

For the Favor of Venus Pompeiana: A Gendered Analysis of Venus Graffiti in Pompeii

In 1748 CE, excavations at Pompeii commenced. With few exceptions, activity at the site has been continuous, resulting in the discovery of thousands of graffiti, many invoking Venus Pompeiana. As the city's tutelary deity, she was the guardian cementing Pompeian social and political identity and her scholarship often reflects this balance (Keegan 2014). Venus' temple, frescos, and the significance of her presence are all well studied (Carroll 2010; Brain 2018; Milnor 2014), but Venus graffiti scholarship often fails to afford women the degree of importance they deserve.

Consider CIL IV. 2457, where Methe invokes Venus to proclaim her devotion. Scholars could afford gender a larger role here. The bulk of gendered graffiti analysis presently concentrates on *programmata*, the Lupanar, and the House of Four Styles (Savunen 1997; Levin-Richardson 2013; Benefiel 2011). Interpretations of women's experiences with Venus Pompeiana graffiti, especially in public spaces, are comparatively limited. Therefore, this project examines a modest corpus of Venus inscriptions of which women were either the audience or authors. My analysis centers on verbiage, nomenclature, and findspots—progressing from a discussion of functional literacy to an analysis of the corpus split along two axes: public/domestic and upper/lower class. To this end, the importance of Venus Pompeiana as a subject is evident. By building on models of female authorship already posited, it is possible to conclude her invocation offers insight on the lives and religion of Pompeian women, which may in turn assist with broader scholarship on female agency and identity in Roman towns.

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