



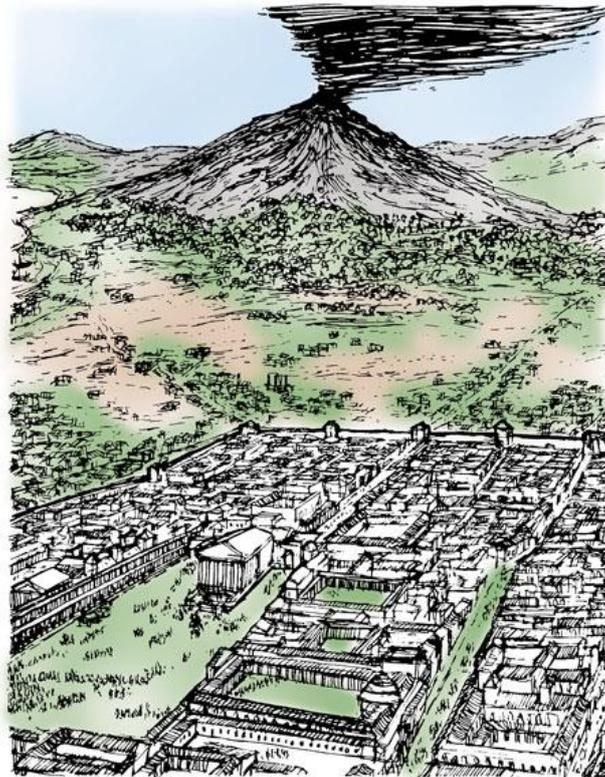
CSCP Support Materials

for
Eduqas GCSE Latin
Component 3A

Latin Literature (Narratives) Pliny, *The Eruption
of Vesuvius*

For examination in 2020 and 2021

Introduction



Introduction

Pliny the Younger

His life

Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, known as Pliny the Younger, was the son of a landowner from Comum (now called Como) in northern Italy. He was born in c. 61 A.D. His father died when he was a young child and Verginius Rufus became his guardian. At some point, he was adopted by his uncle, Pliny the Elder.

In August 79 A.D., the seventeen-year-old Pliny and his mother were staying at Misenum on the Bay of Naples (Neapolis) with Pliny's uncle (known as Pliny the Elder). In the long letter now known as Letter VI:16, written to the historian Tacitus, Pliny describes how his uncle died helping rescue people during the eruption of Vesuvius, claiming he himself preferred to stay behind and continue his studies. Pliny became his uncle's heir, inheriting his estate which made him a rich man.

Pliny travelled to Rome for the later stages of his education. For at least part of his time there, Pliny studied with Quintilian, a famous teacher of rhetoric and of Greek and Latin literature. Although he initially made his name as a lawyer, he later embarked on a career in the Senate and became the first member of his family to be a senator. What Pliny did as a politician is recorded on an inscription found in Comum. His expertise in finance was quickly recognised and he moved through various political appointments, becoming consul before he was forty.

His achievements reveal, among other things, an ability to survive and do well under such different emperors as Domitian, Nerva and Trajan.

As consul in 100 A.D., Pliny delivered his *Panegyricus* in honour of the emperor Trajan. His revised and expanded version of this speech is one of the very few surviving Latin speeches not written by Cicero. In around 110 A.D., Pliny was sent to govern the Roman province of Bithynia where he died about two years later (the exact date of his death is not known).

Pliny was married three times: his last wife was called Calpurnia, whom he praises in several of his letters. She was much younger than he was – perhaps only fifteen when Pliny was over forty – but the marriage seems to have been a happy one, except that they did not have children.

His works

From an early age, Pliny was interested in literature: he wrote a Greek tragedy when he was fourteen and was reading extracts from Livy when his uncle embarked on his mission to save people from the eruption of Vesuvius.

A huge amount of Pliny's personal correspondence was published in ten books. The letters in Books I-IX, almost 250 published between 99 and 109 A.D., cover a whole range of topics: these include incidents in the lives of Pliny's friends, gossip about notorious people, the murder of a man by his slaves, city life, Pliny's attitude to his

slaves and freedmen, family life, the pointlessness of chariot racing, the events of 79 A.D. and obituaries. There are also letters which include advice, comments about elections and trials, topographical descriptions and even job references. The letters provide a unique insight into the society of the time, at least from a wealthy and successful man's point of view.

After his death, a tenth book appeared, consisting mostly of official letters from Bithynia to the emperor Trajan and Trajan's replies: this is the only surviving government correspondence of its kind. Each letter deals with a particular problem and in most cases reveal Pliny as a man who has a real concern for the people in his care – if a little over-fussy at times. These letters are a major source for Roman provincial administration, and give a fascinating glimpse of the paperwork with which emperors were required to occupy themselves. In two of the letters, there are the earliest surviving accounts of the teaching, behaviour and official persecution of the early Christians.

Pliny was also proud of his skill as a poet although only fragments quoted in his letters have survived. He particularly enjoyed composing hendecasyllables and tells his friend, Paternus, that he is sending some of his verses to him. Pliny seems to have been annoyed by criticism that his poetry contains coarse language. He defends himself by citing famous poets against whom the same criticism was levelled, including Catullus and Martial. Whether Pliny sees himself as being on a par with these literary greats is not clear. He was certainly on friendly terms with many of the poets of his day and reveals that he

paid Martial's traveling expenses when the poet retired to Spain.

In a letter written to his friend Maximus, Pliny recalls a story told to him by Tacitus. When Tacitus was once at the circus, he fell into conversation with another spectator. When this man asked Tacitus if he was Italian or from the provinces, Tacitus replied that the man would know him by his published work, whereupon the man asked 'Are you Tacitus or Pliny?'

Pliny the Elder

Gaius Plinius Secundus (Pliny the Elder) was also born in Comum in northern Italy in 23 or 24 A.D. and was almost certainly educated in Rome. For twelve years, he was on active military service in the Rhine during which time he was a fellow soldier with Titus who would later become emperor. On his return to Rome, Pliny practised as a lawyer: after Vespasian became emperor, he held procuratorships in Gaul, Africa and Spain. He seems to have been extremely proficient in these posts: the historian Suetonius says that he carried out his duties 'with the utmost integrity'.

Later, Pliny became one of the emperor's *amici*, those whom the emperor chose to advise him on particular occasions. When Vespasian was succeeded by Titus, Pliny was appointed commander of the Roman fleet which was stationed at Misenum on the bay of Naples. In this way, he was on hand to observe the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 A.D. which was to result in his death at the age of 55.

Pliny the Younger was immensely proud of his uncle and paints a picture of a man who was disciplined, hard-working and always curious about the world around him. He appears to have needed little sleep, rising before dawn and spending much of the morning studying. Then he would have a light lunch. When he was at leisure, in the bath or sunbathing, he would always have a slave there to read to him or to take notes and once his rest was over, he would again work until it was time for dinner. Even then, he would insist that a book be read to him and he took notes. According to Pliny, his uncle always had someone near him with writing tablets in case he should want to write something down.

The elder Pliny was a prolific author and wrote on various topics, including the

wars in Germany, grammar and biographies. However, the only one of his works which has survived is his *Naturalis Historia*, an encyclopedia in 37 volumes which covers many aspects of the natural world.

Further reading

Fifty letters of Pliny: A.N. Sherwin-White

Pliny the Younger Complete Letters: P.G. Walsh (Oxford World's Classics)

Pliny the Elder Natural History: A Selection (Penguin Classics)



The Bay of Naples (Neapolis). The area covered by this map is about 40 miles (60 kilometers) wide.



Central and southern Italy.