

# Scribbling through History

Graffiti, Places and People from  
Antiquity to Modernity

Edited by

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## Gladiators, Greetings and Poetry: Graffiti in First Century Pompeii

Rebecca R. Benefiel

The eruption of Mt Vesuvius in AD 79 obliterated life in nearby Pompeii, but ensured the preservation of fragile material such as wall-plaster, allowing us a glimpse of how filled with writing an ancient city might be. With its exceptional preservation, Pompeii provides a basis for understanding daily life under the Roman Empire. Two-thirds of the ancient city (44 hectares) has been excavated. Nowhere else do we have acre after acre of public and residential buildings that are so well preserved. More than 100 city-blocks have yielded thousands of ancient graffiti at Pompeii. These handwritten wall inscriptions capture a culture of spontaneous written expression, conveying the thoughts and interests of those who inhabited and passed through this city some 1,900 years ago.

Pompeii, therefore, offers a spectacular look at the vibrant culture of public writing and reading that took place during the early Roman Empire. In this chapter, I first present a brief overview of the cultural practice of writing graffiti in Pompeii. I then discuss what makes these graffiti culturally distinct, exploring, how these writings illuminate Roman culture and the society that produced them. To do so, I highlight three particular topics: gladiators, greetings and poetry, which characterize Roman graffiti and distinguish it as culturally different from graffiti of other times and places.

### The cultural practice of writing graffiti

Wall inscriptions began to be documented in Pompeii in the second half of the nineteenth century, more than a century after excavations had begun. Although

early discoveries disappeared before they were recorded and nearly one-third of the city remains unexcavated, Pompeii has yielded a mass of writing. More than 11,000 wall inscriptions have been documented so far, indicating that there must have been a tremendous amount of writing taking place in this ancient town. The wall inscriptions at Pompeii take two forms: painted inscriptions (*dipinti*) and inscriptions scratched into wall-plaster (*graffiti*). The painted inscriptions communicate information of a public nature, similar to our billboards or posters today. They were painted by teams of workers (Franklin 1978), in large letters, high up on the wall along busy streets and were designed to reach a large audience. They contain information for public consumption, including hundreds of endorsements for political candidates and announcements of gladiatorial games (cf. Franklin 2001).

The graffiti, by contrast, comprise handwritten messages, and could be composed by anyone who had a sharp implement and the desire to write something. They occur not only in public spaces but also in workshops, taverns, shops and even private houses. They appear across the entire city. The plaster that covered buildings inside and out provided a ready surface for Pompeians to write messages that could be read by others. The term 'graffiti', in fact, originated in the mid-nineteenth century, as excavations of Roman ruins proceeded to uncover more and more of these handwritten texts, lightly scratched into the plaster of ancient buildings. The Italian noun *graffio*, or 'scratch', was turned into an adjective to describe these inscriptions, *iscrizioni graffite* (Avellino 1841; Ross 1877: 263). Only a century later did the term graffiti come to be more broadly applied to any informal writing on walls (Gorrell 2001: 77).

A major difference between the graffiti of Pompeii and that of other cultures is their size and visual impact. Ancient graffiti tend to be discreet and unobtrusive. They are generally small, sometimes minute, with examples smaller than 0.5 cm in height. Rarely are ancient graffiti taller than 3 cm (Benefiel 2010, 2016b). They do not run across decorative element, rather, they show a certain respect for wall decoration and for the space taken up by other graffiti. Another difference between ancient and modern examples is the wide swath of society involved in writing and reading graffiti in Pompeii (cf. Franklin 1991). Leading citizens and slaves, male and female, inhabitants and visitors to the town all engaged in writing and reading graffiti. For example, in the House

of D. Lucretius, a magistrate who sponsored gladiatorial spectacles for the city, a graffito applauds him and his children (*CIL* IV 8497b), while over by the theatre, a female slave inscribes a prayer to Venus, entreating the goddess to bless her and her beloved (*CIL* IV 2457). Along with the diverse backgrounds of the individuals who inscribed messages, the content of graffiti at Pompeii is wide-ranging. The inscriptions comprise greetings, word games, notes, quotations of poetry, tally marks, drawings and more. I have chosen to highlight three particular topics: gladiators, greetings and poetry, which characterize the graffiti of this time period and illuminate the cultural practice of writing on the wall in ancient Pompeii. This type of content is not often found among the graffiti of other cultures, but it certainly speaks to that of the early Roman Empire.

## Gladiators

Gladiators remain one of the most potent symbols of ancient Rome. Romans commented on their own fascination with the sport. The satirist Juvenal refers to a woman who abandoned her family and high rank to run away with a gladiator (Juv. 6.82–113). Amphitheatres were built in towns and cities across the Empire to host games and gladiatorial spectacles (Golvin 1998; Tosi 2003). Art featuring gladiators appeared in both public and private spaces and in every type of medium, from paintings and mosaics to terracotta figurines and oil lamps (Jacobelli 2003).<sup>1</sup>

Two sets of graffiti provide an example of the fascination that Romans held for gladiators and how closely they followed the successes of individual athletes. One set appeared on a funerary monument outside the city walls, the other within a well-appointed house. Together, these offer a glimpse into how Pompeians might have used graffiti to communicate and share an interest in the major sport of their time.

The first, including multiple drawings and texts, was drawn on a funerary monument outside the city walls, south of town. The roads that led into any Roman town were lined with funerary monuments, a place outside the city to bury the dead and to represent one's achievements. Shade, seats and shelter among these monuments provided a place for travellers to pause

writer may have sketched out the scene to share the exciting news with others, friends who were present as he recounted the details or who may have passed by and stopped at their usual resting spot before continuing on their travels. These graffiti reveal how Pompeians might communicate about a major social event in their world.

## Greetings

If gladiators mark a very *Roman* way of writing graffiti, then the category of greetings marks a very *human* way of writing graffiti. Roman culture flavours the way Pompeians greet and address each other. Two main points are particularly relevant: (1) ancient Roman graffiti were anything but anonymous; and (2) Pompeians were quite a friendly bunch.

One of the basic characteristics associated with modern graffiti is anonymity. Not so in Pompeii. Personal names comprise the largest percentage of ancient graffiti (Langner 2001: 21–6). The names themselves often stand alone, markers of one's presence and ability to write (cf. Benefiel 2008). Greetings take second place. Friends are named and directly addressed with 'hello,' 'take care, or 'bye'. The quantity of greetings across the city makes clear that writing graffiti was a very social exchange. It strengthened and publicized bonds between individuals in a familiar and friendly way.

Latin students often start class with the salutation, *Salve magistra!* Pompeian graffiti contain several instances of this address: *Salve filia!* ('Hello, daughter'), *Salve Vitali!* ('Hello, Vitalis') (CIL IV.2173, 8072). Yet this was not the only way to say hello: graffiti use *salvère* ('to be healthy'), or employ the noun *salutem*. The convention may have derived from letter-writing, where the writer sends greetings (literally 'gives health') to the addressee (e.g. *Cicero Attico salutem dat*). The graffiti almost always present simply the names of writer and addressee followed by *salutem* (e.g. *Optata Secundo suo salutem* ('Optata to her Secundus, greetings' CIL IV.6755)). The term appears so frequently among graffiti and in such simple messages that it is clear Pompeians were not thinking about letter-writing – they were just saying 'hi'. One could wish someone the very best with a phrase like *plurimam salutem*, as occurs in an exuberant exchange between brothers at the House of Fabius Rufus: *Secundus Onesimo fratri suo*



*p[lu]rimam perpetuamque salutem* ('Secundus, lots of greetings forever and ever, to his brother Onesimus'), *Onesimus . . . Secundo plurimam amabiliter salutem* ('Onesimus . . . to Secundus, lots of greetings, with love') (Giordano 1966: nos. 9–10, 13).

Even more popular was the variation on this address: *sal*, an abbreviation of *salutem*. Eleven graffiti contain the imperative greeting with *salve* or its plural *salvete*. More than thirty convey a greeting with *salutem*. By contrast, around 100 individual graffiti at Pompeii use the abbreviation *sal*.<sup>4</sup> This very common expression was the equivalent of 'hi', but could also be part of a longer message. An imperial slave visited Pompeii and wrote his greetings to the entire town with great enthusiasm:

*Poliaeus Aug(usti) cubic(u)larius Marsus hic et ubique sa[lutem]  
[sa]n[cti]ssimae coloniae et populo Pompeieno  
ubique sal(utem)*

CIL IV.7755

'Poliaeus, the bedroom attendant of the emperor, from central Italy, says hi, here and everywhere, to the most worthy town (literally, to the most sacred colony) and to the Pompeian people. Hi everywhere!'

The imperative of *valēre* ('to be strong') was another way to send greetings to a friend. Graffiti exhorting 'take care' or 'fare well' were written to both men and women and seem to have been addressed exclusively to individuals rather than to groups. As with *salutem*, the greeting *vale* was frequently abbreviated. It might be shortened to *val(e)*, perhaps on the model of the abbreviation *sal*, but much more often it was shortened to just two letters: *va(le)*, usually in a short message, e.g.: *Niobida va(le)*, *Mnester va(le)*, *Gloriose va(le)* (CIL IV.1800, 1862, 2012). The main difference between greetings of *salutem* and *vale* was structural; *salutem* greetings named both writer and addressee, while *vale* greetings named only the addressee. More than 250 instances of the greeting *vale* have been found on the walls of Pompeii so far, most abbreviated to *va(le)*.<sup>5</sup>

Another way to send warm greetings to a friend is an acclamation that has no modern-day equivalent: *feliciter*, or 'be happy!' A literal translation is: 'may things go happily for so-and-so.' We might translate *Augusto feliciter* as, 'Long live the emperor!' or *Iustae feliciter* as 'Good wishes for Iusta!' But the root

of *feliciter* is the adjective *felix*, meaning ‘happy’ or ‘lucky’, which a general sentiment of good wishes doesn’t capture.

There are more than 100 instances of this expression at Pompeii. This phrase reflected spoken communication. An appearance by the emperor could inspire chants and acclamations of *feliciter* (Suet. *Dom.* 3), and, even in his absence, the emperor might be wished well this way. The protagonists of the *Cena Trimalchionis* wonder about special cakes and, guessing them sacred, jump up and exclaim: *Augusto, pater patriae, feliciter!* (‘Long live the emperor, father of the fatherland!’ Petronius, *Sat.* 60). The wish could be addressed to others too. Earlier in the evening, after a particularly clever presentation of sausages, the diners acclaim the host with the shout: *Gaio feliciter!* (‘Hooray for Gaius!’ Petronius, *Sat.* 50). Wedding celebrations also routinely included the wish of *feliciter* (Glazebrook and Olson 2014; Hersch 2010: 150–1).

In Pompeii, these shouts of ‘Hooray!’ and ‘Be happy!’ made it onto the walls of the town, resonating their wishes throughout the city. Many are addressed to individuals; others are directed at groups, even entire towns (*Coloniae Puteolanae feliciter*, ‘Happy things for the colony of Puteoli’; *omnibus Pompeianis feliciter* ‘Hooray for all the Pompeians!’ *CIL* IV.4262, 7343). One graffito wishes happiness for those of good will: *Ben{*i*}volentibus felic{*e*}ter!* (*CIL* IV.1326). A number of painted inscriptions also applauded the emperor and his ‘decisions’ with *feliciter* (Benefiel 2004; Mouritsen and Gradel 1991):

*Iudiciis Augusti Augustae feliciter! Vobis salvis felices sumus perpetuo.*

‘Hooray for the decisions of the emperor and empress. With you both safe and sound, we are happy forever.’

*CIL* IV.1074, Add. p. 199, 461

Mention of the empress suggests the couple is Nero and Poppaea, who herself hailed from this area, while the decisions applauded so widely appear to have been rescinding a ban on gladiatorial games implemented a few years earlier (Franklin 2001: 119–23; Mouritsen and Gradel 1991:151–3; Tac. *Ann.* XIV.17).

Modern graffiti often include insults, but positive sentiments were much more common. Only two graffiti in Pompeii carry a wish of *infeliciter*. These two identical messages on a tomb outside the Nocera Gate were used to curse a certain Rarus: *Raro infeliciter* (*CIL* IV.10243a, b). On the same tomb, negative

wishes are directed at Rarus with different sentiments: 'May things turn out badly for Gaius Rarus' (*C. Raro male eveniat*, CIL IV.10243h). The message is then directed at Macer (*Macro male eveniat*, CIL IV.10243j). This cluster of negativity is very unusual – this tomb is the only place in Pompeii where such phrases are found. The verb *eveniat* appears in one other graffito, where positive wishes are repeatedly declared: 'Good wishes (*bene*) for Felicula, good wishes (*bene*) for Daphnicus. May things turn out well (*bene eveniat*) for both of them' (CIL IV.4477). Who knows how Rarus and Macer had generated such anger or why the person mad with them chose to express himself here? This monument shows that it was possible to express negative wishes in graffiti, but that was clearly not the social convention in Pompeii. Rather, greetings were overwhelmingly positive and friendly, a public declaration of good wishes and shared relationships.

## Poetry

Another distinctive feature of graffiti in first-century Pompeii is the prevalence of inscribed verses of poetry. Unattributed quotations of both literature and popular epigrams are inscribed repeatedly across the city no *author is known* (Gigante 1979).<sup>6</sup> The best-represented poet is Vergil, author of the *Aeneid*. As one might expect, the opening words of his epic poem (*arma virumque cano*, 'I sing of arms and the man ...') are frequently inscribed (cf. Milnor 2009), but the phrase that begins the second book of the *Aeneid* is just as popular: *conticuere* ('they fell silent'). That slightly edges out *Aen.* I.1, with fourteen individual quotations, in contrast to twelve of the epic's opening words. Vergil's other works are also quoted on the walls of Pompeii, as are other poets, particularly Propertius and Ovid (Cooley and Cooley 2014: 292–3).<sup>7</sup>

Verses of poetry often appear in clusters; it would seem that a reference to a well-known poem or verse might have inspired others to add their own contributions. Examples of this tendency for poetic verses to cluster can be found in several locations, including the basilica, the tavern of Euxinus (Jashemski 1967) and the House of Maius Castricius (Benefiel 2010a). The series in the basilica illustrate how graffiti might work in dialogue with each other.

## 6. Gladiators, Greetings, and Poetry: Graffiti in First Century Pompeii

- 1 The Metropolitan Museum of Art features numerous oil lamps decorated with images of gladiators. Gladiator imagery appeared on tableware as well.
- 2 For more on the graffiti on this tomb, see Coleman 1999, Caldelli 2001, Garraffoni and Funari 2009, Cooley 2012: 112–13.
- 3 Garraffoni and Funari (2009) provide a nice introduction to gladiatorial graffiti at Pompeii. For gladiator graffiti elsewhere in the ancient world, see Langner 2001, nos. 769–1062. The bibliography on Roman gladiators is vast. See, e.g. Fagan 2011, Gregori 2011, Knapp 2011, Coleman 2009, Bomgardner 2000, Hope 2000, Junkelmann 2000, Futrell 1997, and, for epigraphic material, the series of *Epigrafia anfiteatrale dell'Occidente romano*, 8 vols. (Rome: Quasar).
- 4 The first two issues of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, vol. IV included indices with a vocabula index that listed the appearances of popular words. The more recent fascicles were not given an index. Fortunately, the Clauss–Slaby Epigraphic Database (<http://www.manfredclauss.de/>) provides a powerful tool to query the graffiti. The graffiti of Pompeii are also coming online via the Epigraphic Database Roma (<http://www.edr-edr.it/>) and the Ancient Graffiti Project (<http://ancientgraffiti.org>).
- 5 Greetings could appear in clusters, as happened at the campus, a large colonnaded building beside the amphitheatre. There, a single column featured greetings addressed to: Mysticus, Chloe, Asella, Sautranus, and the boy (*puer*) Eucapa (*CIL* IV.8618–8622). Another cluster in the House of the Four Styles involved eleven graffiti addressing greetings to five different women (Benefiel 2011); this is the only location that features greetings to women without any greetings to men.
- 6 Also of interest are poetic verses inscribed in the corridor between the large and small theatre and attributed to a certain Tiburtinus (*CIL* IV.4966–4973). Cf. Varone 2002:106–8; Lieberg 2005; Milnor 2014: 142–51.
- 7 Cooley and Cooley provide a table listing all quotations of literature among the Pompeian graffiti (2014: 2923, Appendix 2). Five different lines from the *Eclogues* appear among Pompeian graffiti, while one quotation from the *Georgics* appears twice.
- 8 *CIL* IV.1893 = Ovid, *Amores* 1.8.77–78; *CIL* IV.1894 = Propertius 4.5.47–48.
- 9 Giordano 1966: no. 46; Solin 1975: no. 66; Varone 1990: inscription I; Benefiel 2010a: no. 43: {V}asia quae rapui quaeris formosa puella. / Accipe quae rapui non ego solus; ama. / quisquis amat valeat. For illustration, see Benefiel 2010a: 68, fig. 9.
- 10 Ranieri Panetta (2004: 159) provides illustration.