



Pompeii – The Last Day

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The volcanic surge reaches Pompeii as Stephanus remains defiant

the danger of living in its shadow. With no word in Latin for volcano, they might have thought the eruption was a message from the Gods. *Pompeii – The Last Day* is their story.

“Our film offers viewers a unique opportunity to learn about the worst natural disaster to strike the ancient world from the perspective of the people caught up in it,” says producer Ailsa Orr. “It also allows you to witness the terrifying behaviour of a volcano from as close as you’re ever going to want to!”



The main characters

Julius Polybius



Julius is the very successful son of a freed imperial slave. He owns bakeries in Pompeii and has strong political ambitions. As the crisis deepens, he finds true humanity; he frees his slaves and chooses a noble death beside his wife and heavily pregnant daughter, who cannot flee the torrent of pumice rain.

Character based upon: Written accounts and a skeleton found in the Polybius house.

Stephanus



Stephanus (Jonathan Firth) with Hedore (Inika Leigh Wright)

Stephanus is a very handsome but extremely arrogant man. A fuller (cloth worker) by trade, he is an odious social climber. His immense greed leads to his downfall when he chooses to stay and face the horrors of Vesuvius rather than lose his ill-gotten wealth.

Character based upon: Written records and a skeleton found at the gates of Pompeii.

Fortunata

Fortunata is the timid and sensitive young wife of Stephanus. As the crisis deepens, Fortunata discovers new fortitude. She attempts to flee from the torrents of pumice rain and choking ash and finds

solace with the gladiator Celadus and his dying friend.

Character based upon: Skeleton of a rich young woman found in the Gladiator barracks.

Celadus



A gladiator of renown, Celadus is handsome, charismatic and charming. He would rather take his chances and flee, than die like a rat, choking on poisonous gas and ash, but chooses to stay with his mortally injured friend and Fortunata.

Character based upon: Skeleton of a gladiator found in the barracks.

Pliny The Younger (Gaius Plinius Cecilius Secundus)

Pliny the Younger is a teenage follower of Stoic philosophy, the adopted son of his uncle, Pliny

the Elder. He declines to go on a rescue mission across the Bay of Naples, but finds inner strength as the crisis deepens.

Pliny the Younger was born in Como, northern Italy, on 24 August in AD61. He lost his father at the age of eight and was adopted by his uncle, Pliny the Elder.

Pliny the Younger was obsessed with writing and wrote in great detail about his everyday life and the characters that surrounded him. His account of AD79 remains the best explanation of the events surrounding the catastrophic eruption of Vesuvius. From his work, scholars have deduced that he was one of the most truthful and thoughtful writers of his age.

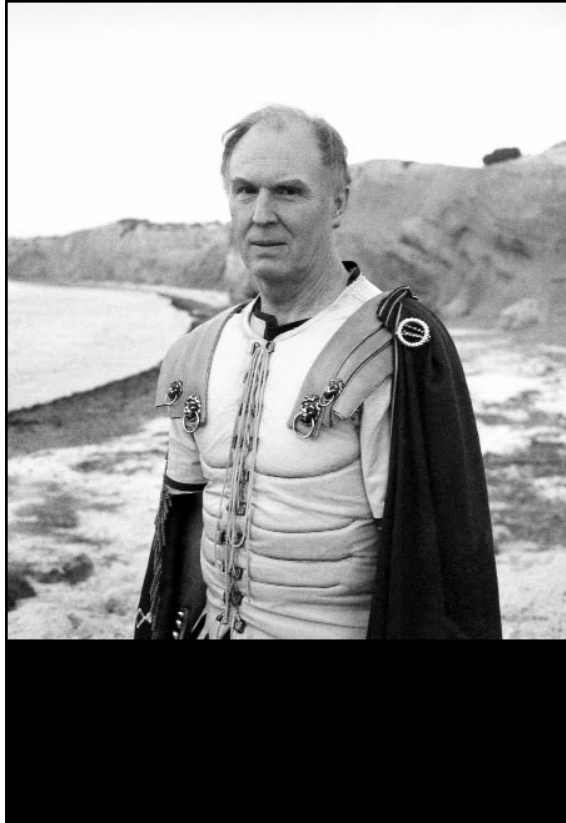
In a letter to his friend, Cornelius Tacitus, Pliny the Younger wrote of the death of his uncle, Pliny the Elder, as he led the rescue mission to Pompeii:

“My uncle decided to go down to the shore and investigate on the spot for the possibility of any escape by sea, but he found the waves wild and dangerous. A sheet was spread on the ground for him to lie down, and he repeatedly asked for water to drink.

“Then the flames and the smell of sulphur gave warning of the approaching fire drove others to take flight and roused him to stand up. He stood leaning on two slaves and then suddenly collapsed. I imagine because the dense fumes choked his breathing by blocking his windpipe, which was constitutionally weak and narrow and often inflamed. When daylight returned on the 26th – two days after the last day he had been seen – his body was found intact and uninjured, still fully clothed and looking more like sleep than death.”

Character based upon: The real-life personality who recorded the events of AD79.

Pliny The Elder (Gaius Plinius Secundus)



Pliny the Elder, played by Tim Pigott-Smith

With an important place in the hierarchy of the Roman Empire, Pliny the Elder was a lawyer who also served as a Calvary officer throughout Europe. He died in his attempt to lead a rescue mission to the stricken city of Pompeii.

Character based upon: The real-life personality who died leading a rescue mission to Pompeii.

Pliny the Elder is the Admiral of the Roman fleet stationed across The Bay of Naples at Misenum. He is in charge of the rescue mission and is a well-thought-of academic and lawyer.

Born in AD24, also in Como, northern Italy, Pliny the Elder was a remarkable man. A prolific scholar, whose biggest work, *Naturalis Historia* (*The Natural Histories* – an ancient encyclopaedia of natural phenomena), encompassed an incredible 37 books. We know from the writings of Pliny the Younger that Pliny the Elder was a man of great powers of mental concentration, who could manage with very little sleep. Instead of walking around the city, he would be carried so he could spend the extra time in study.

Fascinating facts

- The inhabitants of Pompeii did not know that Vesuvius was a volcano – it hadn't erupted in almost 1,800 years. So much so, there is no word in Latin for volcano.
- The longer a volcano sleeps, the more deadly the eruption. There were signs that Vesuvius was beginning to stir – earthquakes, ground rising up, underground springs drying up – but the people didn't know how to read these signs or understand what they meant.
- A reservoir of boiling magma some 3km wide had formed beneath Vesuvius, trapped inside by a plug of old magma. A chemical reaction involving water and gases finally shattered the lava plug and Vesuvius roared back to life.
- The eruption of AD79 was very unusual, without lava or other characteristics normally associated with volcanoes. It was a Plinian eruption – the most dangerous and feared kind of all – involving superheated gas, magma and ash that form a giant towering column that builds up into the sky. The magma cools and falls to the earth as pumice. Vesuvius erupts in this way approximately every 2,000 years.
- Mixed in with the pumice stones were lithics – cold, dense rocks torn from inside the volcano and carried up into the atmosphere only to fall back to earth as deadly missiles travelling at speeds reaching 180kph.
- At the peak of the eruption, a staggering 100,000 tons of magma, ash and gas was released from the volcano every second, travelling upwards at the speed of a jet plane to reach 33km in height – that's 3.5 times the height of Everest.
- The eruption took just under 24 hours from start to end.
- Had the eruption taken place on any other day, the people of Pompeii might have stood a better chance of escape. Usually, the wind blew in a south-westerly direction, which would have blown the column out over the Bay of Naples. But, on that fateful day, the wind was blowing in a north-westerly direction – straight over Pompeii.
- Vesuvius ejected more than four cubic km of material over Campagna that day. Ash fall was traced as far away as Africa.
- The seaside resort of Herculaneum was buried under 25m of pyroclastic material, extending the coastline by some 450m.
- Vesuvius emitted enough ash to fill a cube 1.5 miles on each side.
- Pompeii was first uncovered in 1594, although archaeological excavations only began in 1748 and have been continued since then. A massive area has now been excavated; however, even today, more than a quarter of Pompeii still awaits excavation.

Feature: Vesuvius – The Sleeping Timebomb

“I’d already done a lot of the historical and scientific research before I visited Pompeii for the first time on a filming recce last year,” says producer, Ailsa Orr. “But it was only when I first saw the casts of victims that the full horror of what took place in Pompeii really hammered home. These were ordinary people – men, women, children, babies – who got up as usual one morning and, hours later, they had died in the most traumatic and devastating way. It really compelled us to want to tell the story of what happened to them – particularly from their perspectives.”



The BBC team first had to piece together the evidence of who these people were, how they spent their final hours and why they had chosen to stay in Pompeii rather than flee when the eruption began; clues came from the victims themselves. Many of the victims discovered in Pompeii are old, young, sick and, in some cases, pregnant. So the team concluded that escape for the most vulnerable had simply been too dangerous. Other victims have been found clutching bags of gold and other precious objects, so some people had

probably tried to return to the city to retrieve their valuables. All of this enabled the team to build a cast list for the film.



Julius Polybius's pregnant daughter, Julia (Katherine Whitburn) and his wife, Epidia (Chrissie Cotterill)

“Getting inside the minds of people that died 2,000 years ago is not easy,” admits Ailsa. “Fascinatingly, research suggests that the majority of people living in Pompeii would not even have known that Vesuvius was a volcano. It hadn’t erupted in over 1,500 years – and when it went off, they would have simply no idea what was happening. We made a real effort to portray this innocence in the film and to show how people’s different reactions to the eruption ultimately sealed their fate. Out of this comes a very tense and compelling human drama.”

Ailsa and her team spoke to a crisis psychologist to understand how people react in crisis situations. “The peculiar thing is how little panic there is. Instead, people very often

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concentrate on little things; personal things that are completely inconsequential in the situation. We fed this information into the drama – for example Julius Polybius frets about his political career while his wife worries about the state of her garden.



People in Pompeii do not realise it is their last day

“We also learned that people quite often do things that are completely out of character when faced with a situation of extreme crisis. We developed this idea with one of our characters called Fortunata, the shy wife of Stephanus, a real-life character from Pompeii. She’s terrified to leave her house and, as the crisis develops, she finds herself abandoned by everyone – her husband and her slaves. She’s forced to become strong and ultimately ends up with a gladiator called Celadus, who we know was Pompeii’s most celebrated character at the time. The factual basis for this scenario

is that the body of a rich woman was found in the gladiator’s barracks.”

All the pre-eruption filming took place in Tunisia, on a Roman set just outside the town of Hammamet. But for post-eruption scenes, Ailsa needed something tailor-made; somewhere the team could deliver raining pumice, ash and lithics, recreate surge clouds and topple buildings. “We built a set at Ealing Studios where we filmed for three weeks. Eighty per cent of filming took place in the dark with cast and crew wearing gas masks. It was dark, dirty and fairly unpleasant for all concerned.

“*Pompeii – The Last Day* is the ultimate disaster movie. It’s *Man versus Volcano* – how the greatest civilisation in the world was brought to its knees by a deadly threat it knew nothing about. It’s a true story and its significance today is that it could all happen again, much sooner than most people realise.”

Biographies

John Lynch Creative director, BBC Science

John Lynch is head of the BBC Science Unit, and is responsible for all major BBC science documentary programmes. As a producer and director, he made several television series for BBC Science, including 14 *Horizon* films. A run of award-winning films culminated in producing the extraordinary story of Fermat's Last Theorem, which won a BAFTA Award. In 1994, he was appointed editor of the BBC's *Horizon* series, which won a BAFTA award for best documentary series. He was also executive producer on the BBC's landmark science series, *The Planets*, and the international smash hit, *Walking With Dinosaurs*, netting another BAFTA award in the process.

Michael Mosley Executive producer

Michael Mosley is currently Director of Development, BBC Science. After qualifying as a doctor, he joined the BBC, first working in current affairs, then for BBC Science making award-winning programmes for *Tomorrow's World*, *Horizon* and *Troubleshooter*; as well as being editor of *QED* and *Trust Me I'm a Doctor*. His recent work includes *The Life Of Leonardo da Vinci*, *How to Build A Human*, *Superhuman* and *Human Face*.

Awards include: "Prize du Jury" at the International Science Television Festival in Paris; Medical Journalist of the Year in 1995; Grand prize, International Scientific Festival; Gold medal, Beijing Film Festival 2002; Bafta, Grierson and Emmy nominated.

Ailsa Orr Producer

Ailsa Orr has produced a number of highly successful science documentaries, including *Neanderthal*, which was an RTS Award-winner in 2000, and BBC One's *Threads Of Life*, presented by Lord Winston, which won the "Prize du Jury" at the International Science Television Festival in Paris, and was Emmy-nominated in 2003. Prior to that, she was assistant producer on BBC One's *Walking With Dinosaurs*, series associate producer on *When Dinosaurs Ruled*, and involved as a researcher or reporter on a number of BBC One, RTE and Channel 4 productions.

Tim Pigott-Smith (Pliny the Elder)

Tim Pigott-Smith is a renowned film, television and theatre actor. Highlights of his career include feature films such as *Remains Of The Day* and *Bloody Sunday*, directed by Paul Greengrass. Recent television roles range from Carlton's *The Vice*, to the BBC's *Inspector Lynley Mysteries* and *North And South*. Recent theatre credits include *The Ice Man Cometh* at The Almeida, Islington and Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest* at The National Theatre.

Jonathan Firth (Stephanus)

Jonathan Firth, brother of Colin, has starred in several television productions including playing the role of Albert in the BBC's *Victoria And Albert*, and Romeo in Channel 4's recent adaptation of *Romeo And Juliet*. Recent

theatre roles include Henry in *Henry VI Part III* for the RSC, and Schwartz in *The Lulu* plays for The Almeida, Islington.

Jim Carter (Julius Polybius)

Jim Carter is a regular face on British television and is well known for his film work including *The Madness Of King George*, *Richard III*, *Shakespeare In Love* and *Heartlands*.

Rebecca Clarke (Fortunata)

Rebecca Clarke has appeared in numerous television productions such as the BBC's *Silent Witness* and *Out Of Tune*. Theatre work includes the RSC's *The Lion, Witch And The Wardrobe*.

Robert Whitelock (Celadus)



A regular on British television, Robert Whitelock has appeared in programmes ranging from *The Bill* to *Playing The Field*. Theatre work includes numerous plays for the RSC such as *Dr Faustus* and *Henry VIII*.

Martin Hodgson (Pliny the Younger)

Martin Hodgson's television credits include BBC television's *Vanity Fair* and Carlton's *Big Bad World*.