

Getting to know Primigenia

by Amanda Levit

Project or print the following graffito:

CIL IV 10241 (Porta Nocera necropolis, sepulchrum #22)

Primigeniae
Nucer(inae) sal(utem).
Vellem essem gemma (h)ora(m?) non amplius una(m?),
Ut tibi signanti oscula missa darem

- Written in Pompeii to someone referred to as ‘Nucerian’, the inscription raises interesting questions about travel in the Roman world. Nuceria is Pompeii’s closest neighbor, about 9 miles away.
- The poem also references signet rings in the author’s metaphorical wish, offering a convenient avenue for the teacher to address the significance of the signet ring in Roman social, political, and business culture as both a tool and marker of social status.
- The poem has heavy echoes of a line from Ovid’s [*Ars Armatoria III 223*](#) (and we see similar riffs on this line in other graffiti in Pompeii). These graffiti could be introduced to students together as a way of prompting a conversation about the degree and type of readership of Ovid’s poems and the impact/value they may have held for the contemporary Roman.
 - CIL IV 1698 : Gemma(m) velim fieri hora non(a)
- Finally, this poem could be linked with other graffiti from Pompeii which makes reference to the name “Primigenia” (with at least one sharing the same connection of location (Nuceria). The teacher could share these graffiti with students and promote a discussion revolving around how these different graffiti might tell a story about this ancient Roman woman, and about whether we should or should not imagine them as all referring to the same person.

Extension Activities

Regardless of which aspect of the graffito a teacher discusses with his or her class there are many ancillary project possibilities.

- Students could compose an historical fiction account of the relationship between Primigenia and her lover in Latin or write a comparable graffito in English (referencing a well-known modern piece of literature or lyric).
- Students could also design their own signet ring.
- Students could plot out a potential journey from Pompeii to Nuceria using ORBIS (<http://orbis.stanford.edu/>).

Related graffiti:

CIL IV 8356 : 2nd Nucerian Primigenia

[CIL IV 10676](#) : Hermeros to Primigenia

[CIL IV 8769c](#) : Pittacius cum Primigenia

CIL IV 8770 : Primigenia cum Prima

CIL IV 7464 : Primigenia election poster

CIL IV 3905 : Hirtia Suae Primigeniae