

Latin graffiti at Pompeii

FUN AND GAMES ON THE WALLS OF POMPEII

Voiceover:

Pompeii, on the Bay of Naples in Italy, is today one of the most famous archaeological sites in the world. Every year, over 2 million people visit the ruins of this ancient city, which was destroyed by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD.

We can walk the streets, visit the theatres and amphitheatre, enter the baths, and nose around the homes of the ordinary Romans who lived here, and for many visitors, it feels like travelling back in time. For historians, classicists, and archaeologists, too, Pompeii is a treasure trove of information about daily life in the Roman world.

Sometimes, what we see looks very much like the things we have in our houses today, such as this mosaic from the doorway of the House of the Tragic Poet. You should just be able to make out the letters at the bottom of the picture, spelling out the words 'Cave Canem' – 'Beware of the Dog'!

In fact, Latin writing is all around us at Pompeii, though sometimes we have to look very hard to see it. Today, many people think of graffiti as crude or anti-social, or perhaps even subversive, in the case of famous urban artists such as Banksy; and for a long time, scholars dismissed ancient graffiti for much the same reasons.

Now, though, we realise the value of these scraps of writing, as evidence for all sorts of aspects of ancient life.

So what does graffiti tell us about fun and games in Pompeii? I'm Dr Joanna Paul, a Lecturer in Classical Studies at the Open University, and in these audios, I'll be introducing you to some of the things we can learn from what's written on the walls of Pompeii. We'll also be taking a closer look at the Latin used in the graffiti, so that you can see how you don't have to be very advanced in your studies of the language before you can decipher them.

Some of the most common subjects of graffiti were the gladiatorial contests that were regularly held in the city's amphitheatre. Programmes of events would be painted on the walls to communicate information about upcoming attractions.

We can pick out a few important details from the text of this typical announcement, which was found on the Via dell'Abbondanza, the main street connecting Pompeii's forum and amphitheatre.

Look for the Roman numerals, XX and X, telling us how many pairs of gladiators will fight; 20 pairs belong to Decimus Lucretius Satrius Valens, and 10 to his son, his fili; both of their names are in the genitive, showing that the gladiators belong to them. You will also recognise the word April in the final line – the letters before it tell us the precise date of the games.

Finally, the sign tells us *vēnātio et vēla erunt* – the verb, *erunt*, is the future active indicative of *sum*, to be, so we know 'there will be' something. Importantly for spectators, it means there will be awnings, *vēla*, to keep them in the shade, and a wild beast-hunt, a *vēnātio*, as part of the show.

We find lots of graffiti recording the outcome of gladiatorial matches too, perhaps depicting famous combats, or telling us how many fights a gladiator had won. This scene, found at the House of the Dioscuri, shows a triumphant gladiator holding aloft a palm leaf, while the text reads *campāni victōria ūnā cum nūcerinīs perīstis*.

This seems to commemorate a famous riot that took place in the amphitheatre in 59 AD, between the Pompeians and people from nearby Nuceria.

Here, the vocative *campāni* shows that it is the Campanians that are being addressed – perhaps referring to some other locals. The Pompeians are boasting of their victory, the *victoria*, in which the Campanians perished along with the Nucerians – *cum nūcerinīs perīstis* – so we might translate the sentence as ‘Campanians, through our victory, you perished together with the Nucerians’.

Of course, gladiatorial combat was far from the only leisure activity in Pompeii. Other fragments of graffiti show us how bits of famous literature could also be part of popular culture. Look at this example. The handwriting takes some deciphering, but it reads *fullōnēs ululamque canō; nōn arma virumq(ue)*.

If you’ve ever looked at the *Aeneid* in Latin, some of that might sound familiar, for Virgil’s poem begins with the famous words *arma virumque canō* – ‘I sing of arms and the man’.

Here, though, we have a *non* – it is not the subject of the *Aeneid* that this Pompeian is singing, or writing, about, but *fullōnēs ululamque* – fullers, or people who cleaned cloth, and their symbol, which was the owl, or *ulula* in Latin; so the graffiti reads ‘I sing of fullers and the owl, not arms and the man’ – which makes a lot more sense when we realise it was found on the outside of the fullers’ workshop!

So, you can see how even the briefest scribbles on the wall at Pompeii give us useful and fascinating insights into what the Romans were getting up to in their free time.