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Sarah K. Gorman
Old Dominion University

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Assigning Authorship to Figural Graffiti in Ancient Pompeii

Sarah K Gorman

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Mentor - Dr. Jared Benton

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Graffiti is an inevitable part of any modern cityscape. It can be found on walls, bus stops, and highway overpasses. These markings can be brightly colored and interesting or flat and dull with subject matter ranging from the simple “Kilroy was here” to complex social issues. The act of writing or drawing on the wall is not, however, a new one. Examples can be found dating back to the Paleolithic Era. The cave paintings at Lascaux (ca. 15,000 BC) have been identified as the birthplace of man’s ability to communicate through visual representation.¹ Modern graffiti, in contrast, is often viewed as an act of vandalism or a nuisance created by hooligans or bored teenagers. Unfortunately, these popular biases often skew our interpretations of ancient graffiti.

Since excavations began at Pompeii in 1748, archaeologists have found large numbers of both inscribed and painted graffiti. While many of the textual examples have been documented, it was previously believed they held little value. In his 1899 book, *Pompeii: It’s Life and Art*, August Mau dismisses the graffiti and its authors: [quote]

Taken as a whole, the graffiti are less fertile for our knowledge of Pompeian life than might have been expected. The people with whom we should most eagerly desire to come into direct contact, the cultivated men and women of the ancient city, were not accustomed to scratch their names upon stucco or to confide their reflections and experiences to the surface of a wall...we may assume that the writers were as little representative of the best elements of society as are the tourists who scratch or carve their names upon ancient monuments to-day [sic].² [endquote]

Until recently, Matteo Della Corte was one of the few to break with this traditional view.

Described by Amedeo Maiuri as “the most expert, consummate, and faithful reader of the

¹ Douglas Smith, “Beyond the Cave: Lascaux and the Prehistoric in Post-War French Culture,” *French Studies*, 68.2, 219-32.

² August Mau and Francis W. Kelsey, *Pompeii: It’s Life and Art*. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1899), 481-2.

Pompeian inscriptions,” Della Corte is considered to have been the leading scholar on Pompeian epigraphy in the early 20th century.³ Della Corte attempted to use graffiti found in Pompeii to repopulate the city. Though his work was highly criticized, he is the reason many inscriptions were documented.

To date over 11,000 wall inscriptions have been discovered and properly recorded. As only two-thirds of the city has been excavated thus far and earlier excavation records are poor, it stands to reason the actual number is much higher. Of the inscriptions recorded, one finds examples of poetry, love letters, jeers, advertisements, political solicitations, and personal notes. Most political graffiti, or programmata, were painted in red while the more private and personal musings were scratched into the plaster. In her book, *Graffiti and the Literary Landscape in Roman Pompeii*, Kristina Milnor addresses the authorship of many of these inscriptions, “one of the things which distinguishes Pompeian graffiti writers...is how many of them show familiarity with authors whose works emerged from the highest of high ancient literary culture: Virgil, Ovid, Propertius, Ennius.”⁴ Milnor’s analysis of these writers as highly educated stands in direct contrast to Mau’s assertion that they were not the “cultivated men and women of the ancient city.”⁵ Thus the level of education and the placement of graffiti within elite homes establishes that the elite members of Pompeian society were contributing to the large number of inscriptions which have been found throughout the city.

While the majority of scholarship has focused on programmata and textual inscriptions, the Pompeians did not limit themselves to these forms of expression. A number of figural

³ Amedeo Maiuri, “Presentation,” in Matte Della Corte and Albert William Van Buren, *Loves and Lovers in Ancient Pompeii*. (Rome: E. di Mauro, 1960), 5.

⁴ Kristina Milnor, *Graffiti and the Literary Landscape in Roman Pompeii*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 5.

⁵ Mau, 481.

representations have been discovered as well. Figural graffiti has often been dismissed as the work of children or less affluent members of society.⁶ Its placement in elite homes and throughout the city, however, calls into question these assumptions. While many of the examples may be attributed to children, a greater number cannot. Through examination of placement, proximity to other graffiti, both figural and textual, and content, it becomes apparent that not only was the act of writing on the wall being performed by all members of Pompeian society, but drawing was as well. In addition, investigation of the graffiti allow certain assumptions to be made as to the activities and social roles played by the artists themselves.

As previously stated, archaeologists and epigraphers have attributed much of the figural graffiti found at Pompeii to children. They use the low placement of images on the wall and their crude nature as criterion. By employing developmental psychology, Katherine Huntley has developed a system of identifying children's graffiti from that of adults. Huntley's research not only allows authorship to be assigned, but provides greater understanding to the roles children played in ancient society. Of the 545 instances of figural graffiti analyzed, she found only 161 could be attributed to children.⁷ It is interesting to note that of the graffiti attributed to children and that to adults, subject matter is the same; boats, animals, gladiators, and other human figures.

Figural graffiti found within the House of the Four Styles at Pompeii, while not attributed to children is significant in its repetition of imagery. Located in the main register panels of the northern wall of room 13, the large open room residing on the northern side of the atrium, two boats are etched into the wall one above the other. In the panel next to the boats, one finds

⁶ Mau, 482 and Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow, *The Sarno Bath Complex*. (Roma: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 1990), 59.

⁷ The figural graffiti used by Huntley comes from four sites in the Southern Italian region of Campania: the city of Pompeii, the town of Herculaneum, and the villa sites of San Marco and Arianna near Stabiae. Huntley, 72. 831 instances of figural graffiti have been identified by Martin Langner in Pompeii alone. Huntley, 88-9.

similar placement of two compass drawn circles with petal designs in their interior. Boats were common in Roman graffiti, especially at sites near the sea, such as Pompeii and Delos, or close to major lakes or rivers.⁸ Thus finding two or even three graffiti depicting boats in a single space is not uncommon.⁹ The graffito found within the House of the Four Styles, however, is unique in that the boats represented are of the same type. The boat drawn above shows greater detail than the one below. It is “outfitted with oars, a rudder, mast, a clearly drawn prow and even a cabin in the rear. The boat drawn below presents the same structure, a similar outline with oars and mast, but includes fewer details and would seem to have been created by a less sure hand.”¹⁰ Thus it appears the bottom ship is an attempt to copy the one above. Scholars believe these ships were created around the same time and therefore the pair lend themselves to the interpretation of a drawing lesson within the home.¹¹ The top drawing is done in a more confident style, while the bottom is sketchier.

Where the House of the Four Styles was a moderate sized Pompeian home, the House of Maius Castricius must be considered elite. The home consisted of four levels, a private bath complex, and panoramic windows, which face the sea. In contrast to the House of Four Styles where figural graffiti are concentrated in a single area of the home, those found in the House of Maius Castricius are distributed throughout both the second and third levels. The second level, which housed the bath complex, contains a large number of geometric designs while those on the third are more representational. Two animals, a deer and peahen, are found among the multiple

⁸ 45 sites located inside the Roman empire were found to contain boat graffiti. Of those, only two were a great distance from water. Rebecca Benefiel and Kathleen Coleman, “The Graffiti,” in W. Aylward (ed), *Excavations at Zeugma*, (Los Altos, CA: Packard Humanities Institute, 2013), 190.

⁹ The villa San Marco at Stabiae shows the strong interest ancient Romans had in the drawing of boats. There, 11 of 17 total figural graffiti found depict boats of various types ranging from skiffs to sailboats. Benefiel, “Dialogues of Graffiti in the House of the Four Styles at Pompeii,” 34.

¹⁰ Ibid, 34.

¹¹ Ibid, 35.

geometric motifs on the second level. A boat, face, palm branch, human figure, and other geometric designs are located on the third level, many around the peristyle. While the figural graffiti are not clustered in one area, they tend to be grouped with textual inscriptions. It is possible that those who drew were illiterate members of society desiring to participate in the ritual of writing on the wall. Although many of the textual graffiti located in close proximity to one another appear to be related, there is no evidence of the figural relating to the textual.¹² Thus their relationship is spatial rather than content based. This apparent lack of connection to the written word may support the claim that these artists may have been illiterate.

However, if all who drew on the walls of the House of Maius Castricius were illiterate, they were also highly observant. The peahen found on the second level is highly stylized and the only one of its kind in Pompeii.¹³ While the deer found on this level is simplified and his antlers greatly exaggerated, his placement in the doorway between the caldarium and tepidarium is clever. Square holes across from the drawing are thought to have held oil lamps. Thus not only would the deer have been visible, but the flickering light of the oil lamp could have created an impression of movement.¹⁴ It is not possible to assign authorship to the figural graffiti found within the House of Maius Castricius to any one single person or group of people. The large home would have certainly housed multiple family members of varying ages, slaves, as well as visitors and guests. The only conclusion that can be made with any certainty is that the graffiti

¹² A stairwell found within the home yields 11 graffiti. Many of these are lines of poetry. While some of the inscriptions are often repeated verses found throughout Pompeii, others are highly original. Benefiel argues a sort of “one-upmanship” may be taking place. Those passing through the stairwell would read others verses, become inspired and add their own. Benefiel, “Dialogues of Ancient Graffiti in the House of Maius Castricius in Pompeii,” 67-9.

¹³ Although peacocks and peahens were common in Pompeian wall paintings, this is the only example of one being depicted in graffiti found thus far. Ibid, 76.

¹⁴ Ibid, 85.

was welcome and accepted in the home. This degree of acceptance shows the elite family was comfortable with the images on the wall and contributed to the collection.

In addition to figural graffiti found within Pompeian homes, numerous examples can be seen on the walls of the city. The majority of these fall into the same categories previously discussed; animals, gladiators, boats, and human figures. There are even examples of extended scenes, such as the regatta scene located in the corridor between the theaters often referred to as the graffiti passage.¹⁵ The majority of these drawings have been attributed to the common people of Pompeii as well as visitors to the city. Some have helped to identify different trades and where they operated,¹⁶ while others are lewd or insulting. Regardless of the content, one thing is certain; figural graffiti was prevalent within the city.

While it is difficult to assign authorship to figural graffiti, examination of placement, proximity to other graffiti, both figural and textual, and content provides insight into who the people creating these images. As scholars have just begun to study graffiti in depth, there is still much to be gleaned from them. In contrast to earlier held opinions that only the less affluent and children were tempted to draw on the walls, etchings found in elite and moderate homes show not only a tolerance of, but participation in the act of creating figural graffiti by the elite and learned of Pompeii.

¹⁵ Ibid, 35.

¹⁶ Walter O. Moeller, "The Male Weavers at Pompeii," *Technology and Culture*, Vol 10, No 4 (Oct 1969), 561-6.

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