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Social Studies

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# Pompeii, The Lost City

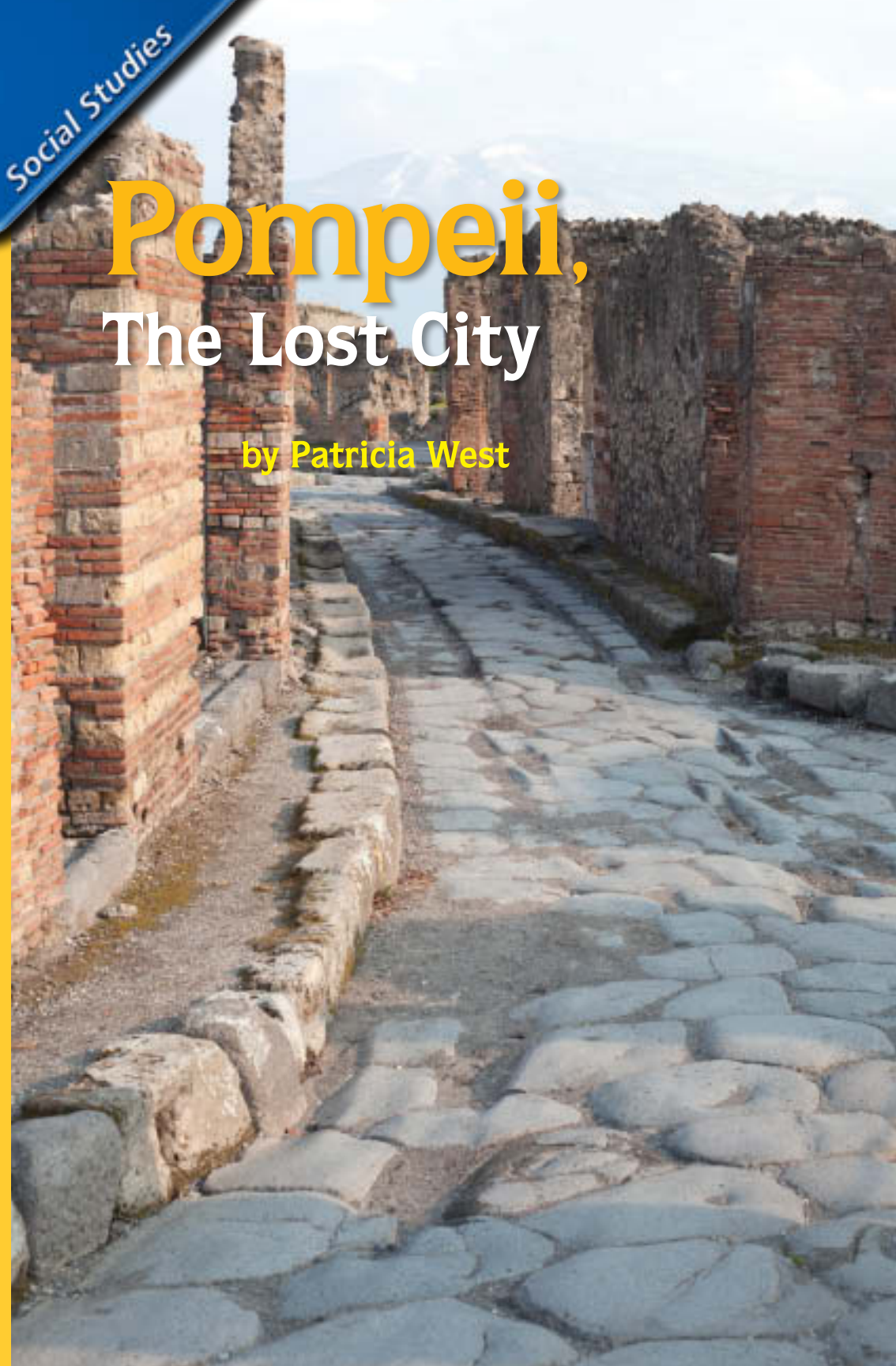
by Patricia West

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## Vocabulary

curiosity

glorious

granite

ruins

terraced

thickets

torrent

Word count: 2,090

# Pompeii, The Lost City



by Patricia West



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## A Day No One Will Ever Forget

Imagine going back in time to August 23, in the year A.D. 79. That is nearly twenty centuries ago! The people of Pompeii, Italy, are celebrating a holiday called Vulcanalia to honor Vulcan, the god of fire and metalworking. In his mountaintop workshop, Vulcan supposedly forged weapons for the other gods.

Pompeii, a city of about 20,000 people, lies near the Bay of Naples at the foot of a **terraced** mountain 6,000 feet tall. **Thickets** of shrubs and trees near the mountaintop provide good hunting grounds. Recently hunters had noticed the Earth's surface here at this mountain, called Vesuvius, seemed strangely warm.

The largest statue ever made in the United States stands in Birmingham, Alabama, and honors Vulcan. This modern Vulcan wears blue overalls similar to the ones worn by steelmakers of the city's past.



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## A Warning?

In the weeks just before Vulcanalia, some odd things happened in Pompeii, beginning with a small earthquake. Soon after, some wells dried up, and suddenly water wasn't flowing from the natural springs. Horses and cattle acted frightened, dogs howled, and birds stopped singing. Some of the citizens of Pompeii felt uneasy. They decided to skip the Vulcanalia celebration. They hurriedly gathered their families and a few belongings and left the city. As they walked away from Pompeii, the wind sprinkled them with a light coat of ashes. Most people, however, stayed in Pompeii.

These people kept preparing for the festivities. "Cowards!" they might have called their fleeing neighbors.

On August 24, the day after the festival, the people returned to their workshops and fields. Just after noontime, however, there was a loud cracking noise. Mount Vesuvius instantly became a giant cannon, shooting burning, molten rock several miles into the sky. The bullet-fast rock may have traveled up to 2,000 feet per second. These same burning rocks tumbled back down, showering the town and people of Pompeii.



The eruption of Mt. Vesuvius may have been similar to this eruption of Mt. St. Helens in the northwestern United States in 1980.



## You Are There!

Historians know a lot about the eruption of Mount Vesuvius because someone who was watching wrote about it! A young man called Pliny the Younger, just 17 years old, had come to visit his uncle, a scientist called Pliny the Elder. He was studying his lessons, 19 miles away from the eruption across the bay when he heard a great noise.

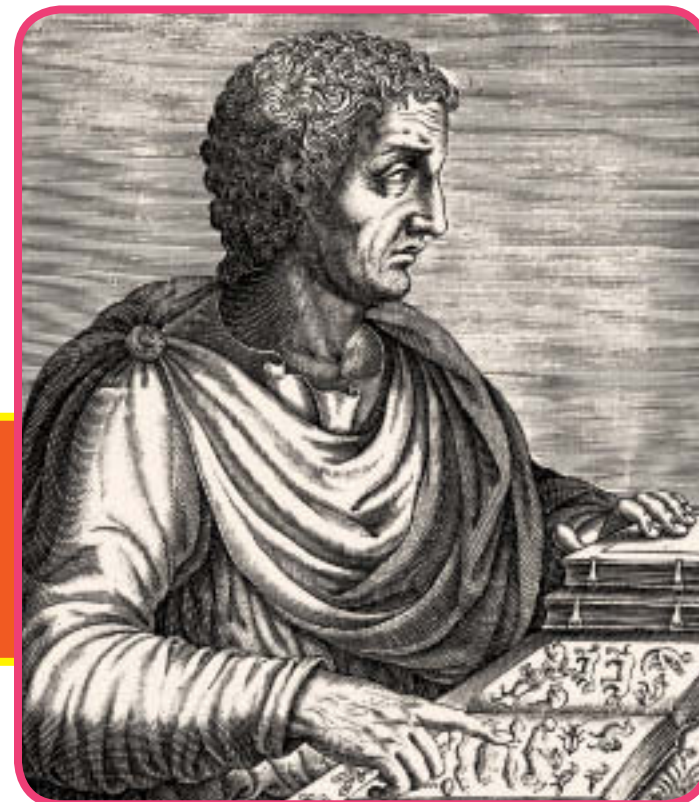
In a letter, Pliny the Younger described the cloud he saw that day: "Its general appearance can best be expressed as being like an umbrella pine, for it rose to a great height on a sort of trunk and then split off into branches. . . . Broad sheets of fire and leaping flames blazed at several points."

Pliny the Younger wrote a letter to his friend, Cornelius Tacitus, about the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

## Getting Closer to the Volcano

Filled with **curiosity**, Pliny the Elder wanted to go to the mountain immediately. He invited his nephew, but the younger man refused, saying that he had studying to do.

Pliny the Elder sailed across the bay and soon reached the home of a friend. Tired by his trip, Pliny the Elder took a nap while his companions watched ash and small rocks fall around the house. When he awakened, he and his friends debated whether they should stay indoors or take their chances out in the open. By now, the house shook so violently that it seemed as if it might fall down. Deciding to go outside, the group tied pillows on their heads to protect themselves from falling rocks.



## A Dangerous Decision

Pliny the Younger wrote down what happened. "My uncle decided to go down to the shore and investigate the possibility of any escape by sea, but he found the waves still wild and dangerous. . . . Then the flames and smell of sulfur, which gave warning of the approaching fire, drove the others to take flight and roused him to stand up. He stood leaning on two slaves and then suddenly collapsed. . . ." Pliny the Elder died on the spot.

## Earthquake!

Meanwhile, Pliny the Younger grew alarmed and, with his mother, headed down to the seashore. He wrote, "We also saw the sea sucked away and apparently forced back by the earthquake. . . . It receded from the shore so that quantities of sea creatures were left stranded on dry land." The young man's aged mother had trouble keeping up. He grabbed her hand and fled inland. "Ashes began to fall again," he wrote, "this time in heavy showers."

Although he said that "The whole world was dying with me and I with it," both Pliny the Younger and his mother survived. What a miracle!



People fled to the sea as lava erupted from Mt. Vesuvius and buried the city of Pompeii.



People fleeing Pompeii during the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius

## Panic!

In the early hours of the eruption, most of the people in Pompeii fled. They escaped the **torrents** of rock and ash by boat, on horseback, or on foot. About 2,000 people chose to stay behind. Pumice, a volcanic rock, rained down at the rate of six inches every hour. People scrambled above the rising drift of rock and watched with dread.

It may have seemed to the people of Pompeii that things couldn't get any worse. They were wrong. Soon after midnight, a fiery river rushed down the mountainside. The temperature of this molten rock, or lava, probably reached 750° F. It roared through the city and down to the sea, where the water began to boil. The ash and deadly gas suffocated every living thing in its path. When the fury of Mount Vesuvius finally



The excavations of Pompeii, 1865

## A Tragic Aftermath

Weeks later, many people returned to Pompeii. They searched for lost loved ones or for their valuables. Digging in the **ruins** was dangerous. Some searchers uncovered pockets of deadly gas and died. Others were buried when the tunnels they dug in the ash collapsed. In horror, people gave up and left. A poet named Statius wondered, "Will future centuries . . . believe that entire cities and their inhabitants lie under their feet, and that the fields of their ancestors were drowned in a sea of flames?"

A century later, Vesuvius was not yet finished. After resting, it erupted again in the year A.D. 202, then in 306, and again in 472, 513, and 533. After centuries of quiet, another eruption happened in 1631. Then Vesuvius became silent. The city of Pompeii was buried and nearly forgotten.

## A Royal Arrival

In 1707, a rich prince visited the Bay of Naples. He fell in love with the beauty and pleasant climate of the surrounding countryside. He began building a large and expensive villa on the site, using **granite** and other kinds of stone. His workers' shovels struck broken bits of statues. The prince decorated his villa with these treasures. He may not have realized that he had unearthed part of a buried city.



Many homes in Pompeii held beautiful statues like this one.

## Unearthing Pompeii!

A half century later, Spanish explorers uncovered broken stone that bore an inscription, *res publica Pompeianorum*, which meant "the commonwealth of Pompeians." Here was proof that the ancient city had been unearthed!

At first, people were only interested in finding treasures in the ruins. They didn't care much about studying the details of its past. Then, in the 1860s, Giuseppe Fiorelli was put in charge of the excavations by the king of Italy. Fiorelli believed it was important to learn as much as possible about the people of Pompeii and their daily lives.

Fiorelli and his workers digging at Pompeii



One historian made fun of the idea of uncovering Pompeii. He said, "What would be the gain, since all that would come to light of the houses crushed between huge masses of lava would be shattered walls?"



## A Day in the Life of Pompeii

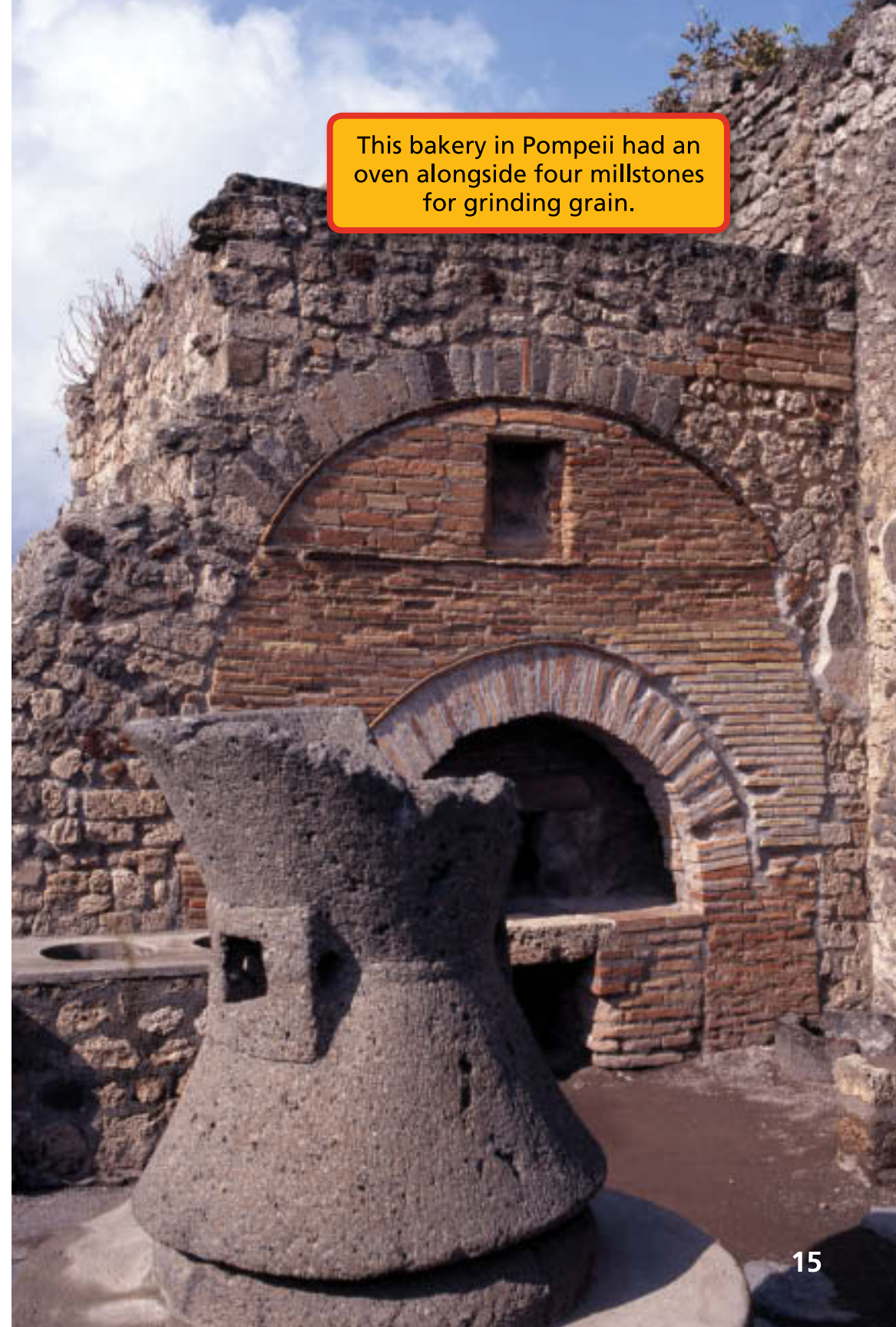
As Fiorelli and his team dug beneath the hardened ash, they made many amazing discoveries. They found the remains of unfinished meals lying upon dining tables. Ropes and fishermen's nets were neatly laid out, as if ready for a day of fishing at sea. Jewelry, perfume bottles, mirrors, and ivory combs remained on dressing tables. You could almost hear the people's voices in the graffiti on the buried city's walls. "Vote for Lucius" and "Marcus loves Spendusa" were examples.



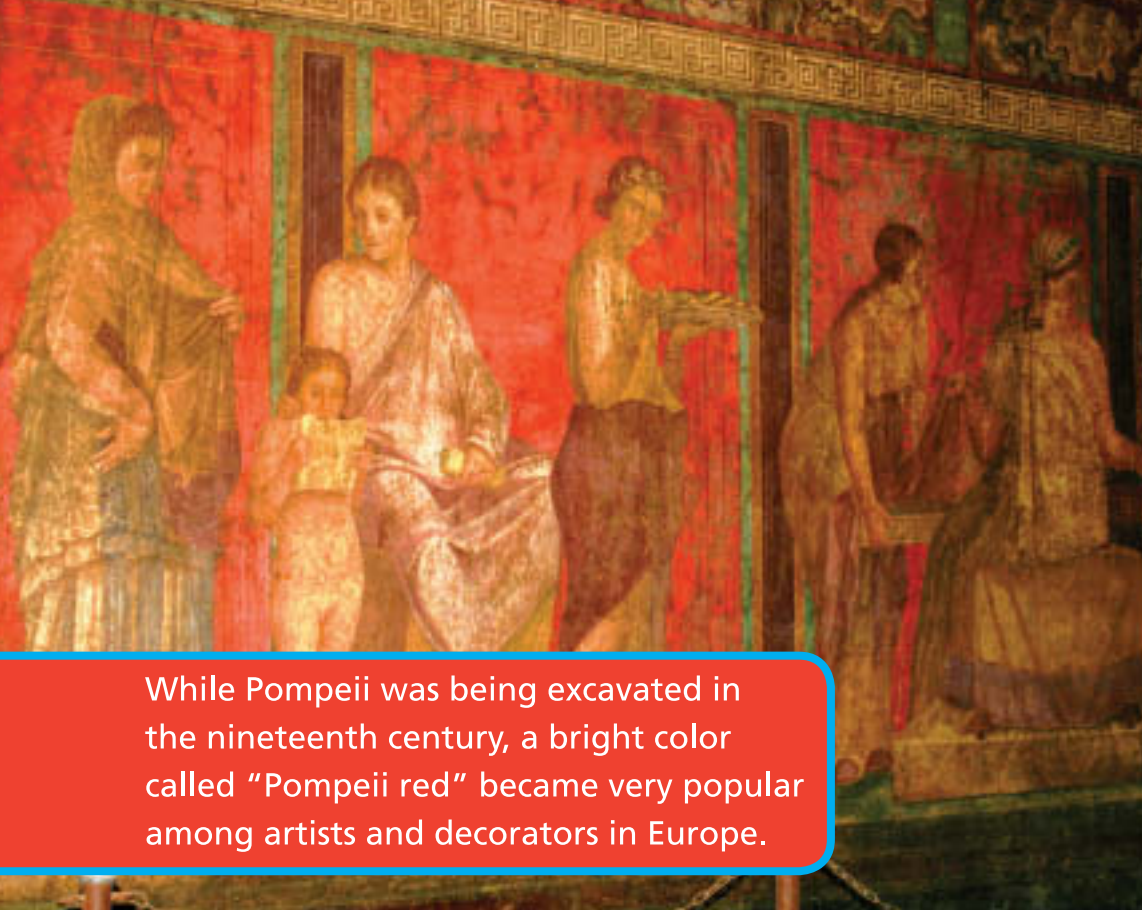
The words on this mosaic mean "Beware of dog."

Fiorelli's team also found the workplaces of glassblowers, bronze workers, blacksmiths, and craftsmen who left their goods on their workbenches when they fled. They discovered at least thirty bakeries. They found loaves of bread, ready for the oven, that had

now turned to rock. Evidence remained that one bakery even sold dog biscuits! They also found two theaters, one with 5,000 seats and showers to cool the crowds.



This bakery in Pompeii had an oven alongside four millstones for grinding grain.



While Pompeii was being excavated in the nineteenth century, a bright color called "Pompeii red" became very popular among artists and decorators in Europe.

### Terrifying Spectacles

A huge, **glorious** amphitheater in another part of Pompeii could hold 20,000 spectators. Still visible after so many years was the announcement of a coming attraction: "The gladiatorial troop . . . will fight in Pompeii on May 31. There will also be a wild animal hunt." Perhaps the event involved gladiators armed with swords and shields, and ready to fight to the death. Another event may have featured battles between lions or panthers. Graffiti on the walls showed that at least one gladiator had loyal fans: "Caladus, the Thracian, makes all the girls sigh."

### Staying Healthy, Pompeii Style

In one of Pompeii's ruined buildings, archaeologists discovered medical instruments that looked like modern surgical tools. They know from records found elsewhere that doctors of this time used some strange medicines. Their "cures" included lizard droppings, pigeon blood, and the ash from burned earthworms.

The bathhouses in Pompeii had steam baths heated by furnaces that were stoked with wood. Not having soap, people rubbed olive oil on their skin. Then they removed the mixture of dirt and sweat with special scrapers.



The floor in this Pompeii bathhouse was so hot that people had to wear special clogs when walking on it.

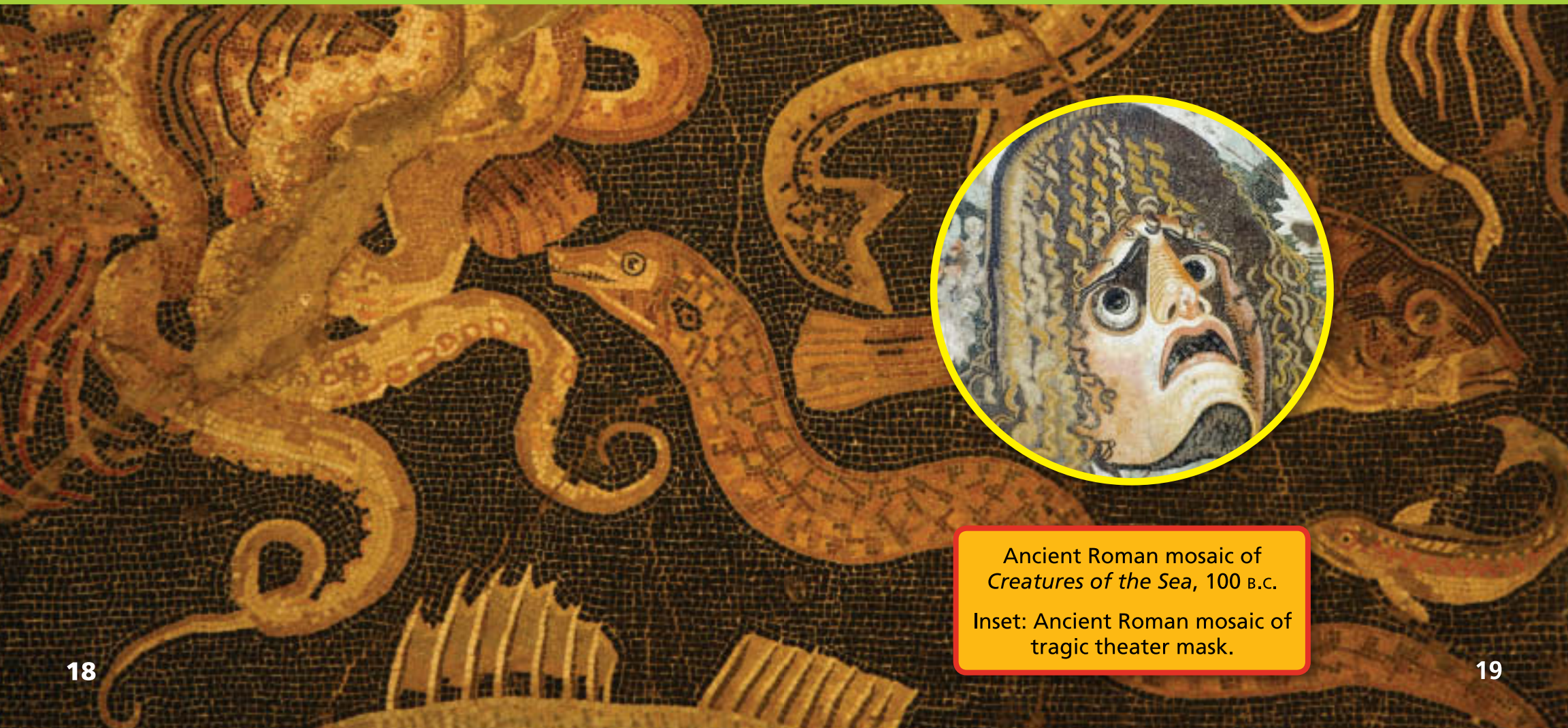
## Tales Told by Art

Many paintings were found on the walls of Pompeii's homes. Some of them show us what people ate. Delicious-looking apples, figs, and pomegranates were probably served at meals.

Many of the homes in Pompeii were decorated with tiny colored stones called mosaics. Artists arranged thousands of small pieces of tiles or rocks to create a mosaic. For example, one unearthed mosaic recorded the kinds of sea life found in the nearby bay. In the center of the

mosaic, an octopus battles a large lobster, while a moray eel waits to gobble up the winner. Around the fish are squid, bass, prawns, red mullets, and dogfish.

Another mosaic, found at the top of a dining table, seems to predict doom. A skull, the symbol of death, hangs above a butterfly to remind diners that time does fly quickly. People feasting at this table may have urged each other to eat, drink, and be merry, never knowing that death would soon come.



Ancient Roman mosaic of  
*Creatures of the Sea*, 100 B.C.

Inset: Ancient Roman mosaic of  
tragic theater mask.

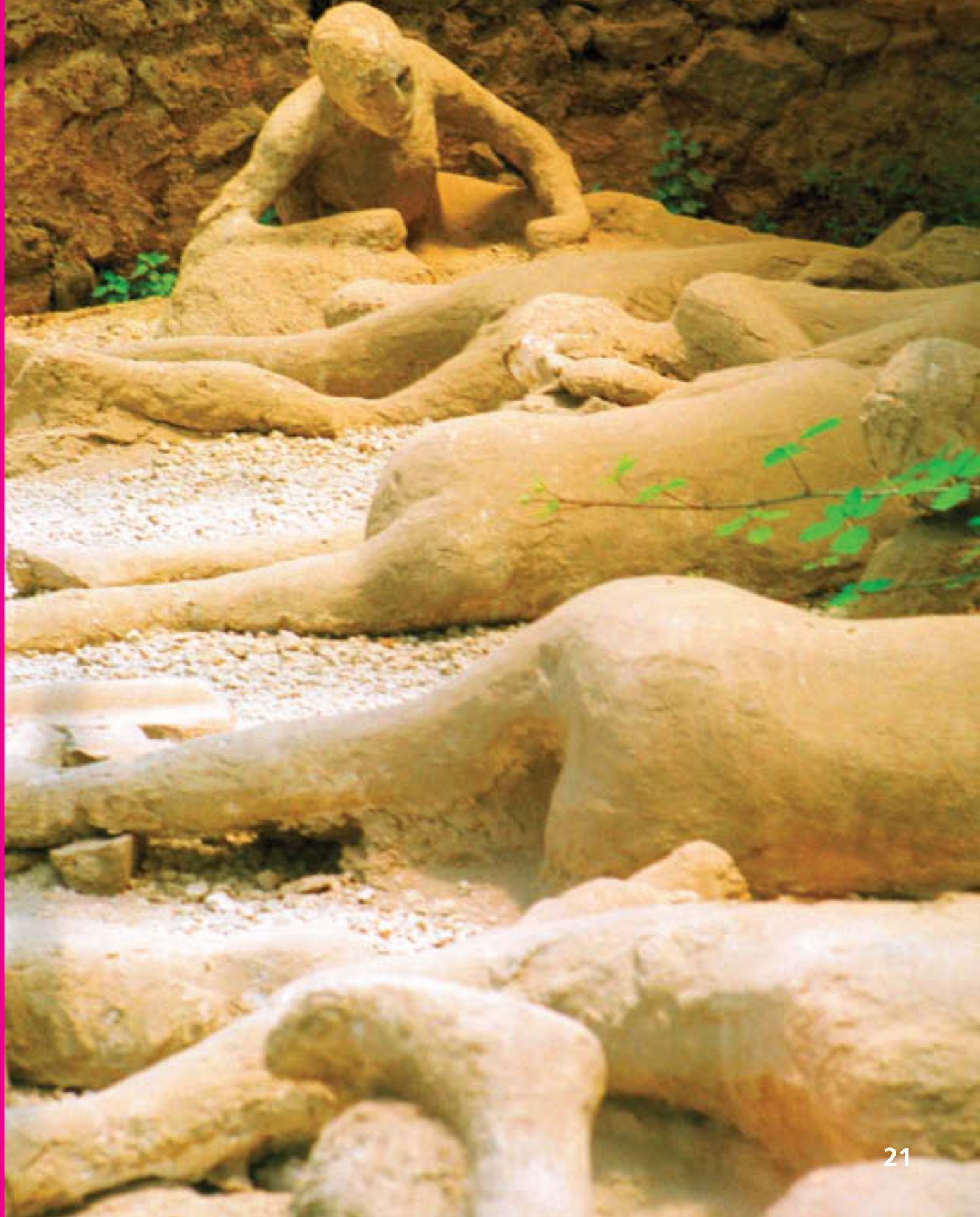
## Sad Discoveries

Fiorelli and his team of archaeologists looked for other evidence of life too. He thought he might even find remains of the people who had been buried at Pompeii. One day, he found a group of holes that seemed to be shaped like bodies. He poured a thin mixture of plaster of Paris into the holes and then let it harden. After it did, he broke away the ash. What remained were casts or models of the people of Pompeii! These casts showed their final moments of life.

One strange cast is of a man in a doubled-up position. At first it puzzled scientists. He seemed to have a branch clutched between his legs. Scientists believe that this man may have been climbing a tall tree in hopes of reaching fresh air above the poisonous gas. The tree limb apparently broke under his weight and he fell. A blanket of ash made sure he stayed in this position over the centuries.

Especially touching are the remains of one family. The father seems to be using his last bit of strength to try to reach his wife and child.

Writing about the tragedy, a Roman poet said, "And all was consumed in the flames, all covered with the gray ash. . . ."



## Pompeii Today

Today, no one lives in Pompeii, but visitors can tour the lost city. There, you can imagine the streets bustling with the people who lived there so many years ago. At the crossing of Stabia and Nola Streets, visitors can stroll down the narrow sidewalks. These sidewalks are set above street level because the streets used to be both storm drains and sewers. At the intersection, visitors can stop to view the ancient water fountain. This fountain provided welcome drinks to Pompeii's people and animals. It also was in front of a shrine dedicated to one of the gods who was supposed to guard the city.

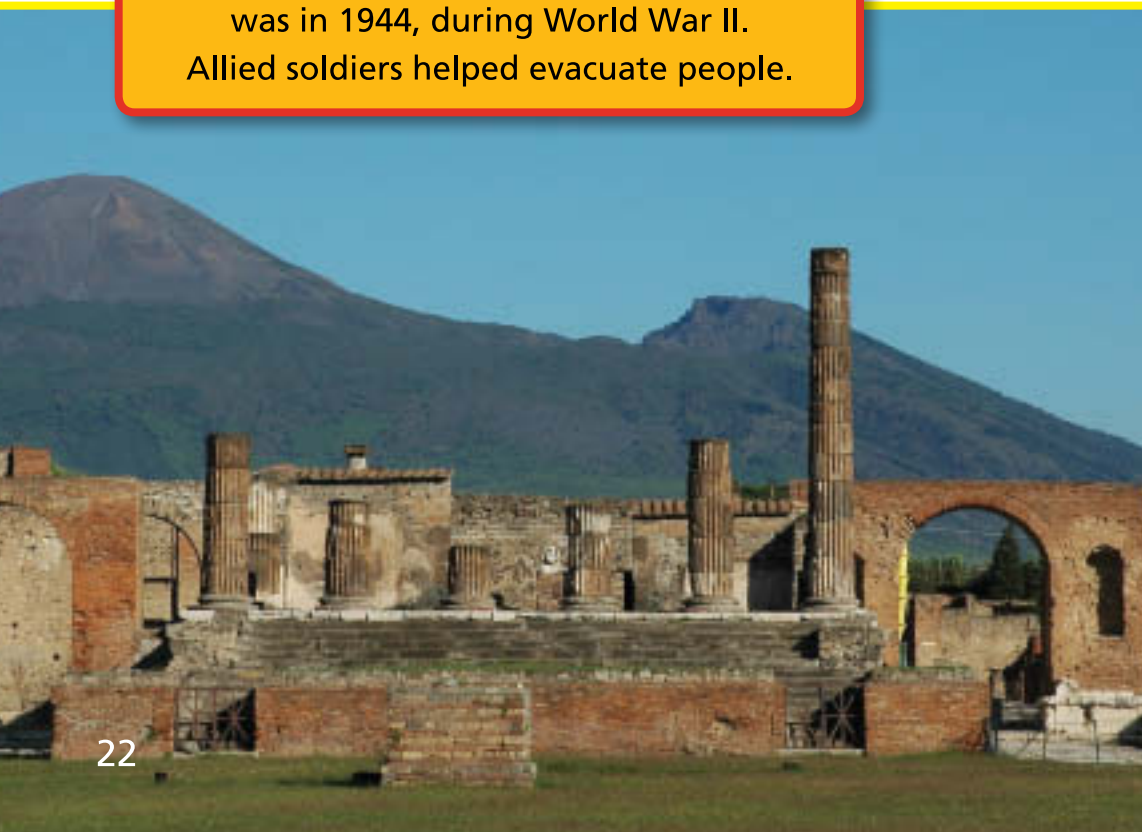
The most recent eruption of Mount Vesuvius was in 1944, during World War II. Allied soldiers helped evacuate people.



A visitor can walk on the same stepping stones used thousands of years ago. These stepping stones kept people's feet dry and they also slowed down speeding cart drivers.

Visitors can imagine scenes from the old city of Pompeii. If they close their eyes, they might imagine Pompeii's citizens relaxing and talking along the city's streets.

While marveling at the remains of the lost city of Pompeii, today's visitors also keep an eye out for Mount Vesuvius. The mountain continues to smoke and even rumble.



# Glossary

**curiosity** *n.* an eager desire to know something.

**glorious** *adj.* magnificent; splendid.

**granite** *n.* a very hard rock made from grains of other rock.

**ruins** *n.* buildings that have fallen apart.

**terraced** *adj.* cut or formed into a series of levels.

**thickets** *n.* bushes and small trees growing close together.

**torrent** *n.* a violent, rushing stream of material.

# Reader Response

1. Reread page 16, which tells how the people of Pompeii enjoyed themselves at sporting events. How is their entertainment different from ours? How is it similar? Use the chart below to compare and contrast ancient sports with the sports of today.



2. Skim the selection to find the quotations from Pliny the Younger. Which of his descriptions of the volcano's eruption made the most vivid picture in your mind? Why?
3. The word *volcano* comes from a Latin word, *vulcan*. As you read, Vulcan was the Roman god of fire. The word *terrace* comes from a Latin word *terra*, which means "earth." What does this tell you about what terraces are made from? Which would be a safer place to stand, on *terra firma* or on shaky ground?
4. Reread pages 7–8. From the way Pliny the Elder tried to protect himself, what do you think he knew about volcanoes? What do you think he did not know?