CHAPTER 5

The Culture of Writing Graffiti within Domestic Spaces at Pompeii

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As the previous chapters have demonstrated, graffiti appear within domestic spaces in cities throughout the Greco-Roman world.¹ They are not a product of any one particular locale, culture, or chronological period. Although their particular expression might vary according to time and place, e.g. the popularity of mnesthe inscriptions² is a product of the eastern Mediterranean, the habit of writing on walls is a phenomenon attested from east to west and through the ancient world. Nowhere is this phenomenon more amply attested than at Pompeii. The light pumice stones that rained down on Pompeii during the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE did not flatten the city but filled it to such a height as to seal off more or less the entire first floor of the town, safeguarding within not only artifacts and architecture but also the plaster that covered virtually every wall surface, inside buildings and out.³ As a result, Pompeii provides not only our best view of a Roman city in microcosm, from its grand public monuments to its well-worn roads; it also gives us acres and acres, and neighborhood after neighborhood of residential dwellings, complete with their graffiti in situ.

Pompeii thus offers our best option for understanding the scale and scope of the habit of writing graffiti—both across the ancient city and inside homes, an idea that is often jarring to modern audiences. How extensive was this graffiti habit? Reaching an answer requires evaluating the evidence from different perspectives. This chapter offers an inroad, beginning by looking broadly at the

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¹ I follow the original definition of the term ‘graffiti’: marks that are scratched into a wall-surface (cf. Benefiel 2010, 59 n. 1; Baird in chapter two of this volume). For discussion of the shift in definition of the term graffiti, see Baird and Taylor 2011, and Keegan 2014.

² Regarding mnesthe inscriptions, see Baird 2011, and chapter two in this volume.

³ For more on the eruption and its effects, see Sigurdsson et al. 1982, and the chapters in Guzzo and Peroni 1998.
presence of graffiti within the city at large, then refocusing the field of vision and moving in closer, to the city-block, to the single house, to individual clusters of graffiti. First, the big picture. Where and how often do these scratched inscriptions appear? And, how does the habit of writing inside homes compare to writing in more public spaces? An overall snapshot reveals that graffiti were found throughout the ancient city, but the ratio of graffiti in the public vs. the private sphere does not conform to modern expectations. Following this brief discussion of graffiti across Pompeii, a survey of two individual city-blocks then provides a mid-range perspective onto the distribution and density of these handwritten wall-inscriptions and underscores how frequently graffiti might be found within domestic spaces. Finally, we move into close-range and examine graffiti in three of the most well-inscribed residences at Pompeii, addressing questions that the topic of graffiti often elicits: How did graffiti impact the interior decoration of the house? And who was involved in writing and reading graffiti? Throughout, the underlying aims of this chapter are to explore the idea of the culture of writing on walls and to understand how graffiti appear within the epigraphic landscape of the ancient city.

Graffiti in Pompeii

Where did graffiti appear in the city of Pompeii? One likely response upon hearing this question might be to imagine the facades of buildings fronting the city’s streets. In Pompeii these were often covered with painted inscriptions, or dipinti (Fig. 5.1). A visitor to the site today can find a few fragments of these inscriptions still in situ, now protected under plexiglass, although in most places fragments are all that remain. Those texts were professionally painted, and sought to communicate information to the public—such as the names of candidates running for political office or the date of gladiatorial spectacles—and were therefore posted in public spaces where they might be seen by a wide audience.4 Graffiti, by contrast, were handwritten inscriptions that could be created by anyone with use of a sharp implement. They appeared on facades too, but they were smaller and scratched in, not painted, and so less visible. Still, almost 1700 examples of incised wall-inscriptions were found on building facades along the city’s streets; another two hundred

4 The painted electoral posters, or programmata, and the local government and society they illuminate, have been the subject of studies by Biundo 2003, Chiavia 2002, Franklin 2001, Mouritsen 1988, and Castrén 1975. Sabbatini Tumolesi 1980 provides the most thorough analysis of the advertisements for gladiatorial games.