I Write, Therefore I Exist: Graffiti as a Medium of Communication and Identity Assertion.

Graffiti in ancient Italy constituted an important form of communication, enabled by the functional literacy of a broad spectrum of society. Its diverse authorship, strategic placement, and varied content created dynamic forums for social interaction and public discourse, giving voice to individuals and groups often absent from literary sources. Beyond marking space, graffiti allowed people to assert themselves in both public and semi-public environments, negotiate social relationships, and participate in shared cultural practices. This essay examines these factors through Pompeian examples, demonstrating how graffiti conveyed personal and public identity, reflected social relationships, and facilitated participation in cultural life.

In Roman society, graffiti functioned as a vital medium for self-assertion and identity formation, allowing individuals to inscribe their presence, record experiences, and express belonging within both public and private contexts. These informal inscriptions preserved the voices of those often absent from literary texts. Simple declarations such as "Acanthus was here" illustrate the impulse to memorialise existence in enduring form.[1] Frequently carved on exterior walls or near entrances, such inscriptions acted as *tituli memoriales*, fixing fleeting moments into permanence and rendering presence visible to passers-by.[2] Similarly, Fadius Naso's self-portrait, accompanied by his name, fuses visual and textual self-representation, producing a recognisable identity within the urban record.[3] As Woolf notes of the wider epigraphic habit, such practices reflect a culture of self-recognition in which even ordinary individuals inscribed themselves into social memory.[4] The brevity of these messages suggests that practical literacy was widespread, and their placement in public contexts presupposes an audience able to engage with them.

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[1] *CIL* 4.8588 (AGP 2021: EDR127971), *CIL* 4.8891(AGP 2021: EDR159412).
[2] Lohmann 2017: 78.
[3] *CIL* 4.3204 (AGP 2021: EDR167662).
[4] Woolf 1996: 24.

Beyond these individual assertions, graffiti also conveyed identity through occupation and social role. The inscription of Floronius, a soldier of the 7th legion, demonstrates this dual function.[5] By recording his military affiliation alongside sexual exploits, Floronius constructs an identity that is both civic and personal, combining the honour of service with humour and virility. Yet this capacity for expression was not confined to men. Inscriptions preserve the voices of women, children, and slaves, extending authorship beyond the elite. Children's graffiti is especially revealing, recording traces of their presence, learning, and identity. Alphabets and simple drawings scratched at child-height in domestic and public spaces embody both practice and play, situating children as participants in household life while projecting their presence into the wider community.[6] Huntley notes that concentrations of alphabets in the Large Palaestra and along the Via dell'Abbondanza suggest structured learning, while scattered examples reflect moments of leisure or imitation.[7] Quintilian's observation that children might learn their letters on street corners reinforces the idea that literacy training spilled into everyday settings.[8] Graffiti thus offered an accessible medium through which children could practise skills, emulate adult behaviours, and assert their presence in spaces otherwise dominated by older voices.

Equally significant, emotional inscriptions allowed private feelings to be projected into public spaces, transforming personal sentiment into social commentary. Affectionate messages, such as "May those whom LVP loves be well..." communicated care and goodwill to both intimate and passing audiences.[9] The prominence of this inscription, facing the atrium and written in large lettering, suggests an intention to maximise its visibility and the welcoming effect it

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[5] *CIL* 4.8767 (AGP 2021: EDR077698).
[6] CIL 4.9295b (AGP 2021: EDR167443); CIL 4.2523 (AGP 2021: EDR168058); Garraffoni and Laurence 2013: 126-128; Huntley 2010: 76-77.
[7] Huntley 2018: 383.
[8] Quint. *Inst* .1.4.27.
[9] *CIL* 4.8215 (AGP 2021: EDR124975).

conveyed, as noted by Benefiel.[10] By echoing a common epigram frequently found throughout Pompeian graffiti, LVP's message participates in a broader cultural dialogue, relying on the audience's familiarity with shared language and references to convey meaning.[11] In doing so, the inscription demonstrates that graffiti functioned as a deliberate medium of communication, transforming a personal sentiment into a message interpretable by others, signalling social awareness, and reinforcing relational and communal identity. Furthermore, the pairing of two inscriptions addressed to Chius demonstrate the varied registers of Pompeian graffiti.[12] Such grief-stricken and mocking texts conveyed aggression, satire, and social positioning, while their placement in the Basilica ensured they were seen, deliberately shaping audience perception. Keegan interprets CIL 4.1852 as an unusual but codified expression of grief outside traditional literary or funerary genres, but he also considers Milnor's argument that the text could parody epistolary consolation, transforming lament into jest.[13] Read alongside this, CIL 4.1820 may be understood not simply as invective but as part of a dialogic cluster in which grief, parody, and insult intersect, complicating the boundary between sincerity and mockery.[14] In doing so, these inscriptions transformed private sentiment into performative acts, relying on shared cultural knowledge, humour, and social norms to negotiate relationships and assert the author and the deceased's presence within the community. Together with affectionate graffiti like LVP's epigram, these examples reveal that Pompeian inscriptions functioned as dynamic communicative acts: they not only expressed personal emotion but also negotiated relationships, signalled social awareness, and positioned authors within visible networks of interaction and belonging.[15]

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[10] Benefiel 2011: 35-36.
[11] Benefiel 2011: 35-36; *CIL* 4.4091 (AGP 2021: EDR168646); *CIL* 4.8215 (AGP 2021: EDR124975).
[12] *CIL* 4.1852; *CIL* 4.1820 .
[13] Keegan 2016: 249-255; Milnor 2014: 167-168.
[14] *CIL* 4.1852; *CIL* 4.1820.
[15] *CIL* 4.1820.

Graffiti in Pompeii functioned as a relational medium through which identity was constructed, turning walls into spaces for interaction, negotiation, and recognition. Inscriptions such as "Dorcas was here with Sollemnis" or "Primigenia was here with Prima" went beyond recording presence to assert relational identity, situating authors within networks of friendship and companionship.[16] Their placement on street-facing or semi-public domestic walls ensured visibility, converting private bonds into publicly legible acts. Professional identity was expressed similarly: Crescens, a dry-cleaner, addressed an innkeeper and later greeted fellow dry-cleaners, transforming the Casa del Triclinio wall into a site of interpersonal communication visible to neighbours, passersby, and customers.[17] Evidently, Pompeian graffiti positioned authors in relation to others, claiming recognition, familiarity, and belonging while creating interactive dialogues in which identity was both asserted and contested.[18]

At the Bar of Prima, a rival mocked Successus' unrequited love for the innkeeper's slave Iris, initiating a public exchange in which desire, rivalry, and social judgment were intertwined.[19] Successus responded by defending his pursuit and asserting his attractiveness and moral standing, while Severus closed the sequence by emphasising the lack of reciprocity.[20] Each inscription communicated relational positioning, as authors negotiated reputation and status before a wide audience. The tavern setting amplified this performative dimension, transforming private grievances into a socially visible act of competition and commentary. While Benefiel highlights the dialogic and interactive qualities of graffiti as fostering ongoing social engagement, it is also possible that some inscriptions functioned more as performative assertions of relationships, intended for observation rather than genuine exchange.[21] For example, Methe, a slave, inscribed her love for Chrestus, invoking Pompeian Venus, projecting

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[16] *CIL* 4.8771a (AGP 2021: EDR167872); *CIL* 4.8770a (AGP 2021: EDR167867).
[17] *CIL* 4. 4100 (AGP 2021: EDR175571); *CIL* 4.4120 (AGP 2021: EDR175572).
[18] Baird and Taylor 2011: 7-8.
[19] *CIL* 4.8258-9
[20] *Ibid*
[21] Benefiel 2017: 359; Benefiel 2010: 60-61, 65-66; Keegan 2010: 182

both personal sentiment and cultural literacy into public space without evidence of direct response or continued discussion.[22] The poetic and culturally coded language, especially the invocation of Venus, elevates Methe's personal declaration into a literary statement that communicates to an audience, signalling rhetorical awareness and shaping perceptions of her identity. Her status as a female slave highlights the extent to which women could access literary knowledge and employ it creatively in graffiti. This challenges Harris' broader claim of generally low literacy, which he allows only in exceptional cases such as the male elite and their slaves.[23] The example of a female slave producing literary graffiti suggests that, even if she were merely copying a familiar phrase, she understood its social and cultural significance, demonstrating a level of literacy that contradicts Harris' view that graffiti were solely the product of a small literate elite.[24] Together, these examples reveal that Pompeian graffiti functioned as a medium of communication through which authors asserted, negotiated, and performed their identities, demonstrating how social recognition, literary skill, and relational positioning were enacted and conveyed to an audience.

Graffiti also demonstrates how communication extended beyond personal identity to encompass cultural knowledge, shared practices, and civic participation. Virgilian quotations illustrate how literacy facilitated engagement with elite cultural traditions in accessible and creative ways.[25] The fragment *arma virumque*, inscribed in the atrium of the House of M. Casellius Marcellus, reproduces the Aeneid's opening but omits *cano*, suspending the line in its epic and imperial resonance.[26] As Rachel Murray argues, this omission and the absence of personal markers suggest that the writer's identity is subsumed within Virgil's authority, aligning themselves with imperial and foundational narratives rather than asserting

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[22] *CIL* 4.2457(AGP 2021: EDR168084).
[23] Harris 1989: 252; 260.
[24] Benefiel 2011: 28; Murray 2023: 19.
[25] Baird and Taylor 2011: 10; Lohman 2017: 79.
[26] Harris 1989: 252; 260; Verg. *Aen*. 1.1; *CIL* 4.5002.

individuality.[27] Yet while the inscription does not assert personal identity, it functions as a deliberate act of cultural participation: by invoking the widely recognised opening of the *Aeneid*, the writer signals engagement with elite literary culture, publicly enacts shared social values, and participates in a collective cultural dialogue. In the same house, Zosimus adapted a line from *Eclogues* into an erotic poem, explicitly claiming authorship with *haec omnia scripsit Zosimus*.[28] This act of reshaping canonical poetry illustrates how individuals of potentially lower status could appropriate and personalise elite literature. Grull interprets this as a deliberate adaptation, in which individuals transposed the narrative context of the *Aeneid* onto their own lived experiences as evidenced in many other inscriptions including CIL 4.8630b.[29] By altering the original line, positioning himself in a homoerotic role, and inscribing it in a semi-private space of social significance, Zosimus asserts literary skill while engaging with mythological and imperial narratives, communicating both erotic subjectivity and knowledge of elite literary culture.[30] This demonstrates that even partial familiarity with the epic enabled Pompeians to creatively deploy canonical texts to convey meaning, assert cultural competence, and participate in socially intelligible forms of communication.

Graffiti in Pompeii demonstrates that communication in ancient Italy extended well beyond elite literary production, encompassing the voices of diverse social, age, and gender groups. Through brief declarations of presence, expressions of affection or rivalry, professional inscriptions, and adaptations of canonical texts, Pompeians transformed walls into sites of dialogue, negotiation, and cultural participation. These texts preserved personal sentiment while signalling relational awareness, social positioning, and engagement with shared cultural

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[27] Murray 2023: 19.
[28] *CIL* 4.5007; Verg. *Ecl*. 3.1.
[29] Grull 2025: 11-12; *CIL* 4.8630b (AGP 2021: EDR159691); Verg. *Aen.*1.192-3.
[30] Murray 2023: 52-54.

and civic norms. Collectively, Pompeian graffiti communicates the relational and performative nature of identity, highlighting the enduring human desire to be visible and remembered.

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