

Was This Villa Pliny the Elder's Front-Row Seat to Mount Vesuvius' Eruption?

Researchers are wondering whether a newly discovered villa in southern Italy could be linked to the celebrated scholar

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The lavish first-century C.E. villa was located in the Roman military port city of Misenum. Italian Ministry of Culture

Archaeologists are investigating a 2,000-year-old villa unearthed during the construction of a playground in Bacoli, a town in southern Italy.

According to a statement from the Italian culture ministry, researchers say it may have belonged to Pliny the Elder, the celebrated ancient Roman naturalist and philosopher who died while trying to reach victims of Mount Vesuvius' eruption, which ravaged Pompeii and other nearby areas in 79 C.E.

The site, located in the ancient Roman port city of Misenum, dates to the first century C.E. The large house, which sat atop a cliff overlooking the Bay of Naples, probably belonged to a wealthy owner.

The structure once featured ten large rooms, detailed tile work, panoramic views and several outdoor terraces, according to CNN's Silvia Marchetti. Its walls were made from diamond-shaped limestone blocks called tufa, which builders placed in a "net-like ornamental pattern." The site also included a stone dock, which is now buried about 13 feet below sea level.

"We think [the excavation of] deeper layers could reveal more rooms and even frescoes—potentially also precious findings," Simona Formola, an archaeologist with Italy's culture ministry, tells CNN.

Pliny the Elder lived in a villa in the region, though the idea that he resided in this particular villa is only a hypothesis. Steven Ellis, an archaeologist at the University of Cincinnati, tells *Hyperallergic's* Sarah E. Bond that Pliny and Pompeii loom large in the history books, and discoveries related to them tend to capture the public imagination—even if the evidence of a connection is uncertain.

"There is an underlying but not unspoken demand for 'major, paradigm-changing' discoveries to come from archaeological excavations these days," says Ellis.

Born as Gaius Plinius Secundus, Pliny is best known as the author of *Natural History*, a sprawling text similar to a present-day encyclopedia. He was also the commander of a Roman military fleet stationed at Misenum, which played a crucial role in protecting the Roman Empire. If the residence were indeed owned by Pliny, the seaside spot would have been an ideal location for the scholar.

"It is likely that the majestic villa had a 360-degree view of the Gulf of Naples for strategic military purposes," Formola tells CNN.

Because of that view, researchers wonder whether Pliny could have seen the eruption of Mount Vesuvius from the villa. The philosopher is known to have sailed across the Gulf of Naples on a rescue mission to help those fleeing the devastation. In a letter documenting the event, his nephew, Pliny the Younger, wrote that his uncle quoted a Latin proverb as he set off: "Fortune favors the bold."

Unfortunately, Pliny didn't survive the journey, likely inhaling toxic volcanic gas. He was one of up to 16,000 people who perished in the disaster.

Looking ahead, archaeologists will continue excavations in the area to learn more about life at the Misenum port. The site will soon debut as an open-air museum, which will open to visitors in a few weeks.