

APOTROPAIC SYMBOLISM AT POMPEII: A READING OF THE GRAFFITI EVIDENCE.

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RESUMO: O artigo trata de algumas inscrições romanas cursivas antigas, de Pompéia, enquanto evidência de hábitos apotropaicos. Grafites fálicos e sexuais explícitos são estudados como representativos do uso popular de expressões obscenas para afastar as forças maléficas.

ABSTRACT: The paper deals with some Old Roman Cursive inscriptions from Pompeii as evidence of apotropaic habits. Explicit phallic and sexual intercourse graffiti are studied as representative of ordinary people's use of obscene expressions for warding off evil influences.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Sociedade romana, grafites, Pompéia, simbolismo apotropaico, religião romana.

KEY-WORDS: Roman society, graffiti, Pompeii, apotropaic symbolism, Roman religion.

Introduction

Apotropaic acts and symbolism for warding off the evil eye or the evil influences played an important part in the Roman Society. Phallic representations and illustrations were particularly used to turn away (cf. the Greek root of *apotrépein*, "to turn away") evil forces: *contra invidentium effascinationes*, against envious charms (*GR baskaino*) (Pliny, N.H.19,50). It is usually accepted that the apotropaic function of the phallus is linked to its association with fertility (e.g. ADAMS, 1987, pp. 4-6, with earlier bibliography on the subject). Different terms which referred to the

phallus are thus considered apotropaic, namely *mentula*, *verpa*, *fascinum*, *phallus* and perhaps even *cauda*. Different classical authors attest to the apotropaic character of male genitalia. Costas Panayotakis emphasizes, for instance, that some of Petronius' passages (e.g. *Sat.* 22, 1; 134, 11; 138, 1) suggest a sexually symbolic rather than pornographic interpretation (personal communication). Related expressions, especially those referring to the sexual intercourse with a woman, are however and unexpectedly usually not associated to apotropaic connotations. Adams (1987, p. 120) was thus able to state that "it seems that *futuo* [to fuck] was freely

used as an unemotive technical term in brothels by both clients and prostitutes”.

Not long ago, the Portuguese anthropologist João de Pina-Cabral (1993, pp.117-118), struck by the ubiquity of phallic displays at ordinary people's level, decided to study the genital symbolism in Portuguese popular culture. Pina-Cabral (1993, pp.117-118) concluded that the purpose of phallic manipulation “is to capture power and use it”. From my own experience with Roman cursive inscriptions, I was impressed by the references to the phallus and by the constant use of expressions referring to the male intercourse with women. Reading the thousands of ordinary people's graffiti found at Pompeii and published in the fourth volume of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (hereafter CIL IV), it became obvious that there was a straightforward link between phallic representations and male sexual intercourse references, both related to fertility and good luck.

This paper deals with some old Roman cursive inscriptions from Pompeii, for these wall scratches or scribbles are probably the best access we have to ordinary people in Roman times. These *tituli graphio exarati* enable the modern scholar to act like an ethnologist or oral historian in search of people's evidences. It is difficult to assess how representative of ordinary *ethos* any written text can be judged considering that literacy was not universal (HARRIS, 1989). However, most contemporary palaeographers who deal with cursive writings emphasize the humble background of ordinary writers (e.g. JORDAN, 1990, p. 438). “A very wide spread of literate skills in the ancient world” was acknowledged by Bowman (1991, p. 123). “The vivacity and sheer mass of the evidence suggests a widely literate population”, after Franklin (1991, p. 81; cf. BEARD, 1991, p. 37). “Lots of people could write, and there was quite a lot to read”, in Hopkins' (1991, p. 152) words. Lower social and economic strata are also widely attested in cursive

tablets (TOMLIN, 1988, p. 80). Giovanni Menella (1992, p. 7), studying *countryside* epigraphy in northern Italy, was struck by the fact that “poorly literate individuals were able to write short texts on unfinished materials thanks to the use of portable and unexpensive stylets”. Even frontier peoples are said to be literate: “we note the rather high state of literacy among those Roman-times Beduins” (GICHON, 1983, p. 585). The acceptance of the fact that there was widespread literacy (*alphabétisation largement répandue* in CORBIER's words 1991, p. 118) is, of course, the result of an inevitable bias: specialists on cursive inscriptions are naturally prone to consider that the hard times dedicated to the deciphering of obscure inscriptions do represent a contribution to the knowledge of a large number of people (GORDON, BEAR, REYNOLDS & ROVECHÉ, 1993, p. 154). The use in these writings of *Vulgar Latin*, however, strengthen considerably the argument.

Pompeian graffiti are still underestimated as a source of Roman customs and *Weltanschauung*. Amy Richlin's *The Garden of Priapus* and Catherine Johns' *Sex or Symbol?* deal with the phallus and its apotropaic connotations but both authors are not particularly concerned with scribbles. Richlin (1983) and Johns (1982), among others, greatly contributed to our understanding of phallic symbology in general and particularly as represented in elite evidences, literary texts, scholarly paintings and so on. Although ordinary people's scribbles should not be opposed to elite expressions as they refer to one and the same society and culture, it is, however, reasonable to emphasize the specificity of popular culture. Carlo Ginsburg (1986, p. 95) stressed that as an analytical model it is “more useful a bipartition between popular and learned culture than a holistic one”. The anthropologist João de Pina-Cabral (1993) attests to the importance of the distinction between popular and learned cultures: Pina-Cabral studied

popular genital symbolism which was completely foreign to his learned culture. This is the main aim of this paper: to look for the apotropaic implications of ordinary scribbles.

Apotropaic wall scribbles at Pompeii

Pompeii was not an ordinary Roman townlet, *Pompeii eine weltoffene Stadt war mit einer bemerkenswerten Aktivitaet seiner Einwohner*, cosmopolitan in outlook (SOLIN, 1973, p. 98), its graffiti representing the feelings of a wide variety of people. Phallic drawings on the city walls are not uncommon. Sometimes ithyphallic drawings are particularly interesting as the *erectum fascinum* is larger than the man himself. On the walls near the Theater quarter there is a drawing of an ithyphallic gladiator using his penis as a weapon (VIVOLO, 1993, pp.148-149; Figure 1). Taking into account the strongly religious connotations associated to gladiatorial fights (HUGONIOT, 1992, p. 12), it seems likely that the phallic representation of the gladiator was intended to protect him against the evil (cf. Porph. Ad. Epod. 8, 18: *fascinum pro uirili parte posuit quoniam praefascinandis rebus haec membri deformitas apponi solet*; cf. TUPET, 1986, pp.2609-2675).

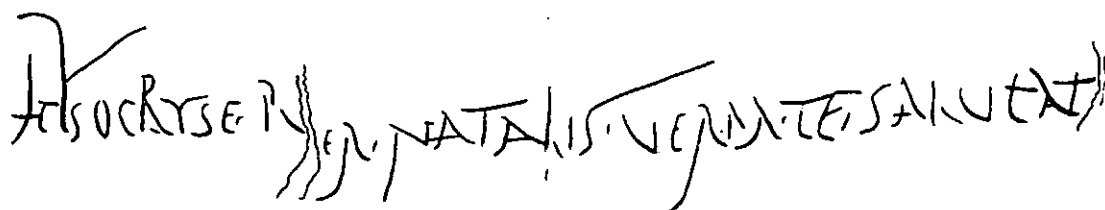
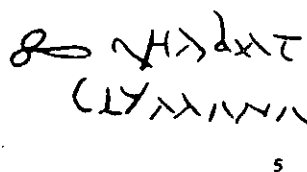
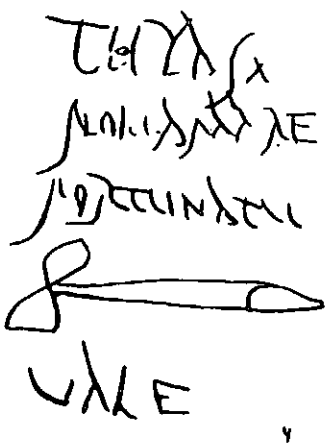
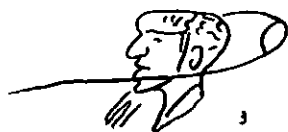
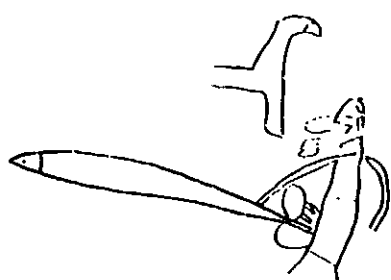
Another ithyphallic drawing (CIL IV, 4566; Figure 2) is followed by an unclear inscription: *Felicio tomintare*. Although still unexplained, this graffito must be related to *tumeo* (to swell) or to *torqueo* (to twist), whilst *felicio* is related to *felix*, fertile and lucky (cf. VAANANEN, 1937, pp. 43-49). It could thus be interpreted as a reference to the phallus being waved or swollen. Good luck and fertility can also be associated to the drawing of a man whose head is completed by a phallus (VIVOLO, 1993, p.179; Figure 3). Phallic drawings could explicitly act as a protection against the evil eye or female contempt. Male dominated societies,

phallogocentric in character (GOLD, 1993, p.79), do tend to generate in men a fear of female sexual assessments. Women were not powerless, as they could choose their mates (cf. GILMORE, 1990) and a graffito by a man named Fortunatus is a case in point (CIL IV, 4498; Figure 4): *Thyas noli amare Fortunatum uale*, "Thyas does not want to love Fortunatus. Farewell". Before the greetings, the phallic drawings acts as a good luck safeguard.

Phallic drawings were also used to substitute *phallum* in a phrase, like CIL IV, 4756 (Figure 5): *q() habiat Clymene phallum*, "Clymene, hold the phallus" (cf. VAANANEN, 1937, p. 62). The first letter, apparently a *q*, remains unexplained if we accept Mau's interpretation in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*. Zangemeister, quoted by Mau, proposed to read it *Quintus habeat Clymenen*, "Quintus shall have intercourse with Clymene". Perhaps we should suggest that the penis is the agent or subject of the phrase: *describo phallum quod habiat Clymenen*, "I draw this phallus which will have intercourse with Clymene" (cf. VAANANEN, 1963, pp. 173-175). The association of the phallic drawing to the written message was probably carried out to lure the good luck. The strength associated to the penis is also clear in other graffiti, like CIL IV, 1655 (Figure 6): *Hysocryse puer Natalis uerpa te salutat*, "Young Hysocrysus, Natalis the phallus greets you".

Male genitals, as a symbol of creative nature, were respected with religious piety as the representation of the mysterious forces of creation, and at the same time they were used as apotropaic amulets against all human and divine evil (MONTERO, 1991, p. 69).

Pompeian graffiti referring explicitly to the male sexual intercourse with women are also very common. Eva Cantarella (1988, p. 276) emphasized that "the sexual mentality of Roman males was that of a raper, a consummate raper". The most popular word used on the walls was the verb *futuo* ("fuck") and



Figures 1-2-3-4-5-6

related terms (originally “hit, bit”?; cf. ADAMS, 1987, p. 118). Like its Greek counterpart *bineo*, also used at Pompeii (e.g. CIL IV, 8767), ancient authors associate it to the use of force (cf. LAMBERTERIE, 1991, pp.149-156). However, as John Boardman (1992, pp. 239-240) has stressed recently, phallic references and intercourse with women do not necessarily mean aggression by men against women and, indeed, most graffiti referring to *futiones* are not offensive. Furthermore, they seem to have the same apotropaic connotations of their phallic counterparts.

In one of the brothels of Pompeii, many graffiti refer to the sexual intercourse. Most of them are clearly harmless, like CIL IV, 2246 (Figure 7): *hic ego cum veni, futui, deinde redei domi*, “I came here, I have fucked and finally I came back home”. Similarly, “Placidus fucked here whomsoever he wanted”, *Placidus hic futuit quem uoluit* (CIL IV, 2265; Figure 8). Some phrases are complex: “the vagina of Roman citizens was fucked, their legs open; there are no substitutes, except for the most sweet and kind”, *futebatur, inquam futuebatur, ciuium Romanorum atractis pedibus cunus in qua nule aliae uices erant nisissei dulcisime et piissimae* (CIL IV, 1261). Even though difficult to interpret since the text was written as a transcription of oral language, it is interesting to note the use of a term with strong religious connotations, *piissimae sc. mulieres* – “the most blessed women” – in connection with a *futio* (for a different interpretation, see ADAMS, 1987, p. 121).

Some phrases are clearly propitiatory. “You are in good shape if you are a good fucker”, *bene valeas qui bene futues* (CIL IV, 2274; on the language, see VAANANEN, 1937, p. 36). The same interpretation applies to an inscription in Brothel Street (*Vico del Lupanare*) by a woman: “I was fucked here”, *fututa sum hic* (CIL IV, 2217; Figure 9). Adams (1987, p. 120) commented on this graffiti remarking that “it is not the sort of remark one would expect from a person who considered that she had been the victim of a hu-

miliating act”. He is obviously right, but this does not mean that it was a “neutral use of the word”. If the *futio* was considered as a lucky act, naturally both males and females would use the word to protect themselves against the evil. This hypothesis is strengthened by graffiti referring to women as “female fuckers”. Two inscriptions refer to “Mula the fucker”, *Mola phoutoutris* (in Greek, CIL IV, 2204; Figure 10; cf. DUBUISSON, 1992, p. 189) and “Miduse the fucker”, *Miduse fututrix* (CIL IV, 4196; Figure 11). It seems that the only reasonable explanation for these inscriptions is that the *futio* was praiseworthy for men and women alike.

A poorly spelled graffiti is probably an interesting evidence of the popular use of references to sexual intercourse as a lucky device. “Lustful lad, how many women have you fucked!”, *filius salax qud tu mulieriorum difutuisti* (CIL IV, 5213; Figure 12). A number of vulgarisms in the phrase make its interpretation difficult, but it does not seem likely that *filius salax* (literally, “youngster fond of leaping”) was pejorative (contra ADAMS, 1987, p. 206). The use of *salax* to refer to a boy, considering that the word was used mostly in relation to male animals, can be explained by the fact that the writer was a very humble person, probably acquainted with countryside slang. This could also explain the use of *filius* (“son”) as “lad” (VAANANEN, 1937, p. 191). Furthermore, there are other references to good or bad luck and as a result of *futiones*. The well-known Floronius inscription is a case in point: “Floronius, fucker and soldier of the seventh legion, was here <sc. an inn> and no woman realized the fact...but they were only six and so they would be too small a number <sc. for this boastful male>”, *Floronius binet ac miles leg. vii hic fuit, neque mulieres scierunt, nisi paucae, et ses, erunt* (CIL IV, 8767; Figure 13; cf. FUNARI, 1993, p. 134). The intention of Floronius with this graffiti was to protect himself from the bad luck which could result from his abstinence. To avoid it, he referred to himself as a fucker,

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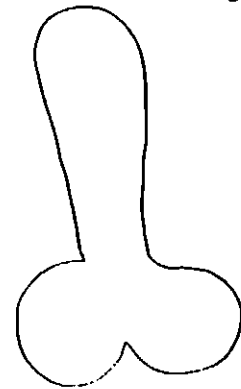
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FFLICITAS

Figures 7-8-9-10-11-12-13-14

binetas in Greek, and thus reasserted his sexual capacity.

Conclusion

Is it possible to conclude from these examples that explicit references to sexual intercourse were apotropaic? There is no easy answer to this question. It is widely recognized that the phallos was charged with deep religious feelings, acting as an actual apotropaic symbol. On the other hand, the widespread use of references to the sexual intercourse by ordinary people is usually not explained. This practice could not be explained satisfactorily by natural sexual desire alone (cf. BING & COHEN, 1991, p. 1). It is, on the other hand, easy to understand that if fertility was at the root of the magic properties attached to phallic representations, it should also explain the popularity of references to sexual intercourse. Long ago Pierre Grimal (1969, pp. 47-49) keenly stressed that fertility cults were common not in the elite people but among "freedmen, slaves, very ordinary people" (*le menu peuple*). The concern with bad luck and evil eye was also characteristic of humble people (JORDAN, 1990, p. 438). Within the popular religious culture, *la culture religieuse populaire* (KUENZEL, 1992, p. 1055), there is no reason to suppose that *futiones* were not associated to the phallus and that sexual intercourse as well as phallic references were both linked to fertility and good luck. The "religion of uncultivated people", *religion des gens incultes* (GOUREVITCH, 1991, p. 136), although difficult to grasp, is surely to be found in *Old Roman Cursive Inscriptions written in Vulgar Latin (die Sprache der niederen Klassen*, VOSSLER, 1954, p. 49).

The ubiquity of references to the sexual intercourse in wall scribbles is striking and the terms used

to refer to it comprise related subjects as well, like *fructus* "enjoyment" (e.g. CIL IV, 2245) and *felicitas* "happiness, luck" (JOHNS, 1982, p. 65; CIL IV, 1454; Figure 14). Gestures are a clear indication of the association of sexual intercourse and the warding off of evil influences, as the use of the fingers to mimic sexual intercourse indicates (cf. *Ov. Fast.* 5, 433). Ritual obscenity, obscene wedding songs and other fertility and apotropaic ceremonial acts should thus not be isolated from ordinary sexual references. It seems reasonable to suppose that the daily use of sexual language, as represented in the graffiti, was the result of the apotropaic properties associated to the sexual intercourse itself and to the *oral and written reference* to it. For defenseless ordinary people, subject to the manifestation of the evil as illnesses, poverty and hunger, the spelling and writing of sexual words could at least be an affordable way of warding off bad luck. The anonymous scribbler had no doubt about that: "here dwells good luck" (Figure 14).

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