

ARCTOS

ACTA PHILOLOGICA FENNICA

VOL. LV



HELSINKI 2021

ARCTOS – ACTA PHILOLOGICA FENNICA

Arctos has been published since 1954, annually from vol. 8 (1974). *Arctos* welcomes submissions dealing with any aspect of classical antiquity, and the reception of ancient cultures in mediaeval times and beyond. *Arctos* presents research articles and short notes in the fields of Greek and Latin languages, literatures, ancient history, philosophy, religions, archaeology, art, and society. Each volume also contains reviews of recent books. The website is at www.journal.fi/arctos.

Publisher:

Klassillis-filologinen yhdistys – Klassisk-filologiska föreningen (The Classical Association of Finland), c/o House of Science and Letters, Kirkkokatu 6, FI – 00170 Helsinki, Finland.

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ISSN 0570-734X (print)

ISSN 2814-855X (online)

Layout by Vesa Vahtikari

Printed by Grano Oy, Vaasa

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AN UNREAD SAFAITIC GRAFFITO FROM POMPEII

KYLE HELMS

Scholars have known about the Safaitic graffiti in Pompeii's theater corridor (VIII 7, 20) since Calzini Gysens' *editio princeps* appeared in 1987.¹ More recently, it has been argued that these inscriptions – eleven distinct texts commemorating the presence of twelve individuals – were written by nomads from the Ḥarrah who had been incorporated into *Legio III Gallica* and who were billeted in Campania in late December 69 or early January 70 CE.²

To these twelve known visitors, we can now add one more. An image of a previously unaccounted for Safaitic inscription was published in volume two of Varone's 2012 photographic survey of Vesuvian graffiti.³ There, in a photograph taken in the theater corridor and labeled D/74859, one can see clearly an additional Safaitic graffito, which was not among those previously published by Calzini Gysens, and which has not – to my knowledge – been transcribed or published elsewhere. The new Safaitic text is, however, quite legible in Varone's photograph. Below, I offer an edition, translation, and commentary.

¹ J. Calzini Gysens, "Graffiti safaitici a Pompei", *Dialoghi di Archeologia* 5 (1987) 107–17; *ed. alt.*: J. Calzini Gysens, "Safaitic graffiti from Pompeii", *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 20 (1990) 1–7. See also *CIL* IV 4961–4963 (cf. p. 1871).

² K. Helms, "Pompeii's Safaitic Graffiti", *JRS* 111 (2021) 203–14. Calzini Gysens' nine inscriptions were reedited as eleven distinct texts in the Online Corpus of Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia (OCIANA). The OCIANA database is maintained at <http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/> and the Pompeian texts carry the sigla CGSP 1–5, 5.1, 6–7, 7.1, 8–9.

³ A. Varone, *Titulorum graphio exaratorum qui in C.I.L. vol. 4 collecti sunt imagines*, 2, Roma 2012, 414.

Pompeii, theater corridor (VIII 7, 20). Varone, *Imagines* (2012), 414 (photo D/74859).

Late Dec. 69–early Jan. 70 CE.

l'nm, “By 'nm”.

In terms of paleography, the *ductus* in this inscription is consistent with the other Pompeian Safaitic, and is written in the so-called “common” variant of the Safaitic script.⁴ For the shape of ' , cf. the same letter in CGSP 8 (visible in Varone’s photographs as line 2 in D/74639) and the form of ' in no. 12 in Clark’s reference tables.⁵ For the shape of the *n*, cf. CGSP 6 where *n* also has a broad circular shape (also visible in Varone’s photo D/74638 – but note that D/74638 must be rotated 180°).⁶ For the *m* that follows, cf. the same character in CGSP 5 and 5.1 (both visible in Varone’s D/74637; again, one must rotate the photograph 180°), though *m* in those inscriptions has a slightly more crescent form; cf. *m* no. 37 in Clark. Only the initial *l* in the unread graffito differs from other Pompeian examples: here, its single vertical stroke seems to have been double-cut – as happens occasionally with Vesuvian graffiti – but it is unclear whether this was due to authorial indecision, coarse plaster, the quality of incision tool, or some other reason.⁷

Turning to content, this new graffito records a name. It begins with the so-called *lam auctoris*, the preposition *l* (“by”), which is followed by the name of

⁴ For letter forms of the Safaitic script, see V. A. Clark, *A New Study of Safaitic Inscriptions from Jordan*, University of Melbourne PhD thesis 1979, 67–71. Letter forms cited below are from Clark’s tables on 70–71.

⁵ Color photographs of the Safaitic are also available in OCIANA, e.g., http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/corpus/pages/OCIANA_0018587.html for CGSP 8.

⁶ Between *n* and the next character, *m*, the plaster appears abraded, and one might wonder whether there could have been one additional (small) character in that space. Comparing the similar name ' *n'm* in CGSP 6 is helpful, as the form of ' there is indeed quite small. Against this possibility, even a small additional character – such as ' – would create a decidedly cramped and uneven letter spacing, whereas Pompeii’s Safaitic graffiti are remarkably evenly spaced otherwise. All things considered, the new graffito appears most likely to be ' *nm* rather than another instance of ' *n'm*.

⁷ It is likely that most plaster-cut graffiti were typically incised with a metal *stilus*: see P. Lohmann, *Graffiti als Interaktionsform. Geritzte Inschriften in den Wohnhäusern Pompejis*, Berlin 2018, 246–51. For single-stroke characters that are double-cut, cf. examples of the letter *l* in *CIL* IV 2416 (cf. pp. 223, 1767–8), also from the theater corridor.

its author.⁸ This kind of inscription is one of the most common text genres for Safaitic graffiti in the Ḥarrah, and is indeed the same as all the other previously known examples from Pompeii's theater corridor. The name that follows appears to be 'nm. This name is attested twenty times in Safaitic graffiti from the Ḥarrah, according to OCIANA's onomastics database.⁹ However, 'nm does not appear in the previously read Safaitic graffiti at Pompeii. We can thus reunite 'nm with his other companions from *III Gallica* and raise the total number of nomadic visitors to Pompeii's theater corridor to thirteen.

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⁸ See A. Al-Jallad and K. Jaworska, *A Dictionary of the Safaitic Inscriptions*, Leiden 2019, 10.

⁹ Accessed on 6 July 2021: <http://krccfm.orient.ox.ac.uk/fmi/webd/ociana>