Supplementary Reading: Chapter 2
The unexpected catastrophe

It is certain that when the eruption of Vesuvius started on the morning of 24 August, AD 79, it caught the local population utterly unprepared, although, as we now know in retrospect, all the tell-tale signs were there to warn them.

It is mainly thanks to the vivid eye-witness account of the younger Pliny (a Roman administrator and poet, whose many vivid letters have been preserved), that we have some understanding of what happened. And it is through him that we can gain insight into the reactions and feelings of the people caught up in the drama of this natural catastrophe.

Pliny’s account leaves no doubt that everyone was caught unprepared. His uncle, known as Pliny the Elder, was stationed in command of the imperial naval base at Misenum, on the north-west extremity of the Bay of Naples. He was not only the senior military officer in the district, but possibly the most well informed living Roman on matters of natural science. His 37-volume Natural History is the longest work on science in Latin that has survived from antiquity.

But for all his science and his seniority, his nephew tells us that the elder Pliny was relaxing, after a bath and lunch, when Vesuvius started to erupt. And the sighting of a column of smoke ‘like an umbrella pine’ on the far side of the Bay triggered a response more of curiosity than of alarm in him. He and his companions were evidently not anticipating such an event.

The same account reveals, however, that the signs were there. Pliny’s casual reference to earth tremors ‘which were not particularly alarming because they are frequent in Campania’ reveals the Roman’s comprehensive ignorance of the link between seismic activity (earth tremors) and volcanic activity.

The volcanologists of today constantly monitor any changes in levels of seismic activity from the observatory on Vesuvius, because they know that the same increase of activity in the deep reservoir of magma (molten or partially molten rock beneath the Earth’s surface) causes both earth tremors and volcanic eruptions. Through measuring seismic activity, these scientists expect to predict an approaching eruption months in advance.

They also know that the activity of Vesuvius is recurrent, and that the longer the intervals between one eruption and another, the greater the eventual explosion will be. The frequent but low-level activity of Vesuvius in recent centuries has relieved the build-up of pressure in the magma chamber. The catastrophic magnitude of the eruption of AD 79 was connected with the extended period of inactivity that preceded it. A long interval combined with mounting seismic activity is a sure sign of impending disaster.

Of course, the Romans could not know this, and our own knowledge owes much to the care of Pliny’s description. The long inactivity of the volcano naturally lulled the people of the region into a false sense of security, though they were aware of the signs of burning at the peak of the mountain.

source: http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/pompeii_portents_01.shtml