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CVCVTA AB RATIONIBVS NERONIS AVGVSTI: A JOKE AT NERO'S EXPENSE?*

On the outside wall and in the vestibule of the 'House of Publius Paquius Proculus' in Pompeii (building I.7.1) three graffiti containing the name Cucuta can be found.[1] The first simply reads *Cucuta* (*CIL* 4.8065 [outside wall]). The second tells us that Cucuta was an attendant of the Emperor Nero (*CIL* 4.8066 [outside wall]): *Cu(cuta)* | *Cucuta Ner(onis)*. From the third we learn that Cucuta was a financial secretary (*a rationibus*) of Nero (*CIL* 4.8075 [vestibule]): *Cucuta ab ra[t]ioni[b]us* | *Neronis Augusti*.[2] While the meaning and significance of these graffiti may seem apparent—that one of Nero's attendants scratched his name on the wall and vestibule pillar as he waited for the emperor to return from a meeting—the closeness between *Cucuta* (an otherwise unattested name) and *cicuta* (hemlock)[3] raises a key question: should we read *Cucuta* as *Cicuta* and therefore understand the third graffito in particular as a joke about Nero's rumoured fondness for killing family, friends and his senatorial enemies with poison?[4] In other words, is it Poison, and not a person, that keeps Nero's finances in order?[5] And, if so, can the *Cucuta* graffiti give us an alternative insight into the plethora of wall inscriptions found outside building I.7.1 greeting Publius Paquius Proculus and recommending him for office?

That there is an implied joke behind the name Cucuta is not a new observation: in his address to the Société nationale des Antiquaires de France in 1960, Jérôme Carcopino suggested that the *Cucuta* graffiti should be read as a sarcastic barb.[6] Following

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[1] A possible identification of Publius Paquius Proculus as the owner of the house, of his offices and of his status has been suggested by M. Della Corte, 'Publius Paquius Proculus', *JRS* 16 (1926), 145–54. However, Della Corte's identification relies upon the electoral inscriptions for P. Paquius Proculus outside the house professing support from his neighbours (*uicini*) to confirm his ownership. On criticisms made of Della Corte's methodology, see A. Degrassi, 'Sui Fasti consolari dell'Impero', *Athenaeum* 33 (1955), 141–9, at 142–3; P. Castrén, *Ordo Populusque Pompeianus: Polity and Society in Roman Pompeii* (Rome, 1975 [1983^2]), 31–3; H. Mouritsen, *Elections, Magistrates and Municipal Elite. Studies in Pompeian Epigraphy* (Rome, 1988), 13–27.

[2] On the position of the graffiti in the house, see W. Ehrhardt, *Casa di Paquius Proculus (I 7, 1.20)* (*Häuser in Pompeji* 9) (Munich, 1998), 25–6.

[3] *OLD*^{2} 1.344 s.v. *cicūta*.

[4] See Suet. *Ner*. 33–6; Tac. *Ann*. 13.15–16, 14.51, 14.65; Dio Cass. 61(60).7.4–6, 62(61).17.1–2, 62(62).13.3.

[5] On the imperial freedmen and slaves in administrative roles, see P.R.C. Weaver, *Familia Caesaris: A Social Study of the Emperor's Freedmen and Slaves* (Cambridge, 1972), 231–40, 259–66; H. Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World* (Cambridge, 2011), 93–100. As Weaver explains, a label such as *a rationibus* can refer to the senior administrator (the head of the office) or to those others of junior grade within the office itself.

[6] J. Carcopino, 'Un procurateur méconnu de Néron', *Bulletin de la Société nationale des Antiquaires de France (1960)* (Paris, 1962), 150–8. Carcopino's argument is repeated in *AE* 1962, 133.

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Carcopino, Ramsey MacMullen, Alexander Demandt and others have accepted the premise that we should understand *Cucuta* as *Cicuta*.[7] However, despite this, distinguished scholars of imperial Pompeian graffiti in recent years have continued to treat Cucuta as a real person, using the graffiti as evidence to support the presence of imperial retinues and the imperial family at elite houses in Pompeii.[8] Part of the reason why the thesis put forward by Carcopino has been missed or ignored might be because, while the published version spans eight pages, he chose to focus almost entirely on the *cognomen* Cicuta in order to show that the name was used only in jest, rather than on why we should understand *Cucuta* as *Cicuta* in the first place. Moreover, Carcopino did not consider the broader questions which are raised by interpreting these graffiti as humorous: for instance that, given their location, this could be a barb directed as much at a member of Pompeii's illustrious elite as it is at the emperor in Rome.

Here I will present the full case in favour of understanding *Cucuta ab rationibus Neronis Augusti* as a joke by considering the linguistic, onomastic and historical lines of argument. Once established, the meaning of the graffiti can be explored anew; they are, I suggest, aimed both at Nero and at elites like Publius Paquius Proculus in Pompeii who might promote (even inflate) their own importance through publicizing connections with the imperial capital. This new understanding then transforms the *Cucuta* graffiti from evidence of Nero's retinue in Pompeii to evidence for local political criticism through humour.

LINGUISTICS AND ONOMASTICS

The suggestion that the first *u* of *Cucuta* should be understood as an *i* in all three of our graffiti has been present since the first publication of the excavation reports. Never before, however, have the arguments that justify this suggestion been collated.[9] In the

[7] See R. MacMullen, *Enemies of Roman Order: Treason, Unrest, and Alienation in the Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 1966), 40; A. Demandt, *Das Privatleben der römischen Kaiser* (Munich, 1996), 58; R. Miles, 'Communicating culture, identity and power', in J. Huskinson (ed.), *Experiencing Rome: Culture, Identity and Power in the Roman Empire* (London, 2000), 29–62, at 44; P. Funari, 'Du rire des Grecs au rire des Romains: les inscriptions de Pompéi et le rire', in M.-L. Desclos (ed.), *Le rire des Grecs: Anthropologie du rire en Grèce ancienne* (Grenoble, 2000), 513–23, at 517; M. Beard, *Pompeii: Life of a Roman Town* (London, 2008), 50–1; J. Toner, *Popular Culture in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge, 2009), 181; A.V. Zadorojnyi, 'Transcripts of dissent? Political graffiti and elite ideology under the Principate', in J.A. Baird and C. Taylor (edd.), *Ancient Graffiti in Context* (London, 2011), 110–33, at 131 n. 27.

[8] For example: J.L. Franklin, Pompeis Difficile Est. *Studies in the Political Life of Imperial Pompeii* (Ann Arbor, 2001), 108; A. Varone, 'Iscrizioni e dipinti lungo via dell'Abbondanza: uno spaccato di vita reale nella Pompei del I sec. d.C.', in S.A. Curuni and N. Santopuoli (edd.), *Pompei: Via dell'Abbondanza: Ricerche, restauri, e nuove tecnologie* (Milan, 2007), 123–41, at 131; R. Benefiel, 'Rome in Pompeii: wall inscriptions and GIS', in F. Feraudi-Gruénais (ed.), *Latin on Stone: Epigraphic Research and Electronic Archives* (Lanham, 2010), 45–75, at 54–5, 58; P. Keegan, 'Blogging Rome: graffiti as speech-act and cultural discourse', in J.A. Baird and C. Taylor (edd.), *Ancient Graffiti in Context* (London, 2011), 165–90, at 179; R. Benefiel, 'The culture of writing graffiti within domestic spaces at Pompeii', in R. Benefiel and P. Keegan (edd.), *Inscriptions in the Private Sphere in the Greco-Roman World* (Leiden, 2015), 80–110, at 103; J. Hartnett, *The Roman Street: Urban Life and Society in Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Rome* (Cambridge, 2017), 290; R. Benefiel, 'Urban and suburban attitudes to writing on walls? Pompeii and environs', in I. Berti, K. Bolle, F. Opdenhoff and F. Stroth (edd.), *Writing Matters: Presenting and Perceiving Monumental Inscriptions in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Berlin, 2017), 357.

[9] Carcopino (n. 6) mentions only E. Diehl, *Pompeianische Wandinschriften und Verwandtes* (Berlin, 1930[2]) and M. Della Corte, *Case ed abitanti di Pompei* (Naples, 1954[2] [1965[3]]).

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1911 volume of *Notizie degli scavi di antichità*, which includes the graffito that would later become *CIL* 4.8065, the entry reads 'CVCVTA (*Cucuta* pro *Cicuta*?)'.[10] The 1929 excavation report records the discovery of our other two graffiti, *CIL* 4.8066 and *CIL* 4.8075. Here again it is tentatively suggested that '*cucuta* (= *cicuta*?)'.[11] Ernst Diehl picks this up in his work on Pompeian wall-inscriptions, in which the footnote for graffito 862a reads: '= *Cicuta*?'[12] In his linguistic notes, he suggests that this may be due to vowel assimilation.[13] Diehl's explanation is adopted by Della Corte, but neither considers whether, nor why, the word poison/hemlock (*cicuta*) better fits the context than the name of an imperial attendant (Cucuta).[14]

While Diehl does not himself expand upon the linguistic evidence further, support for his hypothesis can be found in the works of Wilhelm Baehrens, Veikko Väänänen and Jim Adams. As early as 1922, Baehrens suggests that *cicuta* should be understood for *cucuta* and, more importantly, that the correct translation of the word is 'Schierling' (hemlock).[15] As confirmation, he notes that the Romanian word for hemlock is *cucută*, with a *u* as the pre-tonic vowel, meaning that, unlike French (*ciguë*), Italian (*cicuta*) and Spanish (*cicuta*), Romanian recognized *cucuta* as a Latin variant for hemlock, and has continued its usage as such.[16] Väänänen adds to this by discussing the exchange of *ĭ* and *ŭ* specifically;[17] an 'assimilation vocalique' commonly found in diastratic varieties of Latin.[18] As Jim Adams explains, '[i]t frequently happens that a pre-tonic vowel is assimilated to the following accented vowel (regressive), or alternatively a post-tonic vowel is occasionally assimilated to the preceding accented vowel (progressive).'[19] *Cucuta* for *cicūta* (where the penultimate syllable is long) is an example of the common regressive type of assimilation. Thus we have a plausible linguistic case for accepting *Cicuta* for *Cucuta*, which will become stronger when it is put into the context of an onomastic study.

Could Cucuta/Cicuta, then, be the name of a real person, instead of a reference to personified poison ('Mr Poison is Nero's financial secretary')? Carcopino thought not, and to demonstrate his point he focussed on the use of Cicuta as a pejorative

[10] *NSA* 1911, 430 n. 56.
[11] *NSA* 1929, 439 nn. 60–1.
[12] Diehl (n. 9), 65.
[13] Diehl (n. 9), 85.
[14] M. Della Corte, *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, vol. 4 suppl., part 3 (Berlin, 1952), 8075; Della Corte (n. 9), §638.
[15] W.A. Baehrens, *Sprachlicher Kommentar zur vulgärlateinischen Appendix Probi* (Halle, 1922), 32.
[16] For more on the relationship between Latin and Romanian, see J. Fairey, '"Language wars" and literary vernacularisation among the Serbs and Romanians of Austria-Hungary, 1780–1870', in F. Somerset and N. Watson (edd.), *The Vulgar Tongue: Medieval and Postmedieval Vernacularity* (University Park, PA, 2003), 177–97.
[17] V. Väänänen, *Le latin vulgaire des inscriptions pompéiennes* (Helsinki, 1937 [1959^2] [1966^3]), 40–3. Baehrens (n. 15) and Väänänen (this note) are followed in a very brief note on vowel assimilation, which cites *cucuta*, by C. Battisti, *Avviamento allo studio del latino volgare* (Bari, 1949), 114.
[18] Diastratic varieties of Latin, as discussed by Peter Kruschwitz, are those which resulted from diverse social levels. A great deal of the evidence for these varieties comes from Pompeii: see P. Kruschwitz, 'Linguistic variation, language change, and Latin inscriptions', in C. Bruun and J. Edmondson (edd.), *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Epigraphy* (Oxford, 2014), 721–44, at 723, 725–6, 729–32. J.N. Adams, *Social Variation and the Latin Language* (Cambridge, 2013), 3–27 discusses social variation in Latin, although keeping the older term 'vulgar' to denote 'lower' varieties.
[19] J.N. Adams, *The Vulgar Latin of the Letters of Claudius Terentianus (P. Mich. VIII, 467–72)* (Manchester, 1977), 16.

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nickname based on its appearance at Hor. *Sat.* 2.3.[20] In the *Satires*, Cicuta, a moneylender, is the nickname of a Perellius mentioned a few lines later in the same poem (Hor. *Sat*. 2.3.75). However, the example from Horace is a very particular case: it depends upon the readers knowing the real name of Cicuta, since, without that knowledge, the joke simply does not work. As Cucuta's real name is not mentioned in the graffiti, it would be very difficult for Pompeians passing by to appreciate the reference.[21] On this point, Carcopino is surely correct, but his argument can be strengthened further. To see *Cucuta* inscribed upon a wall would not, I suggest, make Pompeians think of a name at all (it is only used in this way by Horace) but rather of the hemlock plant itself. In another graffito (at building VII.6.28), *cicuta* is listed alongside three other harmful plants: *opocarpasum* (a lethal kind of myrrh),[22] *batrachium* (crowfoot known for its caustic properties)[23] and *hyoscuimon* (nightshade).[24] To expect someone walking by on the street to see *Cicuta* or its variant *Cucuta* and think that it is the name of a person instead of a plant seems highly improbable.

Another point not considered by Carcopino is how the interpretation of the *Cucuta* graffiti might be affected by similar *cognomina* (that is, of those professing to be imperial attendants) found inscribed on Pompeian houses. Neither Cucuta nor Cicuta exists as the *cognomen* of any real person. In this, they have an onomastic record distinctly unlike other names found in the area. Inscribed in the vestibule of the 'Praedia of Julia Felix' (building II.4.10) we find: *Sagitta Imperatoris | seruos Pompeianolus*.[25] As the inscription makes clear, Sagitta is a Pompeian slave belonging to the emperor. While the name is similar to *cucuta* in that it is also a potentially deadly weapon (an arrow), unlike Cucuta/Cicuta, Sagitta is a very well-attested genuine *cognomen*.[26] Moving back to the 'House of Publius Paquius Proculus', where *Cucuta* is found, the names Corinthus, Cimber and Celer also appear, although with no explanation as to who these people were.[27] But all three names are attested elsewhere. Corinthus was the *cognomen* of a Lucius Iunius Corinthus and a Publius Lucceius Corinthus.[28] We know of a Quintus Caecilius Metellus Celer (*cos*. 60 B.C.), and

[20] Carcopino (n. 6), 151–2; Hor. *Sat*. 2.3.69, 2.3.175. Carcopino (n. 6) cites the *TLL*, *Onomasticon*, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1907–13), 433. I add that Kajanto cites one instance in the same Horatian satire (I. Kajanto, *The Latin Cognomina* [Helsinki, 1965], 8.335). Solin and Salomies refer only to Kajanto: H. Solin and O. Salomies, *Repertorium nominum gentilium et cognominum Latinorum* (Zurich, 1988), 314.

[21] Carcopino (n. 6), 153. Cf. Weaver (n. 5). According to Ps.-Acro, a scholiast writing in the fifth century, Perellius was given the nickname Cicuta owing to the harshness (*asperitas*) and bitterness of manner (*amaritudo morum*) characteristic of a moneylender (*faenerator*): see Schol. Hor. *Sat*. 2.3.69, 2.3.74, in O. Keller, *Pseudacronis scholia in Horatium vetustiora*, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1902–4), 143.

[22] Gal. *De Antidotis*, *lib*. *1*, in C.G. Kühn, *Claudii Galeni opera omnia*, vol. 14 (Leipzig, 1827 [repr. Hildesheim, 1965]), 57 line 15.

[23] Plin. *HN* 25.172.

[24] *CIL* 4.9024.

[25] *CIL* 4.10082b; Benefiel (n. 8 [2015]), 103.

[26] *ILS* 6532, 6714, 9007; *CIL* 15.8042, 01–15 (Sagitta is the name of a slave who made bricks that have been discovered in four regions in Italy, Samnium, Rome, Aemilia, and Latium and Campania): Kajanto (n. 20), 342. *ILS* 6532 and 9007 refer to the son of an Octavius Sagitta mentioned in Tac. *Ann*. 13.44; *Hist*. 4.44.

[27] *CIL* 4.8069 (*Corint(h)us*); cf. 4.2024, 4.4620, 4.5161. *CIL* 4.8077 (*Celer(e)m*). *CIL* 4.8070, 4.8079 (*Cimber*); cf. 4.10082a for the name Cimber appearing again next to the *Sagitta* graffito.

[28] Castrén (n. 1), 250.

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Quintus Pilius Celer was a relative (most likely through marriage) of Cicero's friend and correspondent Atticus.[29] Titus Annius Cimber was praetor in 44 B.C.[30]

In fact, the 'House of Publius Paquius Proculus' was a very busy space for graffiti generally, bearing some 78 inscriptions (*CIL* 4.8059–8135). Near the names of Cucuta, Corinthus, Cimber and Celer are greetings and acclamations, repetitions of 'Nero' and 'Rome', and two references to the renaming of April as Neroneus.[31] Our *ab rationibus* graffito is very specific in identifying Nero by name (*Neronis* as opposed to *Augusti*, *Caesaris* or *imperatoris*, as seen in the Sagitta graffito) and is inscribed on a house belonging to a wealthy Pompeian family (as the size of the house suggests).[32] The graffitist wanted to ensure that passers-by knew, at a glance, that Nero was the emperor to whom (s)he referred, and (s)he wanted the graffito to be surrounded by other names and references to the emperor, making that passer-by look twice at what (s)he had just seen. What is more, this is exactly the point. By including the slur *Cucuta ab rationibus Neronis Augusti* near other graffiti bearing names, the prankster heightens the onlooker's pleasure in seeing *and* understanding the 'in-joke' that Cucuta (*cicuta*, hemlock) was as useful to Nero as any flesh-and-blood accountant could be.

HUMOUR AND GOSSIP

While we now recognize *Cucuta* to be *Cicuta* and that Cicuta is not a real person, to understand the joke fully we need to consider the wit behind the wisecrack. The same kind of humorous criticism of Nero that we see in the *Cucuta* graffiti is also apparent elsewhere, largely in Rome, but also in places close enough to the capital to benefit from its gossip mill.[33] In fact, Suetonius himself expresses surprise at how tolerant Nero was of the pejorative jokes made about him by the people (Suet. *Ner*. 39.1). Suetonius gives us a number of examples of these: the joke that circulated (and was still circulating in the biographer's time) about how much happier the world would have been if Nero's father Domitius had married a man instead of Nero's mother Agrippina; the lampoons about Nero murdering his mother, spread orally or written up on walls; the insults hurled about his 'crowing' (singing); and the poems composed about the banishment of the future emperor Otho for daring to sleep with his own wife, Poppaea.[34] According to Suetonius, numerous jokes were made at Nero's expense by the people, and the emperor did not take steps to stop this from happening. Of course, Nero had his limits—particularly when he could easily identify the individual behind the joke.[35] Nevertheless,

[29] Kajanto (n. 20), 248; *TLL Onomasticon* (n. 20), 2.399–402.

[30] Cf. Kajanto (n. 20), 201 (Titus Annius Cimber, *pr*. 44 B.C.); *TLL Onomasticon* (n. 20), 2.441.74–442.36, especially 442.6–9; *AE* 1990, 223(f).

[31] Greetings and acclamations: *CIL* 4.8063, 4.8073, 4.8074 (the vocative *Care*), 4.8076, 4.8098. Nero and Rome: *CIL* 4.8064, 4.8067/8, 4.8095. Neroneus/April: *CIL* 4.8078a, 4.8092; Tac. *Ann*. 15.74; Suet. *Ner*. 55.

[32] See Franklin (n. 8), 107 for a plan of region 1, block 7 and for the 'House of Publius Paquius Proculus' within it.

[33] Cf. R. Laurence, 'Rumour and communication in Roman politics', *G&R* 41 (1994), 62–74, at 63. While talking about rumour, as opposed to gossip, Laurence discusses political centres in Republican Rome as points from which information could spread.

[34] Suet. *Ner*. 28.1, 39.2–3, 45.2; Suet. *Otho* 3.2.

[35] Nero did not take kindly to Petronius' signed deathbed letter, which contained a list of Nero's various debauched sexual activities with both men and women. Upon receiving it, Nero exiled the

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fortunately for those inscribing graffiti in Rome and Pompeii, as no signatures were present, Nero seems to have been able to tolerate their humour.

For the *Cucuta* joke to be successful, there would need to be enough people in Pompeii walking past who could interpret it correctly. Psychological and historical studies have shown that gossip, as distinct from rumour, can (loosely) be defined as a series of entertaining 'evaluative statements' about individuals' private lives. Further, gossip circulates around distinct social networks; in other words, gossip needs to be socially relevant to its audience in order to spread.[36] While it is unlikely that the latest gossip from Rome would have reached as far away as Greece or Asia Minor, it is more plausible that stories about the emperor spread to the fashionable Bay of Naples, given how popular the area was with emperors and their attendants.[37] Augustus, for example, made his nephew Marcellus patron of the town (*CIL* 10.832), statues of the Julio-Claudian imperial family were conspicuous in the forum (as they were in other towns),[38] and, most importantly, Nero's second wife Poppaea Sabina is thought to have been from a prominent family in Pompeii.[39] As such, we can understand Rome's social network as extending to the Bay of Naples, including Pompeii.

Moreover, the idea that Nero used poison to kill senators and members of his family is very likely to have been one of the salacious scandals to emerge from Rome's gossip mill. Not only does the accusation appear frequently in the second-century histories and biographies of Nero, but a link between Nero and poison is made explicitly in the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder in the first century A.D. When discussing the potential risks of eating mushrooms, Pliny includes the widely held belief that Agrippina had killed her husband, the Emperor Claudius, by feeding him poisoned mushrooms. Nero is tarred with the same brush when Pliny goes on to say that Nero himself was a type of poison:

> Among the things which it is rash to eat, I would include mushrooms, as although they make choice eating they have been brought into disrepute by a glaring instance of murder, being the means used to poison the Emperor Tiberius Claudius by his wife Agrippina, in doing which she bestowed upon the world, and upon herself in particular, yet another poison (*uenenum*)—her own son Nero.[40]

Pliny provides contemporary evidence for the perception that poison was intrinsically linked not only with Nero's accession but also with his person and character. Given this account, itself arguably informed by gossip, it is easy to see how a graffito claiming

senator's wife whom he suspected of having told all to Petronius: Tac. *Ann*. 16.19–20. See also Tac. *Ann*. 14.48.1 for the dinner-party incident which ended with the exile of Antistius Sosianus.

[36] N. DiFonzo and P. Bordia, *Rumour Psychology: Social and Organizational Approaches* (Washington, DC, 2007), 14, 19–22; M. Gluckman, 'Gossip and scandal', *Current Anthropology* 4 (1963), 307–16, at 308. See also R. Paine, 'What is gossip about? An alternative hypothesis', *Man* 2 (1967), 278–85, at 283; C. Wickham, 'Gossip and resistance among the medieval peasantry', *Past and Present* 160 (1998), 3–24, at 11–12.

[37] See J.H. D'Arms, *Romans on the Bay of Naples: A Social and Cultural Study of the Villas and their Owners from 150 B.C. to A.D. 400* (Cambridge, MA, 1970), 73–115. For Romans in Pompeii more generally, see A.E. Cooley and M.G.L. Cooley, *Pompeii and Herculaneum: A Sourcebook* (London, 2014[2]), 272–6, H90–4. Cf. *CIL* 4.1711, 4.1994, 4.2145, 4.4311. For imperial visitors during Vespasian's reign, see *CIL* 10.1018 = *ILS* 5942.

[38] Augustus: *CIL* 10.931; Livia: *CIL* 10.799; Gaius Caligula: *CIL* 10.901; Nero: *CIL* 10.932; Agrippina the Younger: *CIL* 10.933.

[39] See *CIL* 4.357 for the involvement of the Poppaei in local Pompeian politics.

[40] Plin. *HN* 22.92, transl. W.H.S. Jones, *Natural History. Volume VI: Books 20–23* (Cambridge, MA, 1951), 359.

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that Nero made use of poison to settle his own affairs would be both comprehensible and entertaining to a Pompeian passing the 'House of Publius Paquius Proculus'.

A JOKE AT PROCULUS' EXPENSE?

The location of the graffiti at the 'House of Publius Paquius Proculus' warrants further attention, particularly because those scholars who recognize the *Cucuta* graffiti as a joke are yet to consider this aspect. As many scholars have noted, ancient wall-inscriptions are a very different type of communicative medium to modern graffiti.[41] Unlike modern examples, ancient graffiti are often found in private domestic space, as well as on public walls.[42] This is true of the *Cucuta* graffiti, as well as the other 'tags' we saw earlier (Cimber, Celer, etc.). Such tags, according to Mirelle Corbier, were more likely written by witnesses rather than by the person named.[43] For Corbier, wall inscriptions are evidence of 'spontaneous writing … [It] presents simultaneously the intelligence, the wit, the sense of humour of an individual'.[44] This wit, located within the spatial context of an elite Pompeian residence, not only supports the interpretation of *Cucuta Neronis* as Mr Poison of Nero's court but also suggests a barbed criticism of the types of people entertained by Pompeii's wealthiest families. While we can say very little that is definitive about Publius Paquius Proculus himself, inscriptional evidence suggests that he was one of Pompeii's political elite as he held the office of *duumuir*.[45] Moreover, although we cannot be sure that Proculus was unquestionably the owner of the house,[46] anyone wealthy enough to own a residence such as the one ascribed to him would have been a fitting target for the *Cucuta* taunt.

In his recent monograph, Jeremy Hartnett supplied an evocative description of the façade of the 'House of Publius Paquius Proculus' as seen by a passer-by on the Via dell'Abbondanza:

> Strong and severe cubic capitals carried an architrave, above which hung a roof spanning the house's frontage and towering 5 meters above the sidewalk. On a street where low-slung balconies and jetties loomed over pedestrians before nearly every building, and where people came and went through many closely packed doorways, this structure's lofty façade, pierced by one stately doorway, signaled that it was a different realm.[47]

[41] See R. Benefiel, 'Dialogues of graffiti in the House of the Four Styles at Pompeii (Casa dei Quattro Stili, 1.8.17, 11)', in J.A. Baird and C. Taylor (edd.), *Ancient Graffiti in Context* (London, 2011), 20–48, at 20; P. Keegan, *Graffiti in Antiquity* (Abingdon, 2014), 1–15. In order for an inscriber to make his or her mark, a sharp object would be needed to scratch the surface of wall plaster.

[42] As we have seen, *CIL* 4.8075 was written in the House's vestibule. See also M. Corbier, 'Présentation. L'écrit dans l'espace domestique', in M. Corbier and J.-P. Guilhembet (edd.), *L'écriture dans la maison romaine* (Paris, 2011), 7–46.

[43] M. Corbier, 'Writing in the private sphere: epilogue', in R. Benefiel and P. Keegan (edd.), *Inscriptions in the Private Sphere in the Greco-Roman World* (Leiden, 2015), 265–78, at 269. For the alternative view, that the tags are inscribed by the person himself/herself, see Benefiel (n. 8 [2010]), 58–9. Benefiel cites *CIL* 4.2335, 4.3123, 4.6828, 4.7755, 4.8066, 4.8075 and 4.10082b as graffiti inscribed by imperial attendants. She also cites *NSA* 1933, 322 n. 358, although this is not a graffito (it is inscribed on a bronze *tabula ansata*) but more likely a nameplate.

[44] Corbier (n. 43), 268–9; M. Corbier, *Donner à voir, donner à lire: mémoire et communication dans la Rome ancienne* (Paris, 2006), 54–60.

[45] *CIL* 4.7197, 4.7208, 4.7237 mention P. Paquius Proculus as either a candidate or holding office.

[46] See n. 1. I have continued to ascribe the house at building I.7.1 to Proculus, but his name here stands in for a type of wealthy elite.

[47] Hartnett (n. 8), 288–9.

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This impressive structure, one that stood out from all others on the street, marked the residents as people of political influence. The electoral graffiti outside the entrance confirmed this assumption: the numerous *dipinti* bearing his name and the endorsements from *uicini* are what prompted Della Corte to attribute this house to P. Paquius Proculus in the first place.[48]

This house also bears a graffito that appears to display a kind of humorous criticism not dissimilar from *Cucuta ab rationibus*. On the doorway's right pilaster was an endorsement of the 'worthiest' of candidates for Aedile, Gaius Cuspius Pansa (*CIL* 4.7201). According to the graffito, Gaius Cuspius is the sort of man to whom glory (*gloria*) should be given, owing to his modest life (*uerecunde uiuenti*). However, Hartnett suggests that there may be more to this graffito than at first meets the eye. Also on the Via dell'Abbondanza, located in the direction the reader of the graffito would have been looking (westward), was the shop of a (rather more lowly) cloth producer named Verecundus. The joke is that Verecundus, 'modest', is anything but—a painted picture on the right-hand side of the doorway to his shop (building IX.7.7) shows a large man watching over his workers and proudly holding up for display a finished garment. The figure is also wearing a cloak and felt shoes, which were probably of the kind on sale in the shop. His name, Verecundus, is written below to ensure his identification.[49] The use of *uerecunde* to describe Pansa just a few doors away from Verecundus' shop suggests that this is an example of Corbier's witty 'spontaneous writing'—Pansa's life may not have been so worthy of glory after all.

The Verecundus/Pansa inscriptions fit nicely into the type of political humour we often find in Pompeii—satirical graffiti that comment on a local candidate. Graffiti recording local electoral disputes are too numerous to list,[50] and there are many examples of the shaming of a politician by means of association with disreputable characters. For instance in the so-called 'Street of the Augustales' (a street connected to the Forum) we see: *M(arcum) Cerrinium | Vatiam aed(ilem) o(ro) u(os) f(aciatis) seribibi | uniuersi rogant* ('The late drinkers all ask you to elect Marcus Cerrinius Vatia aedile').[51] As Keegan observes, '[s]uch graffiti constitute examples of the type of "dirty" or negative advertising campaign not unfamiliar to us today … [the] *sēribibī* must be understood as imaginative caricatures, meant to suggest that all dishonest or unscrupulous persons eligible to vote supported Vatia.'[52]

We can understand the *Cucuta* graffiti as constituting local political commentary of a negative type if we consider that the joke behind them is not simply aimed at Nero, as scholars have assumed.[53] This makes sense, because, as Zadorojnyi points out, political opposition tends to be local—'in a municipal centre like Pompeii bashing the Roman leadership is simply irrelevant'.[54] The graffiti are usually seen in line with (only a

[48] *CIL* 4.7196–256 are all *dipinti* painted on Regio I, Insula 7. *CIL* 4.7819 is another example of the *uicini* declaring support for Proculus, although this one is located at a nearby shop. Inscribed messages of gratitude and support are common in Pompeii; for example: *CIL* 4.7343, 4.1094, 4.7342, 4.7346, 4.7667. See also Keegan (n. 8), 179.

[49] Hartnett (n. 8), 287 fig. 90; *CIL* 4.7839. Cf. *CIL* 4.3130, 4.9083–4.

[50] See Franklin (n. 8), 65–195 for a flavour.

[51] *CIL* 4.581, transl. Cooley and Cooley (n. 37), 165. Cf. *CIL* 4.575, 4.576, 4.604.

[52] P. Keegan, *Graffiti in Antiquity* (Abingdon, 2014), 176. Cf. C. Chiavia, *Programmata: manifesti elettorali nella colonia romana di Pompei* (Turin, 2002), 225.

[53] See the works by MacMullen, Funari, Miles and Toner cited in n. 7.

[54] Zadorojnyi (n. 7), 118. J.R. Clarke, *Looking at Laughter: Humor, Power, and Transgression in Roman Visual Culture, 100 B.C.–A.D. 250* (Berkeley, 2007), 153–4 provides a useful counter example in the Aeneas–as–an–ape painting from Stabiae (National Archaeological Museum of Naples

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few) other such examples aimed at the imperial centre: one claiming Sulla to be 'Unlucky', another claiming that Augustus' mother is a woman (thus lampooning the idea of divine parentage), and another mocking Domitian's conspiracy paranoia in verse.[55] However, the *Cucuta* graffiti also fit into a writing culture in Pompeii that satirized local politicians through their associations. By connecting Proculus (or a political elite like him) with a malicious invented character from Nero's court, the graffiti acted as criticism of the Pompeian politician as well as criticism of Nero. This helps to explain why graffiti of this nature appear in the town when, as Benefiel rightly states, '[n]egative comments about the emperor [Nero] are [generally] not found'.[56]

In the same way as the *Cucuta* graffiti worked so well as criticism of Nero precisely because they were inscribed on a house covered with similar graffiti, their efficacy as a criticism of Proculus is heightened by their position. When we do come across inscriptions bearing the names of imperial attendants, Benefiel points out that they appear on or near the houses of Pompeii's richest members.[57] Discounting Cucuta, we still have Antiochus (a *seruus Liuiae*), Restitutus *Neronis*, Sagitta *Imperatoris* and Poliaeus (an *Augusti cubicularius*).[58] These suggest that such graffiti became a marker of status—they signalled the calibre of visitor to these houses: 'Such prominence would have communicated to passers-by the inhabitants' connection with the emperor.'[59] Cucuta, then, once again acts as a foil to this expectation; Cucuta is exactly the type of imperial attendant that an elite would *not* want visiting his house. Thus, however much he may have thought himself as worthy of a visit from the top levels of the *familia Caesaris*, a Narcissus or a Pallas,[60] P. Paquius Proculus had the likes of Mr Poison gracing his atrium instead.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to interpreting these graffiti, Cicero's phrase uttered in a different context continues to ring true: *Pompeis difficile est* (Macrob. *Sat*. 2.3.11). The relative subtlety of the *Cucuta/Cicuta* joke (the personification of poison) makes it easy for a modern reader to miss, but in antiquity the same subtlety would have made the joke even more pleasing for a passer-by. Inscribing *Cucuta* on a building surrounded by other

inventory no. 9089). This debate has history: Castrén (n. 1), 92–121 argues that the Augustan Age brought with it serious political conflict between the agents of the emperor and the local Pompeian elite. Mouritsen disagrees, pointing out the 'profoundly non-narrative' nature of Castrén's evidence: H. Mouritsen, 'Mobility and social change in Italian towns during the Principate', in H.M. Parkins (ed.), *Roman Urbanism: Beyond the Consumer City* (London, 1997), 59–82, at 60–70.

[55] *CIL* 4.9099, 4.6893, 4.3407.6. The verse is also recorded by Suetonius: Suet. *Dom*. 14.2.

[56] Benefiel (n. 8 [2010]), 63. Carcopino disagrees, but his evidence is limited. He reads together two pieces of graffiti on the basis that they appear near to one another (both at building IX.3.5), one saying *Restitutus Neronis* ('Restitutus [the slave(?)] of Nero') and the other identifying Restitutus as a *cinaedus* (adult male passive homosexual, prostitute, 'dancer'): Carcopino (n. 6), 155; *CIL* 4.2335, 4.2338. These taken together could be interpreted as a slur about the sort of company that Nero keeps, although the *cinaedus* can only refer to Restitutus. On the definition of *cinaedus*, see A. Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor* (Oxford, 1992), xxv, 119; J.N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (London, 1982), 194.

[57] Benefiel (n. 8 [2010]), 59.

[58] Antiochus: *CIL* 4.3123, located at building VII.2.16, the 'House of Gavius Rufus'. Restitutus: see n. 56. Sagitta: see n. 26. Poliaeus: *CIL* 4.7755, located at building II.6.2, an amphitheatre near the property of Decimus Lucretius Satrius Valens.

[59] Benefiel (n. 8 [2010]), 59.

[60] See Suet. *Claud*. 28; Dio Cass. 60(61).30.6.

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graffiti containing names and references to Nero initially makes the graffito seem as if it belongs to the same commemorative or acclamatory group. Moreover, when we do recognize the joke, it seems to contravene things we 'know' about ancient graffiti-culture in Pompeii—that Nero was popular there owing to his connection with the town's leading families, and that Pompeians were not (broadly speaking) interested in criticizing politics in Rome. These graffiti do challenge these ideas but not in a way that undermines them completely. This is a criticism of Nero but not just of him. The real brilliance of these graffiti lies in their local political resonance—they work as well directed at an elite like P. Paquius Proculus as they do at Nero. Our graffitist kills two birds with one stone. Not only were Nero's political methods betrayed as (more than) spurious but, by association, so were the airs and graces of Proculus. The sort of visitor from Rome attending his house was the worst of Nero's court—Mr Poison himself.

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