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## Villa of the Mysteries digs expose Pompeii's tomb-raiding riddle

Archaeologists fear looters may have stolen priceless frescoes and other treasures to sell on the black market



One of the frescoes found at the Villa of the Mysteries, dated to 70-60BC

ALAMY

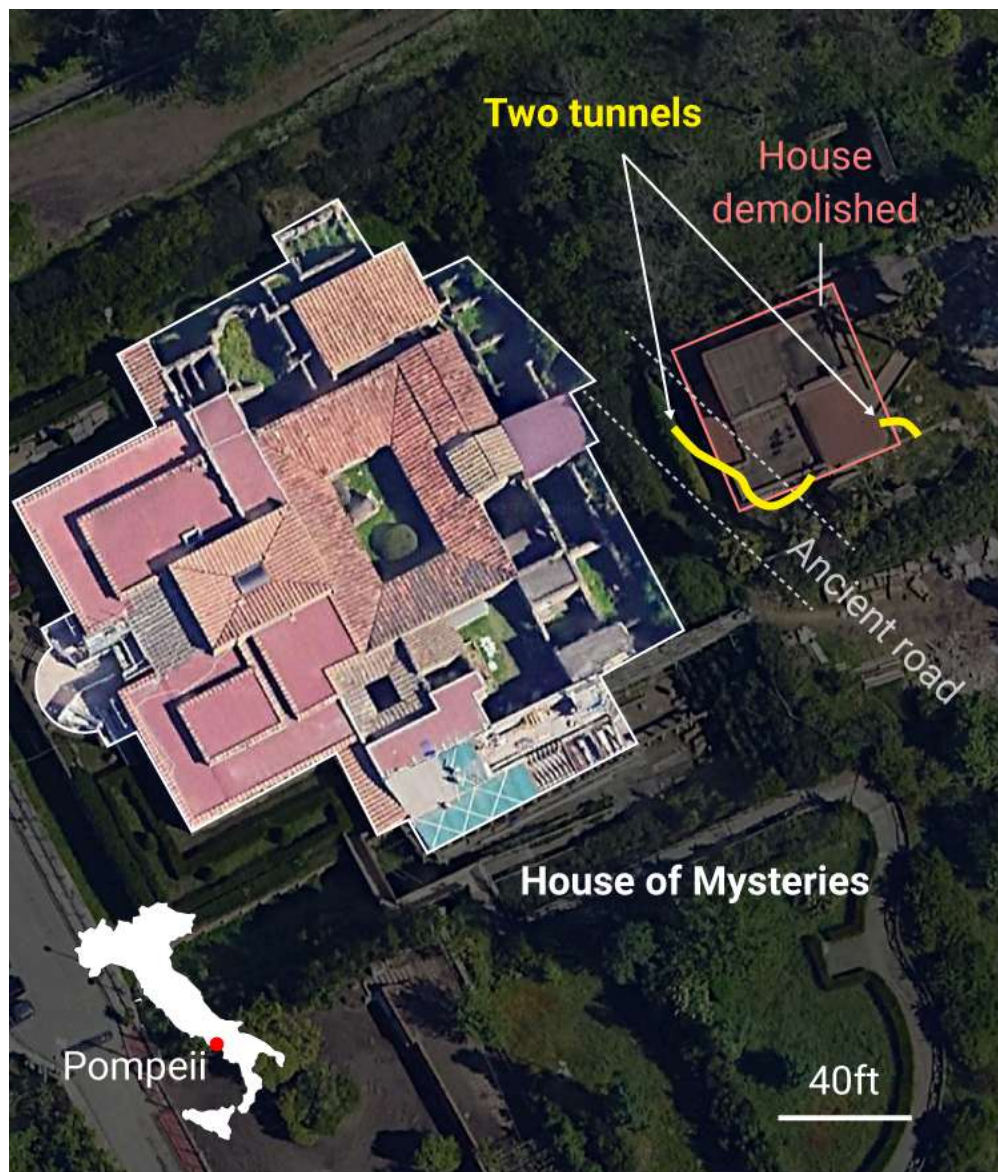
[James Imam](#), Milan

Thursday June 26 2025, 8.40pm BST, The Times

**T**he ancient city of Pompeii has revealed a trove of spectacular finds over the years, from bathhouses and brothels complete with perfectly preserved wall paintings to sumptuous villas and shrines.

However, the latest investigation at the site is not to find out what relics still lie buried by Mount Vesuvius's eruption in AD79, but rather what has been stolen in modern times by tomb-raiding thieves.

of an illegally built house into an ancient Roman home known as the Villa of the Mysteries. The demolition of the illegal modern building has confirmed that the tunnels led towards the villa's entrance and appear to have been used for illicit excavations.



Graphic by The Times and Sunday Times



After fragments of ancient wall paintings — and a pickaxe — were found in one of the tunnels, archaeologists fear tomb raiders may have stolen priceless frescoes and other treasures to sell on the black market.

director of the Pompeii site, told The Times.

Located 400m from the walls of the ancient town, the Villa of the Mysteries was built as a luxurious country home that reached its height of splendour during the reign of Caesar Augustus. It was rediscovered in 1909, when archaeologists stumbled upon breathtaking frescoes measuring 17m long on the ground floor.

Encircling the walls of a banquet room, the paintings depict a woman undergoing initiation into a Dionysian cult. Zuchtriegel said the villa was one of Pompeii's finest discoveries and "one of the most famous monuments across the ancient world". About 10 per cent of the villa itself remains unexcavated, the director added.



Visitors at the Villa of the Mysteries

Prosecutors working with the archaeological park first suspected looters had tried to access unexplored sections of the

before falling into disrepair. It was then renovated and illegally extended gradually over 30 years starting in the 1980s to encroach on the park's buffer zone.

Nunzio Fragliasso, the prosecutor leading the investigation, said: "It loomed over the villa, preventing further excavation."

The park paid for the demolition of the house in 2023, and the extent of the underground shafts has since slowly been revealed. This year their worst fears were confirmed, as at least one tunnel appeared to lead to the entrance of the ancient villa.

The area is now being excavated officially and within weeks, archaeologists expect to determine which relics may have been removed.

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Zuchtriegel said he believed the tunnel led to part of the villa that 2,000 years ago was reserved for slaves, suggesting it may contain everyday objects such as vases, or impressions of furniture or beds left by hardened ash.

But he was careful not to speculate on what might still lie buried. "At Pompeii, it's always a surprise," he said. "You almost never find what you're expecting."

So far, archaeologists have uncovered the villa's first floor, which was damaged in the eruption. Next, they plan to explore the ground floor below, which appears mainly intact.

Zuchtriegel said there were signs of frescoes on the ground floor and that fragments of wall paintings had been found in the tunnel, suggesting looters may have tried to steal them.



Looters may have stolen frescoes from the site

ALAMY

For decades, looters have targeted villas and outlying districts kilometres from Pompeii, burrowing under cover of darkness and smashing through ancient walls to reach hidden chambers.

They have made off with ancient frescoes and statues, smuggling the stolen artefacts abroad. Some of them are displayed in major museums around the world.

Fragliasso said tomb raiders had been at work for decades and that illegal activity still continues. “When tomb raiders find frescoes, they usually peel the whole thing off the wall,” Fragliasso said. “We’re not talking about small vases or everyday objects.”

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Raiders have typically targeted peripheral sites in the vast archaeological area because the ancient town of Pompeii is tightly guarded with fences, video cameras and drones.

by,” Zuchtriegel said.

The joint investigation by the Pompeii park and prosecutors in Torre Annunziata identified two suspects in the Villa of Mysteries tunnels, Milorad Jovanovic and Kadena Casalijevic, former owners of the illegal house. The couple went to trial but were acquitted due to the statute of limitations, Fragliasso said.



The excavation site in Pompeii

Occasionally, looted artefacts are recovered. In 2020, Italy’s Carabinieri art squad repatriated fresco fragments from the Villa Arianna and Villa San Marco.

Zuchtriegel said Italy’s biggest next target should be an iconic statue known as Doryphoros — a Roman 1st or 2nd century copy of a lost bronze by the ancient Greek sculptor Polykleitos, which depicts a muscular nude warrior and is more than six feet tall — deemed by Italian courts to have been stolen from Stabiae in



the 1970s. It is now a centerpiece of the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

“It is the expression of Ancient Roman and Greek culture and

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Rhys Blakely, Science Correspondent  
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The day after the French return the Venus de Milo, the Venetians the Piraeus lion, the Turks Constantinople and Smyrna...which, unlike the Parthenon sculptures, were all stolen rather than bought.

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Bstrds. They're stealing from all humanity.

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4 HOURS AGO

Whats new. Tomb raiding is almost as old as civilisation itself. The fault lies with the authorities not realising this and failing to provide adequate security.

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**P****Peter Ellwood**

1 HOUR AGO

Like blaming Ukraine for being invaded, you mean?

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54 MINUTES AGO

It's hardly been a riddle! It was a common problem and inevitable.

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**V****V Kay**

39 MINUTES AGO

To "peel off" a fresco is a skilled and time consuming piece of work. I doubt thieves would have the patience. And a

cloth adhering to the face I should imagine is a necessity, to help it stay intact. The pick axe is the clue.

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