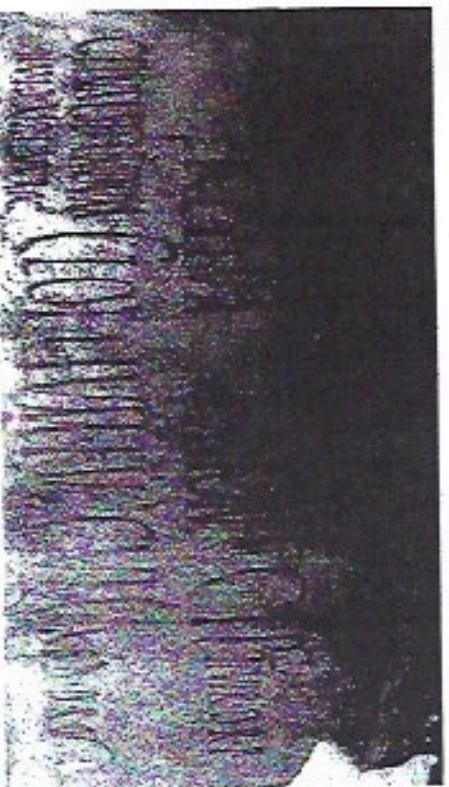


Social media of the ancient world: Scholars study graffiti in Pompeii

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TOP: Pompeii wall's graffiti. MIDDLE: Ruins of Pompeii from above, with Vesuvius in the background. BOTTOM: A 3D reconstruction of a Roman wall, with a fresco of a man writing - often known as "The Writer of the House of the Faun".

Rebecca Benetel stopped onto the first floor of a house in Pompeii, Italy. She entered a tiny dark room. Mosquitoes whined. Huge moths flapped around her head. Her flashlight showed a skeleton that looked as if it were struggling to rise from the floor. Nonetheless, she moved closer and searched for irregularities in the wall. She soon found what she was looking for: a string of names and a cluster of numbers. This was part of the lively graffiti chatter carried on by the citizens of Pompeii before Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 BCE and buried their city.

"There are a few hazards to this work," laughs Benetel. She is a 35-year-old classicist from Washington and Lee University who has spent part of the past six summers in Pompeii. "Sometimes the guards tried to let me out of the buildings at the end of the day!"

Regardless, she's always eager to return.

Vesuvius Covered Pompeii In About 20 Feet Of Ash

Vesuvius dumped debris on Pompeii for 36 hours. It covered the city in about 20 feet of ash and sealed up everything underneath. Since the 18th century, archaeologists have excavated about two-thirds. The city is well preserved, and for that reason it offers a special view of the ancient world. Historians, archaeologists, and classicists can see what it was like in the middle of an ordinary day.

From the very beginning, archaeologists noticed large amounts of graffiti on the outside of buildings. In the late 1800s, scholars began cataloging this graffiti throughout the ancient Roman world. This effort is helpful to scholars like Benetel. More than 80 percent of Pompeii's recorded graffiti have since been erased by rain and wind.

Not The Kind Of Defacement We See Today

In the ancient Roman world, graffiti was a respected form of writing. It was often interactive - not the kind of defacement you now see on rocky cliffs and bathroom stalls. Inside elite dwellings, Benetel has excavated 85 pieces of graffiti. Some were greetings from friends, carefully carved around the edges of artwork in the home's finest room. In a staid, people took turns quoting popular poems and adding their own clever twists. In other pieces, the graffiti include drawings: a bird, a peacock, a beaming deer.

Many historians in the past had ignored the graffiti. They did not think that anyone worth studying helped make it. But Benetel's observations show that's not true. "Everyone was doing it," she says.

Scholars Drawn To The Study Of Graffiti

Modern-day scholars have been drawn to the study of graffiti. They are interested to hear the voices of the non-elite groups that earlier scholars ignored. Today, scholars appreciate graffiti for what it can teach us about ordinary people.

In the past four years, there have been four international conferences devoted to ancient and historic graffiti. One, at England's University of Leicester, drew so many participants that there wasn't space for all of them.

"Graffiti Is Often Produced Very Spontaneously"

"Graffiti is often produced very spontaneously, with less thought than Virgil or the epic poet," says Claire Taylor, a lecturer in Greek history at Trinity College in Dublin. "It gives us a different picture of ancient society."

Pablo Ozcáriz is a lecturer in ancient history in Madrid who has found thousands of medieval graffiti in the Cathedral of Pamplona and at the Abbey of La Olivia in Navarre. "It's as if someone asks us to write two diaries," Ozcáriz explains. "One will be published as a very important book and the other will be just for me. The first may be more beautiful, but the second will be more sincere."

Benefiel's study of Pompeii's graffiti has revealed a number of surprises. She has found that the feared emperor Nero was much more popular than we tend to think. She's found that declarations of love were every bit as common then as they are today and that it was acceptable for visitors to carve their opinions about the city into its walls. She's discovered that the people of Pompeii loved displaying their cleverness via graffiti, from poetry contests to playful recombinations of the letters that form Roman numerals.

"Much Nicer In Their Graffiti Than We Are"

And she's found that Pompeians expressed far more goodwill than ill will. "They were much nicer in their graffiti than we are," she says. "There are lots of pairings with the word 'feliciter,' which means 'happily.' When you pair it with someone's name, it means you're hoping things go well for that person. There are lots of graffiti that say 'Feliciter Pompeii,' wishing the whole town well."

Quiz

1

What is the CENTRAL idea of the section "Scholars Draw To The Study Of Graffiti?"

- (A) A recent international conference devoted to ancient and historic graffiti was extremely popular.
- (B) Modern-day scholars appreciate ancient and historic graffiti for what it teaches about ordinary people.
- (C) Ancient and historic graffiti was produced by both elite people and ordinary people.
- (D) There are international conferences for modern-day scholars who study ancient and historic graffiti.

2

Which detail would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?

- (A) Researcher Rubecoa Bernell has examined 85 pieces of graffiti.
- (B) Scholars have been cataloging the graffiti of the ancient Roman world since the 1800s.
- (C) Researcher Rubecoa Bernell found graffiti on the first floor of a house in Pompeii.
- (D) Four international conferences on graffiti have been held recently.

3

Read the sentences below from the section "Not The Kind Of Defacement We See Today".

In the ancient Roman world, graffiti was a respected form of writing. It was often interactive – not the kind of defacement we now see on rocky cliffs and bathroom stalls.

What does the word "defacement" mean?

- (A) change in the size of something
- (B) damage to the surface of something
- (C) improvement in the appearance of something
- (D) danger in the use of something

4

Read the sentence below from the section "Graffiti Is Often Produced Very Spontaneously".

Benafat's study of Pompeii's graffiti has revealed a number of surprises.

Which word could replace "revealed" WITHOUT changing the meaning of the sentence?

- (A) created
- (B) accomplished
- (C) discovered
- (D) uncovered