

Setting the Record Straight:

The Ancients and Mount Vesuvius

by: P.Y. Forsyth

What understanding of Mount Vesuvius did the Greeks and Romans possess prior to the cataclysmic eruption of 79 A.D.? In recent years, a myth has become entrenched in writings about Vesuvius: for example, in 1976, Raleigh Trevelyan's The Shadow of Vesuvius contained the assertion that "until A.D. 79 people had not realized that Vesuvius was a volcano, although some remarks by Strabo about fire-blackened stones seem to show that he had his suspicions" (p.9), and, in that same year, Fred M. Bullard's authoritative Volcanoes of the Earth stated that "because the ancients made no reference to Vesuvius as a volcano, it must be assumed that a long period of repose intervened between its early activity and the eruption of A.D. 79" (p. 188); finally, Martin Prinz in "Fiery Vesuvius", Natural History 88 (1979), wrote that "the ancients did not describe Vesuvius as a volcano" (p.42).

If these writers are to be believed, the ancient Greeks and Romans lived in blissful ignorance of the true nature of Vesuvius. This may be true to some extent, if we mean that the average Italian peasant-farmer of Southern Italy was not really aware of the terrible potential of the mountain, but it is simply not true if we mean that none of the ancient historians or naturalists ever showed accurate knowledge of Vesuvius' volcanic nature.

In fact, an examination of Latin and Greek sources clearly shows that such knowledge existed prior to the 79 A.D. event. In the first century B.C., for example, the historian Diodorus Siculus, while writing about the hero Heracles in Italy, said the following about the Phlegraean region:

This plain was named "Phlegraean" after the mountain which in past time brought forth terrible fire, just as Aetna in Sicily. And now the mountain is known as Vesuvius, and has many signs of the burning that took place in those olden times. (4.21 ff)

As a Sicilian Greek, Diodorus was quite familiar with Mount Aetna; it is not at all surprising, then, that he would have made a connection between that volcano and Italy's Vesuvius, especially when he recognized the "signs of the burning" on the latter. To be sure, Diodorus did not have the wide understanding of the Phlegraean region that geologists have today, but he knew enough to classify Vesuvius as a volcano nonetheless.

Also in the first century B.C., the architectural writer Vitruvius comes on record as being aware of the true nature of Mount Vesuvius:

Not less it should also be recorded that flames (ardores) in antiquity grew great and abounded under Mount Vesuvius, and from there disgorged fire all around the countryside. (2.6.2)

This statement is found in a lengthy discussion of pozzolana, and shows clearly that Vitruvius knew that Mount Vesuvius had not always been as quiet as it was in his own day.

Finally, we turn to the first century B.C. geographer Strabo, some of whose remarks (according to the quotation above from Trevelyan) show "his suspicions" about Vesuvius. In one part of his geography (5. 247), Strabo is discussing the region of Campania, in which Vesuvius is located. After mentioning Herculaneum and Pompeii (both soon to be destroyed by the mountain), Strabo says,

Looming above these places is Mount Vesuvius, inhabited everywhere (except on its summit) and covered with beautiful farms. But the summit is for the most part flat, and totally barren, and looks covered with ash; it displays hollow cavities in rocks that have the look of being burnt, as if they had been eaten by fire, and as a result one could infer that this area was aflame in former times and had craters of fire, but then was extinguished when the fuel ran out.

Strabo then goes on to compare the fertility of this area to that at Katane in Sicily, where the ash laid down by Mount Aetna made the soil extremely productive. Certainly, it would be difficult to assert that Strabo was ignorant of the true nature of Mount Vesuvius; he may have believed it to be extinct, but he still recognized it as a volcano, akin to Mount Aetna.

Thus, at least some ancient writers were cognizant of what Vesuvius was, and statements like those quoted above, to the effect that "none of the ancients" knew the nature of the mountain, simply cannot be allowed to stand.