

The trembling earth

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. Psalm 46:1-3

The people of Campania were used to the ground moving beneath their feet, having felt the trembling of the earth many times. Sometimes, if the earth shook very hard, things would get broken but they just accepted it as part of their life. On 5 February AD 62 around midday the people of Campania were rocked by an earthquake



9 The crumbling walls of Pompeii and the ever dominant Vesuvius in the background.

whose epicentre was Pompeii, but this time it was different—this time it was ‘the big one’, measuring approximately (so experts surmise) anywhere between 5 and 7 on the Richter Scale.

According to the historian Seneca ‘it inflicted great destruction on Campania, a region which has never been safe from this evil, yet which has remained undamaged and has often got off with a fright. For part of the town of Herculaneum too fell down and even the structures that remain are unstable, and the colony of Nuceria, though it escaped disaster, nevertheless is not without complaint. Naples too lost many private buildings, but no public ones, being stricken only lightly by the great disaster; even villas have collapsed, everywhere things shook without damage.’¹

In Pompeii, the centre of the earthquake zone, buildings swayed and collapsed and the main reservoir for the aqueduct was damaged, affecting the fresh water supply to the city. There is even a report of how a giant chasm opened up in the countryside swallowing a flock of about six hundred sheep. People were left bruised and shocked but, strangely, only one fatality was recorded, that of Vestal Virgin Laelia. As seismologists often say: ‘Earthquakes don’t kill people, buildings do’.

Time to leave?

The psychological impact of the earthquake was far greater than the visual and physical damage it caused. Seneca sums it up very well when he says ‘we must seek solace for the anxious and dispel overmastering fear. For what can any one believe quite safe if the world itself is shaken, and its most solid parts totter to their fall? Where, indeed, can our fears have limit if the one thing immovably fixed, which upholds all other things in dependence on it, begins to rock, and the earth lose its chief characteristic, stability? What refuge can our weak bodies find? Whither shall anxious ones flee when fear springs from the ground and is drawn up from earth’s foundations? If roofs at any time begin to crack and

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premonitions of fall are given, there is general panic: all hurry pell-mell out of doors, they abandon their household treasures, and trust for safety to the public street. But if the earth itself stir up destruction, what refuge or help can we look for? If this solid globe, which upholds and defends us, upon which our cities are built, which has been called by some the world's foundation, stagger and remove, wither are we to turn?'²

Many of the population no longer felt safe in their own homes. It was reported that strong aftershocks and tremors were felt for at least seven days after the initial earthquake. No relief funds were forthcoming from Emperor Nero, due it was thought to the earlier mentioned incident in the amphitheatre. Some houses and civic buildings were now uninhabitable. Many people, seeing the whole incident as an act of divine displeasure, left never to return. However, a few would stay and try to



10 House of the Vetti; a household shrine (lararium) with its guardian or gods (lares) who were thought to protect the family from external threats. The snake was also looked upon as a guardian spirit.

rebuild, offering more sacrifices to their gods in the vain hope that they would keep them safe. But their gods weren't listening!

Notes

- 1 **Cooley, Alison E.** and **Cooley, M.G.L.**, *Pompeii: A Source Book* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 29
- 2 **Seneca**, *Naturales Quaestiones* Book VI
(<http://naturalesquaestiones.blogspot.co.uk/2009/08/book-vi-tr-john-clarke.html>) sections 222 Physical Science Bk, vi 4 & 5.