

Nomads on the Bay of Naples: Pompeii's Safaitic Graffiti

Of the roughly 10,000 ancient graffiti found at Pompeii, nearly all are in Latin and Greek. But in 1987, Calzini Gysens published nine groups of ancient graffiti from Pompeii's theater corridor (VIII.7.20) that were written in Safaitic, an ancient north Arabian script used by nomads in the *ḥarrah*, the basalt desert of southern Syria. While nearly 40,000 Safaitic graffiti have been uncovered in the *ḥarrah* (Al-Manaser and Macdonald 2017), Pompeii's Safaitic remain the only attestation of the script in the Western Mediterranean, and the presence of these inscriptions on the Bay of Naples has largely remained a mystery. In this talk, I will present new research, drawing on evidence from both sides of the Mediterranean, and advance a new explanation for the appearance of these surprising inscriptions at Pompeii. I argue that Pompeii's Safaitic graffiti were inscribed by soldiers who marched with *Legio III Gallica* following its campaign to install Vespasian as emperor, and thus can be dated sometime between late December 69 CE and the end of January 70.

Among the limited previous scholarship on Pompeii's Safaitic, the best working hypothesis for their appearance at the site has been that the Safaitic could have been left there by Eastern traders, perhaps coming south for a visit to Pompeii during extended stay at Puteoli (Calzini Gysens 1987, 1990). But this stopgap hypothesis, advanced originally *exempli gratia* and with the greatest caution, somewhat conflicts with what we otherwise know about the authors of Safaitic graffiti back in Syria. There, we find no evidence in the vast corpus of Safaitic inscriptions for the involvement of the authors even in the caravan trade, let alone long-distance maritime trade (Macdonald 2014). Even the best working account for the Safaitic at Pompeii, therefore, faces some difficulties.

Starting from a contextual approach to ancient graffiti (see especially Benefiel 2010) and studying the Safaitic in the broader context of the theater corridor, I push the *status quaestionis* forward. Two graffiti, written near the Safaitic, commemorate a visit to the corridor by the *tertiani*, the “men of the third legion.” Already in 1871, Zangemeister, writing in *CIL*, connected these *tertiani* graffiti to the lone known opportunity for the “men of the third legion” to visit Pompeii, namely winter 69 CE, when *Legio III Gallica* wintered in Campania following the capture of Rome by Flavian forces. Building on this observation, I connect an important incident in Tacitus's *Histories* (3.24.3–25.1), which reveals that this legion and its auxiliaries included a substantial group that was culturally Syrian—perhaps unsurprisingly, since *III Gallica* had been stationed in Syria for nearly a century before its march to Italy. To this precious testimony, I add evidence drawn from the Safaitic graffiti from the *ḥarrah* that points to the recruitment of the nomads into auxiliary units of the Roman army (Macdonald 2014). Further, Greek inscriptions from the same area even commemorate some of the officials in charge of these nomad units (*PPUAS* IIIA 5,752; Sartre 1982). The result is a confluence of evidence that allows us to reclaim from oblivion the identity of the writers of Pompeii's Safaitic graffiti, while also pointing to broader implications for the role of graffiti and “everyday writing” (Bagnall 2012) in the ancient Mediterranean.

Bibliography

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