



For the Favor of Venus Pompeiana: A Gendered Analysis of Venus Graffiti and Inscriptions from Pompeii

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The Problem

Since the inception of Roman history as an academic discipline, predominantly male ideas have shaped the study of women, categorizing them limitedly as moralistic sacrificial figures or dishonorable transgressors. **The lived realities of women, however, are not so easily defined.** To better understand their lives, we must turn away from the traditional upper-order, middle-aged male gaze characteristic of literary texts. Yet alternative sources of evidence are far less commonly studied and frequently reflect the gender biases of the scholars who study them. This can be seen through a study of Pompeii's epigraphic landscape, which is much richer in nuance than one might initially assume. However, graffiti scholarship still tends to cluster around the same two traditional roles – the moralistic and the debaucherous. In terms of the former, research concentrates on domestic inscriptions (e.g. Allison 1994; 1997; Benefiel 2010; 2011). For the latter, graffiti from the Lupanar, Pompeii's purpose-built brothel, is frequently cited (Levin-Richardson 2011; 2013; 2019). Yet, there are other writings, less easily categorized including the graffiti of Faustilla, which exact terms of repayment for loans, and the already extensively catalogued Pompeian political programmata (Savunen 1999). **Traditionally analyzed for its promise in the study of sexuality, graffiti invoking Venus is rarely subjected to a nuanced gendered analysis, a problem this project seeks to remedy in hopes of contributing to a more complex understanding of Roman women.**

Methodology

How do we determine a female audience or author?

While it is impossible to discern with complete certainty the agency of women in this type of public discourse, there are ways to reach a reasonable conclusion.

- The first is the concept of **functional literacy**.
 - This refers to persons who could read Latin at a basic level or had a command of the alphabet, nomenclature, and some parts of grammar. Persons categorized as functionally literate were able to take part in the exchange of information via graffiti at Pompeii, so long as they were possessed of a sharp tool. This is paramount; functional literacy rids us of the need to establish proof of elite education.
 - Take, for example, CIL IV 10692 and CIL IV 10704, from a public ramp in nearby Herculaneum where two (likely) female authors interact with each other; 10692 reads *Phyl va(he)* [Hello Phyllis]. Another nearby – 10704 – reads *A/ve Fausta s(alutem)* [Greetings, Fausta!]. The Latin is abbreviated, cursory, and not neatly written. The authors, or at the very least audience, were women without a comprehensive understanding of Latin.
 - We might also consider inscribed alphabets or numerical series as the product of a functionally literate individual due to ease in copying. When considered alongside context, we can posit female authorship (pictured Figs I-III below).
- The second is by means of **names**.
 - It is not always true that graffiti invoking a feminine name is authored by a woman or invites a female audience. It is, however, a positive indicator in favor of feminine engagement, so long as we are careful.
- Names are particularly salient when coupled with **sentence construction** (primarily verbs and nouns).
 - It is generally accepted that most graffiti writers used the third person, so if the writing includes a female name acting, it is safe to at least consider the conclusion that a woman wrote the piece. This is used frequently as a means of determining authorship at Pompeii's brothel, the Lupanar. To give one example – Sarah Levin-Richardson uses a third-person verb and feminine name to argue for female authorship of CIL IV 2259, *Fortunata fellat* [Fortunata sucks].
- Other means of ascertaining female engagement fall loosely under the category of **context**.
 - Successful study of graffiti is in large part predicated on **findspot**, and usually grouped with nearby inscriptions into a set. If we can evidence a “gendered” space, the case for female authorship becomes stronger.
 - Although it is a bit dubious, we can also sometimes argue female authorship based on height (some argue shorter height from the ground can be coupled with other factors to identify a female author).

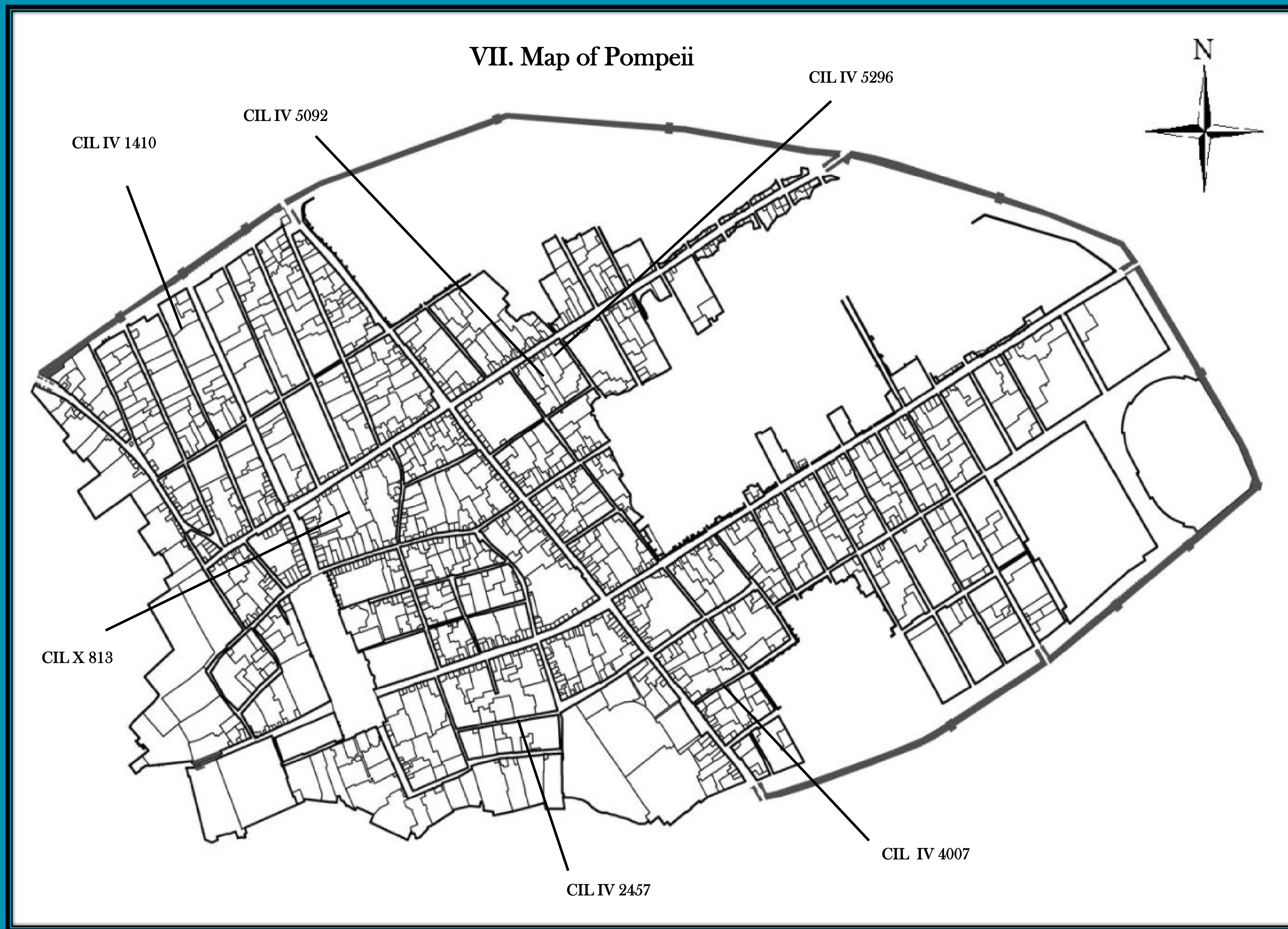


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Graffiti and Inscriptions

<p>IV. Dedication to Eumachia CIL X 813 <i>EUMACHIAE L F SACERD PUBL FVLLONES.</i></p> <p>To Eumachia, daughter of Lucius, public priestess, the fullers (set this up).</p>	<p>V. CIL IV 5092 CIL IV 5092 <i>Amoris ignes si sentires, mulio, magi(s) properares, ut uideres Venerem. Diligo 'iuuenem', Venustum; rogo, punge, iamus. Bibisti: iamus, prende lora et excute, o Pompeios defer, ubi dulcis est amor meus es! - -?</i></p> <p>If you could sense the fire of love, mule-driver You would hurry more, so that you might see Venus. I esteem a youth, Charmer; please, strike (the whip,) let's go. You've had a drink, let's go, seize and drive the reins Carry (me) to Pompeii, where my sweet love is</p>	<p>VI. CIL IV 4007 findspot CIL IV 4007 <i>Tu, pupa, sic valeas, sic habes Venere Pompeianam propitia</i></p> <p>May you always be in good health, my girl, and may Pompeian Venus always be well disposed to you.</p>
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<p>CIL IV 2457 <i>Methè Cominias Atellana amat Chrestum corde [s]it utreus que [utrisque] Venus Pompeiana propitia [est] semper concordēs vivant [vivant]</i></p> <p>Methè, a slave of Cominia, from the town of Atella, loves Chrestus. May Pompeian Venus be propitious in her heart to them both and may</p>	<p>IX. Boat with Mast</p>	<p>X. CIL IV 5296 <i>Oh, if only I could hold your sweet arms around my neck In an embrace and place kisses on your tender lips. Go now, entrust your joys to the winds, my darling, Believe me, fickle is the nature of men. Often I have been wakeful in the middle of the wasted night Thinking these things to myself: many men whom Fortune has raised up on high, Now suddenly rush headlong, and fall, overwhelmed by her. In this way when Venus has suddenly joined together lover's bodies, Light parts them and (----)</i></p>
<p>CIL IV 1410 <i>Venus enim plagiaria est quia exauguri meum petit in vici tumultu pariet optet sibi ut bene naviget quod et Ario sua r(ogato)</i></p> <p>Venus is a weaver of webs; from the moment she sets out to attack my dearest, she will lay temptations along his way; he must hope for a good voyage, which is also the wish of his Ario.</p>	<p>VIII. CIL IV 1410</p>	<p>CIL IV 5296 <i>O utinam liceat collo complexa tenere braciola et teneris oscula ferre labellis i munc ventis tua gaudia pupula crede crepe mihi levis est natura virorum scepde ego cu(m) media vigilare(n) perditā nocte haec mecum medita(n)s multos Fortuna quos supstulit alie hos modo proiectos subito praecipitesque premit sic Venus ut subito coimixta corpora amantum dividit lux et se Aarecs quid amat.</i></p>

Venus Pompeiana

Who is Pompeian Venus?

The origins of Venus in Pompeii are uncertain and remain a source of debate for scholars. Nevertheless, from Sulla's establishment of the colony in the 1st c. BCE, her presence in the material culture of Pompeii is indisputable. **She assumed the role of Garden Deity, Goddess of Eros, and of seafarers.** Pompeians painted her likeness on walls, where she is frequently accompanied by cultic iconography including ship rudders, scepters, olive or myrtle branches, and Cupids. A temple was built, and priestesses served her (Figures XI and XII below). That her popularity transcended the confines of the traditional social orders is certain; one need only contrast CIL X 813 with the boating image found near CIL IV 2457 to draw this conclusion. **Her pervasiveness in the epigraphy of Pompeii is considered here for its rich lens into the lives of women across this social spectrum.**



Analysis & Conclusions

Analysis of the first grouping of texts – those authored for women – demonstrates diversity in representations of Venus in the Pompeian epigraphic landscape as well as widespread functional literacy in the city. **In just this small sample, we can observe the differences in social orders, space, and conceptualization of divinity.**

- The first, an inscription, **CIL X 813**, constitutes a dedication to Eumachia, a priestess for Venus Pompeiana.
 - The text represents both Venus' sacred role in the Pompeian landscape and one of the few acceptable societal roles for women, priestess (which should be juxtaposed against CIL IV 5092 and 2457, where we observe a more populist concept).
 - CIL IV 4007**, similar to CIL X 813, was also probably inscribed by a man for a woman.
 - Here again we observe Pompeians invoking Venus in their personal lives. The cult of Venus can be demarcated from others for its inclusivity, a point this inscription – due to its brevity, cursory nature, and lower-order authorship – illustrates well.
 - CIL IV 5092** was discovered close to (but not in the same grouping as) 5296.
 - Again, we can attest to her role in the private sphere, and syncretism with Pompeian culture. She is conceptualized here as a Goddess of Eros, invoked similar to a literary figure.
- As the above inscriptions demonstrate, women engaged actively in Pompeii's epigraphic landscape.** It should follow, then, that they took part in inscribing, as an ability to read usually indicates capability in writing. We have to be careful in this regard, however. The argument is circular in its reasoning and difficult to prove with certainty. Men probably inscribed in higher numbers. **Nevertheless, we can at least argue women authored some inscriptions.** Given here are a few of the more certain examples.
- CIL IV 2457** is similar to CIL IV 4007, as both invoke Venus as a measure of luck in personal relationships and demonstrate her ambidextrous role in the Pompeii.
 - The inscription is public and written by a slave – an important consideration as this evidences women across the orders inscribed. Notice the third-person verb.
 - The presence of a boat drawing in the same grouping compliments 2457 by linking it to Venus' wider iconographic language.
 - CIL IV 1410** is unusual in that it was inscribed alongside a wall-painting – a habit rather anathema to most authors, which we observe in the heavily skewed number of Pompeians writing on columns and street walls as opposed to near paintings.
 - The writing speaks to the duality of Venus' nature and her significance to upper-order persons in the private realm. The scepter the writing exists alongside reinforces the writer's participation in Venus' broader cult.
 - CIL IV 5296** portrays Venus' role in one of the only probable Latin love poems between women in antiquity.
 - Possibly Venus was considered almost akin to a literary figure in Pompeii's epigraphic landscape. Her invocation outside of public inscriptions bears similarities to excerpts of the *Aeneid* also present in graffiti. Venus is here personalized; taken as an individual goddess Pompeians can invoke to express their desires and lived realities. She, as Goddess of Eros, brings lovers together.

Conclusions:

- Pompeian Venus is a unique avenue by which to interpret the lives of women – her presence does not always fit as either sexual or maternally – and appears not to be confined to a single order, gender, or identity.
- Her divinity was fluid and interpreted differently by the authors, who sometimes incorporated her image.
- Diversity of the graffiti could possibly allude to widespread functional literacy.
- Women could and did inscribe graffiti with relative frequency in Pompeii.

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