

Pliny the Elder

My name is Gaius Plinius Secundus, and I have lived throughout the Roman Empire since my birth in the Year 23.

I am a rich and well-connected former soldier, a cavalry officer in Roman Germany. I have happily taken on a variety of official duties on behalf of my emperors. Among the duties I have performed, I have served as financial adviser to the emperors. At this time, pepper is a very precious and costly spice, much in demand by Roman citizens. It is a favorite ingredient of the most expensive Roman cookery. I can tell you based on my financial experience that there has been “no year in which India does not drain the Roman Empire of fifty million sesterces. So dearly do we pay for our luxury and our women.”

Above all else I am a naturalist, a savant or student “of the nature of things, that is, life,” and these are my very own words.

I have a well deserved reputation as a scholar, based largely on my 37-volume “Natural History,” an immense masterpiece in which, among countless other delights, is the first use of the word from which we derive today’s *encyclopedia*. Not many others have studied and written as extensively as I have.

Today, August 24 Year 79, it is late summer. Beautiful weather prevails here in Naples, a city and port in Southern Italy, near the Bay of Naples, an inlet of the Tyrrhenian Sea. I am performing an official task: investigating piracy in this bay, a rather difficult assignment. But the local people have persuaded me to explore a peculiar cloud formation that

appears to be coming from the summit of the local mountain, Vesuvius.

To reach the mountain, I must be duly rowed ashore with all the circumstance due to my rank and reputation. The panicked inhabitants of a local village near Vesuvius need someone like me to calm them down.

No sooner have I arrived to this village when Vesuvius erupts! Oh, I can't breath!

(Pliny the Elder died of asphyxiation by volcanic gases, and, as a memorial to his dedication to learning and the circumstances of his death, the word PLINIAN has been added to the lexicon of modern vulcanology, or the study of volcanos.

A PLINIAN eruption is now defined as an almighty, explosive eruption that all but destroys the entire volcano from which it emanates. And the most devastating PLINIAN event of the modern era occurred 1,804 years, almost to the day, after Pliny the Elder's death: at Krakatoa, on August 27, 1883.)

