

APOTROPAIC GRAFFITI AND MATERIALITY: A POST-COLONIAL PERSPECTIVE ON WRITTEN SPACES

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Abstract

Building on post-colonial archaeological studies and earlier reflections on apotropaic graffiti by one of the authors, we shall now discuss the value of this *corpus* of graffiti as evidence for a gender approach of Roman daily life. The aim of this paper changed considering the former one to an approach which emphasises the role of graffiti and the urban written spaces in rethinking Roman identity during the Early Principate. We shall argue that such written-on spaces, when analysed in their material context, can be taken as evidence in the discussion of social conflicts, identity and diversity in Roman society. They also enable a more balanced approach to the Roman Empire by taking into consideration the worldviews of people of humble origins.

Keywords

Roman Epigraphy; Pompeii; Post-colonial Archaeology.

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Resumo

Construído a partir das teorias arqueológicas pós-coloniais e de um estudo anterior sobre grafites apotropaicos de um dos autores, neste artigo discutimos a importância de este *corpus* de grafites como fonte para um estudo de gênero sobre o cotidiano romano. O objetivo deste artigo é, portanto, distinto do que o inspirou, mudando a perspectiva para a importância do espaço da escrita para repensar a identidade romana no início do Principado. Argumentaremos que espaços da escrita, quando analisados a partir de sua materialidade, se torna evidência para a discussão de conflitos sociais, identidade e diversidade na sociedade romana. Também permitem uma leitura mais balanceada do Império, levando em consideração as diferentes visões de mundo das pessoas de origem humilde.

Palavras-chave

Epigrafia Romana; Pompeia; Arqueologia pós-colonial.

Introduction

Writing on walls is one of the most ancient habits of humanity and a component of the communication and visual representation that people have used since the earliest known rock art (Baird; Taylor, 2011). Old as it may be, the symbolic and cultural meaning of the act of writing or drawing on walls as well as its content have changed over the course of time and from place to place. We need only consider how writing on walls today may lead to criminal charges, something completely unheard of in the past. Cultural differences in the way in which people see and signify the world, and even the ephemeral nature of these inscriptions are factors that have led us to study the materiality of graffiti on Pompeian walls in greater detail (Garraffoni, 2022). We became enchanted by these incomplete texts and their potential to de-stabilize. Classicists, who are often accustomed to discussing the principles of philosophy or Western thought through the texts of Roman orators, historians, philosophers, rhetoricians and poets, may be surprised at the concise critique of a local politician or reflections on life, death and love that can be found in graffiti.

The graffiti at Pompeii offer an excellent opportunity to study the material aspects of writing in various ways. The different objects and materials used to make the inscriptions are related to their various functions. Graffiti can be defined as incisions engraved on walls with a stylus (*'graphium'*), and they can be found in a wide variety of different places. Funari (2003: 108) asserts that in contrast to inscriptions written in ink with brushes (*'tituli picti'*), graffiti can be understood as non-official handwritten interventions that differ from those meant to give visibility to announcements or requests for payment of taxes. They also cover a wide variety of everyday matters. We can thus define some of their essential features: graffiti can deal with any theme and are ephemeral. Access to graffiti is often accidental. It is a type of handwritten text that frequently appears fragmented, and though much of it is in Latin, it may also be in Greek or other ancient languages.

Graffiti comprise a heterogenous epigraphic corpus, which scholars have approached in different ways over the decades (e.g. debates on social history, different types of popular *ethos*, the creation of various forms of the Latin language, the expression of worldviews, memories and feeling, etc.). Even if graffiti do not offer a theoretical elaboration on life, coming as they do from the wider context in which common folk think about the world and its situation, they provide us with a window on their reflections on life (Funari, 2003: 113). Following this logic of the subaltern or marginal position, researchers of the last decades have been examining the potential of graffiti. Williams (1999), for example, points out that graffiti provide

important documentation for the study of Roman homoeroticism; Feitosa (2005) and Clarke (2001), in turn, have used it to expand the discussion on love and sexuality among non-elite Romans.

In this paper we shall focus on apotropaic graffiti found in the different areas of Pompeii – particularly in the brothel – with the aim of discussing some theoretical frameworks for promoting what Grig (2017: 2) has pointed out in her work on popular culture: the need to move beyond top-down categories and construct a more authentic portrayal of the Roman context of the early Principate. We shall use a particular type of evidence – apotropaic graffiti – to stress that the location of the material support of the writing (the walls) can provide new insights into urban life. Building on post-colonial studies and earlier reflections on apotropaic graffiti by one of the authors of the present article (Funari, 1993), we shall discuss the value of this *corpus* of graffiti as evidence for a gender approach of daily life. The aim of this paper changed considering the former one to an approach which emphasises the role of graffiti and the urban written spaces in rethinking Roman identity during the Early Principate. We shall argue that such written-on spaces, when analysed in their material context, can be taken as evidence in the discussion of social conflicts, identity and diversity in Roman society. They also enable a more balanced approach to the Roman Empire by taking into consideration the worldviews of people of humble origins.

Epigraphic habit and the materiality of graffiti

Inscriptions are valuable evidence for reconstructing various aspects of Roman society, politics, economy and culture. They can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Alföldy (2003) observes that in Augustus' time, at the beginning of the Principate, there was an explosion of epigraphy. Drawing on McMullen's classic study (1982), he states that the Romans developed epigraphic habits and turned inscriptions of the most varied kind into an efficient medium of communication, capable of disseminating symbolic values and expressing public opinion on the most diverse areas of life.

However, it should be noted that there is no consensus among scholars on how to define inscriptions and what approach should be taken towards them. López-Barja (1987), for instance, argues that some scholars define an inscription as 'writing on a hard surface', while others see the defining factor as the writing itself, its shape and content, regardless of where it is embossed. The difference between these two methodological perspectives has generated what Funari (1994) defines as 'a crossroad of epigraphic

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studies'; accordingly, the main difficulty posed by this impasse emerges from the fact that some scholars publish translations of inscriptions without commenting on the material support and context in which they were found, thus creating a void between material culture and epigraphy. In this sense, epigraphists may sometimes end up ignoring the work of archaeologists or vice-versa, thus making it difficult to establish a dialogue that could be useful to both disciplines.

Although this is an ongoing debate in epigraphic studies, some features of inscriptions meet with greater consensus. Scholars point out that inscriptions vary in quantity as much in time as in space. López-Barja (1987), like Meyer (1990), stresses that inscriptions occur more frequently in urban areas and during the imperial period, and that Latin inscriptions prevail in the western part of the Empire, whilst Greek ones do in the Eastern part. López-Barja draws our attention to the fact that even when faced with a variety of types of inscriptions, a scholar who transforms an inscription into a primary source for their investigation of the Roman world must consider the particularities that the inscription expresses, for instance, its legal and religious aspects. Pointing out that epigraphic data are not equivalent to objective reality, López-Barja indicates that they should be interpreted according to their limits and potentials³.

These considerations lead us to discuss the inscriptions from Pompeii while paying attention to their material support: the walls. The parietal material can be studied on more than one level. On the one hand, graffiti provide information about life and pleasures; on the other, they can illuminate patterns of habits and spatial dislocation as their writers walked down streets on foot, materializing speech-acts of pedestrianism (Keegan, 2011: 166). As Pompeii is one of the largest archaeological sites in Europe, it contains an enormous amount of material culture that remains to be studied, including very well preserved walls. The walls that withstood volcanic eruptions became a particular type of archaeological corpus: their paintings, belonging to different periods and holding a variety of inscriptions, reveal rich and heterogeneous data. As noted, inscriptions on Pompeian walls can be divided into two major groups: *tituli picti* and graffiti. The greater part of the *tituli picti* appear on posters called '*programmata*'. Produced for electoral campaigns, *programmata* constitute a unique source for the study of municipal elections in Roman society (Savunen, 1995). *Tituli picti* also include announcements of gladiatorial games and fights, which help scholars understand different aspects of the

³ This initial debate is part of a major study published as Garraffoni and Pantaleão 2010: 72-73.

'munera' (games) and their dynamic structure (Garraffoni, 2021; Weeber, 1996).

These announcements were painted on outer walls by professionals and could be read from afar. Most graffiti, however, consist of small-scale inscriptions made by common people. Their authors used sharp instruments ('*graphia*') to scratch them into the internal and external walls of houses and public buildings. It is important to emphasise that graffiti were small in size and thus invited the reader to come close to the walls in order to read them. This situation enabled a particular kind of interaction with the material support and encouraged the reader to respond to or modify the inscription. Due to such interaction, we consider walls –the material supports onto which the graffiti were inscribed– as a constitutive part of the relationship enabled by the reader; in other words, any place on which graffiti have been scratched leads to a particular relationship between surface, text, image, author and audience (Baird; Taylor, 2011: 6). Thus, graffiti can be considered not only informal, fragmented handwriting, but also, as Baird & Taylor point out (2011: 7), a form of writing practice or a speech-act.

Since Pompeii in the early Principate was a city with a bustling commercial life, there were many people who walked its streets and left messages on its walls. The inscriptions recorded amount to nearly eleven thousand (Feitosa, 2005: 61). The sheer number of graffiti combined with an urban environment buzzing with daily activities provide us with data that help us better understand Roman everyday life. As nowadays scholars assume that any person who knew how to write could leave a message scratched on the walls (Baird; Taylor, 2011), we will focus on some types of graffiti that can be associated with non-elite groups and promote their worldview. Our approach does not intend to create a split between popular and learned culture; rather, it seeks ways of understanding the diversity of written testimony left by the Romans. In this sense, we look at this particular type of Roman inscription from a perspective that considers the material support within the context in which it was found and thus we seek to create alternative means of interpreting the everyday life of common people.

In doing so, we are taking a post-processual approach to the study of Pompeii graffiti. As Baird & Taylor state (2001: 3), the contextualization of graffiti as a particular type of material evidence enables us to contribute to various debates on orality, the relationship between text and image, and the performance or material construction of memory. This quest for alternative ways of thinking about written spaces can lead classicists to

rethink their theories and methods, as well as their interpretations of past societies (Garraffoni; Laurence, 2013). As Ucko has noted (1995), this perspective can also contribute to the construction of a plurality of interpretations of societies. A case study therefore has the potential of serving as an analytical tool (van Dommelen, 1997). If we link these inquiries and consider the material surface on which any given inscription is scratched and look at how Latin is used in it, we may reconsider the idea of Latin as a language restricted to certain members of the elite and understand the various manifestations assumed by this writing in each context. By not centring our perception of writing on canonical texts or official monuments with their standardized abbreviations, we may capture the logic inherent in different forms of expression and avoid the notion of cultural transference, whether from Romans to natives or from the elite to the lower classes.

In this sense, the variety of handwritten evidence allows us to avoid the limitations of classical texts or monumental inscriptions and thus take the common people's forms of expression into account and explore the diversity of worldviews and opinions. Even if the writing of men and women of humble origins is found in lesser quantities, its value is undeniable (Barbet, 1987; Bowman; Woolf, 1998; Feitosa, 2005; Funari, 1991; 1993; Garraffoni, 2021; Langner, 2001; Sabbatini Tumolesi, 1980; 1988).

Apotropaic wall scribbles at Pompeii: a case study

Before discussing the apotropaic corpus and the material supports that we have selected for this occasion, we must stress that graffiti appear in a variety of places, inside and outside of houses and other buildings. This means that they could reach different people depending on where they were scratched. For this reason, the material context of graffiti should be analysed on a case-by-case basis. For instance, the number and kind of people who read graffiti in a house or villa would have depended on the level of access by strangers to different rooms in the building. The well-known inscription '*Rufus est*' (This is Rufus; CIL VI, 9226) accompanied by a drawing exaggerating Rufus' baldness, nose and chin, and stressing his very small ears and toothless lips, criticizes a member of the town's elite. This graffito is found on the north wall of the atrium (room 64) of the so-called Villa dei Misteri (Villa of the Mysteries), i.e. in the main room accessible to guests. As this is a well-preserved suburban Roman villa on the outskirts of Pompeii, the presence of Rufus' caricature suggests various

implications: rivalries among the elite; tolerance of the graffito on the part of the rich owner of the villa; the type of a criticism as only those invited inside could have seen it.

Other graffiti may have been read by a larger number of persons, as in the case of an exchange between two men which was found in a bar (I.10.2 Pompeii. *Caupona di Coponia* or Thermopolium of Prima or Caupona of Iris. Linked to I.10.3. Excavated in 1927 and 1934). These two men were humble individuals trying to win a slave bartender's love. The exchange in a tavern implies literacy at a low social level, as is the case elsewhere in Pompeii. According to Della Corte (CIL IV 8259-58), the set of incised questions and answers between the two contenders appeared in tiny writing to the right of the entrance. The men's names were Severus and Successus:

*Successus textor amat coponiaes ancilla(m)
nomine Hiredem quae quidem illum
non curat sed illa com(m)iseretur
scribit rivalis vale*

*invidiose, quia romperes, sedare noli formonsiorem,
et qui est homo pravessimus et bellus. [CIL IV 8259]*

*Dixi scripsi amas Hiredem, quae te non curat. Sev (erus?) Successo, ut su[p]ra(?)...s...
Severus [CIL IV 8258]*

(Severus) – Successus, a weaver, loves the innkeeper's slave girl named Iris. She, however, does not love him.

Still he begs her to have pity on him. His rival wrote this. Goodbye.

(Answer by Successus) – Envious one, why do you get in the way? Submit to a handsomer man and one who is being treated very wrongly and good looking.

(Answer by Severus) - I have spoken. I have written all there is to say. You love Iris, but she does not love you.

The quarrel between Successus and Severus shows that people used to interact with graffiti more frequently in spaces such as taverns. Thus, responding to a graffito was part of the practice of interaction with the material support (the walls) even though we can find more examples of this attitude in places that were less controlled than was the villa where Rufus' graffito was scratched. Graffiti, therefore, can be described as being immediate and emotionally charged (Barbet, 1987); they can serve as evidence of a personal impulse expressing a particular worldview, such as a caricature of the local politician Rufus or an exchange over a love affair in a tavern, but the place where they are marked, i.e. their materiality, can help us understand how literacy interacts with urban life.

Despite the pessimism of some scholars regarding the possibility of accessing the testimony of common people (MacMullen, 1990: 186) or their characterization as coarse and vulgar (Cèbe, 1966: 372), there is a growing awareness that views such as the so-called 'ancient contempt for any manual activity' should not be applied to people's *Weltanschauungen*. The high levels of literacy among ordinary Romans⁴ strengthen the notion that there were, in fact, different types of Roman identities and different ways of speaking and being in the world. This can be better understood if we take apotropaic inscriptions as a case study and try to gain proximity to common people's ethos and religiosity through this type of epigraphic representation. Taking Pompeian wall inscriptions as a case study, particularly their apotropaic graffiti – as discussed below – we argue that the graffiti scratched by common people constitute a kind of social discourse and have the potential to illuminate aspects of Roman lives and feelings that have seldom been explored by previous scholarship.

Apotropaic acts and symbols for warding off the evil eye or evil influences played an important part in Roman society. Phallic representations and illustrations were especially used to turn away evil spells (cf. the Greek verb 'ἀποτρέπω', turn away, avert): '*contra invidentium effascinationes*' (against envious charms; Pliny *Nat. His.* 19, 50). There is common agreement that the apotropaic function of the phallus was linked to its association with fertility (Adams, 1987: 5-6). Different terms used to refer to the phallus – e.g. '*mentula*', '*verpa*', '*fascinum*', '*phallus*', and even '*cauda*' – are thus considered apotropaic. Surprisingly, however, related expressions, especially those referring to sexual intercourse with a woman, are not believed to have had apotropaic connotations. Adams (1987: 120) thus posits that the verb '*futuō*' (to fuck) 'was freely used as an unemotive technical term in brothels by both clients and prostitutes'.

Struck by the ubiquity of phallic displays among ordinary people, anthropologist Pina-Cabral (1993: 117-8) was motivated to study genital symbolism in Portuguese popular culture. He concluded that the purpose of the display of these images 'is to capture power and use it'. In our own experience with Roman cursive inscriptions we have been impressed by the references to the phallus and the repeated use of expressions referring to male intercourse with women. After reading many ordinary people's graffiti at Pompeii, we assume that a straightforward link existed between phallic representations and references to male sexual intercourse, related both to fertility and good fortune.

⁴ As case studies of epigraphic evidence reveal, see e.g. Gichon, 1986 : 585; Funari, 1989; Garraffoni; Funari, 2009; Garraffoni, 2008.

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Although both Richlin's *The Garden of Priapus* and Johns's *Sex or Symbol?* deal with the phallus and its apotropaic connotations, neither pay any attention to material aspects such as the handwriting on walls. Richlin (1983) and Johns (1982), among others, have contributed a great deal to our understanding of the general topic of phallic symbolism, particularly as it is represented in elite evidence such as literary texts and paintings. Although ordinary people's writings are not necessarily opposed to elite written expressions, as both refer to one and the same society and culture, it is nonetheless reasonable to emphasise the diversity of worldviews spread over the walls of Pompeii.

Phallic drawings are not uncommon on the walls of Pompeii; we can find them on different buildings of the city, including houses, the theatre, and brothels. The location of the material support of these drawings and texts (i.e. the walls) is related to people's access to the different buildings and premises. The graffiti found in houses are generally located in the atrium, peristyle or garden, mainly on columns, which are places that could have been accessed by various types of people – the home owner's family, friends, and slaves. Ithyphallic drawings are particularly interesting since in these cases the '*erectum fascinum*' (erected phallus) is often larger than the man himself. On a wall near the Theatre District is a drawing of an ithyphallic gladiator using his penis as a weapon (Vivolo, 1993: 148-9) (FIGURE 01). The strongly religious connotations of gladiatorial combat (Hugoniot, 1992: 12) suggest that the phallic representation of the gladiator was intended to protect him against evil.⁵



Figure 01

A phallic drawing could function as a replacement for an apotropaic text, with the drawing acting as the apotropaic object itself. Another ithyphallic drawing (CIL IV, 4566; FIGURE 02) found in the garden of a house is followed by an unclear inscription: '*Felicio tomintare*'. No one has yet been able to explain the meaning of this graffiti, whose second word may stem

⁵ Cf. Porph. *Ad. Epod.* 8, 18; Tupet, 1986: 2609, 2675.

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either from the Latin verb *'tumeo'* (to swell) or from *'torqueo'* (to twist), whilst the word *felicio* stems from *'felix'* (fertile, lucky) (Väänänen, 1937: 43; 49). The graffito could thus be interpreted as a reference to a phallus that is being waved around or has hardened. Good luck and fertility can also be associated with the drawing of a man whose head is partly shaped like a phallus (Vivolo, 1993: 179) (FIGURE 03). Phallic drawings could act as protection against the evil eye or female contempt. Male-dominated societies, phallicentric in character (Gold, 1993: 79), do tend to generate fear of women's sexual assessments of men. Women were not powerless as they could choose their mates (Gilmore, 1990). A graffito by a man named Fortunatus, found inside the dining room of a home, is a case in point (CIL IV, 4498; FIGURE 04): *'Thyas noli amare Fortunatu<m> uale'* (Thyas does not want to love Fortunatus. Farewell). A drawing of a phallus, which appears before the farewell, is meant as a good luck charm.



Figure 02

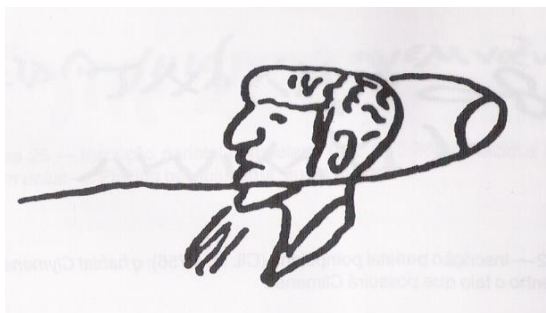


Figure 03

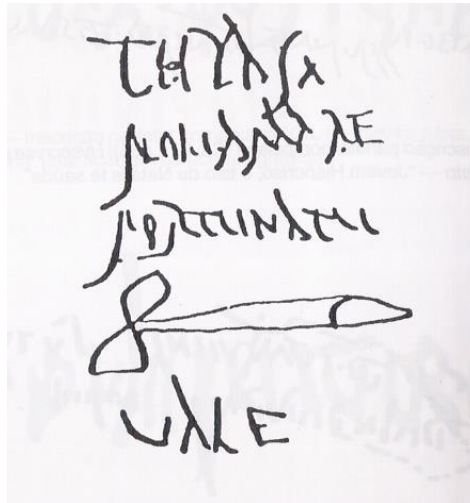


Figure 04

A phallic drawing in a peristyle could likewise serve as a substitute for the word phallus in a sentence, as in CIL IV, 4756 (FIGURE 05): '*q()* *habiat Clymene <phallum>*' (Clymene, hold the phallus) (Väänänen, 1937: 62). The meaning of the first letter, seemingly a 'q', is unclear. Perhaps we should assume that the phallus is the agent or subject of the phrase '*describo phallum quod habiat Clymenen*' (I draw this phallus which will have intercourse with Clymene) (Väänänen, 1937: 173-5). The association of these phallic drawings with written messages was probably meant to bring good luck, and their location in spaces regularly accessible to the families in question, their slaves and visitors and in houses in different neighbourhoods allows us to assume that they were so placed as to be seen and read out loud. The strength associated with the male organ is also clear in other graffiti, as in CIL IV, 1655 (FIGURE 06): '*Hysocryse puer Natalis uerpa te salutat*' (Young Hysocrysus, Natalis the phallus greets you). Indeed, as Montero writes (1991; 69), 'male genitals, as a symbol of creative nature, were respected with religious piety as the representation of the mysterious forces of creation, and at the same time they were used as apotropaic amulets against all human and divine evil'.

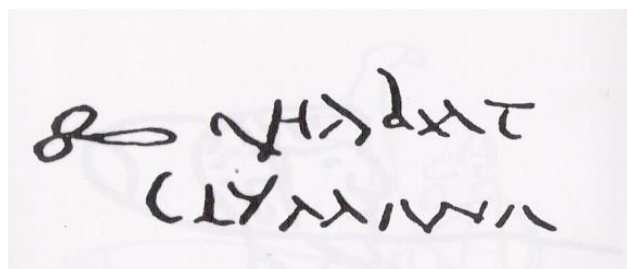


Figure 05

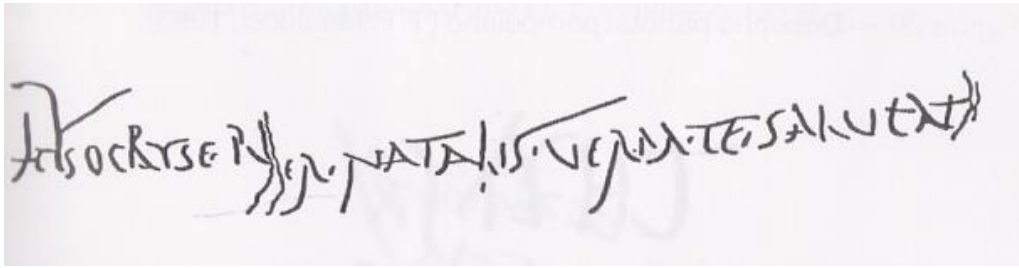


Figure 06

Pompeian graffiti that refer explicitly to male intercourse with women are also very common. According to Cantarella (1988: 276), 'the sexual mentality of Roman males was that of a rapist, a consummate rapist'. The most popular word used on walls was the verb *futuo* or related terms.⁶ As is the case of its Greek counterpart 'βινέω', which is also attested in Pompeii (e.g. CIL IV, 8767), this is a term associated in ancient texts with the use of force (Lamberterie, 1991: 149; 156). However, as Boardman stressed (1992: 239-40), phallic references and intercourse with women do not necessarily signify aggression by men against women. Indeed, most graffiti referring to sexual intercourses ('*fututiones*') are not offensive and seem to have the same apotropaic connotations as their phallic counterparts.

Last but not least, we would like to focus on a particular material support for graffiti, namely the walls of the brothels at Pompeii, and more specifically the one located at the corner of 'Vico del Lupanare' (Brothel Street). This area is close to the forum and it can be assumed that it was a place where people would meet and relax in nearby bars. Here passersby would have found themselves face to face with a written space displaying a variety of inscriptions, such as painted electoral posters/gladiatorial announcements, and sexual graffiti. Since these inscriptions were in a populated area of the city, they attest to intense social and personal interaction and exemplify an encounter between painted inscriptions and graffiti made by common people. The walls here enable us to think about how politics and pleasures interact in everyday life.

With regard to the graffiti, all of which are inside the brothel, many of them refer to sexual intercourse. Most are clearly innocuous, as CIL IV, 2246 (FIGURE 07): '*hic ego cum veni, futui, deinde redei domi*' (I came here, I fucked and finally I went back home). Similarly, '*Placidus hic futuit quem uoluit*' (Placidus fucked here whomsoever he wanted) (CIL IV, 2265, FIGURE 08).

⁶ Cf. Adams, 1987: 118.

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Some phrases are complex: *'futebatur, inquam futuebatur, ciuium Romanorum atractis pedibus cunus in qua nule aliae uices erant nissimei dulcissime et pissimae'* (the vagina of Roman citizens was fucked, their legs open; there are no substitutes, except for the sweetest and kind) (CIL IV, 1261). Although difficult to interpret, given the fact that the text transcribes oral language, it is interesting to note the use of a term with strong religious connotations, *'piissimae <sc. mulieres>'* (the most blessed women) in connection with a *'fututio'* (sexual intercourse).⁷

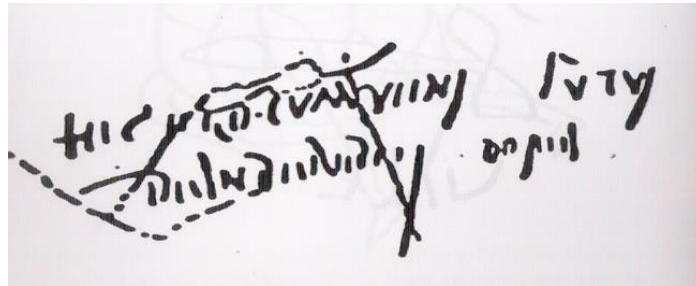


Figure 07

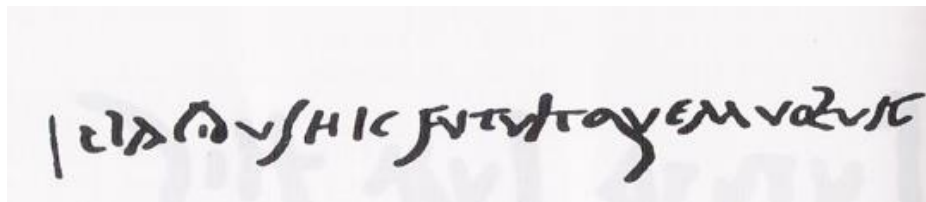


Figure 08

Some graffiti are clearly propitiatory: *'bene valeas qui bene futues'* (you are in good shape if you are a good fucker) (CIL IV, 2274) (Väänänen, 1937: 36). The same interpretation applies to an inscription by a woman: *'fututa sum hic'* (I was fucked here) (CIL IV, 2217, FIGURE 09). Adams (1987: 120) commented on this graffito by remarking that 'it is not the sort of remark one would expect from a person who considered that she had been the victim of a humiliating act'. This assumption is correct, but we do not believe that this represents a 'neutral use of the word' (Adams, 1987: 120). If the *fututio* was deemed an act that brought good luck, it is only natural that both males and females would have used the word to protect themselves from evil. This hypothesis is strengthened by a number of graffiti that refer to women as 'female fuckers'. A Latin inscription in Greek script refers to *'Mola phoutoutris'* (Mula the fucker) (CIL IV, 2204, FIGURE

⁷ For a different interpretation, see Adams, 1987: 121.
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10),⁸ while a Latin one mentions ‘*Miduse fututrix*’ (Miduse the fucker) (CIL IV, 4196, FIGURE 11). It appears that the only reasonable explanation for these inscriptions is that *fututio* was a praiseworthy activity when it came to men and women alike.

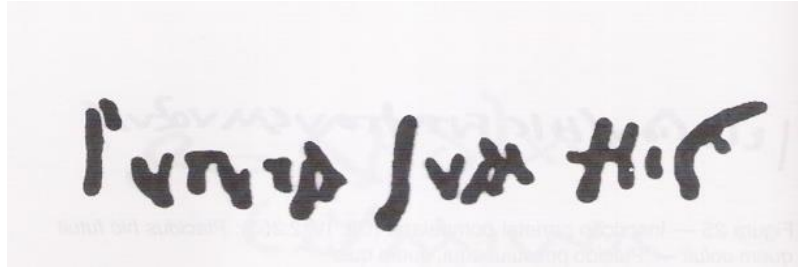


Figure 09

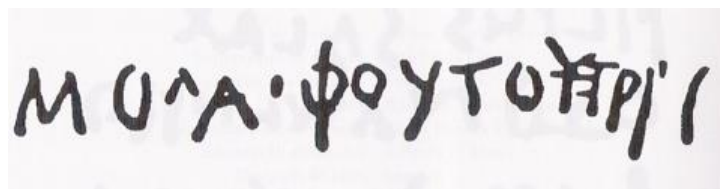


Figure 10

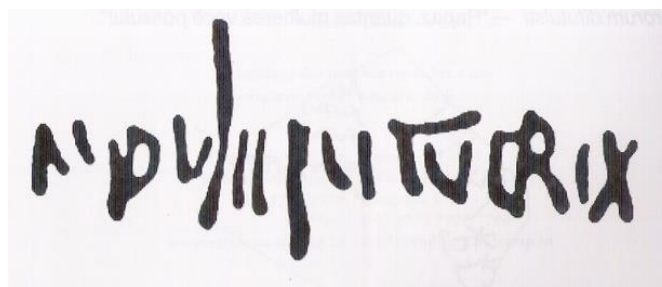


Figure 11

A poorly spelled graffito provides interesting evidence of the popular use of references to sexual intercourse as a device for bringing good luck: ‘*filius salax qud tu mulieriorum difutuisti*’ (Lustful lad, how many women have you fucked!) (CIL IV, 5213, FIGURE 12). A number of vulgarisms in the phrase make its interpretation difficult, yet it does not seem likely that *filius salax* (literally, ‘youngster fond of leaping’) was meant to be pejorative (*contra* Adams, 1987: 206). Considering that the adjective *salax* was used mostly in

⁸ Cf. Dubuisson, 1992: 189.

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reference to male animals, its reference to a boy can be explained by the fact that the writer was most likely a very humble person, probably acquainted with country slang. This could also explain the use of *filius* (son) as 'lad' (Väänänen, 1937: 191). There are other references to good or bad luck as a result of *fututiones*. The well-known Floronius inscription is a case in point: '*Floriuns binet ac miles leg. vii hic fuit, neque mulieres scierunt, nisi paucae, et ses, erunt*' (Floronius, fucker and soldier of the seventh legion, was here <sc. an inn> and no women realise the fact...but they were only six and so they would be too small a number <sc. for this boastful male>) (CIL IV, 8767) (Funari, 1993: 134). Floronius' intention in this graffito was to protect himself from the bad luck that might result from abstinence, and he did so by referring to himself as a fucker ('*binetas*', in Greek) and thus by reasserting his sexual capacity.

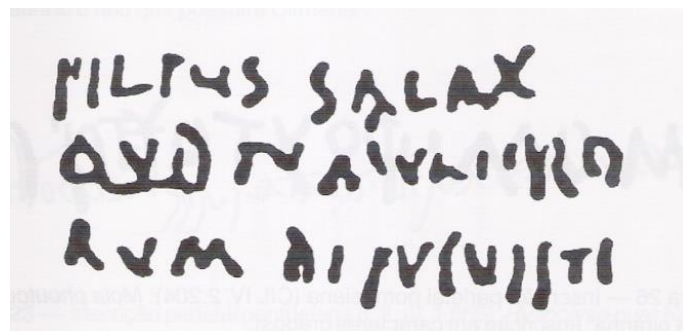


Figure 12

Is it possible to conclude from these examples that explicit references to sexual intercourse were apotropaic? There is no easy answer to this question, but we would like to emphasise that recent research on archaeology and sexuality allows us to seek less normative approaches to graffiti. As Voss and Schmidt have argued (2000), we should view sexuality in the past as interconnected with social and cultural systems. With this in mind, we believe that studying graffiti on their material support and in their proper context may help us understand Roman sexuality and daily life in their full diversity of meanings. That the phallus was imbued with deeply religious connotations and served as an actual apotropaic symbol is widely recognized. On the other hand, the widespread use of references to sexual intercourse by ordinary people has generally gone unexplained. Such practices cannot be imputed to natural sexual desire alone (Bing; Cohen, 1991: 1). On the other hand, it is easy to understand that if fertility lay at the root of the magic properties attached to phallic representations, then the popularity of references to sexual intercourse would be clearer. Years ago, Pierre-Grimal (1943/1969: 47-49)

was keen to stress that fertility cults were common not among elites but rather among 'freedmen, slaves, very ordinary people'. Concerns with bad luck and the evil eye were also thought to be typical of humble people by Jordan (1990: 438). In popular religious culture (Kuenzel, 1992: 1055), there is no reason not to suppose that *fututiones* were associated with the phallus and that sexual intercourse and phallic references were linked to both fertility and good luck. The '*religion des gens incultes*' (religion of uncultivated people) (Gourevitch, 1991: 49), though difficult to grasp, is surely evident in old Roman cursive inscriptions written in vulgar Latin⁹.

The ubiquity of references to sexual intercourse on Pompeian wall graffiti is striking, and the terms referring to it evoke related subjects such as '*fructus*' (enjoyment) (e.g. CIL IV, 2245) and '*felicitas*' (happiness, luck) (John, 1982: 65) (e.g. CIL IV, 1454). Gestures are a clear indication of the association between sexual intercourse and protection against evil influences, as indicated by the use of fingers to mimic sexual intercourse¹⁰. Ritual obscenity, bawdy wedding songs and other fertility and apotropaic ceremonial acts should thus not be set apart from ordinary sexual references. It seems reasonable to suppose that the daily use of sexual language, as represented in graffiti, was the result of the apotropaic properties associated with both sexual intercourse itself and oral and written references to it. For unprotected ordinary people subject to the manifestation of evil in the form of illness, poverty, and hunger, spelling out sexual words could at least have been an affordable way of warding off bad luck.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, we would like to stress that our choice of apotropaic graffiti as a case study originates from our belief that this type of graffiti may challenge common modern perceptions and help scholars in their quest to seek alternative meanings of material culture and to rethink theories and methods as well as interpretations of past societies. If we associate such queries with the variety of material supports and contexts of writings evidenced in epigraphy, we may capture Roman epigraphic habits in their multiplicity and reconsider the idea of the Latin language as restricted to certain members of the elite. By choosing not to centre our perception of writing on canonical texts or official monuments, but rather on the walls of theatres, houses, and brothels, we can observe the proper logic of

⁹ Cf. Vossler, 1954: 49.

¹⁰ Cf. Ov. *Fast.* 5.433.

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apotropaic symbolism while avoiding the notion of cultural transference, whether from Romans to natives or from the elite to common people.

Considering this approach, we believe that material culture – here represented by walls and columns – plays a unique role in telling the stories of people who are invisible or misrepresented in written sources, and that it can help us better understand how common men and women lived under or were affected by Roman power. Our intent here, therefore, has been to examine the ways in which the archaeological record, particularly epigraphy, when set in its proper material context, can suggest new approaches for studying the Roman Empire, ancient sexuality, and religious symbolism. As sexuality and religious perceptions are ephemeral and their meaning may change over time, their transitory nature requires the development of new theoretical approaches. Since apotropaic graffiti refer to diverse experiences and, when materialized, can become sites of memory, we suggest that they can help us better understand those members of society whose desires and worldviews have not always been visible.

In this sense, as Funari has already observed (1986), Pompeian graffiti represent a field open for exploration. If one considers these inscriptions in their spatial context, it becomes possible to approach the Roman world in a more pluralistic way. The apotropaic graffiti discussed here are just one example, but they reveal the potential of the social and cultural aspects of written spaces which are seldom studied. Apotropaic graffiti also challenge scholars' silence on less traditional subjects and shed light on numerous forms of social interaction. In other words, apotropaic graffiti can help us think about imperial effects in a less monolithic manner.

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Abbreviations for editions of primary sources

CIL *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (Berlin, 1863–).

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