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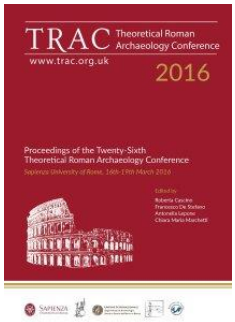

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Private Inscriptions in Public Places? The Ambiguous Nature of Graffiti from Pompeian Houses

Polly Lohmann

Introduction: What we Call Graffiti

The term 'graffiti' was coined by 18th century scholars to describe a newly discovered kind of inscription: those incised with sharp instruments or – though less often documented – written in charcoal, ink, or paint on the walls of private and public buildings in Pompeii (cf. Langner 2001: 10 fn. 53). The *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* IV differentiates between such *'graphio (in)scripta'* and painted wall-inscriptions (*dipinti*) based on technique, and further distinguishes wall-inscriptions from the writing on wax-tablets, amphorae, and from the lapidary inscriptions recorded in an entirely separate volume (*CIL* X). Just like the wall-plaster on which they were written, graffiti are ephemeral. The incised texts – written primarily in cursive lettering –, numbers, and drawings were more or less products of spontaneity, and have been found in considerable number on the inside walls and façades of buildings in the Roman town of Pompeii (graffiti on objects of daily life, or *instrumentum domesticum*, will not be addressed here). Nowadays, however, the term 'graffiti' is mainly associated with the colourful murals and tags in spray paint which we know from our own urban surroundings. The practice of designating ancient and modern inscriptions homonymously as 'graffiti' suggests a similarity both in their function and in the way that they are perceived. It suggests – despite an increasing tolerance towards modern graffiti and the prominence of graffiti artists such as Banksy – that drawing, writing, and inscribing graffiti in the ancient Roman world was, just as in modern times, generally regarded as an illicit and subversive act; that it was carried out within specific social groups as an expression of identity; and that it was perceived as a disturbance by other parts of society.

Ancient graffiti are usually described as private, unofficial, and informal in contrast to other types of inscriptions (e.g. Beltrán Lloris 2015; Berti, Keil, and Miglus 2015; Descoeudres 2007; Keegan 2014; Mouritsen 2011): private, because they were generated by individuals who used them to express their own wishes, ideas, and thoughts; unofficial, because they were not approved by any authority; informal, because their layout, content, and placing did not follow any given rules. The concepts of official and unofficial, public and private, informal and formal are, however, problematic, because their parameters change according to which aspect of ancient inscriptions (content, function, or location) they are applied. Lapidary inscriptions, e. g. honorary inscriptions or building inscriptions, are gen-

erally understood as official, public, and formal inscriptions, but further differentiation is necessary e.g. for funerary or votive inscriptions: these were, on the one hand, authorised inscriptions in public spaces, but had, on the other hand, a relatively private nature, as they were commissioned by individuals and designed according to personal taste; furthermore, not all of them were intended for the same degree of publicity (cf. Beltrán Lloris 2015: 95). Graffiti, too, cross the boundaries of and blur the lines between these paradoxical categories. The following paper aims to show the ambiguous nature of graffiti by considering their distribution, form, and content. Due to limitations of space, it is possible only to highlight certain aspects of the phenomenon that I like to call, following Alison E. Cooley (2012: 111–116), the 'graffiti habit' in Pompeii. Broader topics related to graffiti-writing and its socio-cultural implications such as the level of literacy required, the language used, and Roman commemoration and writing practices cannot be touched upon here. The results of this paper form part of my study on Pompeian domestic graffiti in the De Gruyter series *Materiale Textkulturen* of the Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg (currently in preparation). The study combines an analysis of the macro-scale (i.e. the city-area of Pompeii) and the micro-scale (i. e. case-studies of six Pompeian houses) with the object of improving our understanding of the ancient 'graffiti habit'.

Forschungsgeschichte: A Brief Outline of Dominating Assumptions

Although Pompeian graffiti have always fascinated tourists and scholars alike, only a small part of them have made their way into graffiti research; most studies have chosen to focus on a selection of erotic and 'literary' inscriptions (on the term 'literary graffiti', see Milnor 2014: 38f.). The (by no means insignificant!) body of remaining graffiti was perceived as meaningless by most scholars – an opinion expressed quite clearly in August Mau's well-known book *Pompeii. Its Life and Art*, published in 1899:

> Taken as a whole, the graffiti are less fertile for our own knowledge of Pompeian life than might have been expected. The people with whom we should most eagerly desire to come into direct contact, the cultivated men and women of the ancient city, were not accustomed to scratch their names upon stucco or to confide their reflections and experiences to the surface of the wall. (Mau 1899: 481f.)

This passage makes clear that graffiti were deemed irrelevant for scholarship because scribbling on the wall was regarded as a 'lower-class phenomenon', a habit of social groups in which Mau and others were little interested. A moral valuation becomes visible when Mau (1899: 482) adds that most of the writers "were as little representative of the best elements of society as are the tourists who scratch or carve their names upon ancient monuments". By comparing ancient graffiti to modern ones scrawled on ancient monuments, Mau equates damaging cultural heritage with writing on contemporary buildings – in other words, he assumes that the site of Pompeii had the same significance for its inhabitants as for us: a museum character that only 'uncultivated' people without an understanding of its cultural value would have touched. The focus had, therefore, long been guided by philological questions, if

at all (for valuable philological work on the inscriptions, see, e.g., Gigante 1979; Kruschwitz and Halla-aho 2007; Solin 2012; 2015). Only within the past 15 years, beginning with Martin Langner's dissertation (Langner 2001), have graffiti experienced a kind of renaissance. This renaissance has included a dramatic change in the way ancient graffiti are viewed: they have gone from being illegal scribbles to tolerated texts and images, from random doodles by children and slaves to a common form of communication (for developments in the perception of graffiti, see Benefiel 2010; 2011; 2014; 2016; Keegan 2011; 2014; 2016; Voegtle 2012). The revised view of ancient graffiti stands in contrast not only with earlier scholarship, but also with analogies drawn from modern graffiti, and is based on recent analyses which take both philological and archaeological approaches into consideration, such as the works on Pompeii by Rebecca Benefiel and Peter Keegan already mentioned, and by Henrik Mouritsen (2011), and Eeva-Maria Viitanen, Laura Nissinen, and Kalle Korhonen (2013). The shift towards analysing inscriptions as artefacts – i.e. as tangible objects which communicate meaning not only through their content (text) but also through their form (size, material, text layout), and which interact with their spatial context (location) – can be understood from the perspective of the 'spatial turn' as well as that of the movement in scholarship known as the 'material turn'.

Material culture studies explore the relationship between social reality and material culture; they ask how and to what extent the material world represents social practices and reflects meaning – a question crucial for all who work on past societies and are left with their material remains or 'things' or 'stuff', as Daniel Miller (2010) puts it. The 'material turn' marks a change in the perception of the relationship between people and things and abandons the dichotomy of subjects versus objects (for the approaches that had earlier led to the so-called 'linguistic turn' see, e.g., Tilley 1990). Things, like artefacts, are no longer understood as simply the objects and results of human actions, but as subjects or agents which themselves evoke and are a medium for social practices (cf. Jones and Boivin 2010, with an overview over the diverse approaches and the *Forschungsgeschichte* of material culture studies). Graffiti can be seen as (material) agents in several ways: first, like any text, graffiti transferred the meaning given to them without their author needing to be physically present (cf. Eggert 2014: 48). Secondly, they not only represented an inter*action* between writers and readers, but also inter*acted* with their immediate surroundings: with the walls and their decorations, and with other graffiti already present, as will be shown below. The materiality of the graffiti therefore offers new perspectives on the habits of graffiti-writing and new insights into their production and perception as well as the use and function of the surrounding spaces that would remain unexplored when looking at graffiti as mere texts (or images), i.e. at their content (or motives) alone (cf. Englehardt and Nakassis 2013: 8 and, most recently, Karagianni, Schwindt and Tsouparopoulou 2015). Graffiti thereby contribute to our understanding of Roman domestic space – a subject of intensive research over the past three decades – and they allow us to comprehend the ways people used space (for architectural theory and the reciprocal relationship between people and space, see Schäfers 2010). Whilst the fixed architectural structures formed the spatial framework of the Roman household, graffiti resulted from people frequenting and moving within the house; they therefore constitute a unique

Figure 1: Graffiti from the corridor of the great theatre (section of the southern wall; drawing by author).

source for ancient (domestic) life, not so much because of what they say, but by how and where they say it – and the fact that it is said at all (Bodel 2010: 115).

Between Public and Private

As mentioned above, graffiti have often been categorised as 'private' inscriptions because they express the desires of individuals and communicate personal issues: names of people who wanted to leave their mark, greetings from one person to another, love letters, poems, drawings of one's favourite gladiators, dates to remember, etc. All of these messages, however, were exposed to a broader public over which the authors had no control, regardless of whether the graffiti were (in the words of James L. Franklin, Jr. 1991: 87) 'self-sufficient' or intended for an audience: even when it was directed at a specific recipient, a message could potentially be read by every passer-by. The number and variety of potential readers was, of course, more restricted in houses than in public spaces, more limited within shops than for the graffiti on façades, and differed according to the exact position and size of the graffito as well as other factors affecting visibility, such as the colour of the wall plaster. Nevertheless, it is the accessibility of the graffiti to a (sometimes more, sometimes less) general public that made them a dynamic form of writing on the wall: the accessibility of graffiti allowed passers-by to continue what others had started, and frequently resulted in an accumulation of texts and images, often with similar content and motifs. We find, for example, drawings of ships, fish, and horses, clearly the work of many different hands, concentrated in the corridor leading to the great theatre (VIII 7,20; Fig. 1), and the walls of the brothel (VII 12,18–20) bear the writing of dozens of men who explicitly refer to their sexual experiences in the

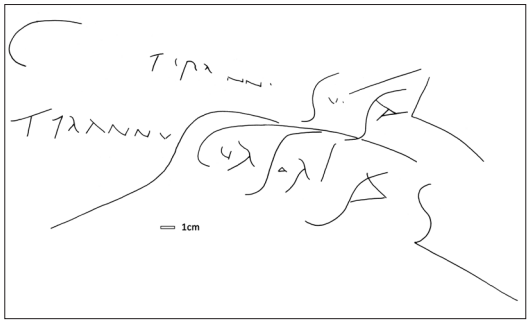


*Figure 2: '*C[ursor] Tyranno suo sal(utem)./ Tyrannus Cursori sal(utem)*' (CIL IV 8045; line-drawing and photograph by author.*

establishment (*CIL* IV 2173–2296; for the graffiti from the brothel, see Varone 2005; Levin-Richardson 2011). We do not have many dialogues in the strictest sense, i.e. between a writer and a (named) addressee, such as that between the weaver Successus and his rival Severus on the façade of insula I 10 (*CIL* IV 8258–8259), or the greetings exchanged by a certain Tyrannus and Cursor in the entrance of the *Casa dei Ceii* (I 6,15; Fig. 2). Rather, we are left with the interactions of people who were influenced by what they saw on the wall and who made their own contribution to it (cf. Benefiel 2010: 65–69). An authorial awareness of having a general audience is reflected in graffiti which play with their readers, catching them, as it were, *in flagrante delicto* and insulting them: "[…] the one who reads (this) is penetrated […]" (*CIL* IV 4008; for a discussion of the entire graffito, see Solin 2015: 132). One of these texts concludes with the additional words 'I who read this am a dick' (*CIL* IV 2360; for graffiti which '(ab)use' their readers by putting words into their mouth, see Milnor 2014: 74f.).

Apart from the nature of their content, graffiti also invite being described as 'private' because of their locations: the largest proportion (45%) of the Pompeian graffiti edited in the *CIL* IV were found on the inside walls of large and very large residential buildings (Fig. 3, type 3+4 according to the categorisation of Wallace-Hadrill 1994: 81–83). This does not necessarily mean that façades and public buildings were not equally or even more densely covered with writing (as e.g. the more than 200 graffiti from the basilica suggest); it simply indicates that domestic graffiti play a dominant role within the body of material which we have from Pompeii. Although there may be a correlation between the excavation history and the number and kind of incised wall-inscriptions recorded (certain buildings and building types received more attention than others), the sheer number of graffiti – nearly 2300 – found in 220 atrium- and atrium-peristyle-houses (type 3–4) speaks for itself. Francisco Beltrán Lloris (2015), who considers public/ private the main criterion underlying the classification of inscriptions, and who categorises them according to their location, function, and intended lifespan, defines scratched graffiti as 'private' inscriptions, despite the fact that some are to be found on façades and in public buildings (cf. also the volume Benefiel - Keegan 2016). Beltrán Lloris (2015: 91) does, however, emphasise that the Roman house itself can hardly be considered to have been a 'private' space in the modern sense of the word. This, and the absence of a sharp differentiation between 'public' and 'private' spaces within the house, was first confirmed by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (1988; 1994: esp. 17–37), and has found continuous substantiation in the scholarship of the past thirty years.

What first case-studies have already indicated (Mouritsen 2011; Benefiel 2010; 2011; cf. also Lohmann 2015), can also be proven statistically: graffiti from Pompeian peri-

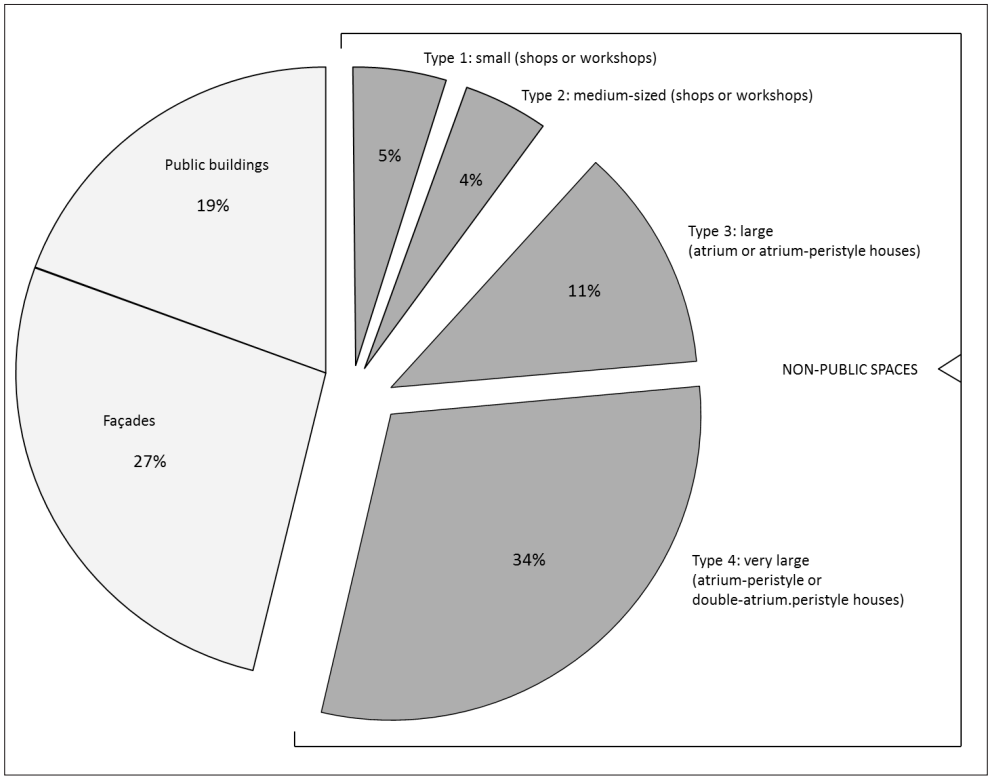
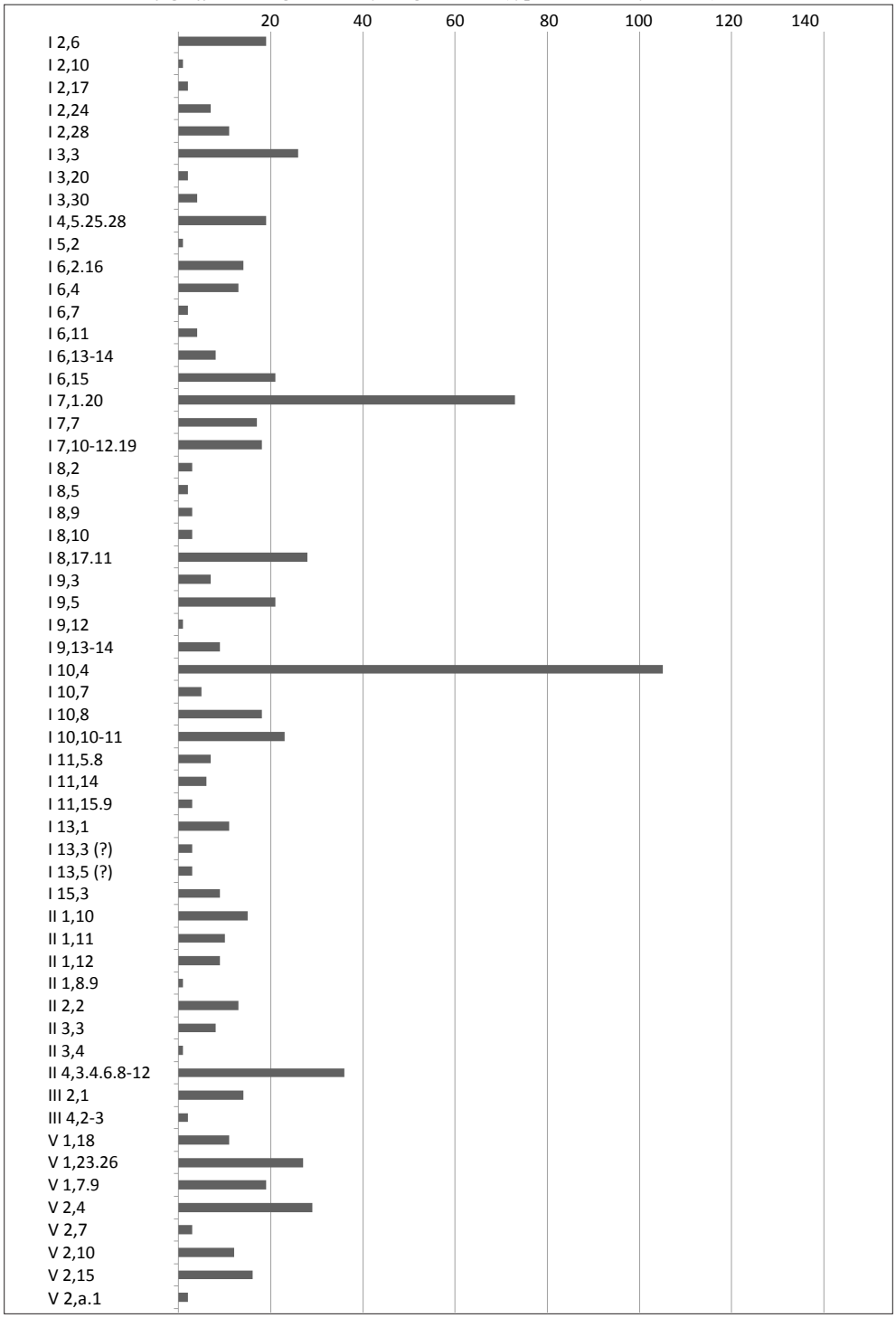
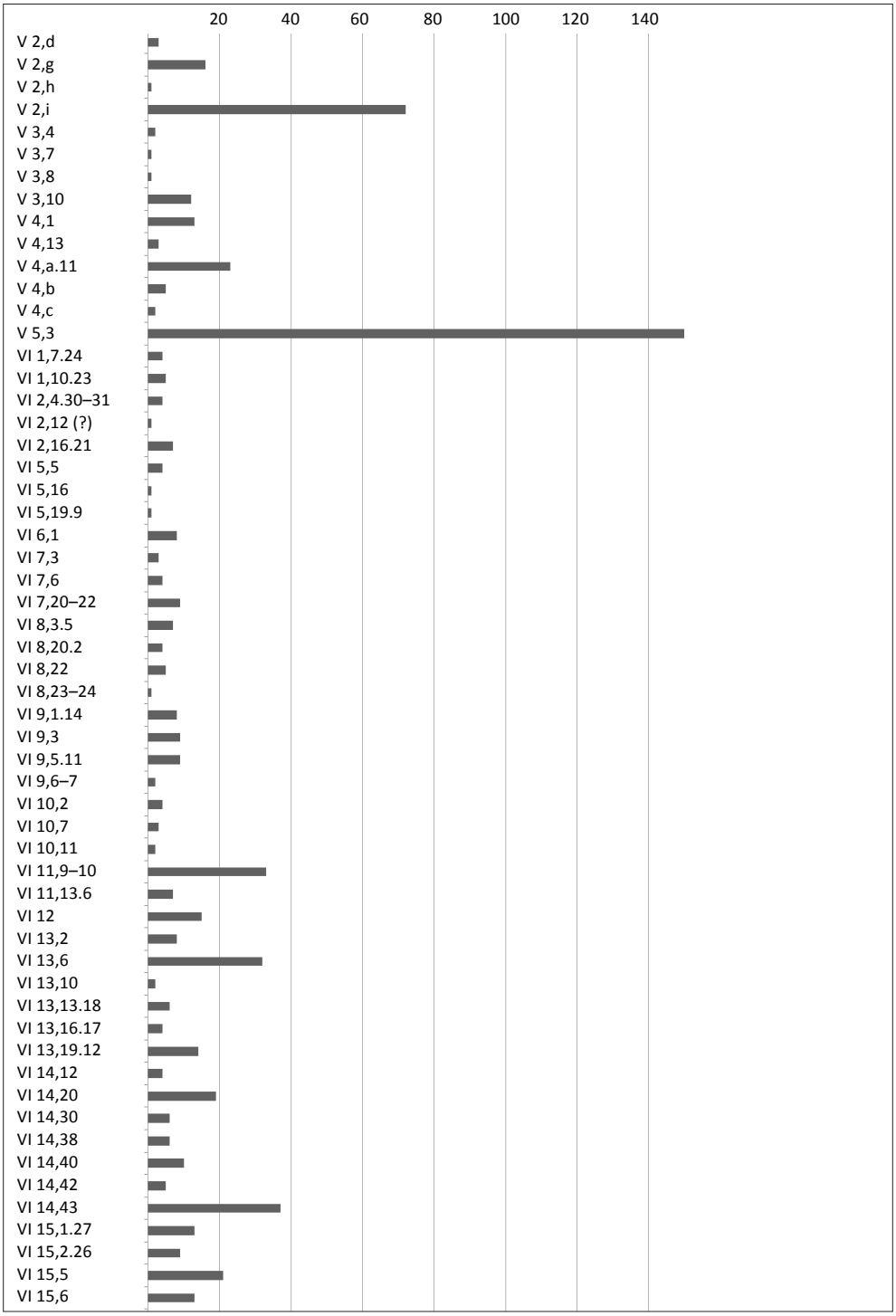


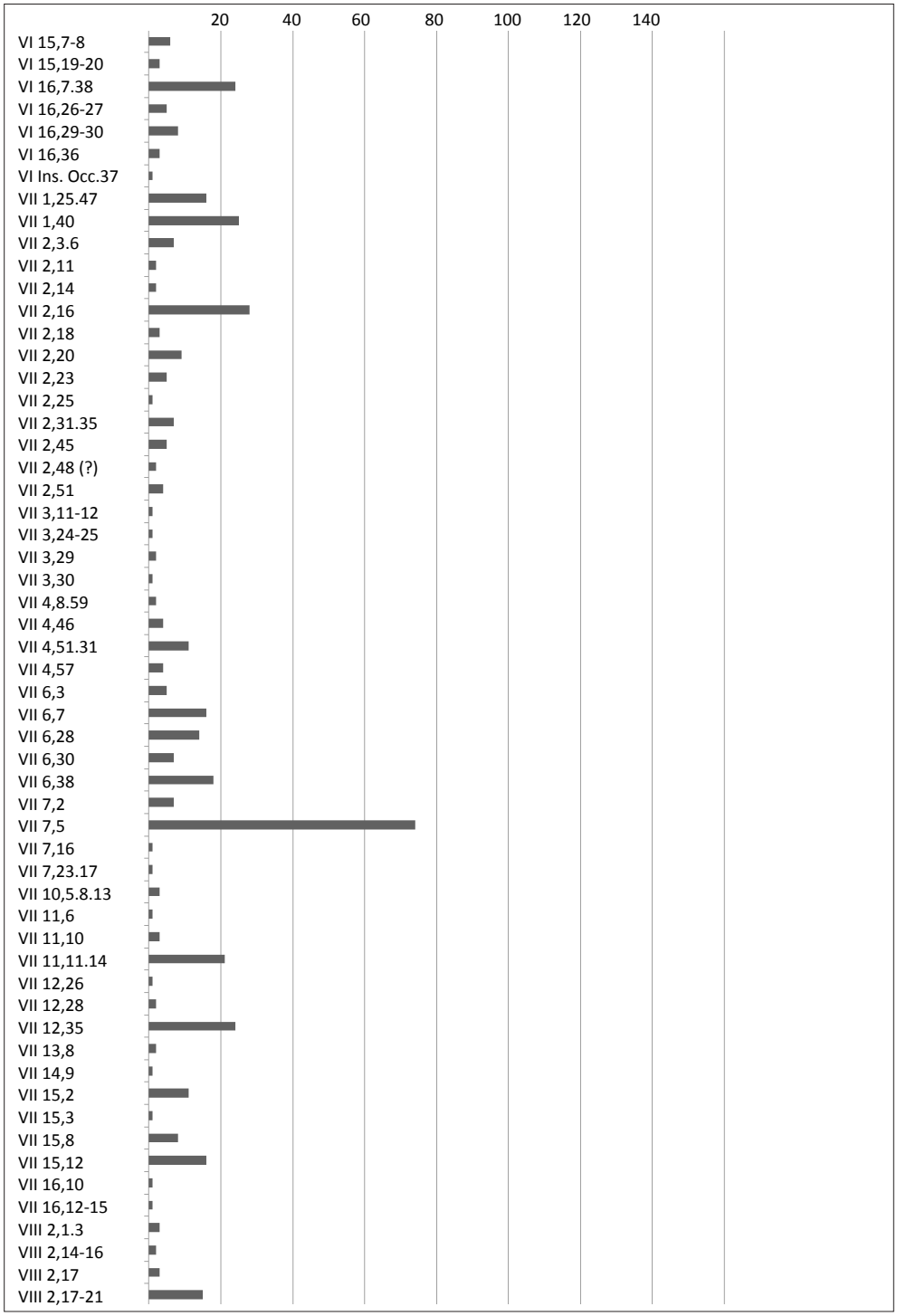
Figure 3: General distribution of graffiti (graph by author).

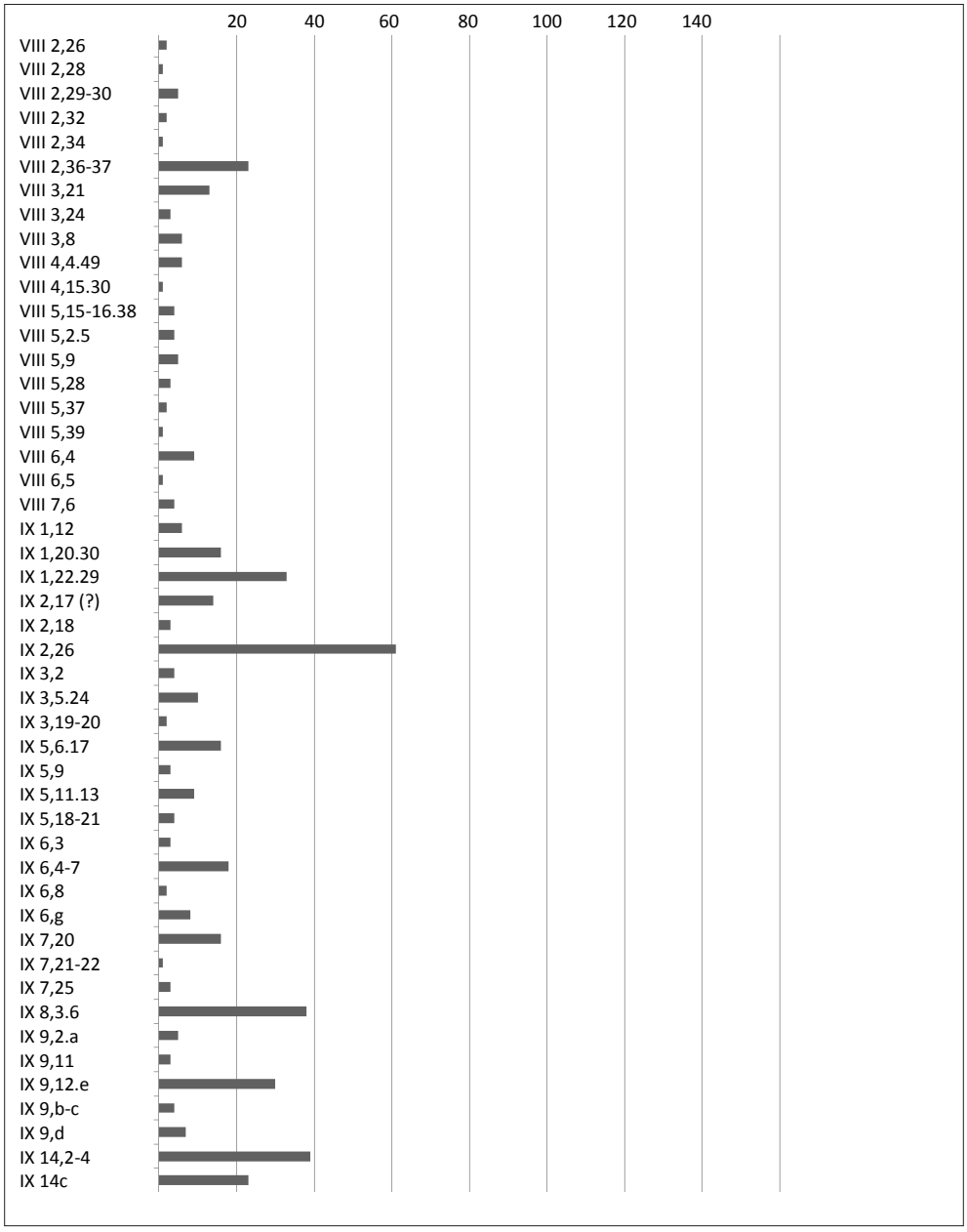
style-houses are usually clustered in entrance rooms (*fauces*), atria, and peristyles or *viridaria*, i. e. in the central distribution rooms which one would pass when entering the house and continuing on to other rooms or facilities. Graffiti have been found found in the *fauces* of 31% of the inscribed houses, in the atria of 32%, in the peristyles/ *viridaria* of 50%, and were often located in two or three of these room types within the same house (cf. Fig. 4). This typical distribution pattern makes it difficult to tell whether the inscriptions were made by inhabitants or visitors, even if other factors can sometimes help answer this question. (The location of a cluster of graffiti around the kitchen entrance in the *Casa del Menandro* (I 10,4), for example, suggests that the graffiti were made by slaves working in this area of the house (Mouritsen 2011: 281); in some cases, the graffiti writers indicate that they are slaves, thus showing that not only visitors left inscriptions behind.) Although graffiti contained personal content and were not always clearly visible or easy to find on a wall or column, they were nevertheless placed in the most public spaces of the house. They were 'private' messages consciously transmitted using a 'public' medium; the level of publicity could be regulated by the place, size, and layout of the graffiti. As a form of writing that was more 'public' than letters on wax-tablets exchanged between two people, but more 'private' than clearly visible monumental inscriptions in an urban space, graffiti made information public, invited others

Table 1 Number of graffiti in large and very large houses (type 3 and 4; by author).




20
40
60
80
100
120
140
V 2,d
V 2,g
V 2,h
V 2,i
V 3,4
V 3,7
V 3,8
V 3,10
V 4,1
V 4,13
V 4,a.11
V 4,b
V 4,c
V 5,3
VI 1,7.24
VI 1,10.23
VI 2,4.30–31
VI 2,12 (?)
VI 2,16.21
VI 5,5
VI 5,16
VI 5,19.9
VI 6,1
VI 7,3
VI 7,6
VI 7,20–22
VI 8,3.5
VI 8,20.2
VI 8,22
VI 8,23–24
VI 9,1.14
VI 9,3
VI 9,5.11
VI 9,6–7
VI 10,2
VI 10,7
VI 10,11
VI 11,9–10
VI 11,13.6
VI 12
VI 13,2
VI 13,6
VI 13,10
VI 13,13.18
VI 13,16.17
VI 13,19.12
VI 14,12
VI 14,20
VI 14,30
VI 14,38
VI 14,40
VI 14,42
VI 14,43
VI 15,1.27
VI 15,2.26
VI 15,5
VI 15,6


20
40
60
80
100
120
140
VI 15,7-8
VI 15,19-20
VI 16,7.38
VI 16,26-27
VI 16,29-30
VI 16,36
VI Ins. Occ.37
VII 1,25.47
VII 1,40
VII 2,3.6
VII 2,11
VII 2,14
VII 2,16
VII 2,18
VII 2,20
VII 2,23
VII 2,25
VII 2,31.35
VII 2,45
VII 2,48 (?)
VII 2,51
VII 3,11-12
VII 3,24-25
VII 3,29
VII 3,30
VII 4,8.59
VII 4,46
VII 4,51.31
VII 4,57
VII 6,3
VII 6,7
VII 6,28
VII 6,30
VII 6,38
VII 7,2
VII 7,5
VII 7,16
VII 7,23.17
VII 10,5.8.13
VII 11,6
VII 11,10
VII 11,11.14
VII 12,26
VII 12,28
VII 12,35
VII 13,8
VII 14,9
VII 15,2
VII 15,3
VII 15,8
VII 15,12
VII 16,10
VII 16,12-15
VIII 2,1.3
VIII 2,14-16
VIII 2,17
VIII 2,17-21



to participate in a communicative exchange, and created a dynamic interaction on the walls of houses, shops, and public buildings.

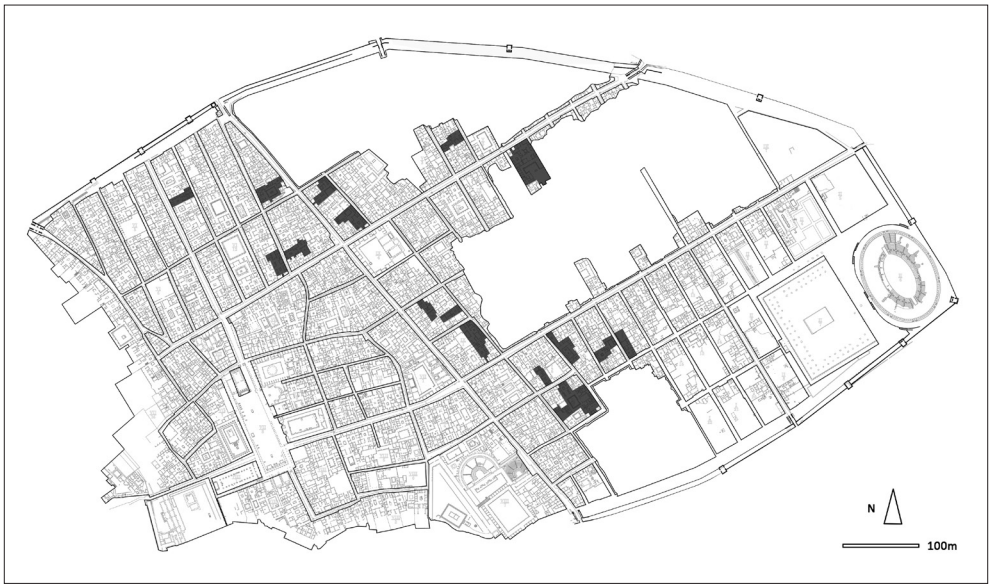


Figure 4: Houses (type 3 and 4) featuring the typical distribution pattern of graffiti in fauces*,* atria*, and peristyles or* viridaria *(by author; map based on Dobbins, Foss 2007: xxxvi–xxxxix, map 3).*

Between Official and Unofficial

Like their modern counterparts, ancient graffiti were unofficial in the sense that they were unauthorised inscriptions, i. e. the act of writing was performed without explicit permission from the state or local, from public or private authorities, and Martin Langner (2001: 12) defines graffiti as inscriptions on surfaces not *primarily* intended for being inscribed. This does not necessarily mean that wall-graffiti were forbidden; explicit prohibitions are only known from a few house fronts, and from some tombs whose owners sought to protect their monuments from human waste and from writings such as advertisements (*dipinti*) and scribbles (graffiti) (cf. *CIL* IV 538 against damaging [*laedere*] the façade generally). The fact that a large part of the Pompeian graffiti were found inside residential buildings suggests that they were at least tolerated, whilst prohibition signs found in specific places might simply indicate how common graffiti-writing was (cf. Wallace-Hadrill 2012: 410). It must be borne in mind, however, that many of the scratched inscriptions are comparatively small and blend into their surroundings, so that they are visible only from close up (Benefiel 2011: 41; 2014: 496; Lohmann 2015: 73f.). Furthermore, whilst the total number of domestic graffiti might seem impressive at first glance, a look at individual houses reveals that their inscriptions were not that numerous (cf. Tab. 1). Even the eighty graffiti from the *Casa di Paquius Proculus* (I 7,1.20) and the *Casa delle Nozze d'argento* (V 2,i) or the over 110 graffiti from the *Casa del Menandro* (I 10,4) do not represent extensive graffiti activity if we consider that these must have been made in a relatively sprawling time frame of seventeen years: Style and content do not allow Pompeian graffiti to be dated more precisely (excepting those graffiti in which consuls are named), so that their time frame must take as its beginning the year of the last decoration of the respective wall (*terminus post*

quem) and end with the eruption of Mount Vesuvius (*terminus ante quem*) in 79 A.D. Since many walls were renovated or redecorated after the earthquake of 62/63 A.D., the time frame spans at least 16 or 17 years. In the peristyle of the *Casa delle Nozze d'argento*, the inclusion of consular names in one graffito allows the graffito to be dated to 60 A.D. (*CIL* IV 04182; see Ehrhardt 2004: 219) and thereby extends the possible production time frame for the inscriptions in this room. In a large residence (which presumably had a significant number of inhabitants and visitors), eighty to 110 graffiti in 16 or 17 years does not make for a high average of graffiti *per annum*, and gives the impression that graffiti-writing was a less common occurrence in houses.

Graffiti formed part of the cityscape, they were one form of writing amongst many others. Although they differ by (our) definition in content, form, technique, and function from other texts and images present in ancient daily life, they did not remain unaffected by those. In her latest book, Kristina Milnor (2014) presents numerous examples of the ways graffiti repeated 'authorised' (e.g. literary) texts: not only do we find variations and word-for-word quotations of the first line of the *Aeneid* and several other literary works (cf. Gigante 1979), but even standard epistolary formulae, for example, appear as greeting in graffiti (Milnor 2014: 161–174). Additionally, the layout of certain graffiti repeated the one of 'official' inscriptions by, e. g., imitating the *capitalis quadrata* of lapidary inscriptions instead of using cursive lettering, or by setting a *tabula ansata* around a text (Fig. 5) (see Kruschwitz and Campbell 2010: 59–70 for a collection of graffiti and *dipinti* texts in *tabula ansata*). Similarly, many graffiti drawings were influenced by 'authorised' images: they copied motifs from wall-paintings or imitated the style and iconography of tomb reliefs showing (e. g.) gladiator fights (cf. Flecker 2015: 135–137). In the combat scenes represented in incised graffiti, gladiators are shown in profile and fighting in pairs, just as in the reliefs, with weaponry corresponding with that used in the real fights (Fig. 6); the outcome of the duel is often anticipated by the position of the legs (the future winner steps forward) or by injuries (the future loser bleeds from an arm or a leg). The many names and *tituli memoriales* ('I was here') seem to reflect the general epigraphic habit: the desire to memorialise oneself on the walls echoes that of the more prominent figures memorialised in the forum. But unlike 'official' lapidary inscriptions, which meant (e.g.) to honour distinguished individuals or which named building sponsors in prominent lettering, graffiti were condemned to perish sooner or later due to the limited durability of the wall-plaster. This predictably restricted lifespan, however, did not prevent people from intentionally leaving behind traces of their existence in the plaster – on the contrary: some graffiti containing the names of consuls indicate the writers' expectation (or hope?) that their texts would survive longer than a consular term of office, and that later readers would be able to date the graffito based on the names of the consuls. However ephemeral graffiti may be in theory, some may also have been intended as longer-lasting texts, and the oldest graffito known from Pompeii (*CIL* IV 1842), dating to 78 B.C., shows that graffiti could, like their monumental counterparts, in fact survive for well over 100 years, depending on the building where they were inscribed. Without official approval or permission – whether from representatives of the state, such as the emperor or senate, or from local authorities such as the respective municipality or house owners –, graffiti thereby drew upon the function and meaning, the language and layout, and the motifs and style of authorised texts and images.

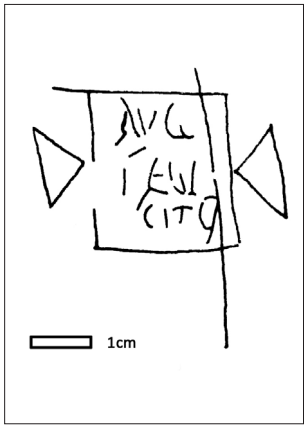


Figure 5: Graffito in tabula ansata*: '*Aug(usto)/ feli/ citer*' (*CIL *IV 2460; line-drawing by author, after* CIL *IV).*

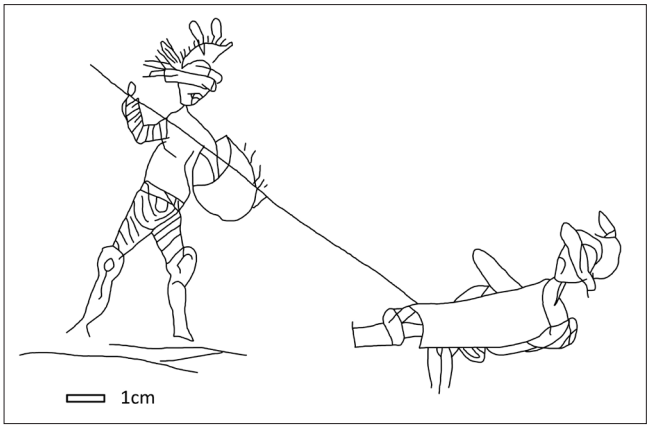


Figure 6: Gladiators from the oecus *14 of the* Casa di Obellius Firmus *(IX 14,2.4) (Langner 2001: cat. no. 1044; line-drawing by author).*

Between Formal and Informal

As described in Vitruvius' *De architectura* (VI 5), the Roman *domus* appears to have been a highly-formalised space in which individuals of different social status, gender, and age interacted: social hierarchies were reflected in the spatial layout of the house, which allowed the *paterfamilias* to regulate access to and choose appropriate rooms for every occasion, from the ritualised *salutatio* to the *convivium*, and even according to daytime and temperature (Dickmann 1999: 275–297). Additionally, our perception of the Roman house has been influenced by the archaeological record of the Vesuvian cities, which offer impressive examples of venerable houses with high entrance halls, elegant wall-paintings, rich mosaic floors, and silent, well-shaded gardens. The visual and sensual impressions of these (now empty and uninhabited) spaces, together with the significance of reception rooms for influential men as explained by Vitruvius, make it difficult to accept that visitors and inhabitants could simply have written on the walls when entering a house or moving about it. Nonetheless, we have thousands of graffiti from perfectly 'formal' Pompeian domestic spaces, as well as from the later terrace-houses in Ephesos (for a report on the latter, see Taeuber 1999). Whilst graffiti seem to us an act of vandalism that violates the painted walls, they were evidently not perceived this way in antiquity, but were instead tolerated even in the most accessible, i.e. most-trafficked rooms of the house. As direct traces of the people who frequented these spaces, graffiti enable us to gain insights into ancient daily life that no other material can provide, and, at the same time, remind us of our own preconceptions: graffiti bring us closer to the ancient Romans, but also distance us from them.

What made the graffiti 'informal' is the freedom their authors had with respect to the location, form, and content of the inscriptions, since graffiti were not written on behalf of others. They were partly doodles, created in moments of boredom, and partly more meaningful messages; perhaps in part inspired by the many official inscriptions present in the urban land-

scape, many graffiti seem to reflect the basic human desire to leave one's mark, and are in this respect not unlike modern visitors' inscriptions on tourist sites. Other scratched inscriptions were clearly designed to be written on the wall, like the well-known phrase that occurs four times in Pompeii: 'I admire you, wall, that you have not fallen apart, even though you have to carry the writing of so many people' (*CIL* IV 1904; 1906; 2461; 2487). Creativity can also be observed in graffiti which play with form and content or with image and text – and words as images (for an excellent summary of graffiti-writing, see Cooley 2012: 211–213). Nonetheless, the authors' freedom led to surprisingly few exceptions within the formalised space of the *domus*, as most of the incised inscriptions follow very specific distribution patterns, as outlined above. The same holds true for the content of the textual graffiti, which consist mostly of single names, and for a small number of greetings, literary quotations and verses, erotic and romantic messages, alphabets, and certain other graffiti genres; many of the texts, such as the *vale* and *salutem* graffiti, are formulaic and repeat common expressions (cf. Mouritsen 2011: 283 on the formulaic nature of the texts, and Milnor 2014: ch. 3 on authorship and originality). Amongst the pictorial graffiti, we find a similarly standardised repertoire of motifs, with ships, animals, human busts, and gladiators at the top of the list (Langner 2011: 75; 84f.). The graffiti appear frequently on monochrome wall-panels, but we do not know if this is because writers respected the artistic value of the wall-paintings, or because the free panels guaranteed better visibility of the graffiti than a turbulently colourful background. On the other hand, columns were especially favoured as writing-surfaces, but their graffiti are often minute and difficult to find, as the faint inscriptions get lost in the white background or disappear in the shadows cast by the flutes of the columns (Lohmann 2015: 73–75). In any case, the 'informal' inscriptions followed clear patterns and developed their own conventions, which we might describe as part of the 'graffiti habit'.

Given the many difficulties outlined above, 'informal' may, after all, still be the most appropriate adjective available, because it explains the range of possibilities: the possibility to draw upon authorised inscriptions in one case and to write down original text in one's own handwriting and style in another, even if, in practice, the inscriptions have a predominately repetitive nature. Without the 'informal' nature of graffiti, its creators and contributors would not have felt free to expand upon the graffiti already present on a given wall. I do not, however, wish to argue that we should not use any of the other descriptions for graffiti *in general*, I simply wish to draw attention to the fact that the categories of public and private, official and unofficial, formal and informal are not always mutually exclusive, and that certain types of material evidence – in this case the graffiti – can cover two extremes either because it is heterogeneous or because it can be described according to different aspects such as location/spatial context ('public') or content ('private').

Conclusion: Crossing Borders, Blurring the Lines

When defining the object of our research, we must differentiate it from other potential objects of study on the basis of selected criteria. As others have shown, the criteria for defining graffiti are not, and cannot be, fully distinctive. The *CIL* IV, for example, categorises inscriptions according to their technique and the surface on which they were written, but graffiti

are hardly the only type of inscription to be incised – one need only consider inscriptions on pottery or metal or of writing preserved on wax. Nor are graffiti the only transitory inscriptions on wall-plaster, where dipinti were also placed. At the same time, certain inscriptions in charcoal, paint, and ink also count as graffiti because of their cursive writing and the content of their messages (cf. Baird and Taylor 2011). The *CIL*'s categorisation was, however, necessary for recognising graffiti as a specific type of inscription and assigning them a place amongst the many other types of inscription – however we categorise these – within the urban landscape and domestic space. The axes official/unofficial, public/private, and formal/informal have conventionally functioned as a framework for this, but graffiti defies these categories and demands, as we have seen, a less polarising model.

The present paper has sought to provide an outline of the Roman (or at least Pompeian) 'graffiti habit' by showing how graffiti defy conventional dichotomies. Graffiti blur the lines between seemingly fixed categories in multiple respects: they were informal inscriptions within the formal environment of the *domus*; they consisted of unauthorised images and texts which drew upon the 'language' of authorised media; and they communicated private issues – such as wishes, thoughts, and messages – in the most public spaces of the house. When we consider the contrasting positions of the early and recent Pompeianists sketched out at the beginning of this paper, we might conclude that ancient graffiti were something in between illegal and legal writings, between vandalism and a common form of communication: although the total number of graffiti in Pompeian domestic spaces might seem overwhelming at first sight, the number of graffiti found in single houses tends to be relatively low in consideration of the time frame in which they were written. Graffiti seem, in general, to have been a common form of writing, yet they were placed very deliberately in their surroundings (cf. Benefiel 2014: 496). Just because we do not know of explicit prohibitions of graffiti-writing from Pompeian houses does not mean that graffiti were welcomed everywhere. The fact that we *do* know of signs on graves prohibiting graffiti does not, on the other hand, necessarily mean that graffiti-writing was generally forbidden. The distribution patterns of graffiti could have resulted both from certain habits that had been established over time and from unwritten rules: the occurrence of graffiti in the most central rooms indicates that a certain audience was probably envisaged, while at the same time the domestic atmosphere seem to have prevented people from randomly placing their graffiti all over the walls; the placement and size of scratched inscriptions reveal that their makers instead showed a certain awareness or respect for their surroundings. Last but not least, to conclude with a comment on the ambiguous nature of Pompeian graffiti, even the term 'ephemeral' does not seem to be fully appropriate, because – thanks to the eruption of Mount Vesuvius – thousands of graffiti have survived more than 1700 years. Sadly enough, however, their discovery has led to their undoing and proven their ephemeral nature: after being excavated, Pompeian graffiti have been steadily vanishing due to exposure to the weather and being frequently (mis)handled by modern visitors.

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