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FROM THE TRENCHES

BOOKS

Scenes of an Eruption



Ashen Sky: The Letters of Pliny the Younger on the Eruption of Vesuvius (Getty Publications, \$19.95) pairs a new translation of Pliny's famous firsthand accounts of the A.D. 79 eruption with the stark black-and-white illustrations of renowned artist Barry Moser.

In his letters, Pliny describes the eruption so accurately that scientists today refer to the first of its two violent stages as the "Plinian" phase. In disturbingly calm prose, he also recalls the bone-chilling moments as people began to panic—"there were some who in their fear of dying begged for death"—and explains how ash

and gases inundated Herculaneum so quickly that many residents didn't even have a chance to recoil in terror before they died.

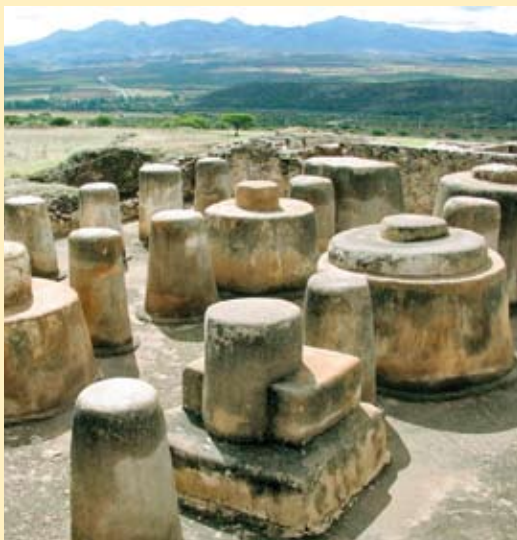
Moser's jagged images capture the eerie moments before, during, and after the eruption, from which the solidified ghosts of Pompeii's fleeing inhabitants emerged as artifacts almost 2,000 years later.

—ETI BONN-MULLER

DESTINATION

We asked pioneering archaeoastronomer Anthony Aveni of Colgate University to name his favorite overlooked site:

Alta Vista, or Chalchihuites, in the Mexican state of Zacatecas, gets my nod. A Teotihuacán ceremonial center right on the Tropic of Cancer, it was occupied from A.D. 315 to about 1050. It has a number of astronomically important features, including petroglyphs, a processional walkway, and the dramatic "Hall of Columns." At noon on the summer solstice the sun stands directly overhead.



I always thought of it as one of the best cases for astronomical alignments at an archaeological site, but unfortunately people don't visit it very often. It's in northwest Mexico, which is very hot in the summer and freezing cold in the winter. It's an impressive place, sitting lonely on the badlands about four miles east of the town of Chalchihuites. It's also not far from the colonial town of Zacatecas, which has a beautiful cathedral.

Alta Vista is a small site, not like the massive Teotihuacán, but I have always thought it was a cool place.