

Latin graffiti at Pompeii

POLITICS AND BUSINESS ON THE WALLS OF POMPEII

Voiceover:

Some of the most striking things you might see if you visit Pompeii today are these bold red-and-white painted posters, called programmata. They carried announcements relating to forthcoming political elections, which would usually take the form of endorsements for individual candidates. Once the election was over, the posters would be white-washed, ready for the next round of electioneering.

As with other aspects of Pompeian life, the walls tell us a lot about what happened in the city on a daily basis. I'm Dr Joanna Paul, Lecturer in Classical Studies at the Open University, and in this audio we'll be looking at what they reveal about its political life?

One of the most notable aspects of this kind of graffiti – or, to give it its technical term, *dipinti*, since these words were painted rather than scratched onto the wall's surface – was the amount of abbreviations that were used, all so that the message could be conveyed as concisely as possible. Look at the small letters at the end of the top row of this sign, which adorns a tavern on Pompeii's main street.

The Roman numeral II is followed by the word for man, *vir*, so this refers to the one of the most important political offices in Pompeii, that of the *duumvir*. Each year, two men held this office, overseeing a range of civic activities, from council proceedings to financial dealings.

Next, you can see the letters 'DRP', which is a common abbreviation for the phrase *dignum rei publicae*, meaning 'worthy of public office'. So this poster is telling us that its subject, whoever he may have been, was running for the office of *duumvir*, and was worthy of our vote.

The same abbreviations pop up in this election notice, which was found a little further down the same street. Again, we can see that the candidate is running for *duumvir*, and that he's worthy of public office; in fact, that endorsement is repeated in the final words *dignus est* – he is worthy.

This time, we can also see the candidate's name, *Publius Paquius Proculus*; it's in the accusative case, because it's the object of a main verb wrapped up in another commonly found abbreviation, *OVF*, here depicted as the little symbol at the end of the second line. *OVF* stands for *oro vōs faciātis*, which means 'I urge (oro) you – that is, the person on the street – to vote for' whoever – in this case, *Proculus*.

We don't know who wrote this poster, but other examples record exactly who is supporting a given candidate. Here, you can see the candidate for *duumvir* is *Holconius Priscus*, and the final words, *fullōnēs ūiversī rog*, tell us who is endorsing him. *Rog* is an abbreviation for our main verb, standing for *rogant*, the third person plural present active indicative of *rogō*, meaning 'I ask'; and its subject is *fullōnēs ūiversī*, meaning all the fullers. So all of Pompeii's fullers are asking that you vote for *Holconius Priscus* for *duumvir*.

Around Pompeii, there are countless further examples of these kinds of messages all over the walls – some are easy to spot if you visit the city today, but for others, we rely on the work of archaeologists over the centuries, who have deciphered and published them.

As you go further in your studies of Roman history and culture, and the Latin language, you may study graffiti and other kinds of inscriptions, not only from Pompeii, but around the Roman world. And there is certainly lots to study. Here's one final example. The graffiti writer

is addressing the wall on which he writes, the *pariēs*, and is amazed, *admīror*, that it has not fallen down – *nōn cecidisse*. Why? Because, he says to the wall, you hold up, or support, *sustineās*, the tedious words of so many writers – *tot scriptōrium taedia*!

The writer of this little motto, which appears in a number of places in Pompeii, might have found the graffiti tedious; but for us, each snippet of text that we've met gives us a precious glimpse of how Romans lived, and how they went about their political business, leisure activities, and personal relationships.