

Name: _____

Date: _____



Letter from Pliny the Younger

Extract of Pliny the Younger's letter to his friend Cornelius Tacitus, a Roman historian, recording his experience of the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD.

Meanwhile on Mount Vesuvius broad sheets of fire and leaping flames blazed at several points, their bright glare empasised by the darkness of night. My uncle (Pliny the Elder) tried to allay the fears of his companions by repeatedly declaring that these were nothing but bonfires left by the peasants in their terror, or else empty houses on fire in the districts they had abandoned.

Then he went to rest and certainly slept, for as he was a stout man his breathing was rather loud and heavy and could be heard by people coming and going outside his door. By this time the courtyard giving access to his room was full of ashes mixed with pumice-stones, so that its level had risen, and if he had stayed in the room any longer he would never have got out. He was wakened, came out and joined the rest of the household who had sat up all night. They debated whether to stay indoors or take their chance in the open, for the buildings were now shaking with violent shocks, and seemed to be swaying to and fro, as if they were torn from their foundations.

Outside on the other hand, there was the danger of falling pumice-stones, even though these were light and porous; however, after comparing the risks they chose the outside. In my uncle's case one reason outweighed the other, but for the others it was a choice of fears. As a protection against falling objects they put pillows on their heads tied down with cloths.

(See: <http://www.u.arizona.edu/~afutrell/404b/web%20rdgs/pliny%20on%20vesuvius.htm>)

1. Why did Pliny the Elder tell his companions that the fires were bonfires?

2. Why was he woken up?

3. Explain why you think going outside was a wise choice?

4. Do you think that putting pillows on their heads was a good idea?
