

Dominance through Permanence: Schoolboy Graffiti in the Greco-Roman World

As modern readers of classical works honor authors such as Virgil, Ovid, and Homer, ancient students learned from their literati as well. Sites like Pompeii, Artesian, and Smyrna show evidence of graffiti produced by students learning these authors' age-old works. Creation of graffiti connotes the intention of staking one's claim to an idea, and I investigate several examples of these schoolboy inscriptions. Forever etched into ancient walls, these graffiti represent the spontaneity, vulgarity, and ephemerality of their authors.

In the context of graffiti and public inscriptions in general, classicists and classical archaeologists discuss the Greco-Roman cultural element of the epigraphic habit, which refers to the classical penchant for publicly recording one's achievements (Macmullen 1982). I investigate where, when, and why ancient students of ancient texts chose to re-inscribe these works; clearly, the epigraphic habit reached beyond imperial inscriptions on marble plinths and mausoleums and established a type of casual commemoration in graffiti. I consider the implications of the epigraphic habit and its influence on "ephemeral media" as described by Rebecca Benefiel in Pompeii (Benefiel 2010). Peter Keegan describes these graffiti as proof of the ancients' "episodic memory, a kind of continuity between experiences and remembering [that] denotes a personal need to express individual life-choices" (Keegan 2011). By exploring the sociocultural purposes of these graffiti as well as the learning and living environments of their creators, I question how students of both cultures interpreted these literary works.

This cross-cultural study will examine the ancient world in both its Greek and Roman contexts. By reading these graffiti and their sources in their original languages, I will track and investigate the spread of these famous works of western literature from an archaeological and literary standpoint. These informal inscriptions may not seem as grandiose or intentional as the

original literary works themselves or monumental inscriptions in the classical style, but their intended permanence leads to questions about their creators: Who were these students? What were they learning? How did they learn? How did they interpret these works, and how did they apply them to their public lives in inscribing their graffiti in public places? Close examination of the quoted literary works in conjunction with analyses of several archaeological sites will provide the perspective of an ordinary citizen—one that was not memorialized in monuments or epic poetry.

Bibliography

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