



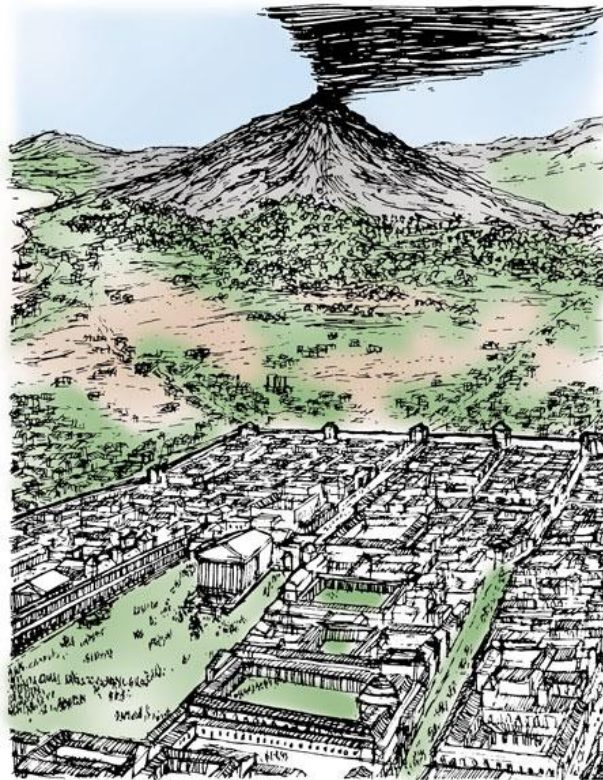
## CSCP Support Materials

for  
Eduqas GCSE Latin  
Component 3A

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

For examination in 2020 and 2021

### Section B



## Section B

*Pliny begins his account of his uncle's heroic actions.*

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### Notes

- 1 Miseni:** Misenum (modern Miseno) was the largest base of the Roman navy. According to mythology, its name stems from one of the companions of Aeneas who was called Misenus. Aeneas and his men escaped from the fallen city of Troy and eventually sailed to Italy. Misenus was a trumpeter who challenged the sea god Triton to a musical competition which was regarded as an act of extreme arrogance. As a punishment for believing that he could play as well as a deity, Misenus was drowned by Triton near the headland which was subsequently named after him. Aeneas eventually founded a city on the site of the future Rome.  
**classem:** at this time, Pliny's uncle was in charge of the fleet at Misenum, although his responsibilities would probably have been largely administrative.
- 1-2 nonum... Septembres:** the recent discovery of an inscription suggests that the eruption took place in October 79 A.D., not August as Pliny states here. There has long been doubt about the date, with archaeologists citing the remains autumnal crops, for example, which were found in the ruins of Pompeii. See [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-45874858](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-45874858)
- 2 hora... septima:** in the Roman calendar, daylight hours varied according to the season. Pliny states that the first indications of the eruption appeared in the early afternoon, around 2.00pm.  
**mater mea:** little is known about her. In letter VI:20, Pliny describes how the two of them escaped the fallout from the eruption.
- 3 nubem... specie:** pressure had built up in the magma chamber of Vesuvius. Eventually, this resulted in an explosion which displaced the solidified magma which had acted as a kind of 'plug'. The resulting hot steam, pumice and gases were then forced high into the air, producing the cloud Pliny describes. This kind of eruption is now known as a Plinian eruption in honour of the man who first described it in detail.  
**et... et:** 'both'... 'and'.  
**usus:** supply *est* – 'he had been engaged in...'  
**frigida:** supply *aqua*. Pliny's uncle had a cold bath.
- 4 iacens:** Romans often reclined to eat although this would not always have been the case at a light lunch which Pliny is describing here.  
Note the lack of connectives to give the impression of busyness. In another letter (III:5), Pliny describes how his uncle hated to waste any time, even taking notes while a book was read to him at dinner. When travelling, he was always accompanied by a secretary with writing tablets who wore gloves to protect his hands from the cold while he wrote.  
**poscit... ascendit:** Pliny uses present tense verbs even though he is describing something in the past. This is known as the historic present and often creates a

vivid account. Here, it reflects his uncle's sense of impatience to observe the unusual cloud.

- 5 **miraculum illud:** even with all his knowledge of natural phenomena, the cloud was sufficiently unusual to arouse the elder Pliny's interest.
- 5-6 **incertum... cognitum est:** Pliny is able to use the benefit of hindsight to confirm that the cloud was indeed rising from Vesuvius, although this was not exactly clear at the time.
- 7 **non alia... pinus:** Pliny likens the cloud to an umbrella or stone pine which has a flattened head and wide-spreading branches. These trees are very common in the Mediterranean and ancient readers would readily be able to recognise Pliny's description.



An umbrella pine still visible in the ruins of Pompeii

- 9-10 **credo... vanescebat:** Pliny was correct. The features he mentions are typical of a Plinian eruption.
- 10-11 **candida interdum, interdum sordida et maculosa:** note the elegant arrangement of words here. The repetition of *interdum* and the reversed order of the adjectives forms a pattern - *candida* (A) *interdum* (B) *interdum* (B) *sordida* (A) et *maculosa* (A). This pattern is known as a chiasmus or a chiasmic arrangement and is very common in Latin literature. This stylistic feature appears several times in the letter.

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## Discussion

Although this letter describes the characteristics of the eruption, Pliny begins with his uncle on whom the whole letter is focused: his main objective is to tell how his uncle died, which is what Tacitus had asked him to do. For modern readers, the description of the cloud, its size and shape, and the

technical details confirm what is now known about this kind of volcanic eruption named in honour of Pliny.

Pliny creates an impression of his uncle as a man of routine and discipline: from this and other letters, his pride and admiration are evident.

As a natural historian (see introduction), Pliny's uncle would have been very interested in what was happening. Although he already knew Vesuvius, he had previously dismissed it as having little significance. The mountain had

been inactive for many years and was covered in vineyards according to the geographer Strabo (c. 64 B.C. –21 A.D.). It seemed to pose little threat: in letter VI:20 (section J) Pliny dismisses the early tremors as being common in the area and nothing to worry about.

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## Questions

1. Look at line 1 (*erat Miseni... regebat*): how did Pliny the Elder come to be in the area?
2. Look at lines 1-3 (*nonum... specie*): Who was the first person to notice that something odd was happening?
3. Look at lines 3-5 (*usus ille... poterat*):
  - What had Pliny the Elder been doing that day?
  - What did he do in order to be able to see the cloud more clearly?
4. Look at lines 6-9 (*cuius... diffundebatur*): how effective is the comparison with an umbrella pine in understanding the shape of the cloud?
5. Look at lines 9-12 (*credo... sustulerat*):
  - Quote **and** translate the **three** Latin words Pliny uses in lines 10-11 to describe the cloud.
  - How does word order help create a vivid picture?
  - What explanation does Pliny give for the cloud changing colour?



An artist's impression of the younger Pliny and his mother watching the eruption of Vesuvius.