

# The Ostia Graffiti Project: Finding and Documenting

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## Where We Stand

HIC EGO MENA EMI  
"Here I bought (the slave) Menas"

### Aims of the project:

- ✓ Locate and digitally document **600+** published and **new** graffiti at Ostia.
- ✓ Propose a preliminary first reading, translation and interpretation of the graffiti.

PVPA V(ALE) SAL(VTEM)  
"Darling (doll), hello, greetings!"

### The work so far:

Late 1990's – 2007:  
All plaster in buildings studied. Low-resolution photos made, short descriptions added.

2014 – 2016:  
Four semi-annual campaigns for **high-resolution** photos. (Not yet online).

### Work to be done:

- ✓ Revisit a number of closed buildings.
- ✓ Add new measurements.
- ✓ Study plaster in storerooms.
- ✓ Documentation in an extensive **database** for online searches.

DOMINVS SOL HIC AVITAT (= HABITAT)  
"Lord Sun lives here"

### Results available at:

<http://www.ostia-antica.org>

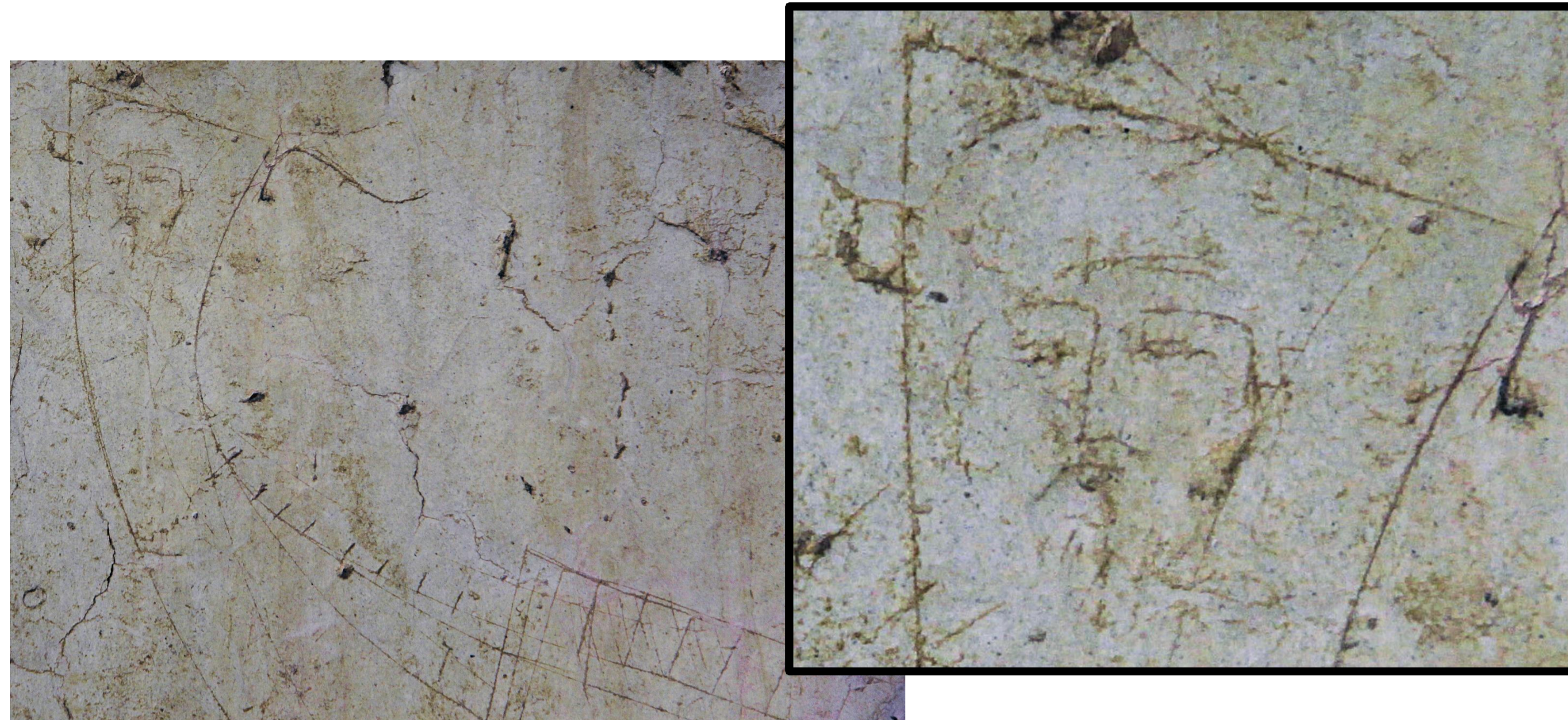
Sensitive information, such as location, is password-protected (theft, vandalism).

Collaboration with EAGLE is being investigated.

### Some characteristics:

- ✓ The majority are anonymous.
- ✓ Dates are frequent (days of the month), but consular dates are rare.
- ✓ Widely varying styles of writing.
- ✓ A large number of drawings were found.
- ✓ Many drawings of ships and lighthouse.
- ✓ Some instances of the Greek and Latin alphabet, a few literary graffiti.
- ✓ A small number of references to amphitheatre and circus.
- ✓ Financial transactions on one wall only.
- ✓ Clustering in a simple room under a staircase.
- ✓ Other examples of clustering, but also noticeable absence of graffiti.
- ✓ The number of erotic graffiti perhaps smaller than might be expected in a harbour city.
- ✓ Many religious graffiti: household context, Mithras, Imperial cult, Christianity.

## What We See

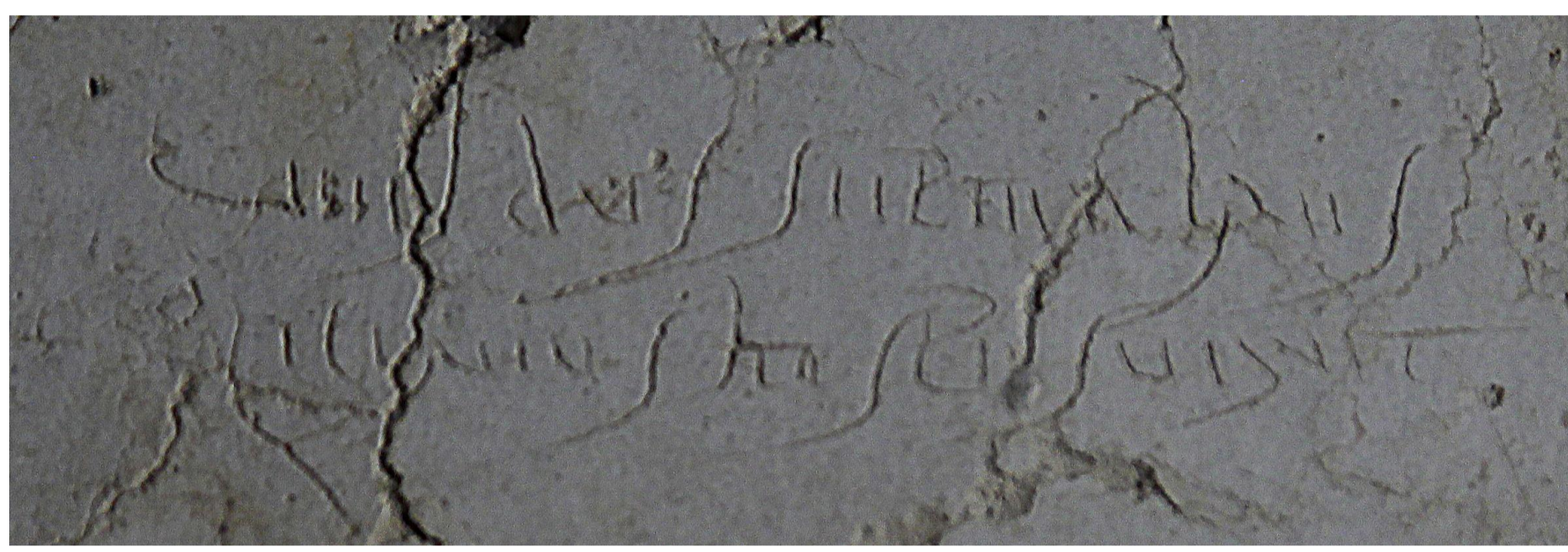


Top: A head on the stern or prow of a ship

Left: The lighthouse



Bottom:  
VIII IDVS SIPTIIMBRIIS  
LICINIUS HOSPIIS VIGVIT



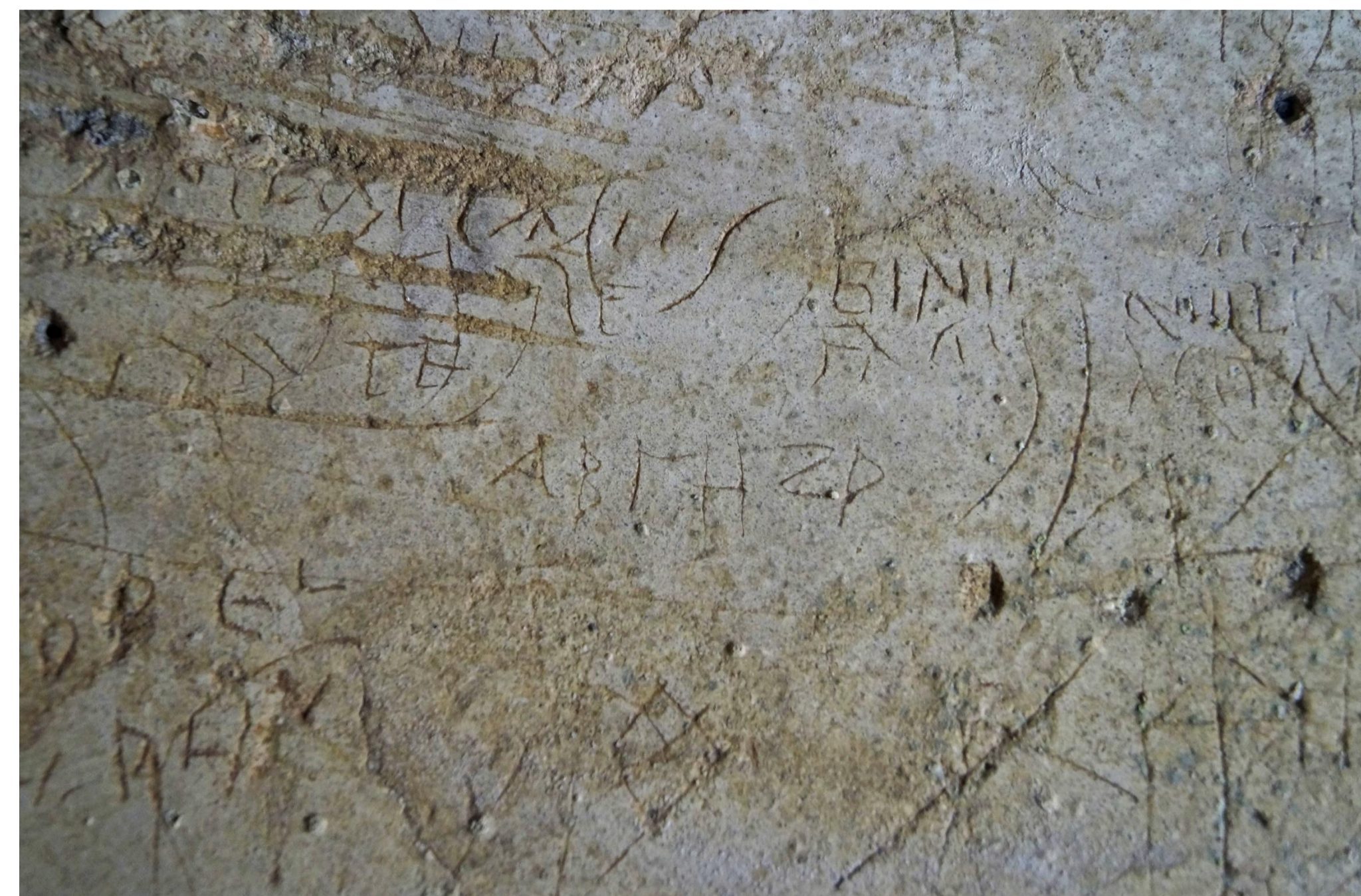
Right: Trajan's column, with the text  
PVTE(OLANVS) HIERON PINXIT

Bottom: Three lines of Greek text  
(still trying to read and explain)



Left: Three dice, 6 – 1 – 6  
(a number with special significance?)

Bottom: Part of clustered graffiti under a staircase



Top: Structures like this were found several times (what are they?)

Right:  
V K SEPTE  
HIC TONAT  
(a reference to an earthquake?)



## Who We Study

PRI(DIE) K(ALENDAS) SEP(TEMBRES)  
ACCE(PTI) HS XL

We quote and paraphrase the important articles in "Understanding Graffiti. Multidisciplinary Studies from Prehistory to the Present" (edited by Troy Lovata and Elizabeth Olton), Walnut Creek 2015.

IMP(ERATORE) ANTONINO III  
E(T) COMAZONTE II CO(N)S(VLIBVS)  
VIII IDVS AVG(VSTAS)

August 6, 220 AD

### Fundamentals:

"The writing of graffiti is an essentially social act. To write graffiti is to communicate, one never finds graffiti where they cannot be seen by others."

"It is this relation of the writer to the wall that holds the key to our investigation."

"In many ways, graffiti afford a vital human function by allowing people to anonymously share sentiments and their most private and vulnerable thoughts."

### More specifically:

Do anonymous texts make differences disappear: status, ethnicity, education ...?

Modern graffiti have been described as illegal writing on the wall, identifying "latent conflicts and grievances that in any other medium would bring sanction and retribution." Did they serve as such among Ostian slaves and freedmen? What did the writers over a period of 2000 years have in common, and how were they different?

Graffiti can help us to distinguish between gender-related differences in perception.

It has been noted that graffiti can transform a room to "a meeting place mediated by a wall, where often serious concerns are honestly expressed." This is reminiscent of the clustering of graffiti in a room under a staircase in Ostia.

Modern high school graffiti have been depicted poetically: "Silently the words clamor for our attention. They are a key to the locked door, which when opened shows us their humor, cynicism, faith, and despair."

COH(ORTE) VII (CENTVRIA) OST(IENSIS)  
IMP(ERANTE) AN(TONINO)  
CO(N)S(VLIBVS) L[A]JETO ET  
CERIALE SEBARIVS  
CALPVRNIVS, X

"Calpurnius, night-watchman from the *centuria* of Ostiensis, from the seventh *cohors*, during the reign of Caracalla, in the year of consuls Laetus and Cerialis (215 AD), X". *Sebarius* = *sebaciarius*, night-watchman. The X means *vota decennialia*.

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