

The People of Herculaneum AD 79

Recent discoveries of skeletons of Herculaneum give us insights into the lives of some people contemporary with Pliny the Elder. Studies of the skeletons of people who perished in the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in AD 79 reveal information about their health, nutrition, disease, occupations, as well as give us a glimpse of the social structure of the society. This paper will give an overview of this work: first, review new ideas about the eruption itself; second, give findings for the population as a whole; third, discuss several of the more interesting people as individuals.

The Eruption of Vesuvius AD 79

The people of Campania in AD 79 did not realize that Vesuvius was a volcano, nor did they recognize the warning signs of eruption. The first sign was a strong earthquake in AD 62¹. Damage was severe and not fully repaired by the time of the eruption 17 years later, as can be observed in Herculaneum today. On August 24, AD 79, intermittent earth tremors started². In the early afternoon of August 24, Vesuvius erupted. Pliny the Younger described it:

«It was not clear at that distance from which mountain the cloud was rising (it was afterwards known to be Vesuvius); its general appearance can best be expressed as being like an umbrella pine for it rose to a great height on a sort of trunk and then spread off into branches... In places it looked white, otherwise blotched and dirty according to the amount of soil and ashes it carried with it»³.

1 Tacitus, *Annals* 15, 22-23.

2 Pliny the Younger, *Epistles*, 6, 20.

3 Pliny, *Epistles* 6, 18; Radice, 1963 for this and the following translations.