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WRITTEN INTERACTIONS
Graffiti in Pompeian domestic spaces

More than 11,000 inscriptions have been recorded from Pompeii and edited in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (CIL) 04. Around 7,000 of these, scratched into the wall plaster or written with charcoal or chalk, have been labelled as graffiti.

Graffiti are informal writings and drawings which can be found on exterior and interior walls of buildings, on city gates and tombs, in houses, shops, and public buildings (cf. fig. 1). The largest selection of the Pompeian graffiti comes from interior walls (fig. 2) and is the object of my PhD project within the Munich Graduate School "Distant Worlds", presented in this poster. The aim of my research is to investigate the communicative and decorative functions of Roman graffiti. The study is based on several case-studies of Pompeian houses as well as on statistics of the distribution and contents of all graffiti edited in the CIL 04. A collection of all names which appear as graffiti aims to add information about the authors' and addressees' gender and status and to trace individuals within a house or neighbourhood.

The number of graffiti recorded per region and insula varies according to time and focus of their excavation. From some buildings no graffiti have been edited at all, whereas from some huge elite houses the entirety of inscriptions is listed in the CIL. Statistics of all Pompeian graffiti can therefore indicate trends regarding distribution and contents, but a close study of several houses is necessary to investigate in detail locations, form and visibility of graffiti in domestic spaces. Because only about 5% of the graffiti listed in the CIL still exist, my selection of houses is conditioned by conservational issues.

Map taken from Dobbins – Foss 2007, xxxvi-xxxix fig. 3

Fig. 1: Clusters of ▢ > 20 ▢ > 50 ■ > 100 graffiti inside of buildings.

- Indoor rooms type 2-4 (houses)
- Indoor rooms type 1 (shops)
- Façades
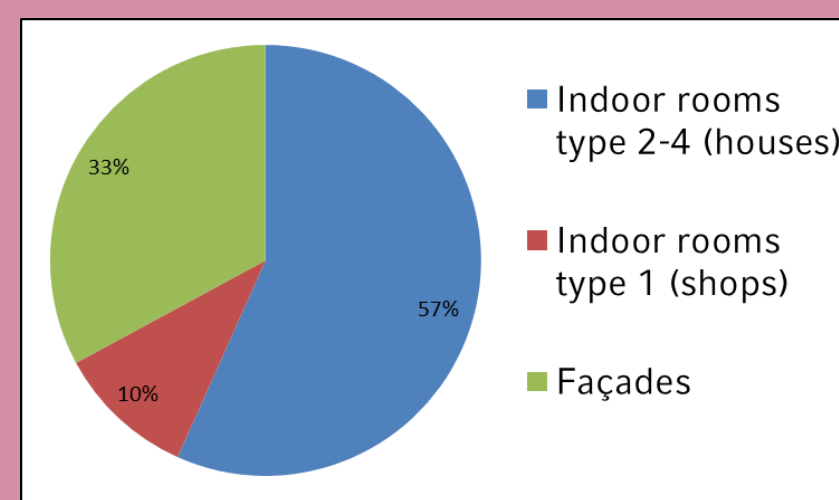
Fig. 2: Distribution of graffiti (sample: regiones I-VI).

- Names
- Salutations
- Stories, letters, etc.
- Nr.s, dates, prices
- Alphabets
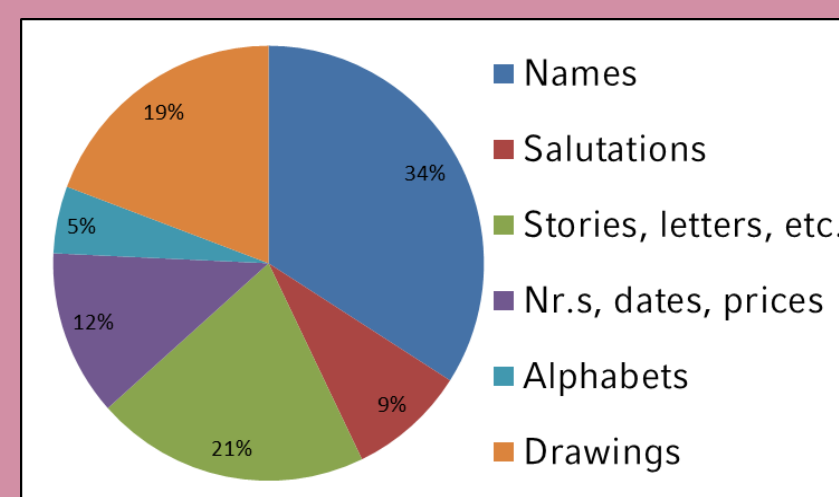- Drawings

Fig. 3: Contents of graffiti (sample: regiones I-VI).

Movement patterns within the house

Obviously, graffiti were meant to be seen by a broader or limited readership. They contain names, salutations, announcements, letters, stories, erotic sentences, poems, wordplays, alphabets, numbers, dates, and prices (fig. 3); many of them either name the writer and/ or a certain addressee or include stories about third persons (e.g. fig. 4 + 7). The choice of the locations for these kinds of personal messages could indicate that the intended readers were often around or more probably lived in this space. Direct reactions and responses are proven by graffiti dialogues inside houses and on insula façades.

Within the houses, graffiti mainly cluster in entrance rooms, atria and peristyles, so they seem to indicate the rooms mostly frequented by inhabitants and visitors. Whereas atria contain more practical notes like numbers, dates, and prices, peristyles feature a wider range of names, messages, and announcements. Where available, the peristyle columns were particularly popular surfaces for scratched inscriptions. Graffiti appearing at heights of 1.4-1.6m above floor level seem to reflect the writing of standing adults and were therefore legible nearly at eye level; nonetheless, their visibility also highly depends on their size and the colour of the background wall painting. In four houses examined from region I, tiny texts are hidden in the cannelures of white peristyle columns and must have been hard to find if one did not know where to search and what to look for. These graffiti are contrasted by large numbers and lines marking the walls of the atria. Obviously, the peristyles were used for more personal or almost secret messages.

Tracing individuals

Sometimes, more individual spots were chosen for messages addressed to certain persons, as in the case of Chryseros, who was the addressee of a message on the outer kitchen wall in the *Casa del Menandro*. The writer, a certain Crescens, obviously knew that Chryseros would regularly be around to read the message, probably because he worked in this area of the house as a slave. On the façade of the same *insula*, Secundus and Prima were greeting each other several times, and as local VIPs, some gladiators were often named in graffiti. In room 9 of the *Casa dei Quattro Stili*, several greetings to women were written by the same persons, as a comparison of the handwritings proves (fig. 8). The broader study of individual names is supposed to trace individuals within certain households as well as neighbourhood relations.
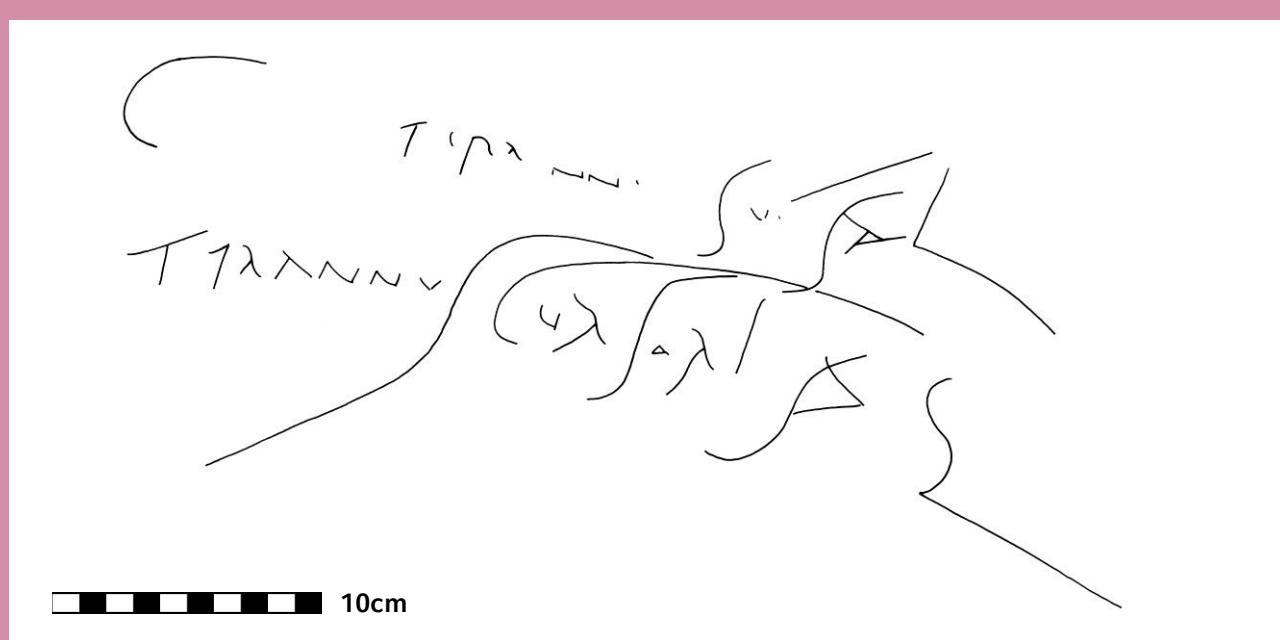

Fig. 4: CIL 04, 08045: Cursor Tyranno suo sal(utem)/ Tyrannus Cursori sal(utem).
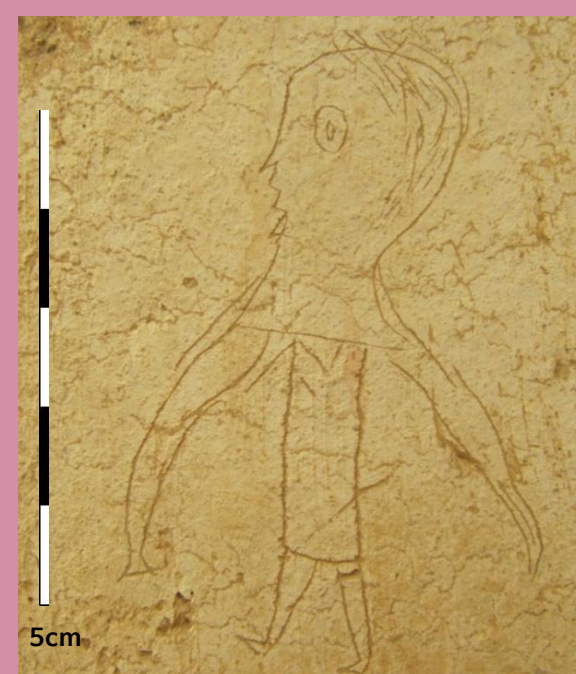

Fig. 5: CIL 04, 08215: Ships.

Fig. 6: Human figure.

Fig. 7: CIL 04, 08098: Alogiosus fecit/ Caro feliciter.

(Courtesy: Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Pompei, Ercolano, Stabia . ÖAI)

The decorative and playful character of graffiti

Graffiti often clustered in certain spots within rooms and influenced one another. Once a wall was 'opened' by a writing or drawing, other people would add their names, thoughts or even extend already existing graffiti, as the drawing of a human figure in the Hanghaus 2 from Ephesos shows (fig. 6): The original bust was extended to a whole human body by adding an unproportional torso, arms, and legs. Graffiti writing in general can thus be seen as a playful performance.

Often, graffiti copied other graffiti (fig. 5) or imitated nearby wall paintings or sculptures. In the *Casa dei Cervi* in Herculaneum, sculpted stags provoked a huge number of graffiti drawings showing stags made by different persons. Three figural drawings of Erotes from the peristyle of the *Casa del Sacerdos Amandus* were influenced by a painted Eros. These graffiti were centrally placed in the main panels of the walls, so we have to assume that wall paintings were not the 'sacred' form of decoration that modern viewers like to regard them as.

Fig. 8: CIL 04, 08218a.d: Nicopolis va(le). CIL 04, 08218b-c: Anthis va(le).

Framing interactions.
Approaches to coexistence in the houses of Roman Pompeii