

The Real Housewives of Pompeii

Much of what we know of the Ancient Romans originates from sources created by elite men. Information about the lives of women in the ancient world is comparatively sparse, especially sources written from women's own perspectives. This project seeks to reduce this imbalance by examining women's voices and agency in Roman Pompeii. It is presented in four case studies: the house of Julia Felix, a wealthy female entrepreneur; the building of Eumachia, another wealthy woman heavily involved in the religio-political landscape of the city; the Lupanar, Pompeii's custom-built brothel; and CIL IV.5296, a controversial inscription argued to be one of the few extant writings expressing love between two women in the Roman world. This project synthesizes graffiti, inscriptions, and my own on-site examinations of archaeological evidence from Rome, Pompeii, and the Naples Archaeological Museum with the work of other scholars in Classics and Feminist Theory to open a window into what life might have been like for Roman women of different social classes across their many intersecting identities.

I first present the case of Eumachia, and the potential paths for women in the civic and political spheres of Pompeii. She managed to amass and exert her own political influence, culminating in the construction of a large building in the city's forum. Allusions to the first emperor of Rome, Augustus, and his wife, Livia, are readily visible in the decoration and inscriptions of the Eumachia building. With these allusions, as well as other details in the building and inscriptions, Eumachia is utilizing visual language to communicate a message of wealth, power, and agency (Berry, 2007).

Other evidence from Pompeii suggests ways in which women could reach independent economic success. A prominent example is that of Julia Felix, the owner of an expansive property within the city, who decided to rent her estate as apartments and shops. The property

spans an entire insula block, with private baths, lavish gardens, and ample room for tenants. The estate demonstrates the agency and intelligence of its owner. It is probable that Julia Felix began renting her complex sometime after the year 62 CE, in which a severe earthquake struck Pompeii. In the aftermath of the disaster, many homes were destroyed or needed extensive renovation (D'Ambra, 2012). By responding to the demand for new housing, Julia Felix proved herself as a capable businesswoman.

Departing the upper echelons of the city, I turn to two final cases, both dealing with the graffiti left behind by now nameless women. First is the Lupanar, or brothel of Pompeii. Over a hundred graffiti are etched into its walls. They likely were inscribed by both patrons and clients, include names and prices, and record - often explicitly - the various actions performed inside the building. These graffiti provide some insight into the lives of the prostitutes, or *meretrices*, who worked in the building. If these graffiti were indeed written by the Lupanar's prostitutes, they may be interpreted as attempts to assert the presence and agency of these women on the margins of Roman society (Strong, 2016).

Lastly, I examine a controversial inscription, IV.5296. At first glance, this epigraph appears to simply be a love poem, one among many inscribed on the walls of Pompeii. It can be found in the *fauces* (a narrow entryway) of a small house in one of the less opulent areas of the city (Milnor, 2014). Upon closer inspection, however, this graffito reveals itself to be one of the most exciting epigraphs in the city. The grammar in this inscription reveals both the author and subject to be women, and the poet's manipulation of pre-existing quotations strengthens this argument (Milnor, 2014). The resident seems to have been attempting to claim her living space, literally making a mark upon the place she inhabited.

Despite the patriarchal nature of the Roman world, women across classes lived full and interesting lives, and even became economically and politically successful. The first century CE, the period represented by the evidence from Pompeii, provided new opportunities and restrictions for both men and women as Rome transitioned from Republic to Empire. Ripples of these shifts in power can be observed across the social strata in Pompeii. Wealthy women like Eumachia and Julia Felix provide the clearest examples of this phenomenon. Nevertheless, members of all classes, despite the many hardships they faced, left traces of their presence and autonomy.

Bibliography

- Berry, Joanne (2007), *The Complete Pompeii*. (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.) 114-115.
- D'Ambra, Eve (2012) "Women in the Bay of Naples." *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*. James and Dillon (eds). (Blackwell), 407-408.
- Milner, Kristina (2014), *Graffiti and the Literary Landscape in Roman Pompeii*. (Oxford University Press), 199-228.
- Strong, Anise (2016), *Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World*. (New York: Cambridge University Press), 148-170.