

THE MESSAGE BENEATH POMPEII

A Grade 6 History Mystery Reading Comprehension Passage

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND + HISTORY DETECTIVE CASE FILE

Pompeii was an ancient Roman city near the Bay of Naples in southern Italy. Its streets were lined with homes, workshops, food shops, public baths, temples, and other busy public buildings. People carried goods through the city, bought food from shop counters, visited neighbors, and watched workers repair and decorate buildings.

Many wealthy Roman homes and public buildings had floors made from mosaics. Mosaic workers arranged small pieces of stone, glass, or pottery, called tesserae, to form patterns and pictures. Builders and decorators were still repairing many buildings in Pompeii after a powerful earthquake damaged the region in 62 CE.

Romans wrote messages in several ways. They could write with ink on papyrus, scratch words onto pottery or walls, or use reusable wooden tablets coated with wax. A pointed stylus made marks in the wax, and the flat end could smooth the surface so the tablet could be used again.

In 79 CE, Mount Vesuvius erupted and buried Pompeii beneath pumice, ash, and other volcanic material. People living there did not have modern instruments or a scientific understanding of volcanoes. They could observe shaking ground, damaged walls, changes in water, or material falling from the sky, but they could not reliably predict an eruption.

Today, you will investigate a fictional mystery set shortly before the eruption. The characters and hidden message are fictional. Pompeii, its streets and shops, Roman writing tablets, mosaics, earlier earthquake damage, and the eruption of Mount Vesuvius are based on history.

Case

The Message Beneath Pompeii

Time

Ancient Rome

Pompeii, 79 CE

Location

A Shop and Mosaic Workshop on a Busy Pompeian Street

Mission

A delivery boy discovers a mysterious message beneath a loose section of mosaic. It describes several strange events around the city, but no one knows who wrote it or why it was hidden.

Can you discover the message's true purpose?

HISTORICAL FACTS YOU'LL DISCOVER

The Roman City of Pompeii

Mount Vesuvius

Roman Streets and Shops

Mosaic Floors and Tesserae

Wax Writing Tablets

The Earthquake of 62 CE

The Eruption of 79 CE

MAIN CHARACTERS

Lucius

Delivery Boy

Livia

Shop Owner

Marcus

Mosaic Builder

Cassian

City Guard

YOUR GOAL

Discover who wrote the hidden message and why.

Separate historical facts from fictional events.

Use clues, evidence, and logical thinking to solve the mystery.

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By midmorning, the street outside Livia's shop was crowded. A cart creaked past as workers carried food and building supplies between the shops.

Lucius moved through the crowd carrying a small clay jar. He worked as a delivery boy near the forum, and Livia had sent him to collect fish sauce.

When Lucius returned, he found Livia kneeling beside the shop counter. Several small black-and-white stones lay on the floor.

"Do not step there," she warned. "Another part of the mosaic has come loose."

The floor had been repaired more than once. A powerful earthquake had damaged Pompeii years earlier. Builders had fixed many cracked walls and broken roofs, but repairs were still common.

Lucius set down the jar. "Did the floor move again?"

"A cup rattled on the shelf just after sunrise," Livia replied. "It may have been a cart outside. Then I heard these pieces scatter."

Lucius crouched beside the loose tesserae, which formed a border of dark waves. He lifted one and saw the corner of something brown beneath it.

"There is something under the floor."

Livia brought a lamp closer. Beneath three more tesserae lay a thin wooden tablet coated with dark wax. Someone had scratched a message into it with a stylus.



Lucius read the words aloud.

"The roof carries gray dust. Water trembles in the cup. A crack has opened beside the red wall.
The dogs refuse the courtyard. Watch the mountain."

Livia frowned. "Who placed that beneath my floor?"

"And what does 'watch the mountain' mean?" Lucius asked.

From the doorway, Mount Vesuvius looked calm. Farms and vineyards covered its slopes.

Livia turned the tablet over. Scratched into the wooden back was a small mark shaped like three joined squares.

"That looks like a builder's sign," she said. "Marcus repaired this floor last month. We should ask him about it."

They found Marcus sorting tesserae in a nearby courtyard. He studied the tablet.

"The three squares are the mark of my workshop," he admitted. "But those are not my words."

"Then one of your workers wrote them," Livia said.

"Perhaps, but I never ordered anyone to hide a message."

Lucius pointed to the thin line of pale mortar along one edge of the tablet. "Was this tablet placed beneath the floor during the repair?"

Marcus examined it more closely. "The mortar is new enough. It probably came from your mosaic. Still, the tablet may have slipped into an open section while we worked."

He explained that his crew had removed damaged tesserae and mortar, then laid fresh mortar and reset the pattern. Part of the floor had remained open for several hours.

"Who worked there?" Lucius asked.

"I did, along with my assistant, Tullus. Livia entered several times. Cassian also came to inspect the crack in the wall."

Livia frowned. "Why would Cassian inspect my wall?"

"Because the crack faced the street," Marcus answered. "Loose stone could have fallen on someone."

They carried the tablet to Cassian's post. He read the message twice.

"This sounds like a warning," he said. "Has anyone threatened your shop?"

"No," Livia replied. "But the message was hidden beneath my floor."

Cassian studied the back. "I remember this mark. Marcus drew it on a wax tablet when he listed the repairs that still needed attention."

"You saw the tablet?" Lucius asked.

"Yes. Tullus carried it while Marcus inspected the wall."

Cassian looked toward the roofs. A faint gray film covered several tiles, but dust was common around carts and construction work.

"A potter complained about dust yesterday, and a new wall crack was reported today," the guard continued. "Neither proves anything unusual is happening."

Lucius agreed. Each detail might have an ordinary explanation. Heavy carts could make water shake. Old earthquake damage could widen. Dogs might avoid a hot courtyard. Dust could come from repairs.

Yet someone had connected all four observations and added a final instruction: Watch the mountain.

They returned to the mosaic workshop to question Tullus, but his workbench was empty.

"He left early to help his family outside the city," Marcus said. "He was worried about his mother's house."

"Why?" asked Lucius.

Marcus hesitated. "Tullus has recorded small tremors for weeks. His mother lives closer to the mountain, and her water basin has cracked. He asked whether the shaking might grow stronger. I told him no one could know."

Lucius looked again at the message. "Did he write his notes on this tablet?"

"Possibly. He used my workshop tablets, so each one carried the three-square mark."

Livia crossed her arms. "But why hide it under my mosaic?"

Marcus searched beneath Tullus's workbench and found a broken stylus and a narrow leather tie.

"His tablets were usually tied together in pairs," Marcus explained. "This strap has snapped."

Lucius examined the hidden tablet. A small hole had been drilled through one corner, and a torn piece of leather remained inside it.

"Then it may not have been hidden at all," he said. "It could have broken away from another tablet."

They reconstructed the day of the repair. Tullus had carried tools, bowls of tesserae, and two tied tablets into Livia's shop. One tablet held the repair list. On the other, he had recorded the unusual things he had noticed. When the leather tie snapped, the second tablet fell near the open section of floor.

"But why didn't anyone see it?" Cassian asked.

Marcus thought for a moment. "We covered the open floor with a cloth while we ate. The tablet could have fallen beneath the cloth. Later, Tullus spread fresh mortar without noticing it."

Livia shook her head. "A wooden tablet is too large to disappear beneath a flat floor."

Lucius remembered the uneven patch. "Unless it fell into the old crack beside the wall. Marcus filled that hollow before replacing the tesserae."

They returned to the shop and inspected the loose area. The tablet had rested at a slight angle inside a shallow space. One edge was coated with mortar, but the wax surface had remained readable. The cracked floor had loosened the tesserae and exposed it.

The clues fit together. The workshop mark identified the tablet. The broken leather showed how it separated from its pair. The mortar proved it became trapped during the repair. Tullus's concern for his family explained his notes.

No one had placed a threat beneath Livia's floor. Tullus had simply kept a record of events that worried him.

"He was observing carefully," Lucius said, "but his notes do not prove he knew what would happen."

Cassian nodded. "A record is not a prophecy. Each sign may have more than one explanation."

Livia placed the tablet on the counter. "Then we will return it when Tullus comes back."

A cup beside the fish-sauce jar trembled faintly. This time, no cart passed outside.

Everyone in the shop became still.

Marcus looked toward the cracked wall. Cassian stepped into the street. Lucius lifted his eyes to the green mountain beyond the rooftops.

The mystery of the message had been solved. What the observations meant, however, remained beyond anything the people of Pompeii could know with certainty.

Name : Date:

CASE NOTES

Choose the best answer for each question.

1. Why was part of Livia's mosaic floor already in need of repair?

- A. A delivery cart had broken the floor that morning.
- B. Builders had removed it to hide a valuable object.
- C. Earlier earthquake damage had weakened buildings in Pompeii.
- D. Livia wanted to replace the old design with a new one.

2. Why did the hidden message seem mysterious at first?

- A. It was written in a language no one could read.
- B. It described several unusual events and told readers to watch the mountain.
- C. It accused Livia of damaging a public building.
- D. It contained directions to a treasure outside the city.

3. What did the three-square mark on the tablet show?

- A. The tablet belonged to Marcus's workshop.
- B. Cassian had approved the message.
- C. The tablet had come from the public baths.
- D. Livia had purchased three mosaic designs.

4. Which evidence best supported the conclusion that the tablet fell accidentally?

- A. Gray dust covered several roofs near the shop.
- B. A cup rattled on Livia's shelf after sunrise.
- C. Tullus had family members living outside the city.
- D. A broken leather tie remained in the tablet's corner.

5. Which statement best expresses a central idea of the story?

- A. Every unusual natural event has only one possible cause.
- B. Careful observers can always predict exactly what will happen.
- C. Evidence can explain a mystery without proving what the future will bring.
- D. Written warnings were the main responsibility of Roman guards.

Name : Date:

WORD DETECTIVE

Choose the best meaning of the underlined word.

6. Lucius carefully removed several tesserae from the mosaic.

- A. small pieces used to form a design
- B. wooden tools used to write in wax
- C. shelves used for storing clay jars
- D. cracks caused by shaking ground

7. Cassian inspected the crack in Livia's wall.

- A. covered it with a painted design
- B. examined it carefully
- C. measured the height of it
- D. reported it to a merchant

8. Lucius and the others reconstructed the day of the repair.

- A. built the entire shop again
- B. copied the message onto a wall
- C. determined the likely sequence of events
- D. removed the old mortar from the floor

9. The message described several observations made by Tullus.

- A. details he had noticed and recorded
- B. orders he had received from a guard
- C. stories he had invented for amusement
- D. supplies he had delivered to a shop

10. The people could not know with certainty what the events meant.

- A. without disagreement
- B. in complete safety
- C. with confidence that something was true
- D. before the end of the day