[Graffito mocking Roman citizenship (CIL IV, 1261)](#) **[1]**

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Graffito.
Original Location/Place: Vicolo della Fullonica, on the outer wall of the House of the Tragic Poet, region VI, insula 8, Pompeii, Italy.
Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Lost (?)
Date: 1 CE to 100 CE
Physical Characteristics: Graffito on the west exterior wall of the House of the Tragic Poet, vicolo della Fullonica, in Pompeii. Now lost (?).
Material: Paint on plaster.
Measurements: Unknown.
Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Publications:
CIL IV, 1261

Commentary: This short graffito was found on one of the exterior walls of the House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii; it is a unique text that appears to parody elements of Roman power, such as Roman citizenship, using language that is evocative of high literary forms. Although the motivation behind this graffito, the situation in which it was set up and its reception amongst the inhabitants of Pompeii remain entirely unknown, it nonetheless presents a "trajectory of dissent" in response to the Roman concept of the body politic (Zadorojnyi, "Transcripts of dissent?" p. 110).

The graffito is unapologetically obscene in the language and imagery used; written in the first person, "I say" (*inquam*), it repeats the passive form of the main verb, *futuebatur* ("fucked") for emphasis at the beginning of the text. The use of *inquam* is particularly interesting given its rhetorical connotations and place in the language of orators, who used it to draw attention to themselves and to emphasise the point that they were making; paradoxically here the *inquam* emphasises the obscenity of the passive *futuebatur*, whilst highlighting the anonymous nature of the speaker/author, who is clearly not present to take responsibility for the opinion expressed (Milnor, *Graffiti and the Literary Landscape*, p. 122-123). Of course, once read or spoken aloud, the person reading it would be cast in the role of the graffito's author, which only served to enhance its provocative and audacious content.
The subject of the verb is the "pussy of the Roman citizens" (*civium Romanorum cunnus*), which is described as being assailed "with legs in the air" (*attractis pedibus*). Some grammatical errors in the graffito follow; *in qua* has been suggested by Paolo Cugusi as an abbreviation for *in qua res*, or even *in quo*, giving a translation of "in which" or "wherein" (Cugusi, "Spunti di polemica politica," p. 27). *Voces* ("sounds") has been misspelled as *vices* and *nisissei* appears to be for *nisi si*, when only *nisi* would suffice (Varone, *Erotica Pompeiana*, p. 85). In spite of these slight errors, the graffito reveals some literary pretensions, with a number of scholars understanding it as a florid adaptation of a passage from Cicero's *Second Verrine* (2.5.162), in which a Roman citizen is being beaten and tortured; he refuses to make any sound other than to claim "I am a Roman citizen" (Van Buren, "Osservazioni su alcuni testi letterari ed epigrafici," p. 195-196; Cugusi, "Spunti di polemic politica," p. 27). Although there are no "verbatim parallels," Alexei Zadorojnyi has noted that "the flair and the pathos [of the graffito] are suitably Ciceronian" ("Transcripts of Dissent?" p. 112). A further literary reference can be found in the description of the "open legs" (*attractis pedibus*), which was identified by Jean-Pierre Cèbe as borrowed from Catullus (15.18), who uses the exact phrase in a similar context to the graffito, in a suggestion of rape (Cèbe, *La caricature et la parodie*, p. 173). Kristina Milnor has noted that this feminisation of the masculine *civis Romanus*, through the attribution of a single "pussy" or *cunnus* to the citizen body was not unknown in Roman political thought; whilst the blatant sexualisation of the 'body' of the state in this graffito might be shocking to a modern audience, in Roman political vernacular the metaphor of the state as a 'body' was well-established, with the additional female qualities apparently unproblematic, particularly given the promotion of rape as a message of political triumph (Milnor, *Graffiti and the Literary Landscape*, p. 123).
The political implications of what is suggested by the graffito are also worthy of consideration. Did the text intend to sound exhilarated or despondent? Was the graffito making fun of Roman women or of male pathics? Did it intend to parody Cicero's speeches and imitate Catullus's poetry, or was the object of its mocking the Roman people themselves? It is hard to imagine a context in which any remotely subversive interpretation of the *populus*

Romanus would not, as Alexei Zadorojnyi has rightly noted, create a "political thrill" for a speaker of Latin ("Transcriptions of Dissent?" p. 113). The graffito may have intended to answer all of the above questions, in a multi-faceted assault on Rome's literary, rhetorical and political traditions, or it may simply have employed these well-known tropes in order to lament on the general state of Rome and her citizens. It may also be the case that the graffito was not as shocking in a contemporary context as it is today; the graffiti from Pompeii are as numerous as they are varied in their use of sexual language and suggestions, which has long been understood as an expression of the corporeal freedom and familiarity that characterised much of popular urban culture in the Roman world. However, the insistence of the obscenity implied by *futuebatur* and the paradox of pairing the suggested action with the "sweetest and most pious sounds" (*voces dulcissimae et piissimae*) that it was said to elicit from the body of Roman citizens, in vocabulary usually associated with the ideal qualities of Rome, appears to me to be entirely deliberate, and motivated at drawing attention to a subversive view of citizenship and empire. The graffito was clearly set up in a local context, and may thus at first appear to appeal to local sentiment but, as Kristina Milnor has concluded, "the image of the body politic…the possible reference to Cicero's *Verrines* and the text's rhetorical style would seem to connect the graffito to political discourse on a grander scale" (*Graffiti and the Literary Landscape,* p. 123). Parallels might be drawn with other graffiti from Pompeii, such as the images of Aeneas and Romulus as apes with the heads of dogs [2] and the drawings that accompanied the parody of the first line of the Aeneid at the Fullonica of Ululitremulus, which demonstrated a clear engagement with, and manipulation of, Augustan propaganda and imperial themes; graffiti were usually anonymous, and potentially temporary statements, which guaranteed accessibility to and rebellious interpretation of ideology that in any other format might be considered dangerous or seditious. This graffito from the House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii is a good example of how local and imperial political contexts interacted; the obscene statement, made at a local urban level, reflected ideas and attitudes from the larger imperial sphere and reformulated them in a way that spoke to both Pompeian society and interests and those of the wider empire.

Literary reference: Cicero's *Second Verrine* (2.5.162).

Keywords in the original language:

- futuo [3]
- inquam [4]
- civis Romanus [5]
- attractus [6]
- cunnus [7]
- dulcissimus [8]
- piissimus [9]

Thematic keywords:

- graffito [10]
- Pompeii [11]
- Roman citizenship [12]
- rape [13]
- piety [14]
- Roman power [15]
- sexual assault [16]
- sexual organs [17]
- political subversion [18]
- laughter [19]
- humour [20]

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Other sources connected with this document: Fresco / Wall Painting

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