds already on hand'.[92]

Nevertheless, it soon became clear that Pompeii, Herculaneum, and other Vesuvius cities and towns that had been buried by the eruption would not be easily restored, as Titus hoped. Many families refused to return. Many moved to Naples. Research undertaken by Steven Tuck, an archaeologist and historian from Miami University, shows that the Caninia family from Herculaneum moved to Naples – where inscriptions from the second century AD bear their members' names. Likewise, Vettia Sabina, her husband, and their family, moved to Naples where a tombstone records her name with the Oscan salutation '*Have*'. Used around Pompeii much like the Italian word '*Ave*', this is its only usage of the word in Naples, although it is repeatedly found at Pompeii in inscriptions and graffiti. An inscription from Dacia, dated to AD 87, commemorates one Cornelius Fuscus, who was originally from Pompeii, but who moved to Naples after

84 *Sib. Or.* 4. 130-136.
85 Tert. *Palio*, 2. 3.
86 Rev 19:3.
87 Lk 9:51-56.
88 1 Pet 5:13.
89 Pl. *Ep.* 6. 20; TONER 2013, 35-36.
90 Suet. *Tit.* 8.
91 Suet. *Tit.* 8; Dio 66. 24. 3-4.
92 Dio 66. 24. 4.

the eruption, and from thence was stationed in Dacia as a praetorian prefect, leading five legions during Domitian's wars there.[93]

These locals could not bear to risk their lives again by living in the Vesuvian area. They now knew that Mount Vesuvius was an active volcano. According to Statius' *Silvae*, over the next few years after the eruption, the landscape around Mount Vesuvius was still completely barren and even though there were no traces of Pompeii, Herculaneum, and the other buried Vesuvian cities, there were visible signs of what locals believed to be another impending eruption:

> *'Will future generations, when the crops have grown again and that*
>
> *Wilderness shows green once more, credit that people and cities*
>
> *Are buried beneath, that an ancestral countryside has vanished,*
>
> *In a mundane act of fate? Nor does the crater cease its deadly*
>
> *Eruptions.'*[94]

As Newlands points out, this aftermath demonstrates the resilience of the Italian Romans who aimed to reflect and ponder the scarred local area, and rebuild agriculturally and with at least some urban development.[95] However, it is also clear that earthquakes and minor eruptive activity still progress for months, if not several years, after the main eruption in AD 79. Nevertheless, despite these ominous and even hostile conditions around where Pompeii and Herculaneum had once stood, when the emperor Titus set out on his second visit, he overtly continued in his hopes to rebuild the region from the ground up as Tiberius had done in Asia following the AD 17 earthquake there. However, those plans were emphatically put to rest when, in AD 80, not long after he arrived in Campania, Titus received devastating news of another natural disaster – fire had engulfed Rome. Like Nero, the emperor returned immediately. It is unclear who started *this* fire – the sources are too scarce. But it burned for a long time, like Nero's. Suetonius states it lasted for three days and three nights.[96]

According to Dio, this fire consumed the temple of Serapis, the temple of Isis, the Saepta, the temple of Neptune, the Baths of Agrippa, the Pantheon, the Diribitorium, the theatre of Balbus, Pompey's theatre, the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, and the Octavian buildings together with their sizable and priceless books, now lost forever. In that sense the fire reflects the burning and pillage of Alexandria and its famous Alexandrian library by Julius Caesar's soldiers in 47 BC.[97] Because the fire destroyed or damaged so many of Rome's prized temples, Titus announced to the city and to the empire that the fire was, to paraphrase Dio, 'of divine origin'.[98] Then plague swept through Rome and the provinces, especially presumably, in the more highly populated and urbanised eastern provinces.[99]

It is unknown who Titus blamed for this fire. Presumably it was arson and since it lasted for three days and nights, it had some help in its conflagration, continuity, and spread, as well as its eventual and final extinguishment. If there were scapegoats, the plague might have destroyed some, as well as the many others it destroyed. But revealingly, according to Eusebius, in AD 80/81 the second bishop/Pope of Rome, Linus 'yielded', and Anencletus assumed leadership, after a twelve-year time in office. So, it is most certainly arguable that there was a persecution of the Christians in Rome after the fire of AD 80/81, similar to that under Nero. Also, revealingly, under Domitian there was another persecution, larger than Titus' and comparable to Nero's, as Tertullian and Eusebius recorded. This could have been an extension of Titus' persecution. If so, it was sparked and kindled under Titus, but fanned into flame under Domitian.[100]

This persecution extended to Jews. Domitian ordered all of king David's line extinguished – an impossibility – but he attempted it anyway. When Jesus' brother Jude's grandsons were questioned over whether or not they were related to Jesus, who was descended from king David, they admitted they were but that Jesus' kingdom is primarily spiritual, not temporal. When he learned this, Domitian let them go, and wound down the persecution. These grandsons of Jude were then promoted through the ranks of the Church and became great Church leaders, and according to Eusebius, 'they lived on into Trajan's reign.' Thus, the effects of the eruption of Vesuvius most certainly permeated Roman society to a large degree.[101]

Upon inspection, Titus announced that the cost to restore the city would be vast. Consequently, Titus curtailed his plans to rebuild Pompeii and the other Vesuvian Cities, and his long-term funding that he overtly intended for Campania, was diverted instead to the task of recreating Rome in his own image. Thus, the fire, and the rebuilding of Rome, saved Titus from rebuilding Pompeii, Herculaneum, and the other cities around Vesuvius effected by the AD 79 eruption, and thus from spending money on them, as he spent the funds and others beautifying his renewed Rome. Just as there are pretexts for wars, but with underlying causes that can be checked properly, so too the eruption of Vesuvius can be seen as a pretext for the fire and remaking of Rome in Titus' own image. The fire and Rome's reconstruction were a pretext for Titus' wilful neglect of the Vesuvian Cities, and the fire and cost to Rome were also a pretext for the persecution. Titus' persecution was a pretext for Domitian's. However, heart won the day.[102]

Along with the task of rebuilding Rome after the fire, the main financial priority of Titus' was the completion of the Flavian Amphitheatre, or as we know it today: the Colosseum. Funded mainly from spoils taken from

[93] KILLGROVE 2019.
[94] Stat. *Silv*. 4. 4. 78-85; NEWLANDS 2010, 206-211; CONNORS 2015, 126.
[95] NEWLANDS 2010, 206-221.
[96] Suet. *Tit*. 8.
[97] Dio 66. 24. 1-2.
[98] Dio 66. 24. 3.
[99] Suet. *Tit*. 8.
[100] Tert. *Apol*. 5; Eus. *EH*. 3. 17-20.
[101] Eus. *EH*. 3. 20.
[102] Suet. *Tit*. 8; Dio 66. 24. 1.

Jerusalem at the end of the First Jewish War, the Colosseum stood as a monument of violence of Roman might. This colossal building, so named after the colossus of Nero that Titus had erected outside it, marked another new beginning for the cityscape of Rome. However, the construction cost for the Colosseum and the reparations of Rome's burnt regions, meant that money and human resources would be focussed towards the empire's capital, not Campania. Thus, like Pompeii, Rome was not built in a day. However, unlike Pompeii, Rome was not destroyed in a day.[103]

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, many Romans saw a need in the eruption to preserve life, and many also a need to pray, and these two desires stemmed from familial ties and beliefs that had existed for many years. But others clearly believed, philosophically, that they, and people's relationships, and people's gods, were not as immortal as others believed them to be. It is notable, that of the responses to the AD 79 eruption, it is the belief in love for family and friends that overtook mythic and Epicurean beliefs of the past, in order to preserve life. Still, through research and growing public interest, the memory of the ancient Romans at places like Pompeii and Herculaneum, have defied the violence of Vesuvius for almost two millennia – proof of how remarkable and resilient the ancient Romans really were. Thus, their words, and their deeds, are, indeed, universally memorable, reaching out to us, from then to now.

[103] On the dedication of the Colosseum, see Dio 66. 25 – 26. 1.

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