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City/Cities & Epoch: Pompeii, Late Republic and Early Imperial Period

Project title: Talking with, about, and in the presence of the Gods: Graffiti in Pompeii

Topic + research questions + case study + methodology:

The aim of the research project is to make everyday interaction with, about, and in the presence of the gods tangible by examining and contextualising graffiti. The case study will focus on late Republican and early Imperial Pompeii (destroyed in A.D. 79) – the city with the absolute best surviving record of ancient wall graffiti. Graffiti is particularly suitable in dealing with such a research question, for three reasons:

- The act of writing graffiti constitutes a form of urban agency. Graffiti not only constitutes a discourse, it is also a part of urban interaction and communication processes in and of itself.
- As a spontaneous and unplanned form of interaction and communication that is not officially regulated, graffiti is close to 'everyday' communication.
- Graffiti is related to concrete places by its physical attachment. It is thus possible to understand graffiti in relation to specific places.

Against this background, the project chooses two interdependent approaches. On the one hand, it analyses ritual graffiti and graffiti addressing or mentioning the gods. The project focuses on their positioning within the urban context, their relation to 'installations' (e.g. altars, fountains), their positioning in relation to decorative features and their interaction with other forms of script (graffiti; dipinti). On the other hand, the project examines graffiti placed in the 'presence' of gods – texts written in sanctuaries or close to ritual installations such as altars. This complementary approach provides an understanding of the communicative habits in sacred places. These two interlinked approaches allow for a new understanding of everyday ritual-religious concepts and actions.