

Transl.

Two letters, two Plinys, two days: the sulphurous mysteries of antiquity

Rare are works that combine high scientific value with a pleasantness to read, such as to make them as compelling as a mystery novel, and at times as exciting as an adventure book. One of these is dedicated to the two Plinys, and has been published at a time of commemoration (the 2000th anniversary of Elder Pliny's birth) and reflection.

Pedar W. Foss, professor of archeology and ancient history at the small but prestigious DePauw University in Indiana, United States, has published the effort of a lifetime: *Pliny and the Eruption of Vesuvius* (Routledge). It is a masterful interpretation, or rather fine-tuning, of the joint events of the two Plinys, which also includes a new translation and exegesis of the two fundamental letters of the Younger to Tacitus, where he narrates the events of the death of his famous uncle, and of the eruption of Vesuvius.

Manipulative tradition

Ancient or classical history - which goes from the birth of Rome and its first almost legendary king to the fall of the Western Roman Empire in AD 476, therefore a story of almost 1200 years, an age which seems to belong to the great empires, from that of the East to Venice, both of which died however a hundred years younger than their model - is fundamentally divergent from the medieval one, but above all from the modern and contemporary one, due to a sometimes disheartening scarcity of sources, and the long, twisted, often manipulative tradition of their elaboration, reading, rediscovery and adaptation between the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age: which obviously applies not only to the *Historia Naturalis* (*Natural History*) of the Elder, but also to the *Epistulae* (*Letters*) of the Younger.

Foss clearly shows how arduous is the path to establish, first of all, the factuality of the events narrated—Leopold von Ranke's "how it actually happened," "*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*": though this is the proper task of the historian, at least serious historians and not contemporary storytellers, some even present in universities (unfortunately). But in the case of ancient history, not only the "how" is problematic, but also the "when."

Using not just manuscripts and narratives, but also the most sophisticated tools of volcanology and geology, Foss definitively establishes, for example, the date of the epochal eruption of Vesuvius, 24 and 25 August, AD 79. For a long time (centuries) this was not clear, indeed because the historiography of the time was not interested—except marginally—in such details, that political annals *à la* Tacitus committed, with serious long-range damage to all historiography, to discussing only political events, adding "extraordinary" ones in an appendix to their chapters: earthquakes, epidemics, and indeed, occasionally, eruptions. Two days. Did they change the world? Perhaps not, but they certainly shook the prevailing harmony quite a bit: a consolidated Empire in the process of further expansion, until the beginning of its decline, a century or so later, with the end of Marcus Aurelius and the maximum expansion of the Empire having been achieved (with difficulty).

A singular duality runs through the book: Pliny the Elder, who heroically dies in an attempt to save civilians—one of the first non-war but rather humanitarian operations of the "Italian" Navy, as Admiral Domenico Carro has well shown—and Pliny the Younger, who, through the reconstruction of the last days of his uncle, not only builds a myth of that uncle, but also of himself, as a writer, and of his own lineage, noble but not very noble, belonging to a sort of provincial patriciate.

A patriciate linked to Como, abundantly present here, with a worthy review of Plinian inscriptions, and of the history of *Novum Comum*, which from the maps of the first century AD appears, in the end, tremendously similar to today's, a walled city that looks much the same in 2023.

It is moving to see here the name of Giorgio Luraschi, never forgotten Master – of humanity, together with knowledge – and one of the Founding Fathers of Insubria University, but it could not have been otherwise, given his very important studies of "Roman" Como, not always to the advantage of the people of Como. Then, the duality extends: two Plinys, two days of eruption, two cities covered but not erased, Herculaneum and Pompeii, but also two fundamental texts, the *Naturalis Historia* of one and the *Epistulae* of the other, which intertwine and follow, in the end, truly peculiar philological paths. Then, stimulated by Foss, we can extend this duality, into the duality of a world that was perfecting itself, the Empire, and the Christian world that was emerging – and read the profound and prophetic pages dedicated by the Elder Pliny to Divinity – but also in the duality between Como and Rome, between the maritime and terrestrial power of the Empire, between the pride of the State and the excessive power of Nature, but also between memory and oblivion. The news of the eruption reaches every corner of the Empire. But one accepts the will of the gods, or of the one God who was silently but inexorably asserting himself.

Paul of Tarsus had been dead for over ten years on the date of the eruption. But his school had been born, and it was inexorably asserting itself. Paradoxically, his fame will long be greater than that of his contemporary Pliny. Yet, so different, both become protagonists of their own era, and Paul would certainly have interpreted the eruption of Vesuvius differently than Pliny the Younger. But, for a long time, excepting the hypothesized meeting between that very Paul and Seneca, these two worlds did not speak to each other. Perhaps.

Poetic elaboration

The Roman world elaborated the disaster poetically, perhaps also to exorcise the traces of a bad omen. We owe Martial for his splendid verses (*Epigrams*, 4.44), which Foss analyzes, and which I re-translate here: "Now this is Vesuvius, just recently it was in the shade of green leaves/Just now, here noble grapes gave, in great quantity, their wine ... / These hills are dearer to Bacchus than those of Nisa / Where the Satyrs gave themselves to the dance / And Venus loved these peaks more than Sparta / And here Hercules had a splendid cult of his own / And now...now everything is in sad flames, incinerated/The gods lament: "Oh would that this was never allowed!"

But then for a long time no one dared to go in search of the cities submerged in ash. It took almost seven centuries to think back upon them. In the meantime various myths were created, from Plinian courage, a true man of the Renaissance, a proto-Christian without knowing it, to the natural "sublime," speculatively established by Burke and Kant in the Age of Enlightenment, and immortalized in the volcano. Indeed, again, in the "two" Italian volcanoes, often confused in literature (to give just one example, Olive Schreiner, an exceptionally talented South African writer, who in 1883 published her masterpiece, *The Story of an African Farm*, where Vesuvius is comically confused with Etna...).

Pedar Foss has admirably reminded us how infinite stories unfold from history, all worthy of attention, never boring, if scientifically approached, asking the right questions and possessing the intellectual means to answer them.