

CHAPTER  
**6**

Section 5

PRIMARY SOURCE

## The Eruption of Vesuvius

### Letter from Pliny the Younger to Tacitus

*In A.D. 79 Mount Vesuvius, a volcano in southwest Italy, erupted, burying the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Among those killed was Roman historian C. Plinius Secundus, known as Pliny the Elder. His nephew, Pliny the Younger, wrote an account of the disaster in a letter to the Roman historian Tacitus. As you read part of his letter, think about the dangers Pliny's uncle faced.*

Your request that I would send you an account of my uncle's death, in order to transmit a more exact relation of it to posterity, deserves my acknowledgments; for, if this accident shall be celebrated by your pen, the glory of it, I am well assured, will be rendered forever illustrious. . . . On the 24th of August, about one in the afternoon, my mother desired him to observe a cloud which appeared of a very unusual size and shape. . . . This phenomenon seemed to a man of such learning and research as my uncle extraordinary and worth further looking into. . . . He ordered the galleys to be put to sea, and went himself on board. . . . Hastening then to the place from whence others fled with the utmost terror, he steered his course direct to the point of danger, and with so much calmness and presence of mind as to be able to make and dictate his observations upon the motion and all the phenomena of that dreadful scene. . . . [The wind] was favourable, however, for carrying my uncle to Pomponianus, whom he found in the greatest consternation. . . . Meanwhile broad flames shone out in several places from Mount Vesuvius, which the darkness of the night contributed to render still brighter and clearer. But my uncle, in order to soothe the apprehensions of his friend, assured him it was only the burning of the villages, which the country people had abandoned to the flames; after this he retired to rest. . . . The court which led to his apartment being now almost filled with stones and ashes, if he had continued there any time longer, it would have been impossible for him to have made his way out. So he was awoke and got up, and went to Pomponianus and the rest of his company. . . . They consulted together whether it would be most prudent to trust to the houses, which now rocked from side to side with frequent and violent concussions as though shaken from their very foundations; or fly to the open fields, where the calcined stones and cinders, though light indeed, yet fell in large showers, and threatened destruction. In this choice

of dangers they resolved for the fields: a resolution which, while the rest of the company were hurried into by their fears, my uncle embraced upon cool and deliberate consideration. They went out then, having pillows tied upon their heads with napkins; and this was their whole defense against the storm of stones that fell round them. It was now day everywhere else, but there a deeper darkness prevailed than in the thickest night. . . . They thought proper to go farther down upon the shore. . . . There my uncle, laying himself down upon a sail cloth, which was spread for him, called twice for some cold water, which he drank, when immediately the flames, preceded by a strong whiff of sulphur, dispersed the rest of the party, and obliged him to rise. He raised himself up with the assistance of two of his servants, and instantly fell down dead; suffocated, as I conjecture, by some gross and noxious vapour. . . . As soon as it was light again, which was not till the third day after this melancholy accident, his body was found entire, and without any marks of violence upon it, in the dress in which he fell, and looking more like a man asleep than dead. . . . I will end here, only adding that I have faithfully related to you what I was either an eye-witness of myself or received immediately after the accident happened, and before there was time to vary the truth. You will pick out of this narrative whatever is most important: for a letter is one thing, a history another; it is one thing writing to a friend, another thing writing to the public. Farewell.

*from William Melmoth, trans., Letters of Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (New York: Collier, 1909), 298–302.*

### Research Options

1. **Using Research in Writing** Find out about Pliny the Elder, Pliny the Younger, or Tacitus. Write a brief biographical sketch of this person.
2. **Analyzing Cause and Effect** Read more about Mount Vesuvius. Then create a cause-and-effect diagram to illustrate your findings.