

## PLINY'S DESCRIPTION OF VESUVIUS

Foss (P. W.) *Pliny and the Eruption of Vesuvius*. Pp. xviii + 333, b/w & colour ills, b/w & colour maps. London and New York: Routledge, 2022. Cased, £120, US\$160. ISBN: 978-0-415-70546-2.

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F.'s volume covers familiar ground. He tackles the Vesuvius letters (*Ep.* 6.16 and 6.20), arguably the two most famous letters in Pliny the Younger's collection. The greatest achievement of this book is that F. has taken a genuinely unique interdisciplinary approach. He examines Pliny the Younger's *Letters* with cross-references to studies in the fields of volcanology and archaeology. A Plinian monograph with genuine engagement with archaeology is very exciting and has been an uncommon approach. At least according to my memory, the last meaningful engagement with the field of archaeology in a Plinian monograph was R. Gibson and R. Morello's *Reading the Letters of Pliny the Younger* (2013), which included a comparison of Pliny's idealised portrait of his villas to the reality of the Italian set-up (Chapter 7). To see F. take such influence from the social sciences is welcome, and it would be great to see future Classics studies continue in this admittedly formidable direction.

In the first chapter F. gives a biographical outline of Pliny the Younger and Pliny the Elder. This chapter has a clear practical function in describing the careers and lives of these two men. It is useful to have Pliny's career posts laid out and explained so concisely. Political offices such as the Prefect of the Treasury of Saturn are illuminated in a way that helps to understand them more clearly. F.'s biography provides a fantastic outline of all inscriptions related to Pliny the Younger. These inscriptions are often spread out across various scholarly works; having them all collated in one place in this manner is therefore invaluable. F. also provides an excellent and concise overview of the recent developments in scholarly research on Pliny the Elder (the *Natural History* as promoting Rome as the centre of the world) and Younger (reading the *Letters* as socio-historical documents or as a literary collection).

The second chapter is a masterclass study on the manuscript tradition of Pliny the Younger's *Letters*, with a focus on the transmission of the Vesuvius letters. F.'s findings on the manuscripts are a genuine advancement on previous studies, which were impressive in their own time but have since become somewhat outdated, such as S.E. Stout's *Scribe and Critic at Work in Pliny's Letters* (1954). While conceding that many of the inconsistencies in the manuscripts are only minor errors, F. convincingly demonstrates that the contributions made to the manuscript tradition by Lorenzo Valla and the *theta* family can be distinguished; thus he calls for a new critical edition of the *Letters* at the book's conclusion. The work that has gone into this study is staggering; F.'s findings are accompanied by multiple and excellent graphs.

The third chapter addresses the controversial dating of the eruption of Vesuvius by cross-referencing the literary accounts of Pliny the Younger and Cassius Dio with archaeological evidence and more recent volcanological studies. F. begins by looking at the manuscript traditions of Pliny and Cassius Dio, convincingly arguing that any October dating in the manuscripts has been caused by scribal errors. F. is keen to prove that the eruption occurred on 24 August, as reported by Pliny the Younger, and not in October, as has often been claimed by those who have doubted Pliny's dating. F.'s argument is convincing because a wide range of archaeological data demonstrates that Pliny's August date cannot be contradicted: for example, the coins in the region may have been minted before

August, and the wool clothing that has been discovered would have been appropriate for the August climate and especially for the hazards of the ash cloud. Even archaeological food remains cannot prove an October date with any reasonable certainty. F. concludes that we can trust Pliny's word.

Finally, in the fourth and fifth chapters, F. examines the two Vesuvius letters with the array of methodological tools outlined. It is somewhat surprising to see the book transform into something of a traditional commentary at this point, with a large focus on philology. F. painstakingly engages in close analysis of vocabulary usage and grammatical constructions, demonstrating that Pliny writes the letters in such a way as to quicken the pace of their stories, to create a vivid sense of the setting in the reader's mind, and sometimes to slow down and bring emphasis to certain scenes. F. writes at a typically high level when using this approach, but the book is certainly at its most unique, and in my opinion best, when he examines the letters with reference to the manuscript tradition, archaeological data and volcanological studies.

I list a few examples of the advantages of F.'s methodology. In Chapter 4 F. uses archaeological evidence and his knowledge of the geography of the Bay of Naples to bring the Elder Pliny's rescue mission to life. Firstly, F. details the kind of ships that Pliny the Elder assembled for his rescue mission (local quadrimeres, based upon the tombstones of crew members found in the area). He uses road maps to demonstrate the impracticality of leaving by road for Rectina and Pomonianus, which highlights the urgency of the Elder Pliny's rescue mission. He also convincingly argues that the Elder Pliny was wise in leaving the house to go out into the hazardous outside environment as archaeological data suggests that 37% of all people who died during the eruption of Vesuvius perished from falling debris, including 90% of those who died indoors. He even offers substantial evidence for the claim that Pliny the Elder probably died of asphyxiation. F.'s engagement with the manuscripts is often based upon subtle word differences but the great effect of small changes can be observed in both Chapters 4 and 5. It is more likely that the Elder Pliny thought, not that his comrades felt 'solitude' (*solitudo*) during the eruption, but more probably that they experienced 'anxiety' (*sollicitudo*). This difference highlights the Elder Pliny's empathetic heroism. Sometimes the manuscript tradition leaves room for some nice ambiguity. Depending upon the reading, we could interpret the Younger Pliny as worrying he would be 'overwhelmed' (*operire*) by the ash cloud or we could opt for the more vivid and horrifying 'crushed' (*obterere*). Finally, F. references volcanological studies effectively throughout Chapter 5 to demonstrate the Younger Pliny's talent for describing the multiple stages of the volcanic eruption with vividness and accuracy. I particularly found the discussion around the shifting appearance of the ash cloud engaging.

F. provides an exciting new methodological approach for both Plinian scholars and the fields of Classics and archaeology more generally. Yet I am most fond of F. examining both the Elder and the Younger Pliny as serious writers and thinkers. F. leads readers to appreciate further Pliny the Younger's talent as a first-rate narrator of natural wonders and makes them want to discover more about the ways in which the *Natural History* crafts ideological messages about Rome's place in the natural world. F.'s monograph is useful as the Plinian-esque academic and practical study, which he clearly hopes it to be, but, more importantly, it inspires an affection for great art, which is equally, if not more, Plinian.

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