

Rebecca R. Benefiel

## Urban and Suburban Attitudes to Writing on Walls? Pompeii and Environs

Inhabitants of the Roman Empire encountered text in a material way on a frequent basis. Those who lived in Roman cities were surrounded by writing, from the formal inscriptions on stone that spoke of euergetism or civic honors to public notices that took a less costly form, such as the painted inscriptions that announced candidates running for public office or the details of gladiatorial games. Stone inscriptions are found in towns across the Empire, but since painted inscriptions were ephemeral, sometimes whitewashed away and often fading from exposure, only in Pompeii can we come to appreciate the ubiquity of these public notices.<sup>1</sup>

I am interested in the people living among these monumental texts and the decidedly non-monumental writings that they created. The site of Pompeii has preserved a city full of these non-official, spontaneous messages that were created by the general population, often called graffiti.<sup>2</sup> These handwritten messages convey the thoughts and interests of the city's inhabitants and could be scratched into the wall-plaster that covered buildings, inside and out, by anyone who had a sharp implement and a desire to express himself. The central question I would like to pose in this chapter is: Was this phenomenon of writing on the walls primarily an urban practice that occurred mostly in Roman cities? Or did it extend to other settings as well?

I begin by briefly discussing ancient graffiti in Pompeii, since that is where the bulk of our evidence comes from, and then offer two useful contexts for comparison: the villa San Marco in Stabiae and the so-called Villa of Poppaea, or Villa A, in nearby Oplontis. Both are suburban villas that have been excavated nearly in their entirety

---

1 For the vast range of epigraphic material on display in a Roman town, see Corbier 2006. See also the chapters in the recent volume edited by Gareth Sears, Peter Keegan, and Ray Laurence (Sears/Keegan/Laurence 2013), especially Corbier's chapter, "Writing in Roman Public Space" (Corbier 2013). Cf. also Ma 2012 and Cooley 2012. Other information might be painted for public consumption as well, e.g. notice of a lost horse (CIL IV 3864 and 9948). The *Fasti Antiates* and the *Fasti Praenestini* furthermore present large painted inscriptions of the Roman calendar, with the days of each month and festival days represented (cf. Degrassi 1963). These were likely displayed on the town forum. For more on the painted political campaign posters of Pompeii, see Castrén 1975, Franklin 1980, Franklin 2001, Mouritsen 1988, Chiavia 2002, and Biundo 2003.

2 The term "graffiti" is sometimes applied to any inscription on a wall, but for our purposes, it is useful to employ it as it was initially coined more than a century ago: referring to texts that had been scratched into a surface, as opposed to carved or painted inscriptions. Though the modern word "graffiti" often carries negative connotations, implying defacement, a range of recent work argues that incised inscriptions were not viewed this way in antiquity (e.g. Benefiel 2010a, Baird/Taylor 2011, Keegan 2014, Swetnam-Burland 2015).

in recent decades, both were destroyed in the same eruption as Pompeii, and both contain a significant quantity of incised wall-inscriptions. These villas therefore provide valuable material for comparison by offering a view onto the presence of graffiti in large residential, *non-urban* contexts.

## 1 Graffiti in Pompeian Residences

The site of Pompeii offers us the unparalleled opportunity to analyze the material presence of wall-inscriptions through an entire ancient city. Thousands of wall-inscriptions occurred not only in Pompeii's public spaces, such as on building facades and on the funerary monuments bordering the roads leading into town, but also in significant numbers within private homes. The fact that ancient wall-inscriptions appear—and appear regularly—in domestic contexts, is completely alien to our own, contemporary experience of what we call “graffiti”. Yet these numbers reveal that it was clearly a component of the culture of writing in first century Pompeii.

One such handwritten inscription appears in the atrium of the House of the Four Styles (I.8.17, 11). There, on the northern wall of the room, atop second-style wall-painting, the following message greeted visitors who entered the house:<sup>3</sup>

*Quos • L • V • P • amat • valeant*

(“Welcome to those whom LVP loves.”)

Or, more literally, “May those whom Mr. LVP loves fare well”).<sup>4</sup>

It is clear that deliberate care went into the writing of this message (fig. 1). Inter-puncts, a standard element of honorific inscriptions on stone, appear between every word, and the carefully-spaced lettering includes serifs as well as the downward flourishes of the Q and N at the beginning and end of the message which thereby frame it. The content of the text also shows that effort that went into its composition. This was a message of welcome but one which incorporated an allusion to a verse of popular poetry that was found written throughout Pompeii. The opening words of the poem (*quisquis amat valeat*) were inscribed frequently through the city, while the full elegiac couplet was written out in a couple of locations: (*quis*)*quis amat valeat, pereat*

<sup>3</sup> CIL IV 8215. For more on this house, see Gallo 1989 and PPM (Pugliese Caratelli, Giovanni (ed.) (1990–2003), *Pompei: Pitture e Mosaici*, 11 vols., Rome) 1990, vol. 1, 847–913. For the inscriptions in this house, see CIL IV 8211–8255, and Benefiel 2011.

<sup>4</sup> The letters LVP present the initial letters of a Roman citizen's *tria nomina*. These same letters were incised onto an amphora found in this house (CIL IV 9469b: *LVP*), leading Matteo Della Corte to suggest that LVP was the owner of this home. The “L” is the abbreviation for the *praenomen* Lucius; the *gentilicium* and *cognomen* cannot be further identified. Della Corte offers several possibilities: Varius Priscus, Vedius Primigenius, or Vettius Proculus (Della Corte 1965, 331).

*qui nescit amare, pereat bis tanto qui amare vetat.*<sup>5</sup> In this case, the writer had modified the epigram to offer a personal welcome to the visitors received here.



**Fig. 1:** The graffito *Quos LVP amat valeat* in the House of the Four Styles (Su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali. Reproduction prohibited).

Most houses at Pompeii contain at least a few writings on their walls, but the House of the Four Styles is one of roughly thirty houses to contain somewhat more.<sup>6</sup> A small subgroup of six residences can be categorized as “highly inscribed”, since they each contain more than fifty examples. These “highly inscribed” residences (The House of Maius Castricius, the House of Paquius Proculus, the House of the Menander, the House of the Silver Wedding, the House of Triptolemus, and the house at IX.2.26) were excavated at different periods, from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, and they are spread out across the city (fig. 2).<sup>7</sup> One characteristic they have

<sup>5</sup> Written in full: CIL IV 4091, 1173 cf. Add. p. 204, 461 (a painted still-life with writing implements; the poem is written on a scroll). Opening words inscribed: CIL IV 3199, 3200d, 5272, 6782, 9130. Cf. CIL IV 4659, 4663, 5186.

<sup>6</sup> I will discuss these houses further in my current project on graffiti in private homes.

<sup>7</sup> *Regio I* holds the House of Paquius Proculus (I.7.1) and the House of the Menander (I.10.4, 14–17); *Regio V*: the House of the Silver Wedding (V.2.i); *Regio VII*: the House of Triptolemus (VII.7.2, 5), and the House of Maius Castricius (VII.16 Ins. Occ. 17); *Regio IX*: the house at IX.2.26, sometimes called the House of M. Casellius Marcellus (Eschebach 1993, 411), but usually left unnamed.

in common is the size. These are all very large houses and they likely belonged to leading citizens and socially active members of the community.<sup>8</sup>

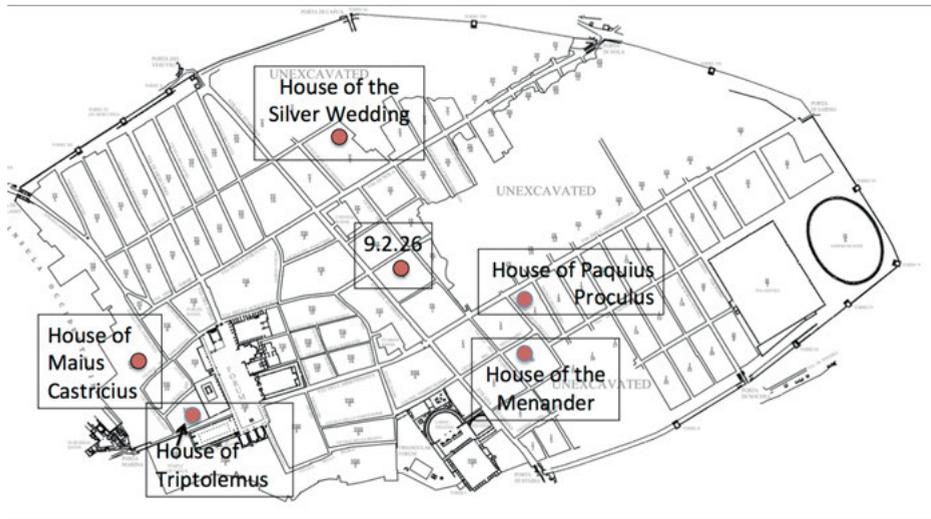


Fig. 2: Map showing the locations of “heavily inscribed” residences at Pompeii (based on Map 2, in: *The World of Pompeii*, edited by P. Foss and J. Dobbins, 2007).

The House of Maius Castricius, for example, stood at the western edge of town (VII.16 *Ins. Occ.* 17) and occupied some of Pompeii’s best real estate, with spectacular views out over the Bay of Naples.<sup>9</sup> Built into the city’s fortification walls, it stood four stories high, and featured a private bath complex, a double peristyle, and a number of reception rooms. This house was brought to light relatively recently, during excavations of the *insula occidentalis* in the 1960s, and its wall and ceiling frescoes were painstakingly pieced back together and restored *in situ*.

The House of Paquius Proculus (I.7.1), further to the east, opens off the Via dell’Abbondanza, an important artery of the town. A significant investment was clearly

<sup>8</sup> The House of Paquius Proculus and the House of the Silver Wedding have both been meticulously studied and published within the esteemed series *Häuser in Pompeii* (Ehrhardt 1998 and Ehrhardt 2004, respectively). The House of Menander, famous for its silver treasure, was given a lavish publication by Amedeo Maiuri in the first half of the twentieth century (Maiuri 1933) and is currently the subject of a comprehensive five-part study, *The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii* (Oxford University Press) with four volumes in print so far, Vol. 1: *The Structures* (Ling 1997); Vol. 2: *The Decorations* (Ling/Ling 2005); Vol. 3: *The Finds, a Contextual Study* (Allison 2007); and Vol. 4: *The Silver Treasure* (Painter 2001). Volume 5: *The Inscriptions* is currently in progress (Mouritsen/Varone, forthcoming). Cf. also Varriale 2012.

<sup>9</sup> On this residence, see PPM vol. VII (1997), 887–946, Varriale 2006, Varriale 2009, Benefiel 2010a.

outlaid for the elaborate mosaic decoration that ran throughout its atrium.<sup>10</sup> The careful attention paid to building facades during the excavations of this area during the early twentieth century has left us with one of the most politically and epigraphically active hotspots in the city, with more than thirty political *programmata* advertising local candidates for political office in all shapes, sizes, and appearances.<sup>11</sup>

The graffiti within these houses illuminate the interests of residents and visitors and speak to the activities that took place here. Each home features graffiti of a different character. The House of Paquius Proculus, for example, contains a number of graffiti concerning the emperor Nero, his attendants, and the city of Rome:

CIL IV 8064:	<i>Ner / Neroni / Ne</i>
CIL IV 8066, 8075:	<i>Cucuta ab rationibus Neronis Augusti</i>
CIL IV 8067, 8078:	<i>Rom / Roma / Romanus</i>
CIL IV 8092:	<i>Ol(ympica) III K(alendas) Ner(onias)</i>
CIL IV 8095:	<i>Neronis</i>
CIL IV 8114:	<i>Cupidi multo magis cupimus (ut liceat nostros visere Roma Lares)</i> <sup>12</sup>
CIL IV 8119:	<i>Roma felix</i>

Graffiti in the House of Triptolemus, by contrast, point to renovations that were taking place. An inscribed message gives instructions for the measurements of a window (CIL IV 4713a, b) and an architect leaves his mark, signing his name by incorporating it into in the shape of a boat (CIL IV 4716, 4755). Both houses also contain a number of greetings issued to friends. The House of Maius Castricius, meanwhile, reveals an interest in poetry, with a concentration of messages involving quotations from literature, popular epigrams, and original compositions (fig. 3), including:<sup>13</sup>

*Venimus h[uc c]upidi, multo magis ire cupimus /  
set (sic) retinet nostros illa puella pedes.*

*Suabe (sic) mari magno*

*Vell'essem gemma hora non amplius una /  
ut tivi (sic) signanti oscula pressa dare(m).*

<sup>10</sup> PPM vol. I (1990), 483–552. This house also appears in the *Häuser in Pompeji* series: Ehrhardt 1998.

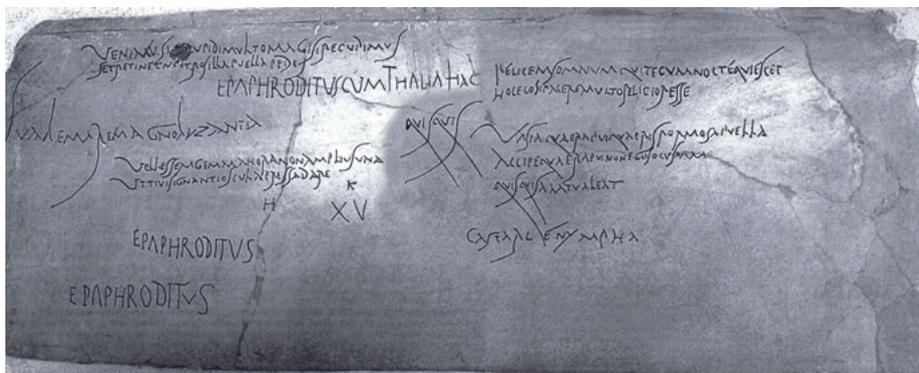
<sup>11</sup> CIL IV 7196–7216, Spinazzola 1953, 297–314. See Varone/Stefani 2009, 69–76, for excavation photos of this heavily postered façade.

<sup>12</sup> This graffito in the House of Paquius Proculus only contains part of this popular couplet (*Cupidi multo magis cupimus*), but the remainder of the poem is known from its appearance elsewhere in Pompeii (cf. CIL IV 1227). Other examples include: CIL IV 2995, 6697, 8114, 8231a, 8891, 9849, 10065a; Solin 1975, no. 17. For more on this poem, see also Magaldi 1936, Gigante 1979, 223–236, Kruschwitz 2006, Benefiel 2010b, 51–56.

<sup>13</sup> The cluster of graffiti has been discussed by Giordano 1966 (nos. 38–47); Solin 1975 (nos. 57–67); Varone 1990 (a–m); and Benefiel 2010a (nos. 34–44).

*Felicem somnum qui tecum nocte quiescet? /  
Hoc ego si facere, multo felicior esse.*

*Vasia (sic) quae rapui, quaeris formosa puella. /  
Accipe quae rapui non ego solus; ama. /  
Quisquis amat valeat.*



**Fig. 3:** Enhanced photograph of wall-plaster from the House of Maius Castricius featuring a concentration of poetry (reproduced from R. Benefiel 2010a, 68 fig. 9).

Yet while the content of the messages may vary, the locations where they are posted adhere to a similar pattern. Graffiti tend to appear in clusters in central spaces, with few, if any, instances found in the smaller rooms of the residence. The House of Maius Castricius, for example, features concentrations of graffiti in three main locations: the vestibule of the house, the central peristyle, and the staircase leading to the fourth floor, where the cluster of poetry was found.<sup>14</sup> The Casa di Trittolemo reveals a distribution even more striking, with more than seventy instances, nearly all the graffiti recorded, inscribed on the walls and columns of the peristyle.<sup>15</sup>

The clustering and the nature of the texts in these houses point to ongoing conversations. These writings may have developed out of spoken conversation but once committed to the wall, their messages continue to resonate. In the House of Paquius Proculus, for example, Alogiosus applauds Carus not just once in person but in echoes that can be heard (or read) by those who come across the inscription later (CIL IV 8098: *Alogiosus fecit / Caro feliciter*).<sup>16</sup> The poetry inscribed in the House of Maius Castricius inspires others to add their own contributions and ends up a cluster

<sup>14</sup> Benefiel 2010a, 69–74.

<sup>15</sup> CIL IV 4706–4785.

<sup>16</sup> The message is accompanied by a drawing of hands, presumably clapping as accompaniment to the acclamation, cf. Langner 2001, no. 2489.

of quotation and original composition. Together these messages offer a dialogue that might be encountered by later observers. We are left with a picture of an active mode of communication, with inscribed messages inspiring other messages and multiple individuals taking part.

What, then, does the picture look like when we move outside of the city? It is difficult to get as full a picture when we move beyond Pompeii: tantalizing glimpses of graffiti surface here and there, for example, two epigrams inscribed in the *Domus delle Fontane* at Brescia<sup>17</sup> or a palindrome inscribed in Greek, a single graffito discovered within the remains a Roman villa near Lausanne.<sup>18</sup> The recent catalogue edited by Alix Barbet and Michel Fuchs offers an excellent resource, a fascinating collection of graffiti discovered at sites in France and Switzerland.<sup>19</sup> Pompeii was clearly not the only place where people were writing on the walls. But often we are left with glimpses. Excavations are limited, evidence is fragmentary, and it is difficult to get a sense of the whole.

## 2 Suburban Villas

Fortunately, two villas in the Vesuvian countryside have been excavated and sufficiently well studied to provide full contextual material for comparison (fig. 4).<sup>20</sup>

The Villa San Marco at Stabiae was initially explored by the Bourbons in the eighteenth century but was reinterred soon after, according to the practice of the time. It was reexcavated during the 1950s, and its graffiti were studied and published by Antonio Varone in Alix Barbet and Paola Miniero's multi-volume publication of the villa.<sup>21</sup> Recent excavations have uncovered another section of the Villa San Marco and revealed a few more graffiti.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> AE 2005, 632–633, Gregori/Massaro 2005.

<sup>18</sup> SEG XLVII 1545, Fuchs/Dubois 1997.

<sup>19</sup> Barbet/Fuchs 2008, catalogue of an exhibit held at the Musée romain de Lausanne-Vidy. Martin Langner's collection of figural graffiti (Langner 2001) draws from sites from the entirety of the ancient world as well.

<sup>20</sup> On the luxury villas of this region, see Zarmakoupi 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Barbet/Miniero 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Varone 2016, Terpstra 2013, Terpstra 2012, Terpstra et al. 2011. Varone is planning a new edition of the graffiti from the Villa San Marco, which will include the graffiti from the nearby Villa Arianna as well.



Fig. 4: Google map showing location of Pompeii and villas.

The so-called Villa of Poppaea, or Villa A, in Oplontis was likewise excavated in recent years, beginning in 1964. It is currently the subject of a large, comprehensive study, whose aim is the first systematic publication of the villa.<sup>23</sup> As a contributor to that project, I have documented and studied more than eighty graffiti, only a handful of which have been published previously.

Altogether these two suburban villas feature roughly the same number of graffiti as the highly inscribed Pompeian residences, and one might imagine that the messages would be similar, containing perhaps a different subject matter but nevertheless comprising a number of texts shining a light on the interests of those who inhabited and visited these residences. Yet close inspection reveals some surprising results, including:

1. in the case of Oplontis, a significant number of Greek-language inscriptions,
2. a difference in the spatial distribution of Greek and Latin within the villas, and
3. the considerable presence of non-textual wall-inscriptions, including numbers and drawings.

<sup>23</sup> *Villa A ("of Poppaea") at Oplontis*, edited by John Clarke, Stefano De Caro, and Michael Thomas, 3 vols., American Council of Learned Societies (in progress).

### 3 Textual Graffiti

One striking aspect about graffiti in the villa at Oplontis is the amount of Greek present. Messages written in Greek appear at Pompeii, but in relatively small quantities. The Villa San Marco at Stabiae has just one graffito written in the Greek alphabet. That text gives the name of Paris, the famous actor of the Neronian period; his name is written in that villa in Latin too.<sup>24</sup> In the villa at Oplontis, by contrast, as many as 50% of the textual graffiti are written in Greek.

The longest message in the villa is the inscription found in room 25. The wall-plaster is well preserved, the text is located just above eye level, and the letters are sufficiently large to read, but the meaning of the text is not so straightforward, and three different readings have been offered so far.

Giordano and Casale 1990                      ΓΑΕΙC KAMEPEIC AΓ(?)EAIC

De Caro 1988                                      ΓA(?)EIC KAAIEPEIC AΓIE AIC

Fergola 2001                                      ΓAEIC KAMIEPEIC AΓEAIC

I have written about this inscription at greater length elsewhere and so here simply summarize the key points about this intriguing text.<sup>25</sup> In their catalogue of the epigraphic material recovered following the publication of CIL vol. IV Supp. 3, Carlo Giordano and Angelandrea Casale presented this text as it was recorded when discovered in 1967 during excavations. They did not attempt to explain its meaning.<sup>26</sup> Stefano De Caro presented an improved reading of the text, and suggested that a combination of the verb *καλ(λ)ιερῆω* and the end of the message, which he read as the phrase, *ἄγιε λις*, pointed to a connection with the cult of Magna Mater.<sup>27</sup> Lorenzo Fergola suggested that the text instead recorded a name. He proposed reading it as a message written in Greek that had been contaminated by Oscan and interpreted the message as providing the name *Agelis*, slave of a *Gaius Camerius*.<sup>28</sup>

The key to unlocking this message is recognition that the writer does not always fully complete his letters, particularly toward the end of the line when his arm may have been tired. We are faced with personal handwriting that is not gliding over a smooth page but that is formed by scratching into a vertical plaster surface. Incised

<sup>24</sup> Varone 1999, no. 50 (Greek), 6 and 16 (Latin).

<sup>25</sup> SEG XXXVIII 1001, Petrain/Benefiel 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Giordano/Casale 1990, no. 127.

<sup>27</sup> De Caro 1988.

<sup>28</sup> Fergola 2004, 85.

wall-inscriptions will always include personal idiosyncrasies and should not be expected to have the standardized forms or appearance that we find in carved inscriptions. The letter A, or alpha, for example, is sometimes written without a third stroke.

I follow De Caro in reading the middle of the text as καλ(λ)ιερείς (“you sacrifice favorably”), but I propose that the poorly understood end of the line gives us instead the word: ἀγαθαῖς, where the middle combination of letters, alpha-theta-alpha, have been quickly sketched rather than fully completed. References to ἀγαθὴ τύχη (“good fortune”) are frequent in stone inscriptions, and mention of part of this common phrase might allow the other half (τύχαις) to be understood. The tendency to rush one’s writing rather than carefully crafting each letter was likely more pronounced toward the end of a long message like this one, due to the effort it took to keep one’s arm elevated and to incise strokes into the plaster. The difference in the depth of writing for the final three letters suggests that the writer took a break at that point, perhaps to lower or shake out his arm, before then finishing the message.

That then brings us to the beginning of the inscription and Γάθις, perhaps an address to an Agathis, with the first syllable omitted: (A)gathis, or possibly a Greek transliteration for the name Gaius, Γαις, although in that case one would wish for the vocative form rather than the nominative.<sup>29</sup> The entire inscription would thus read (A)γάθις (or Γαις), καλ(λ)ιερείς ἀγαθαῖς, or “Agathis/Gaius, you sacrifice favorably with good (fortunes).” The inscription thus appears to address an individual who is complimented for activity related to making a sacrifice.

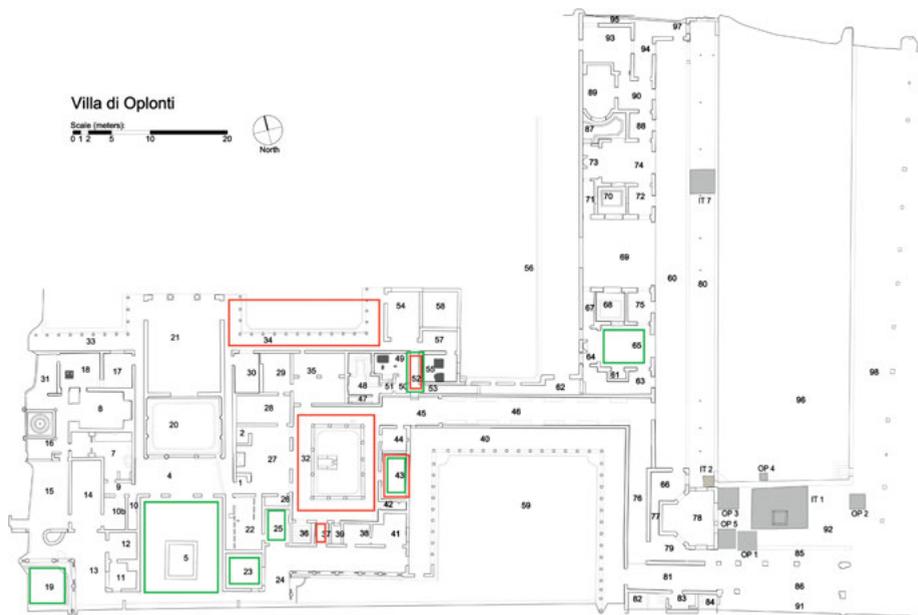
Others were named among the graffiti at Oplontis too. Just around the corner, in another reception room, a graffito names two females: Prokope and Anatole. In the next room over, yet another message may have been intended to present a Greek name. It appears to be unfinished, however, since it only gives the letters *PUME*. An interesting group of graffiti appears on a column in the partially excavated peristyle at the southwestern corner of the villa. There, someone inscribed a series of Greek letters that a reader can follow only if he walks around the column (Ξ, Φ, Ξ, Ζ).<sup>30</sup>

The large amount of Greek in the villa at Oplontis is even more interesting for its distribution through the residence. These graffiti in Greek just mentioned all appear in the southwestern section of the villa and in several highly decorated reception spaces (rooms 5, 23, 25, and 65), locations that contrast with those of the messages written in Latin (fig. 5). The Latin graffiti instead cluster on the columns at the entrance to the villa (room 34) and in the service areas at the center of the residence (rooms 32, 43, 52). The Latin examples also tend to appear in groups, unlike the Greek graffiti that

<sup>29</sup> The issue of nicknames or shortened forms of address in the Roman world requires further attention, but note the repeated appearances of the text “Amianth”, for the name *Amianthus*, in the basilica of Pompeii. Cf. Benefiel 2008.

<sup>30</sup> These graffiti are cat. #25, 3, and 15–18, respectively, in the publication of the graffiti from Villa A in Oplontis (Benefiel forthcoming).

appear individually. No space in the villa presents more than one graffito in Greek. This may suggest a difference in the culture of inscribing graffiti, particularly in the sociability of such activity.



**Fig. 5:** Distribution of Greek (in green) and Latin (in red) graffiti in Villa A at Oplontis (Plan supplied by The Oplontis Project, Director: John Clarke).

These examples, however, are just a small portion of the graffiti in this location, and that is what these two villas demonstrate most forcefully: *writing on the wall was not limited to text*. This is the major difference between the graffiti in highly inscribed houses at Pompeii and the suburban villas outside the town. These non-textual wall-inscriptions fall into two categories: numerical graffiti and incised drawings.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Varone had earlier identified these three categories of graffiti (graffiti alfabetici, numerici, and raffigurazioni) in his study of the graffiti in the Villa San Marco at Stabiae (Varone 1999).

## 4 Numerical Graffiti

Roughly a third of the graffiti in the Villa San Marco consist of series of Roman numerals. These appear in a few different rooms, with a massive concentration in the kitchen (room 26), which has as many as seventeen distinct series of numbers. Here, it seems clear that scratching on the wall served a practical purpose: keeping track of quantities of items. The bulk of examples contain simply a series of Roman numerals. Most of those on the southwest wall contain moderate quantities, ranging from five to fourteen.<sup>32</sup> A cluster on the southeast wall includes larger numbers, with one example adding all the way up to the number 48.<sup>33</sup> In fact, that total is written twice: once as XXXXIIIIIIII, then again, just below, as XXIIIIXXIII. The writing is similar and suggests the writer may have been working out a division. One other example in the kitchen includes the abbreviation A for *a(sses)* and seems to have been jotted down to note the cost of something.<sup>34</sup>

The villa at Oplontis displays a similar pattern in regards to numerical graffiti. It contains virtually the same total number (29 examples in the Villa S. Marco, 30 in the villa at Oplontis) and here again the distribution of numerical graffiti is limited to a certain type of space. Numerical graffiti do not appear in the kitchen here. That room features a large, detailed drawing of boat, but otherwise no additional markings on the walls.<sup>35</sup> At Oplontis numerical graffiti are again found clustered, but this time at the core of the villa, where roughly twenty examples occur in the central, “rustic” peristyle (room 32) and two rooms that open off it, room 37, a short corridor that links the service area with the highly decorated reception rooms to the south, and room 43 (fig. 5). At Oplontis, room 43 appears to have seen the same type of writing activity as that which occurred in the kitchen of the Villa San Marco (fig. 6).

Some of the plaster is missing in room 43, but where the plaster remains intact seven graffiti list numerical series, several of which are concentrated near the door of the room. The layout and decoration of the room suggests that it was used for storage, as it continues to be used even today. The walls did not have any decorative wall-painting but were instead covered with simple white plaster. Regularly-spaced square holes in the east wall point to the presence of shelving. And room 43 has only one entrance, so all movement into and out of it came from the central courtyard.

<sup>32</sup> Varone 1999, nos. 31–37. One additional example reads: XXXX (Varone 1999, no. 38).

<sup>33</sup> Varone 1999, nos. 25–30, with no. 29 documenting the number 48 written out in two different ways. Varone 1999, nos. 39–41 document numerical graffiti found elsewhere in the kitchen.

<sup>34</sup> Varone 1999, no. 41: *A(sses) III*.

<sup>35</sup> Boat drawing: cat. #4 (Benefiel forthcoming).



**Fig. 6:** Numerical graffiti in the kitchen of the Villa San Marco at Stabiae (Su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali. Reproduction prohibited).

In both cases, these numerical graffiti were largely out of view of the public. They were concentrated in service quarters—the kitchen, a storage room. These were not about self-representation or dialogue. The writers who scratched these numbers on the walls of the kitchen had a different motivation than those who wrote greetings and poetry in the houses within the city of Pompeii. Here, writing fulfilled a different purpose—a practical and a functional one.

## 5 Figural Graffiti

Finally, there is the issue of drawings. Both the highly inscribed houses in Pompeii and the Villa San Marco and the villa at Oplontis include a handful of drawings. The House of Maius Castricius in Pompeii, for example, featured several representational or figural drawings, including a boat, a palm frond, a bird, and a deer. The House of Paquius Proculus also features drawings of birds, along with boats, a gladiator, and a face in profile. These boats, faces, and animals are common motifs that are found drawn throughout the ancient world.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Maius Castricius: Benefiel 2010a, nos. 49, 20, 60, and 73, respectively. Paquius Proculus: Langner 2001, nos. 1666–1667, 1852 and 2102, 1048, and 413, respectively. The House of Paquius Proculus also

The two villas are similar, to a certain point. The villa at Oplontis contained a number of representational drawings, including: a boat, a pair of figures, and heads drawn in profile. It also featured more than twenty geometric drawings.<sup>37</sup> The Villa San Marco features a handful of these same motifs: a bird, two drawings of gladiators and gladiatorial helmets, possibly one figure in profile.<sup>38</sup> But, more than anything, the figural graffiti of this villa communicated an overwhelming interest in boats. Boats were a popular image to draw on walls and are found in locations across the ancient world.<sup>39</sup> The houses of Maius Castricius and Paquius Proculus each contain one or two examples, as does the villa at Oplontis, but the Villa San Marco holds a particularly large concentration of boat drawings, with more than fifteen examples.<sup>40</sup> Boats were drawn here individually and in pairs. Some have oars, some are fishing vessels, some are simple skiffs (fig. 7).

These boat drawings are simple in design and they are small. They were sketched mostly in narrow corridors and passageways. This is in strong contrast to the locations for drawings of gladiators and their equipment, which were found in the more public areas of the villa (and indeed the locations where one might expect to find graffiti in the elite houses of Pompeii), namely, the large open peristyle, which was the centerpiece of the villa, and at the entrance to the property, just above a bench that could accommodate visitors who were waiting to be received (fig. 8).

The Villa San Marco was perched atop a bluff and, with its large windows and open plan, its design was calculated to highlight its setting and its expansive view over the Bay of Naples. That view would have certainly encompassed any number of boats on a daily basis, as the bay was traversed by numerous vessels being used to fish the day's catch, as well as for transport around the region. What is interesting is that several of the boats drawn in the Villa San Marco are sketched with people on board. At Pompeii, scores of boats are drawn too, but usually the artist's interest is squarely on the vessel. The boat is hardly ever populated.

---

contained the drawing of hands clapping, discussed above (Langner no. 2489). See Langner 2001, 84 Abb. 40 for a table detailing the relative popularity of figural graffiti motifs across sites.

<sup>37</sup> These will be discussed at greater length in the publication of The Oplontis Project (Benefiel, forthcoming).

<sup>38</sup> Varone 1999, nos. 61, 1 and 83–84, 67, respectively.

<sup>39</sup> Delos in particular has yielded significant boat graffiti (Langner 2001, 84 Abb. 40). Langner collects more than 400 examples of boat drawings on walls across the ancient world (Langner 2001, cat. nos. 1844–2265).

<sup>40</sup> Boats: Varone 1999, nos. 9, 13, 19, 21, 23, 44, 47, 56–59. Several of the boats are drawn in pairs, thus eleven sets of drawings present a total of fifteen boats.

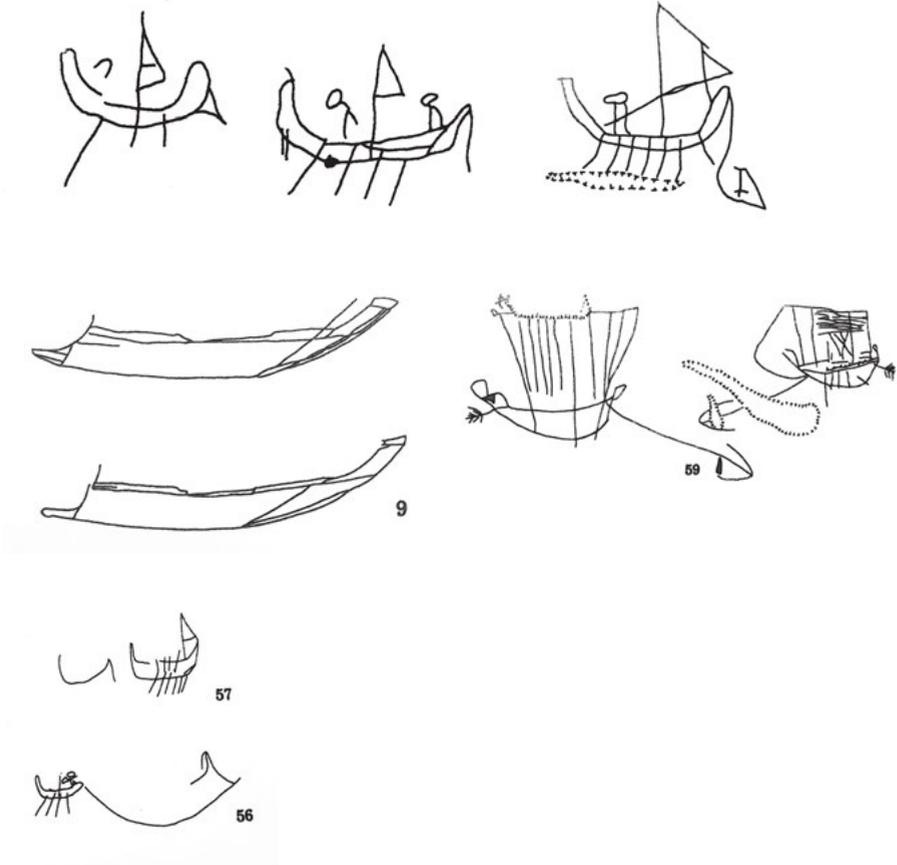


Fig. 7: Examples of boat drawings in the Villa San Marco at Stabiae (from Varone 1999).

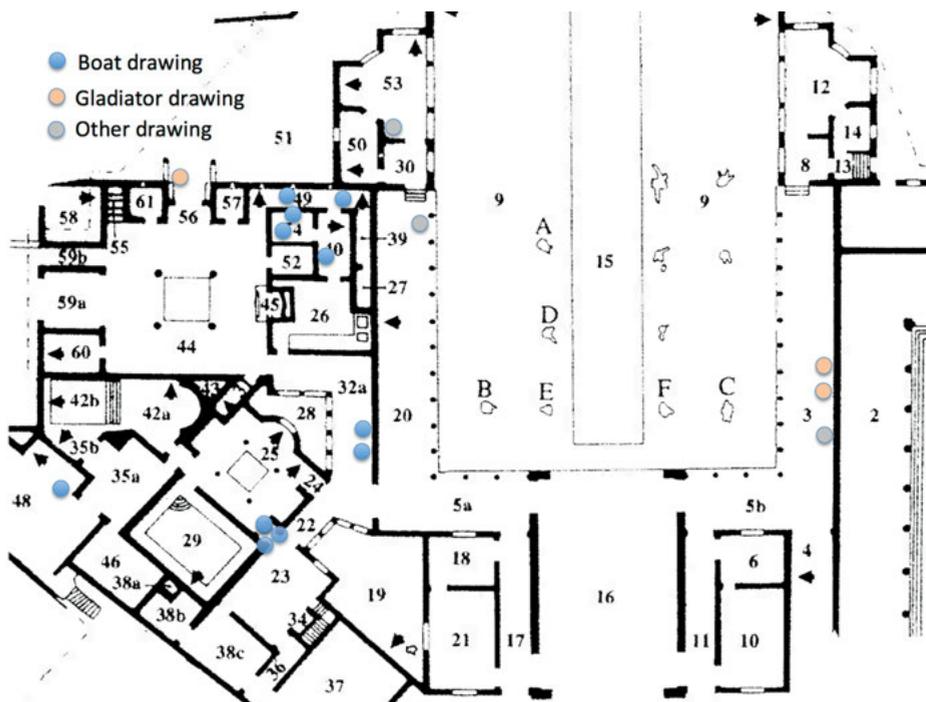


Fig. 8: The distribution of boat drawings and gladiatorial graffiti in the Villa San Marco at Stabiae (adapted from Barbet/Forte 1999, fig. 53).

The figures in these drawings nudge us toward thinking about the individuals who may have drawn them. The location of these many boat drawings in the service quarters suggests that these were not the work of visitors or clients, but perhaps the work of the villa staff, whose duties may have included fishing to stock the villa with provisions. These examples thereby suggest that one additional motivation for writing on the wall may have been the influence of one's surroundings.<sup>41</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

Two main distinctions arise, therefore, between graffiti in the highly inscribed residences of Pompeii and in these grand, suburban villas. Firstly, in Pompeii, graffiti are generally clustered, often at the entrances of houses and in the peristyle. In any given

<sup>41</sup> At Oplontis, the influence of one's surroundings was even more immediate, as a handful of sketches replicate the patterns of the zebra-stripe design found throughout the core spaces of the villa, or play with the boundaries of its stripes.

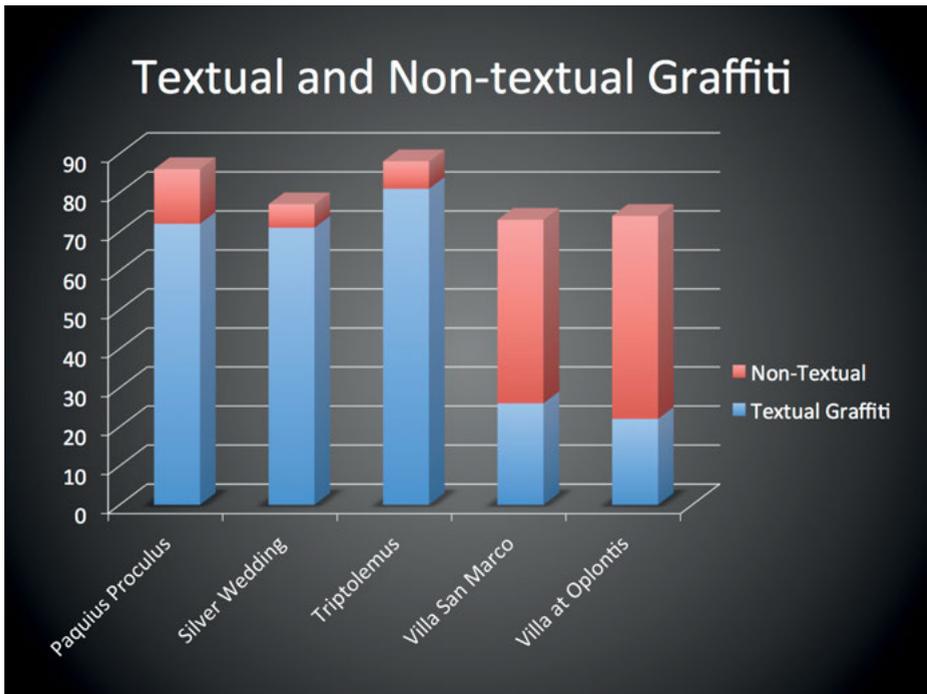
cluster, an inscription may have inspired others to add their own contribution or response. Secondly, Pompeian graffiti are overwhelmingly textual. They take a wide range of forms: from signatures to greetings to friends to short verses and epigrams.

In the suburban villas of Stabiae and Oplontis, graffiti do not follow the same patterns. To begin with, there is a broader distribution of graffiti through the building. Within these expansive, highly articulated suburban villas, graffiti can be scattered across as many as twenty-five different rooms, rather than appearing in two or three central spaces, as at Pompeii. In the villa at Oplontis, it is also clear that graffiti do not cluster. Of the twenty-five rooms holding graffiti, only *two* rooms contain anything like a cluster (more than six graffiti), while fourteen rooms have only one or two graffiti present (fig. 9). Whereas at Pompeii the act of writing a graffito generates other responses, in these villas that is not happening.



**Fig. 9:** Density of graffiti in Villa A at Oplontis (Plan supplied by The Oplontis Project, Director: John Clarke).

That leads us to the second difference between graffiti in these suburban villas and the graffiti in highly inscribed residences at Pompeii, namely, the amount of text written on the walls. In Pompeii, the graffiti habit is highly textual. There might be a few drawings in a house, but these account for generally less than 10% of the total number of graffiti. In the villas at Oplontis and Stabiae, however, written messages are only a fraction of what was scratched onto the walls. While all the residences considered here contain roughly the same total number of graffiti, the ratio of text to non-textual wall-inscription diverges markedly (fig. 10).



**Fig. 10:** Table illustrating textual and non-textual graffiti in Pompeian residences and suburban villas.

These differences may reflect the fact that villas in the countryside did not witness the same frequency of social activity as occurred in elite houses in town. There were not the same daily interactions with people coming and going, and perhaps not the same number of opportunities for graffiti to arise organically from conversations or from clients waiting to be addressed or received by a patron. Nevertheless, in the absence of such textual conversations we find the traces of a different social group exhibiting similar behavior. The non-textual graffiti from these villas suggest that even those with less leisure and possibly less freedom might write, too: as part of their work or as a means of reflecting upon the world around them.

What does this suggest about the habit of writing on the walls in general? We can see that people are doing something different in the city than they are in the countryside. The numerical graffiti reveal that people are writing, but in certain cases they are doing so for a practical—rather than social—purpose. The drawings demonstrate that one’s surroundings and one’s environment might provide inspiration.<sup>42</sup> Still, it is important to recognize that although there was a different means of expression, *the same activity* is taking place. In both locations, inside the city and beyond, people are interested and are active in writing on the walls.

It is only through the extraordinary preservation of the area around Mt. Vesuvius that we can reconstruct the writings created by the general population in this level of detail at all. What then were urban or suburban attitudes about writing on walls? In Italy in the early Roman Empire, it seems that is something people did. To them, as to us, Writing Matters.

## Bibliography

### Abbreviations

PPM                      Pugliese Caratelli, Giovanni (ed.) (1990–2003), *Pompei: Pitture e Mosaici*, 11 vols., Rome.

### Secondary Literature

- Allison, Penelope M. (2007), *The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii: The Finds, a Contextual Study*, Oxford.
- Baird, Jennifer A./Taylor, Claire (2011), “Ancient Graffiti in Context: Introduction”, in: Jennifer A. Baird and Claire Taylor (eds.), *Ancient Graffiti in Context*, New York, 1–17.
- Barbet, Alix/Fuchs, Michel (eds.) (2008), *Les Murs Murmurent. Graffiti gallo-romains*, Gollion.
- Barbet, Alix/Miniero Forte, Paola (1999), *La Villa San Marco a Stabia*, Rome.
- Benefiel, Rebecca R. (2008), “Amianth, a Ball-Game, and Making One’s Mark”, in: *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 167, 193–200.
- Benefiel, Rebecca R. (2010a), “Dialogues of Graffiti in the House of Maius Castricius at Pompeii”, in: *American Journal of Archaeology* 114, 59–101.
- Benefiel, Rebecca R. (2010b), “Rome in Pompeii. Wall Inscriptions and GIS”, in: Francisca Feraudi-Gruénais (ed.), *Latin on Stone. Epigraphic Research and Electronic Archives*, Lanham, 45–75.
- Benefiel, Rebecca R. (2011), “Dialogues of Graffiti in the House of the Four Styles at Pompeii (Casa dei Quattro Stili, 1.8.17, 11)”, in: Jennifer A. Baird and Claire Taylor (eds.), *Ancient Graffiti in Context*, New York/London, 20–48.

---

<sup>42</sup> In Roman cities, graffiti drawings might be inspired by watching a gladiatorial event or beast-hunt. Those who lived outside of town probably attended fewer of such events.

- Benefiel, Rebecca R. (forthcoming), "The Scope and Typology of Graffiti at Oplontis", in: John Clarke, Stefano De Caro and Michael Thomas (eds.), *Villa A ("of Poppaea") at Oplontis*, vol. 2 (American Council of Learned Societies).
- Biundo, Raffaella (2003), "La propaganda elettorale a Pompei: la funzione e il valore dei programmi nell'organizzazione della campagna", in: *Athenaeum* 91, 53–116.
- Castrén, Paavo (1975), *Ordo populusque Pompeianus. Polity and Society in Roman Pompeii*, Rome.
- Chiavria, Catherine (2002), *Programmata: manifesti elettorali nella colonia romana di Pompei*, Turin.
- Cooley, Alison (2012), "From Document to Monument: Inscribing Roman Official Documents in the Greek East", in: John Davies and John J. Wilkes (eds.), *Epigraphy and the Historical Sciences*, Oxford, 159–182.
- Corbier, Mireille (2006), *Donner à voir, donner à lire. Mémoire et communication dans la Rome ancienne*, Paris.
- Corbier, Mireille (2013), "Writing in Roman Public Space", in: Gareth Sears, Peter Keegan and Ray Laurence (eds.), *Written Space in the Latin West, 200 BC to AD 300*, London, 13–47.
- De Caro, Stefano (1988), "Un graffito e altre testimonianze del culto della Magna Mater nella villa romana di Oplontis", in: Robert I. Curtis (ed.), *Studia Pompeiana et Classica in Honor of W. F. Jashemski*, vol. 1, New Rochelle, 89–96.
- Degrassi, Attilio (ed.) (1963), *Inscriptiones Italiae vol. XIII fasc. 2, Fasti et Elogia*, Rome.
- Della Corte, Matteo (1965), *Case ed abitanti di Pompei*, Naples.
- Ehrhardt, Wolfgang (1998), *Casa di Paquius Proculus I, 7, 1.20* (Häuser in Pompeji 9), Munich.
- Ehrhardt, Wolfgang (2004), *Casa delle Nozze d'Argento V, 2,1* (Häuser in Pompeji 12), Munich.
- Eschbach, Liselotte (ed.) (1993), *Gebäudeverzeichnis und Stadtplan der antiken Stadt Pompeji*, Cologne.
- Fergola, Lorenzo (2004), *Oplontis e le sue Ville*, Pompeii.
- Franklin, James L. (1980), *Pompeii: The Electoral Programmata, Campaigns and Politics, A.D. 71–79*, Rome.
- Franklin, James L. (2001), *Pompeis difficile est: Studies in the Political Life of Imperial Pompeii*, Ann Arbor.
- Fuchs, Michel/Dubois, Yves (1997), "Peintures et graffiti à la villa romaine de Contigny, Lausanne", in: *Jahrbuch der Schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Ur- und Frühgeschichte* 80, 173–186.
- Gallo, Anna (1989), *La Casa dei Quattro Stili*, Naples.
- Gigante, Marcello (1979), *Civiltà delle forme letterarie nell'antica Pompei*, Naples.
- Giordano, Carlo (1966), "Le iscrizioni della Casa di M. Fabio Rufo", in: *Rendiconti della Accademia di Archeologia Lettere e Belle Arti (Napoli) n.s.* 41, 73–89.
- Giordano, Carlo/Casale, Angelandrea (1990), "Iscrizioni pompeiane inedite scoperte tra gli anni 1954–1978", in: *Atti della Accademia Pontaniana n.s.* 39, 273–378.
- Gregori, Gian Luca/ Massaro, Matteo (2005), "Brescia, domus delle fontane: i graffiti del 'passaggio del kantharos'", in: *Epigraphica* 67, 129–158.
- Keegan, Peter (2014), *Graffiti in Antiquity*, London.
- Kruschwitz, Peter (2006), "Die Bedeutung der Caupona des Euxinus für die epigraphische Poesie Pompejis (und darüber hinaus)", in: *Rivista di Studi Pompeiani* 17, 7–13.
- Langner, Martin (2001), *Antike Graffitzeichnungen: Motive, Gestaltung und Bedeutung* (Palilia 16), Wiesbaden.
- Ling, Roger (1997), *The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii*, vol. 1: *The Structures*, Oxford.
- Ling, Roger/Ling, Lesley (2005), *The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii*, vol. 2: *The Decorations*, Oxford.
- Ma, John (2012), "Epigraphy and the Display of Authority", in: John Davies and John J. Wilkes (eds.), *Epigraphy and the Historical Sciences*, Oxford, 133–158.
- Magaldi, Emilio (1936), "Echi di Roma a Pompei", in: *Rivista di Studi Pompeiani* 2, 25–100.
- Maiuri, Amedeo (1933), *La Casa del Menandro e il suo tesoro di argenteria*, Rome.

- Mouritsen, Henrik (1988), *Elections, magistrates and municipal élite: studies in Pompeian epigraphy*, Rome.
- Mouritsen, Henrik/Varone, Antonio (forthcoming), *The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii*, vol. 5: *The Inscriptions*, Oxford.
- Painter, Kenneth (2001), *The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii*, vol. 4: *The Silver Treasure*, Oxford.
- Petrain, David/Benefiel, Rebecca R. (2016), “Good Fortunes at Oplontis? A Reconsideration of SEG 38.1001”, in: *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 200, 229–233.
- Sears, Gareth/Keegan, Peter/Laurence, Ray (eds.) (2013), *Written Space in the Latin West, 200 BC to AD 300*, London.
- Solin, Heikki (1975), “Die Wandinschriften im sog. Haus des M. Fabius Rufus”, in: Bernard Andreae and Helmut Kyrieleis (eds.), *Neue Forschungen in Pompeji und den anderen vom Vesuvausbruch 79 nach Christi verschütteten Städten*, Recklinghausen, 243–266.
- Spinazzola, Vittorio (1953), *Pompei alla luce degli scavi nuovi di Via dell’Abbondanza (anni 1910–1923)*, 3 vols., Rome.
- Swetnam-Burland, Molly (2015), “Encountering Ovid’s Phaedra in House V.2.10–11, Pompeii”, in: *American Journal of Archaeology* 119, 217–232.
- Terpstra, Taco T./Toniolo, Luana/Gardelli, Paolo (2011), “Campagna di scavo APAHA 2011 a Villa San Marco, Stabiae: relazione preliminare sull’indagine archeologica”, in: *Rivista di Studi Pompeiani* 22, 199–205.
- Terpstra, Taco (2012), “The 2011 Field Season at the Villa San Marco, Stabiae: Preliminary Report on the Excavations”, in: *Fasti Online Documents & Research* 259, 1–11 <<http://www.fastionline.org/docs/FOLDER-it-2012-259.pdf>> (last access: 20.5.2016).
- Terpstra, Taco (2013), “The 2012 Excavation Season at the Villa San Marco, Stabiae: Preliminary Field Report”, in: *Fasti Online Documents & Research* <<http://www.fastionline.org/docs/FOLDER-it-2013-286.pdf>> (last access: 20.5.2016).
- Varone, Antonio (1990), “Iscrizioni/Inscriptions”, in: L. Franchi Dell’Orto and Antonio Varone (eds.), *Rediscovering Pompeii*, Rome, 148–153.
- Varone, Antonio (1999), “I Graffiti”, in: Alix Barbet and Paola Miniero Forte (eds.), *La Villa San Marco a Stabia*, Naples/Rome/Pompeii, 345–362.
- Varone, Antonio (2016), “Newly Discovered and Corrected Readings of iscrizioni ‘privatissimi’ from the Vesuvian Region”, in: Rebecca Benefiel and Peter Keegan (eds.), *Inscriptions in the Private Sphere in the Greco-Roman World*, Leiden, 113–130.
- Varone, Antonio/Stefani, Grete (2009), *Imagines Titulorum Pictorum Pompeianorum qui in CIL Vol. IV collecti sunt*, Rome.
- Varriale, Ivan (2006), “VII 16 Insula Occidentalis 17 Casa di Maius Castricius”, in: Masanori Aoyagi and Umberto Pappalardo (eds.), *Pompeii (Regiones VI–VII): Insula Occidentalis*, Naples, 419–503.
- Varriale, Ivan (2009), “Nuove osservazioni sulla Casa VII 16, *Insula Occidentalis*, 17 a Pompeii”, in: Antonella Corralini (ed.), *Vesuviana. Archeologie a Confronto*. Atti del Convegno Internazionale (Bologna, 14–16 gennaio 2008), Bologna, 463–475.
- Varriale, Ivan (2012), “Architecture and Decoration in the House of the Menander at Pompeii”, in: David L. Balch and Annette Weissenrieder (eds.), *Contested Spaces. Houses and Temples in Roman Antiquity and the New Testament*, Tübingen, 163–184.
- Zarmakoupi, Mantha (2014), *Designing for Luxury on the Bay of Naples. Villas and Landscapes (c. 100 BCE–79 CE)*, Oxford.

