Understanding the Common Roman Man Through Ancient Graffiti

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Histories and ancient writings of Rome often were preserved only in the works of elite, educated citizens, such as Vergil, Caesar, and Tacitus. While these works depict many important facets of ancient society and myth, they only capture just one perspective on Roman life and society. Their works describe history, powerful government officials, heroic wars, and mythological tales. Because of this disparity, the daily life and society of the common man is difficult to capture through Roman literature. However, beautifully preserved ancient graffiti in and around major Italian cities brings the common man in ancient Roman society into history, where he is sometimes forgotten.

The urban expression of the common man onsite in these ancient cities is embodied and preserved in the (often crude) language of that common man: graffiti. The mention of graffiti used as a medium of communication was detailed in Roman contemporary literature; even the upper-class poet Catullus in Carmen 37 references drawing his own crude graffiti to vandalize a local tavern. Additionally, some of the sites in Pompeii also showcase graffiti written by urban, non-elite women and prostitutes. This graffiti is particularly important as an insight into the lives of the common woman as well.

I am interested to explore what facets of theme and expression in graffiti have been conserved from the Romans: the use of crude language and drawings, sexual references, jokes, and political expressions as a depiction of culture. The interactive and spontaneous nature of the graffiti lacks elaborate planning (necessary, for example, for Vergil’s epic The Aeneid), showcasing the common man in raw and unembellished light. To whom was the author writing and why would they proclaim this (often intimate, in the case of the urban women) information publically? What does the presence of this graffiti reveal about the high literacy capabilities of the common Roman citizens, including women, and their intended audiences? Was some graffiti considered an art form or was it all considered crude vandalism? What story does this street art expression in context tell about society?

The purpose of the study is to explore Roman graffiti by attaining a better understanding of the themes and purpose of the ancient Roman graffiti as an insight into Roman society as seen through the eyes of a common, urban citizen.

Methods

Figure 1. Two ancient sites [A] the Imperial Forum in Rome and [B] Pompeii visited to observe Roman graffiti preserved in their structures.

I traveled to four ancient cities rich in preserved ancient Roman artifacts and ruins: Rome, Naples, Pompeii, and Herculanenum. These cities were known to contain and display ancient graffiti as well as other artifacts, with which I used to piece together an entire picture of Roman society for the common man. The graffiti could be classified into 4 different categories: children’s graffiti, sexual graffiti, political advertisements, and early Christian graffiti.

While visiting these sites, I learned about ancient Roman society and everyday life of the citizens inhabiting these cities. I read relevant literature to enhance my knowledge of the purpose of this graffiti and the place it played in society, as well as its intended messages. After this trip, I was able to come to conclusions about the cares and priorities of ancient common citizens often ignored in historic texts, and compare it to modern graffiti to see to what extent these priorities and cares may or may not have changed.

Results

Figure 2. Playful graffiti drawn by children on the side of the schoolhouse in the Imperial Forum: (A) recitation of the first line of The Aeneid and (B) and (C) math drills. Graffiti drawn by children in Pompeii on the side of the schoolhouse: (D) and (E) gladiators fighting, (F) and (G) a horse, (H) and (I) an anchor, (J) and (K) a ship, and (L) and (M) a fighting nest.

Figure 3. Sexual graffiti written inside a brothel in Pompeii: (A) and (B) the Roman minor god of fertility, Priapus, ejaculating. (C) Latin text translating to “I came three times, and I will come again”, and (D) and (E) Latin text “Fructus” translating to “she is a good one”.

Figure 4. Political graffiti in Pompeii (A) and (B) written outside of the thermae public bathhouses with political propaganda, and (C) Latin text “Cornelium” translating to the male name “Cornelius”, a political candidate, outside of a private shop.

Figure 5. Graffiti written by early Christians on the walls of tombs in the St. Sebastian catacombs in Rome: (A) Latin text translating to “St. Peter and St. Paul pray for us” and (B) Christian symbols for Jesus Christ, including the Chi Rho, the Alpha, and an anchor.

Conclusions

From this project, I was able to learn what common Roman citizens valued. Children, like children of today, enjoyed watching sports and idolized athletic heroes. They grew up drawing what they saw in their daily lives: boats, horses, gladiators, and school drills. Similarly, in modern American society, graffiti often is used as a mode of expression for urban youth. The presence of sexual graffiti shows the prominence of brothels in ancient Roman society, as well as the common patronage the brothels enjoyed. This suggests that this business was more accepted in ancient society than it is today. Likewise, the widespread political graffiti, common to what is witnessed today where private citizens and businesses display signs on their properties advocating for one candidate or another, shows how the ancient Romans also publicized their political beliefs. Similar to today, these messages written on buildings provided a means to show citizens the candidates the owners supported in a hope to persuade their patrons in voting likewise, and as a means for businessmen to attempt to earn favors from politicians by advertising on their behalf. Finally, in contrast to the light-hearted Roman graffiti, the early Christian graffiti was very devout: the writers invoked saints Peter and Paul and drew symbols representing Christ. Combined, I observed that the common ancient Romans enjoyed pleasures in their lives such as games and sports, education, and prostitution, and prioritized politics in society. Meanwhile, I observed early Christians prioritized their religion and valued prayer and piety. These values all were expressed in their graffiti. This is a relevant way to learn about society because graffiti, as a method of communication, is still used in the society of today as a method to understand societal values and concerns.

References

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