

Mixed Media Graffiti at Pompeii and Herculaneum

In 2018 a charcoal graffito, which was discovered during the ongoing excavations of Regio V in Pompeii, made international news as it was used to re-date the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 CE (Osanna 2019). Roughly 5% of the graffiti found at Pompeii and 12% at Herculaneum were produced using charcoal. Few of these have survived since the cities were excavated and many were only partially recorded due to their poor preservation at the time of excavation. For this reason, they have been almost completely ignored in scholarship. This paper focuses on the phenomenon of mixed media graffiti, that is the same or similar messages repeated in different media or graffiti composed in more than one medium: incision, charcoal, chalk, or pigment. I provide an overview of this phenomenon and analyze the locations in which it occurs. The evidence of mixed media graffiti offers insights into the artistic sensibilities and the lives of ordinary people in the Roman world (including marginalized groups like women and slaves) and underscores the impact of graffiti in the visual landscape of Roman cities.

I begin with *CIL* IV 8888b, which was written in charcoal on the façade of III.5.3 in Pompeii. This graffito, a greeting to a woman named Triaria, is repeated in chalk a little below it (*CIL* IV 8888a) and again in an uncertain medium (*CIL* IV 8888c). Were these three graffiti written by the same person, or are they perhaps a greeting from three different people to the same woman? A close examination of the line-drawing of the inscriptions indicates that all three were made by the same individual. This observation was only made possible through archival work analyzing the line-drawings of Matteo Della Corte, the epigrapher who documented many of the graffiti from Pompeii and Herculaneum (Vander Poel Campanian Collection). The huge size of the three graffiti (ranging from 55 to 126 centimeters) ensured that Triaria would not miss the

message. This example highlights the differences in visual impact between inscribed graffiti and graffiti in charcoal and chalk, which tend to be larger and more conspicuous than their inscribed counterparts.

I then turn to *CIL* IV 8501a-b, which were written on the façade of II.4.6 in Pompeii, likely a sexual invective. The graffiti were inscribed (11 cm width) and written in charcoal (70 cm width). Again, archival work clarifies the visual presentation of the two graffiti. The letter forms of the inscribed graffiti are angular, as is typical due to the difficulty in inscribing into wall plaster. The charcoal graffiti, by contrast, has long flourishes and curved letter forms that would be atypical for inscribed graffiti. Since very few line-drawings of charcoal graffiti were ever published in the *CIL*, close examination of the paleography from the archival line-drawings allows us to understand the visual impact of these inscriptions in a new way.

Several mixed media graffiti were found in Herculaneum as well. Examples include the same text written in two different media (*CIL* IV 10501 and 10503, 10657 and 10659, 10656 and 10660) and graffiti composed with two different media (10511, 10666a-d, and 10672). These examples highlight the rich variety of writing implements available to the writers of these graffiti. The people of Pompeii and Herculaneum used graffiti to play with language in a variety of ways: by creating verbal games such as the *Menedemerumenus* graffiti (Kruschwitz, Campbell, and Nicholls 2012), engaging in dialogic wordplay and creating interactions between the graffiti and wall paintings (Swetnam-Burland 2015), forming magic squares and riddles (Benefiel 2012), and parodying poetry such as the *Aeneid* (Benefiel 2010; Milnor 2014), to name a few. I argue that mixed media graffiti are another manifestation of this playfulness and indicate the inhabitants of Pompeii and Herculaneum were well-aware of the visual impact of their writings.

Archival Collections

Halsted B. Vander Poel Campanian Collection, circa 1570–1997, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, Accession no. 2002.M.16; Series I.C Matteo Della Corte papers, Research materials, 1903-1997.

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