The Christian Inscription of Pompeii: A Post-it Note?

We offer a new interpretation of the so-called “Christian inscription” at Pompeii (*CIL* IV 697) and will discuss the context in which it is found. Clues to a proper understanding of the purpose of the message may be derived from the mood and number of the verb, and especially from its position on an interior wall. The phrase *audi christianos* can be construed as an imperative singular form with its object, reminding the resident to go hear the Christians. This would be similar to a modern-day Post-it note. We suggest that it is therefore a self-addressed memorandum, and may contain the earliest precise date of a Christian preaching.

The inscription has attracted much interest and conjecture. It was written in charcoal on the wall of an atrium of a private house. The location and the writing material indicate that the message was intended as a short-term reminder to the resident and his clients, and was not intended to be permanent. Other text is also preserved in the same location and attempts to interpret all of the text have led to quite different results. G. de Rossi, in *Bullettino di Archaeologica Christiani*, (Rome 1864) 69-74, postulated that there was more than one single inscription on the wall. Most attempts to make sense of the text follow this interpretation, as do we. V. Schultze, in *Zeitschrift für Kirschengeschichte* (Berlin 1881) Vol. 4 125-30, suggested that the text was a list of quality wines. W. Newbold, *AJArch*. (1926) 291-295, went in a much different direction and suggested that the text was not in Latin at all, but was Aramaic transliterated into the Latin alphabet. More attractive is the interpretation of M. Guadarducci, “La più antica iscrizione col nome dei Christiani,” *Römische Quartalschrift* 57 (1962) 116-25, but it is still problematic because it violates the *Lex Youtie* and emends the text to *audit* next to a lacuna. Finally P. Berry, *The Christian Inscription at Pompeii* (Lampeter 1995), prints a history of the textual interpretations, but takes no stand on them, being interested mainly in the presence of the word *Christianos*.

We feel that the context suggests a group of miscellaneous items written in the same area, of interest to the owner and his clients, perhaps in a similar fashion to the inscriptions mentioned in the house of Trimalchio by Petronius. Thus it would be similar to a Post-it note or perhaps a bulletin board of the kind found in kitchens today.