

## Latin graffiti at Pompeii

### *LOVE AND HATE ON THE WALLS OF POMPEII*

#### **Voiceover:**

When we think of graffiti today, we might be most familiar with the kinds of things scrawled on school desks or toilet walls, teenage sweethearts proclaiming their love for one another; or just as likely, writing lewd or abusive messages.

In this respect, much of the graffiti found at Pompeii is very similar. I'm Dr Joanna Paul, Lecturer in Classical Studies at the Open University and in this audio, we'll be exploring what it can tell us about the personal relationships of the town's inhabitants.

With thousands of people from all sections of society living here, it's not surprising to find traces of every kind of emotion, virtue, and vice preserved on Pompeii's walls.

In fact, one of the things that Pompeii has been most famous for, ever since it was rediscovered in the mid-18th century, has been the sheer amount of apparently obscene material found in the city, images like these frescoes found above the doorways in the city's brothel.

But it's not always the case that graphic imagery necessarily equates to pornography: images of large phalluses are all over the place in Pompeii, but look at the Latin text surrounding this one, found at a bakery.

*Hīc habitat felicitas* - 'here lives good fortune, or happiness', it says, suggesting that the phallus here is a symbol of prosperity, or good luck, and in no way intended to be rude or offensive.

Elsewhere, though, graffiti writers would think nothing of using all kinds of obscenities in their accounts of sexual exploits. This piece of text was found, unsurprisingly, in a brothel: it reads *hīc egō puellās multās futuī*, and it's not hard to translate.

The author is telling us that in this place, hic, I, ego, did something to puellas multas; these words are in the accusative and mean 'many girls'. Perhaps you can also recognise that the verb, futui, is a first person singular perfect indicative active, by its 'i' ending, indicating that this happened in the past. So what he did do? Well, he boasts, 'here I fucked many girls'.

Of course, not all the graffiti about love and sex is quite so vulgar. Sometimes it can be quite touching, allowing us to imagine that we can really access the innermost feelings of a long-dead Roman.

One man named Vibius Restitutus scratched some words on the wall of a building that was probably a small inn: firstly, he tells us that he, Vibius Restitutus, *hīc sōlus dormīvit* – again, the main verb is in the perfect tense, and it's from dormio, so it tells us that he slept here – *hīc* – *sōlus*, that is, alone. A very different scenario from our previous graffiti writer!

Not only that, he goes on to reveal how *Urbanam suam dēsīderābat*. The main verb is now in the imperfect, and it's from *dēsīderō*, meaning 'to long for' – so he kept on longing – but for who, or what?

The accusative object of the verb reveals all – it is *Urbānam suam* – his own Urbana, the wife or girlfriend whom he must have left at home. The fact that another piece of graffiti in the city tells us that *Restitutus multās decēpit s(a)epe puellās* – Restitutus has often deceived many

girls – only adds to the intrigue, though of course we have no way of knowing that they refer to the same person.

It's not only men recording their feelings for women on Pompeii's walls. Some of the best-known bits of graffiti in the city imply that the city's gladiators were also objects of lust, as in this bit of text found on one of the main streets.

It refers to a man named Celadus, with the letters 'tr' an abbreviation for 'Thraex', meaning that he was a Thracian-style gladiator; and it tells us that he was the *suspīrium puellārum*, the 'heart-throb of the girls'.

This has often been taken to mean that the gladiators were worshipped as celebrities, and maybe that's true – but of course, this could also have been written by Celadus himself, or perhaps a friend of his.

Whether you were a gladiator, an ordinary man on the street, or an important politician, graffiti like this was a useful way of advertising your fame and reputation in Pompeii.