

## Did Archaeologists Discover Pliny the Elder's Famous Roman Villa?

News that researchers may have found the site where Pliny watched the eruption of Mount Vesuvius epitomizes the pressure to tie discoveries to well-known narratives.

Sarah E. Bond February 4, 2024



Remains of the villa in Miseno (photo courtesy Soprintendenza Archeologia)

In early January, Italian archaeologists **announced** the discovery of a sizable Roman villa in Bacoli (ancient **Bauli**) along the Bay of Naples. The city sits to the west of Naples and was famed in antiquity for being a bustling resort town that once housed a famous resident, the statesman and naturalist Pliny the Elder. Although local archaeologists have noted that it is but a hypothesis, the suggestion that this villa may be the elder Pliny's has garnered headlines across the globe.

What we do know for certain is that Gaius Plinius Secundus — today known as Pliny the Elder — did reside in a villa in the area of Bacoli. The **letters** of his nephew, Pliny the Younger, provide a pivotal account. In **either August or October** of 79 CE, Plinia Marcella spotted a rising cloud to the east, in the distance. She alerted her brother, who then served as the commander of the Roman fleet at **Misenum**, that something was amiss. Putting down his reading and calling for his sandals, Pliny eventually had ships prepared. As the eruption raged, he boarded one of the ships and headed for a friend's house about three miles from Pompeii, before then pushing on to the nearby town of Stabiae. He likely died from inhaling poisonous volcanic gas. His body was found two days later.



There is admittedly no finite evidence — written or otherwise — tying the newly unearthed villa directly to Pliny the Elder. As the geographer **Strabo noted**, the coastline around the Bay of Naples was filled to the brim with villas side-by-side with little separation. The area was also not abandoned after the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE. Well into the 4th century, there were a number of prominent Romans, such as the statesman Symmachus, who spoke of the luxury villas that still drew the wealthy to Bauli for sunbathing, lounging, bathing, and coastal leisure.



Johan Christian Dahl, "An Eruption of Vesuvius" (1824), oil on canvas, 37 x 54 3/4 inches (public domain image via the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#))

The current assertion that the newfound villa is Pliny's is based in large part on the view of Vesuvius afforded by the villa on the promontory. This was coupled with the information in the letters of Pliny the Younger that the cloud rising from the volcano was visible. In reality, that could have been the case for any number of villas within the town. So why suggest it was Pliny's residence?

In comments to *Hyperallergic*, Pompeii archaeologist **Steven Ellis**, associate professor of Roman Archaeology at the University of Cincinnati, discussed the new find and the pressure on archaeologists across the globe to grab headlines when reporting them.

"There is an underlying but not unspoken demand for 'major, paradigm changing' discoveries to come from archaeological excavations these days," Ellis said. "It's at once aimed at, but especially driven by, various expectations in the media to cover headline-making news."

Tying stories to a well-known and dramatic narrative of destruction is one way to capture the public imagination immediately. As Ellis noted, the stories surrounding Pliny and Pompeii are still alive and well in the cultural zeitgeist. And yet even **the alleged skull** of Pliny the Elder remains unauthenticated and controversial. The reality is

that archaeology is often inconclusive. It is also most often tied to people whom we may not have any evidence for in the history books.

The Bacoli announcement perhaps reveals the “culture of the superlative, the culture of expectation” that plagues the work of archaeologists, Ellis notes. What grabs the attention of many readers is too often only those objects or sites that can make a claim to some sort of record — the oldest, the biggest, the first, the most expensive — or those who can connect a discovery to historical persons known by the broader public. This is particularly true in Biblical Archaeology, which often actively seeks out objects allegedly tied to biblical persons such as Pontius Pilate, James, and, of course, Jesus as a means of trying to corroborate scripture and a way of using material culture to confirm faith. But these are often specious attributions.



Pliny, “*Historia naturalis*” (c. 1457–58) (image courtesy the [British Library \(Harley 2677\)](#))

Let’s admit it: As a culture, we are rather obsessed with celebrity attribution — to a fault. “Just as works of Renaissance art take on more value when attributed to a name, so too do archaeological finds, whether small Greek pots or lavish Roman villas,” Ellis said. “What this all speaks to is a need to connect the things we find with the things we know, and know well. It’s about both fame and familiarity.”

The argument for the possible discovery of Pliny’s villa may be tenuous, but as Ellis remarks, it is not hopeless. In a recent interview, lead archaeologist Simona Formola said that excavations in Bacoli are ongoing, suggesting that potential new findings could add more to substantiate the researchers’ interpretation.

Uncertainty may be disappointing to readers, but finds such as the Roman villa at Bacoli are not useless or unremarkable just because they may not have been the setting for an infamous story and or the house of a famed Roman statesman. We can still appreciate the lives, the deaths, the objects, and the impact of those in antiquity who may never have been recorded in the annals of elite Roman history. Shedding light on the invisible persons of the past is perhaps the most important job of archaeologists at Pompeii and the surrounding area today, even if historical celebrity grabs headlines.