

Virgil's ubiquity: Virgilian texts on papyri, ostraca, writing tablets, graffiti, and dipinti, and the question of literacy in the Roman Empire

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ABSTRACT

From the large number of quotations that survive in the vast and varied written documents of the Roman imperial period, it is evident that Virgil was the most popular poet, at least in the Latin-speaking western part of the Empire, where he played the same role as Homer in the Greek-speaking East. A notable aspect of Virgil's legacy, however, lies not merely in the sheer volume of quotations and allusions that have survived; rather, it is the remarkable versatility of his written mediums which include inscriptions painted or scratched upon walls, papyri, ostraca, writing tablets, and even scrawls on simple bowls. Furthermore, the scope of Virgil's literary influence extends beyond the confines of the privileged upper classes, as evidenced by his presence in the epitaphs of ordinary people, gladiatorial dressing rooms, or in barracks of distant garrisons. Additionally, his literary contributions have permeated diverse geographical areas, from Hadrian's Wall to Dura-Europos on the Euphrates. The present article explores the potential explanations for the phenomenon of Virgil's 'ubiquity'.

KEYWORDS

Virgil, papyri and ostraca, graffiti and dipinti, writing tablets, ancient Roman literacy

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1. INTRODUCTION

Virgil's elementary influence on Roman culture began soon after his death, and it was not entirely devoid of political ramifications. While the merits of Augustus may be contested, it is an indisputable fact that the first *princeps* brought an end to a hundred years of devastating civil wars, stabilised, extended, and enriched the Roman Empire, engendered social and economic prosperity, and renewed religious institutions. For this work of immense proportions, Augustus found an enthusiastic and devoted supporter in Virgil, and repaid him by ensuring the survival of his works, not only through copying them and placing them in public libraries, but also in ensuring a cult-like veneration for both the author and his oeuvre.¹ Virgil's first appearance in a school curriculum dates to the 20s BCE, when his published work still comprised only the *Eclogae* and *Georgica*, and he was lectured on by Q. Caecilius Epirota, a freedman of Cicero's friend and publisher T. Pomponius Atticus and an intimate of Cornelius Gallus, from whom he may have derived a fondness for contemporary poetry uncommon in a schoolmaster.² "What makes the reception of Virgil unique is the pervasive character of his influence, which is visible at the level of both popular culture and official ideology. Verses and characters from his poetry appear in wall paintings and graffiti, mosaics and sarcophagi, even the occasional silver spoon, in locations ranging from Somerset to Halicarnassus"—as was stated by Richard Tarrant.³ In the course of this overview, the focus shall be on textual sources that have been transmitted directly, as opposed to those that are derived from the manuscript tradition. Such sources include graffiti, papyri and writing tablets, excluding stone inscriptions.⁴ This article does not aim to be exhaustive in its overview of the individual topics—that would require a monograph—but I will focus on the essential and typical elements. My objective is to illustrate prevailing trends, as opposed to assembling all disparate elements, except for the graffiti on bricks and tiles, for which no corpus has yet been produced.

2. VIRGIL'S WORKS IN EGYPTIAN AND NEAR EASTERN PAPYRI

When Robert Cavenaile published his collection of Latin papyri in 1958, *Corpus papyrorum Latinarum* (CPL), his corpus contained forty-seven literary texts, all of them originating from Egypt: Virgil (19), Cicero (8), Sallustius (5), Livy (3), Lucanus (1), Juvenal (1), fabulists (3), historians (4), and philosophers (3).⁵ The *Catalogue des papyrus littéraires grecs et latins*

¹TARRANT (1997) 43–72. However, it would be a mistake to think that the relationship between Augustus and Virgil was always untroubled, see JOHNSON (1981).

²TARRANT (1997) 43. It should be noted here that Virgil was a friend of Gaius Cornelius Gallus, who was a *praefectus Aegypti* in 30–26 BCE, but after his recall for unknown reasons, he committed suicide (Dio Cass. 53.23). According to Suetonius's biography, Augustus then had Virgil draw out the passages praising Gallus from the *Aeneid*.

³TARRANT (1997) 42–43.

⁴The complex topic of Virgilian allusions in CLE is out of the scope of this article. For a comprehensive overview, see HOOGMA (1959); CHEVALIER (1973); SOLIN (1986); CUGUSI (1982, 1996, 2008, 2021).

⁵CAVENAILE (1958). The corpus contained 345 Latin and 28 bilingual texts altogether. The PLATINUM database contained approximately 1,500 papyri (c. 185 originating from the Western Roman Empire), and more than 400 ostraca (of which 283 are from Numidia and Africa Proconsularis) by 2016, see SCAPPATICCIO (2019) 625.

(Mertens-Pack³) was published online in 2004.⁶ In this database we find twenty-four papyri and seven parchment fragments, most of them school exercises, with a Greek translation between them.⁷ The Greek translation of the *Aeneid* was made by Polybius, a freedman of Claudius.⁸ It is not known whether P. Hawara 24 (a first-century CE papyrus containing the Greek texts of *Aen.* 2.601 and *Aen.* 4.174), which is the oldest surviving manuscript of Virgil, is identical to Polybius's translation. In the online catalogue we find the following Roman authors: Virgil (37), Cicero (12), Sallustius (7), Livy (3), Terentius (2), Lucanus (1), Juvenal (1), and Seneca minor (1), not to mention the jurists. What is striking at first glance is the prominent role of Virgil among the Roman authors (40% in the *CPL*; 57% in the Mertens-Pack³). Another striking feature is that all the authors included here were (and still are) part of the elementary school curriculum.⁹ It is also noteworthy that among the approximately 8,000 Greek and Latin literary papyri in CEDOPAL, Roman authors in Latin constitute a small minority, primarily due to linguistic factors, given that Egypt utilised Greek as its intermediary language in conjunction with the local languages.¹⁰ According to CEDOPAL's online catalogue, three quarters of the Virgil texts (twenty-two fragments) were written on papyrus, and one quarter on parchment (seven fragments, only one is possibly a roll). The fragments written on parchment are not relevant for our study, both because they are late (fifth to eighth century CE) and because they were certainly not used in schools. Unsurprisingly, all fragments originate from codices.¹¹

The fragments written on papyrus date from the first to the fifth centuries CE. Of the twenty-two papyrus fragments, fifteen are from codices (68%) and the rest are written on separate papyrus sheets. We know next to nothing about the circumstances of the discovery of most of the papyri, but in some cases, we are aware of which Egyptian settlements they are linked to (e.g., Oxyrhynchus, Tebtunis, Antinoöpolis, Nessana, Hawara). There is also a very special papyrus found in the famous fortress of Masada, which was taken by the Romans from Jewish rebels in 73 CE. The P. Masada II 721 (TM 62948 = LDAB 4140) was discovered along with other Latin papyri in one of the wall casements. It is assumed that *Aen.* 4.9 was copied as a calligraphic exercise by a Roman soldier who lived in the fortress after its occupation.¹² As we shall see in the case of the ostraca, Virgil's presence in a military context is not at all surprising.

Returning to the fragments of parchment and papyrus books found in Egypt, according to Lucio Del Corso both the papyrus and the more expensive of the parchment books are of good

⁶The catalogue is available through the website of the CEDOPAL, the 'Centre de Documentation de Papyrologie Littéraire' of the University of Liège, and it is co-ordinated by Prof. Marie-Hélène Marganne, director of the CEDOPAL, <http://www.cedopalmp3.uliege.be/> (Accessed 6 August 2025).

⁷Viz. they were taught Latin to Greeks, see SCAPPATICCIO (2013).

⁸Sen. *Polyb.* 8.2; 10.5.

⁹Quintilian recommended reading Cicero, Livius, and Sallustius for beginners (*Inst.* 2.5.18–26); for advanced students he recommended, above all, Virgil, and in addition to the above-mentioned authors, Lucan, Tibullus, Ovid, Propertius, Terentius, and Seneca (*Inst.* 10.1.85–131). MORGAN (1998); BLOOMER (2011) 111–138.

¹⁰For the language of Egyptian papyri, see EVANS–OBBINK (2009); DICKEY (2011); CRIBIÖRE (2003–04).

¹¹P. Strasb. Lat. 2. = TM 62955 (possibly a roll, see GEYMONAT (1964) 345–347); P. Allen s.n. = TM 62967 codex; Biblioteca Ambrosiana L 120 sup. [S.P. II 161] = TM 62964; P.Oxy. 50.3553 = TM 62968; P. Oxy. 8.1098 = TM 62959; P. Vindob. L 24 = TM 62969; P. Ant. 1.30 = TM 62961. These book-texts probably belonged to libraries. For a detailed evaluation, see DEL CORSO (2019).

¹²According to RADICIOTTI (2010) 91, it was obviously an *exercitatio scribendi*.

quality; their size is huge for the standards of that period. They are often around 30 cm tall and 20–25 cm wide, with large, blank margins. An example is the *Aeneid* PSI I 21 (TM 62966) from Oxyrhynchus. We also find over-sized books, an example of which is another Virgilian book, P. Ant. I 29 (TM 62956), which is 41 cm tall and 27 cm wide, with only twenty-five verses for each page and an extant, lower margin of more than 9 cm. These books were usually written by professional hands—or at least by hands which were given specific calligraphic training. A few fragments are in elegant rustic capitals. This is the case of two beautiful, e.g., an *Aeneis*-fragment (P. Ant. I 30 = TM 62961) assigned to the fifth century CE. The uncial manuscripts found in Egypt can compete with the best examples from the West.¹³ This begs the question, where were these books made? To quote Del Corso again: “The far majority of Latin books found in Egypt are professionally made and written books. This is a noteworthy point, especially if you compare it with Greek book production: Greek books written in rapid, nondescript hands, sometimes ‘home-made’—we can suppose—by their readers, are very frequent, and they often outnumber ‘professional,’ luxury books written in normative scripts.”¹⁴ As a consequence of the high scribal level of Latin manuscripts of Egypt, Lowe suggested that the most likely place for their manufacture was the capital of the Eastern empire, Constantinople, where a production of Latin books is well attested by literary evidence.¹⁵ However, according to Del Corso, it would be a mistake “to underestimate the richness and complexity of Alexandrian cultural life during late Antiquity,” a time at which science, law, and literature flourished. He asserts that “the bulk of Latin manuscripts found in Egypt was originally written there, even if it is not possible to specify whether in Alexandria or in other cities.”¹⁶ He adds too that, “Only very few of our texts can be referred to school or scholastic practices, and neither of them is a school exercise of basilar, elementary level,” as was confirmed by Raffaella Cribiore’s research.¹⁷

On the use of literary and paraliterary papyri for literalisation, Maria Chiara Scappaticcio wrote these sharp observations: “Literary and paraliterary texts on papyrus will also expand our understanding of the forms of Latin education in a multilingual and multicultural setting (especially in the Late Antique Eastern Roman Empire). The palaeographical and papyrological groundwork carried out in this respect will enrich our understanding of Latin books and aspects of cultural circulation, especially in an educational context. These papyri can be divided into the following groups: luxurious books from libraries; workbooks with wide margins (sometimes annotated in both Latin and Greek); teachers’ notebooks; bilingual handbooks; and scraps of papyrus on which students did their writing exercises or scribes did their calligraphy exercises (with their different respective aims).”¹⁸ It was Paolo Radiciotti (1961–2012), the excellent Italian papyrologist, who thoroughly examined the Virgil fragments from a palaeographical point of view.¹⁹

¹³DEL CORSO (2019) 213–214.

¹⁴DEL CORSO (2019) 214.

¹⁵LOWE (1961).

¹⁶DEL CORSO (2019) 215.

¹⁷DEL CORSO (2019) 217, cf. CRIBIORE (1996) 35–74.

¹⁸SCAPPATICCIO (2019) 621.

¹⁹RADICIOTTI (2010); of course, he is not the only one, cf. SEIDER (1976) 132–137 (papyri). For a palaeographical and bibliological study of the Latin books, see AMMIRATI (2015).

Most interesting in the context of literacy research are the writing exercises (*exercitationes scribendi*). Four such papyri have been found so far, in chronological order as follows: (1) P. Haw. 24. (TM 62949 = LDAB 4141), a papyrus found at Hawara, dated to the first century CE and written in cursive, and which is most likely a school text; on one side is *Aen.* 2.601, written seven times, and on the other is Horace's *Ars poetica* (*Ep.* II. 3.78). (2) P. Oxy. 50.3554 (TM 62950 = LDAB 4142), a papyrus sheet found at Oxyrhynchus, dated to the second half of the first century CE. It is a calligraphic writing exercise written in cursive, containing *Aen.* 11.371–2 written six or seven times. (3) P. Tebt. 2.686b (TM 97904 = LDAB 4145), a papyrus found at Tebtunis, dated to the end of the second century CE (Lowe), which is a writing exercise on the back of a reused Latin papyrus roll, written in *capitalis cursiva* and containing *Georg.* IV 1–2 lines written six times. (4) P. Oxy. 1315 (TM 62971 = LDAB 4163), a papyrus sheet found at Oxyrhynchus, dated to the fifth to sixth centuries CE and containing *Aen.* 11.1 = 4.129 (*verso*), “in una scrittura minuscola tipologicamente vicina alla semionciale.” It also contains glossaries, word lists, and two incomplete Latin alphabets, with a few equivalent Greek letters: “abecedario in due scritture: l’una è una maiuscola capitale, l’altra una minuscola indifferenziata, inoltre al di sopra di alcune lettere sono collocate le equivalenti lettere greche.”²⁰ In three of the four papyri, we can see that the practice of Latin writing involved copying one or two lines of Virgil six or seven times, and in one case the copying was supplemented by an alphabet, a glossary, and a word list. What does this information reveal about literacy in Roman Egypt?

3. VIRGILIAN QUOTES ON EGYPTIAN OSTRACA

So far, two Virgil fragments written in Latin have been found in ostraca, both from military forts in the Eastern Desert, which guarded partly the quarries of Mons Claudianus and partly the highly important Coptos–Berenice trade route. The discovery of the Virgilian fragments in a military context is not surprising in itself, as we have already seen in the case of P. Masada 721 and we will see again in the context of military camps along Hadrian's Wall. The ostrakon found at Mons Claudianus is dated to c. 100–120 CE (O. Claud. 1 190 = TM 62952 = LDAB 4144) and contains *Aen.* 1.1–3, written in “exercices scolaires et exercices d’écriture.” The other ostrakon was found at the fortress of Xeron Pelagos and is dated to the second to third centuries CE (O. Xer. 871 = MP³ 3016.011). The 26 × 29 cm ostrakon, consisting of thirteen fragments, is written in cursive letters and contains the following quotations from Virgil in twenty-two lines: *Aen.* 1.1–9, 11 (?), 12–14, 17, 19–20, 66–67, 71; 2.1–2; 9.367–8.²¹ It also contains the names Aemilius Valentinus and Ulpus Iuvenalis, which probably belonged to the soldiers who wrote the ostrakon. Adam Bülow-Jacobsen writes, “This is clearly not a school exercise, but rather a soldier who, in a fit of boredom, or perhaps to show off to less learned comrades, starts writing down what he can remember of Virgil, which he must have memorised and forgotten a large part of again.” It would be interesting to know where these soldiers came from. Perhaps they were native Egyptians, or they came from Dacia, Thrace, Palmyra, or perhaps Parthia, as we know from the soldiers stationed here. Unfortunately, even the typos do not help to define this.

²⁰RADICIOTTI (2010) 91.

²¹BÜLOW-JACOBSEN (2014). <https://aigis.igl.ku.dk/aigis/CMT80/ABJ-Vergil.pdf>.

Thousands of ostraca excavated in the Roman forts of the Eastern Desert attest the importance of written communication for their inhabitants.²² “It seems fairly clear that the distances involved forced a good deal of people who would not normally have needed to write letters, to do so,”²³ whatever educational background they may have possessed. Although in general the level of literacy may well have been higher in the Roman army than among the civilian population in Roman Egypt, occupants of the desert forts comprised people of various origins, social standings and careers, whose ability to read or write could differ greatly. Even illiteracy was not a homogenous phenomenon: Jean-Luc Fournet speaks of “*analphabétisme total ou partiel*” when exploring strategies by which those without schooling or who do not possess knowledge of the relevant language could get by in the world of written communications, for example, by asking others to do the reading, writing, or correcting for them, or by copying a muster.²⁴ The ultimate and most efficient means of addressing illiteracy, however, was through acquisition of literacy. Ostraca found on the Koptos to Myos Hormos road, in particular those in the forts of Maximianon and Krokodilo, give witness to occasional learning taking place there, a product of what Fournet calls “*l’enseignement de fortune et de circonstance*.”²⁵ From Krokodilo, Maximianon, and Didymoi, a total of forty-three sherds and two papyrus fragments can be identified as either literary or school texts, and another dozen contain texts of an indeterminate nature, possibly literary.

4. VIRGILIAN QUOTES ON WRITING TABLETS

The function of the ostrakon in ancient Egypt was analogous to that of the wooden writing tablet in the Western and Northern parts of the Roman Empire where it was the most important writing material in everyday life.²⁶ According to Benjamin Hartmann’s compilation, approximately 3,500 writing tablets have been found so far in sixty-three places (Vindolanda, 1,700+; Vindonissa, 613; London, 400; Herculaneum, 350; Köln, 200; Pompeii/Agro Murécine, 185).²⁷ By their sheer number, the Vindolanda Tablets (Tab. Vindol.) are among the most important Roman artifacts ever excavated in Britain. Composed over the span of less than fifty years in the late first and early second centuries at the Roman fort of Vindolanda in the north of England, this set of more than 1,700 writing tablets texts written on thin sheets of wood comprises a rich source of military and social history, as well as providing insights into the development of the Latin language.²⁸ The Vindolanda Tablets can of course also be used to investigate literacy, especially in military context.²⁹ However, we are interested here in the quotations from Virgil,

²²For a checklist, see <http://papyri.info/docs/checklist> (Accessed 6 August 2025), cf. LOUGOVAYA (2022).

²³BÜLOW-JACOBSEN (2001) 157.

²⁴FOURNET (2003) 457–465; for examples of ‘second-hand literacy’ in Didymoi, see STAUNER (2016) 806–807.

²⁵FOURNET (2003) 465–466.

²⁶It does not mean that wooden writing tablets were not used in Egypt, see, e.g., SOURLAS 2020.

²⁷HARTMANN (2015) 45.

²⁸BOWMAN (1994); BIRLEY (2005), see Vindolanda Tablets Online, <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/tabvindol> and <http://vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk> (Accessed 6 August 2025).

²⁹MAIRS (2012); TOMLIN (2018); MULLEN (2021).

four of which we can be sure are quotations from his oeuvre.³⁰ At first sight, the variety of works cited is surprising. The *Aen.* 9.473 is quoted on an ink writing tablet, dated to 97–105 CE (Tab. Vindol. 118 = TM 62951). On one side of the tablet is a draft of a letter (Tab. Vindol. 331 = TM 114561) and on the other is a line from Virgil, which appears to be an example of a practice writing exercise. We have assumed that the letter was never sent and, once discarded, was used for writing the line of Virgil. Consequently, the letter has been designated as the front and the Virgil as the back, but it is not impossible that the sides were used in the reverse order. While it is not possible to establish that this tablet belongs to the papers of Flavius Cerialis (prefect of the ninth cohort of Batavians, who lived with his family in the praetorium at Vindolanda in the years around 100 CE), it was certainly found in the same context and there is good evidence for the presence of children in the *praetorium* at Vindolanda.³¹ The line may have been written out simply as a writing exercise, even though such exercises normally contain more letters of the Latin alphabet than are to be found in this line of Virgil. It is difficult in fact to see what other purpose it can have served; the line itself does not seem capable of conveying any coherent message and is not even a complete sentence. The other, much less quoted text is the *Georg.* 1.125 found on an ink writing tablet dated to 104–120 CE (Tab. Vindol. 854 = TM 107266 = LDAB 10979). The other side of this tablet (Tab. Vindol. 855) is highly controversial. Scappaticcio says that it is from the *Aen.* 10.860–1, but Anthony Birley believes that it is a fragment of an unsent letter, as in the previous case. However, the fragment from the *Georgica*—*ante iovem nulli subigeba[nt] / arva coloni iu.[...]*—is clearly visible and is a verbatim quotation of Virgil's line *ante iovem nulli subigebant arva coloni*, even if the next two or three letters are controversial. (According to Birley, although by the same hand in darker ink as if the pen had just been dipped, the three letters following the word *coloni* do not continue the quotation, since line 126 would begin *ne signare quidem*.) The third ink tablet, quoting *Ecl.* 7.26 (Tab. Vindol. 662 = TM 130295 (97–105 CE)) is also a Virgilian quotation inserted into a private letter. Both sides of the tablet are written in a competent, right-sloping cursive. The actual words used in our letter are *invidia rumpantur ut ilia Codro*. This Virgilian 'tag' became deeply embedded in the epigraphic tradition,³² so it cannot be taken as evidence that the *Eclogues* were widely read in Britain. Finally, the last example is also a controversial text (Tab. Vindol. 856 = TM 660145, dated to 104–120 CE) which has previously been defined by Birley as a fragment from *Aen.* 7.373 (*[his ubi nequiquam dictis ex]perta Lati[num]*) but is, according to the editors of the Vindolanda Tablets Online, more a quotation from *Copa* 28: *[nunc varia in gelida sede lac]erta late[t]* ['the spotted lizard now lurks in its chilly home', translated by H. Rushton Fairclough]. The ink writing tablet is broken on three edges with the top edge being original. The other side of the tablet is part of the heading of a letter to Verecundus, prefect of the First Cohort of Tungrians, written in a fairly stylish cursive (Tab. Vindol. 867). The literary quotation was written in uncials. The *Copa* was attributed to Virgil in antiquity, and it would have been

³⁰SCAPPATICCIO (2009) mentions a total of five identified quotations from Virgil, but I only accepted what the editors of Vindolanda Tablets Online and RIB-online took for granted, cf. BIRLEY (2009) 273.

³¹As shown by the presence of children's shoes, see GREENE (2014).

³²For a list of epigraphic examples, see DUNBABIN–DICKIE (1983) 10–19.

available to students at Vindolanda a century later, implying an interest in Virgil which extended beyond the *Aeneid*.³³

Who could have written these quotations from Virgil? What is certain is that the writers were members of the garrison stationed at Vindolanda, but it is unclear whether they were simple foot soldiers or more educated officers, or perhaps professional scribes.³⁴ Karlheinz Dietz argued half a century ago that in the Roman army—at least in the legions—there was a specialist ‘non-commissioned officer’ (NCO) with the title *pollio*, or, as it is often spelled, *polio*, whose tasks included teaching soldiers to read and write.³⁵ This rank is also attested by about a dozen inscriptions in the long list of immunes enjoying *vacatio munerum graviorum*, quoted from the *liber primus militarium* of the Antonine jurist and guard prefect Paternus (Dig. 50.6.7). Dietz ingeniously compared a puzzling passage in a letter of the young Marcus Aurelius to Fronto (*Ad M. Caes.* 2.8.4, p. 29 van den Hout: *Polemonis tui quo meministi, rogo ne Horatii memineras, qui mihi cum polione est emortuus* [‘Since you have mentioned your Polemo, please don’t mention Horace, who perished for me with *polio*’]). Long ago *polione* was emended to *Pol<I>ione*, with varying suggestions as to which *Pollio* was meant. But Dietz makes a convincing case that Marcus here meant ‘the *polio*’; in other words, Marcus is glad to have got rid of Horace at the same time as the speech tutor he had had as a boy and doesn’t want to be reminded of that poet again. As it happens, two of these bracket Virgil (‘Maro’) with Horace (‘Flaccus’) as regular school texts.³⁶ Whether or not the *pol(l)io* was a military Latin tutor—and for an auxiliary unit there is in any case only one conjectural attestation, P. Dura 66, [*p*]ollione coh(ortis)—it looks as if some Latin was being taught to men in the garrison at Vindolanda in the early second century using traditional methods, with repetition of the *altisonus Maro*. This is no surprise. After all, soldiers, particularly those who were outstationed, had to be in a position to read written orders and report back in writing. This is clear not only from the Vindolanda Tablets but also from the ostraca in the Egyptian desert. They are so numerous that one has to assume that the majority of the men could at least read and understand short texts.³⁷ Ultimately, I agree with Michael A. Speidel that evidence for existing the *pol(l)io* as a military rank is rather weak:³⁸ “It therefore seems very unlikely that recruits and soldiers of the legions and auxilia (not to mention any of the irregular or allied units) would have been forced to attend compulsory Latin classes taught and organized by specifically appointed under-officers. It is far more likely that those who sought to improve their Latin skills during their military service would have found competent instructors among their fellow soldiers.”

³³ZOGG (2018).

³⁴On this subject I refer first to the classic article by BEST (1966); see also WILKES (2012). For an outlook on the southern *limes* based on the ostraca found at Bu Njem, see SPEIDEL (2018).

³⁵DIETZ (1985).

³⁶According to Juvenal 7.226–7, the unfortunate schoolmaster had to endure the stink of the pupils’ lamps, *cum totus decolor esset / Flaccus et haereret nigro fuligo Maroni*, ‘while Flaccus was completely dark and the soot sticking to Maro was making him black’, translated by William Gifford. A more positive view was taken by Ausonius, glad to return to school texts with his grandson, *Idyll.* 4.56–7: *te praeunte, nepos, modulata poemata Flacci / altisonumque iterum fas est didicisse Maronem*, ‘With three for guide, grandson, it is permitted for me again, to learn Flaccus’ rhythmical poems and the sonorous Maro’, translated by Hugh G. Evelyn White.

³⁷BIRLEY (2009) 278.

³⁸SPEIDEL (2023) 153–154.

In conclusion, it can be posited that of the 1700+ tablets unearthed at Vindolanda, only four contain quotations from Virgil—by no means a significant proportion. This assertion is undoubtedly valid but warrants consideration of Roger Tomlin’s thoughtful opinion: “The extent of literacy within the garrison of Roman Britain cannot be quantified, of course, but it should come as no surprise that some common soldiers could read and write. This is not to say that they spent their evenings reading Caesar and Virgil, but a significant minority must have possessed a basic literacy.”³⁹ Furthermore, it is recommended that these four instances are situated within a broader context, i.e., that the appearance of Virgil’s quotations on other writing materials is considered.

5. VIRGILIAN GRAFFITI AND DIPINTI

Ancient graffiti of the Greek and Roman worlds has frequently been compared with modern examples; it has been assumed that such marks on modern and ancient walls alike, in their informality and immediacy, have something in common. Moreover, the attitudes of archaeologists and historians towards such writing are as deeply embedded in their own disciplines as they are in the popular consciousness: ancient examples are sometimes given as evidence of the ‘less educated’ or the ‘vulgar’ in ancient societies without much interrogation of this idea.⁴⁰ However, this was not unequivocally confirmed by the thousands of examples of graffiti and dipinti found on the walls of Pompeii.⁴¹ Modern definitions of graffiti routinely include adjectives such as ‘illicit,’ ‘informal,’ or ‘unauthorised,’ but as is explored here, the notion of graffiti as being inherently subversive is also very much a modern predilection. Examples of graffiti found in Aphrodisias for instance (acclamations praising benefactors, the emperor, and the senate written on the columns of porticos in the South Agora) do not imply the wanton destruction of public buildings but rather the acceptance of authority.⁴² The practice of writing upon interior walls on/in private houses—up to 100–200 pieces of graffiti in a single house—does not appear to be unusual or undesirable in the ancient world.⁴³ All this should be taken into account when discussing the quotations from Virgil.

5.1. Graffiti and dipinti on walls

“Within discussions of the social role of the *Aeneid*, it is often observed that Pompeian graffiti preserves a remarkable number and range of Virgilian quotations,” writes Kristina Milnor, whose book spares us the painstaking collection of graffiti and dipinti referring to Virgil.⁴⁴

³⁹TOMLIN (2018) 214.

⁴⁰CAVALLO (1983) 174–175.

⁴¹BAIRD–TAYLOR (2011) 2–3.

⁴²CHANIOTIS (2011).

⁴³KEEGAN (2011) 172–173.

⁴⁴MILNOR (2014) 237.

Among the more than 11,000 instances of graffiti found on Pompeii's walls, a total of sixty-nine quotations from the Mantuan poet were found, with the works distributed as follows: *Aeneid*, 53; *Eclogues*, 14; *Georgics*, 2.⁴⁵ However, on the other hand, it has been pointed out that the vast majority of the graffitied Virgilian quotations are limited to the first words of *Aeneid* books I and II—little more than 'school tags' and not necessarily indicative of a wide-ranging knowledge of Latin literature.⁴⁶ Indeed, the *arma virumque cano*, at the very least, was a well-known phrase. Often shortened simply to *arma virumq*, it is found quoted at least fifteen times in the graffiti from Pompeii in material contexts which range from the walls of cookshops to the interiors of wealthy houses.⁴⁷ William V. Harris and Milnor each emphasise that the *arma virumque* probably circulated as a phrase almost independently from the rest of Virgil's text, and was probably consumed and reproduced by people who had only the vaguest notion of what connection it had with the great epic poem.⁴⁸

In this context it is worth taking note of one instance in which the first words of the *Aeneid* are found not scratched but *painted* on a wall in Pompeii. On a wall to the south of the city, in Regio 1, was found a *programma* which supports a certain Gaius Cuspius Pansa for *aedilis* (CIL IV 7129)—a notice which was painted over numerous others which are difficult to disentangle from one another. From Matteo Della Corte's line drawing in his 1911 excavation notebook, it is clear that the notice supporting Cuspius Pansa was the freshest when the city was destroyed. On the basis of this and other evidence, it has been concluded that he was standing for aedile in the elections of 79 CE.⁴⁹ Below it in the same black paint is a small, two-line phrase written neatly in block letters which reads *arma virumque | cano Troiae q(ui) arm[...]*—that is, the first four words of the *Aeneid*, an abbreviation of the fifth *q(ui)*, and another *arma* to start the quotation all over again.⁵⁰ There is probably some kind of pun here: between the large letters *L(ucium) LAELIVM / C(aium) C(uspium) P(ompeii)s AED(ilem) O(ro) V(os) F(aciatis)* and the much smaller letters *Arma virumque*, there is the abbreviation D.I.D.O.V.F., which is easy to decipher: *Duumvirum Iure Dicundo Oro Vos Faciat*. According to Milnor, "An examination of Della Corte's drawing of the wall shows that the *Aeneid* quotation is placed neatly under the first four letters—which, it will be noted, spell DIDO, the name of Aeneas' doomed lover in Book IV of Virgil's text. In other words, the

⁴⁵MILNOR (2014) 263–272 (Appendix). The author is rather sceptical about the identification of the passages from the *Georgica* (Georg. 1.163: *tardaue Eleusinae matris volventia plaustra*): MATRIS ELEVSINAE (CIL IV 8560) and MATRIS HELEVSINAE (CIL IV 8610) found in the portico of the palaestra.

⁴⁶DELLA CORTE (1940); HARRIS (1989) 261; FRANKLIN (1996–97).

⁴⁷MILNOR (2014) 240.

⁴⁸MILNOR (2014) 253.

⁴⁹What is known from the evidence is that a Gaius Cuspius Pansa did run for the office of aedile in the last years of Pompeii, appearing in at least fifty dipinti (AE 1951: 157d, CIL IV 97, 117, 275 = ILS 6419e, 385, 438, 509, 542, 559, 562, 566, 572, 579, 610, 619, 622, 702 = ILS 6419a, 708, 710, 785, 855, 869, 871, 960, 1006, 1011 = ILS 6419f, 1046 = 7181, 1068 = ILS 6437, 1153, 1172, 2972, 7129a, 7179, 7201 = CLE 2053, 7220, 7242, 7257, 7289, 7320, 7404, 7435, 7445, 7518, 7601, 7630, 7686a, 7742, 7743, 7777 = AE 1937: 127, 7850, 7875, 7919 = AE 1913: 15, 7955, 7963). This man, since he is running for the lowest magisterial position in the local *cursus honorum*, is not only the last member of the family, but is probably not the reason the name of Gaius Cuspius Pansa is so ubiquitous in the epigraphic evidence of the city.

⁵⁰CIL IV 7129–7131, MILNOR (2014) 242, see also Fig. 5.3 on p. 243.

Aeneid quotation here does seem to have both context and some content, although it is noteworthy that the painter did not quote Book IV or any other lines from the epic which directly relate to Dido. Rather, he provided the most remembered and easily recognizable words from the text as a whole, so that the joke, if we may call it that, is still fairly basic, requiring only the ability to recognize *arma virumque* as the first words of Virgil's text and 'Dido' as the name of a central character within it."⁵¹

Outside the so-called House of Fabius Ululitremulus (on the Via dell'Abbondanza, IX.xiii.5) appears a painted version of Aeneas, Ascanius, and Anchises which flanks the main door on one side; across from it in a parallel painting is the figure of Romulus bearing the *spolia opima*.⁵² Nearby was found scratched a witty hexameter: *fullones ululamque cano, non arma virumque* (CIL IV 913: 'I sing the fullers and the screech owl, not arms and the man'). Della Corte, among others, suggested that the screech owl was a bird sacred to the fullers (i.e. laundry workers) and associated with them, probably because of the connection between the bird and their patron goddess, Minerva. On the other hand, a fragment of Varro's *Menippean Satires* offers the proverbial phrase, *homines eum peius formidant quam fullo ululam* (*Sat. Men.* 86.4: 'men fear him worse than the fuller fears the screech owl', translated by Joseph McAlhany), which suggests a particular aversion between the bird and the woolworker—although it has been suggested that the 'fear' here is more of a sense of religious awe. The name of the building on whose face the graffito was found, moreover, arises from a *programma* found written below the image of Romulus and above the *fullones ululamque* graffito; it announces that Fabius Ululitremulus ('owl-fearer') recommends Gaius Cuspius Pansa and Popidius Secundus for the position of aediles. It seems legitimate that we should take this Ululitremulus as a fuller, on the basis both of his cognomen (which seems to allude to the proverbial phrase above) and the fact that the word *fullones* was scratched several times on both sides of the *programma*. The fullers and their screech owl, therefore, seem to have a popular, proverbial connection, expressed in both Ululitremulus's name and in the graffito cited above.⁵³ In Milnor's interpretation, the images that decorate the house and the graffito can be understood in relation to each other: 'I sing the fullers and their screech owl, NOT arms and the man.' At the same time, this epigram creatively reinterprets the 'canonical' prologue of the *Aeneid*, creating a perfect literary parody similar to the Aeneas and Romulus caricature from Pompeii mentioned in the introduction. Let us not forget that we are now before 79 CE (Milnor asserts that the graffito was created between 70 and 79 CE), and the *Aeneid* has already become part of the *gesunkenes Kulturgut*. This is truly an astonishing achievement for a literary work in an era when books were a difficult commodity to access.

On the house walls of Pompeii, we also find Virgil's texts what I would call 'contextual literary quotations.' In these, the writer of the graffito knows and understands the original context of Virgil's text (usually from the *Aeneid*), which he extracts from and transposes into a similar context of his own world. This is not dissimilar from the present day where we may appropriately quote from a known literary work without needing to know the specifics; for example, if we are dissatisfied with our own country's policies, we might say that 'Something is

⁵¹MILNOR (2014) 245.

⁵²GALINSKY (1969) 30–31; ZANKER (1988) 212.

⁵³FLOHR (2013).

rotten in the state of Denmark,” and we don’t necessarily need to know that it was originally uttered by Marcellus in Act 1, Scene 4 of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* but we probably would know that it was said in *Hamlet* or that it originates with Shakespeare. I will give three examples from Pompeii. (1) One line scratched into the wall of the palaestra: *nec prius absistit qua[m] septe(m) ingentia victor | corpora funda(t) hum(i)* (CIL IV 8630b: “nor did he cease before he laid seven huge bodies on the ground”) is a direct quotation from *Aen.* 1.192–3 perfectly suited to the *palaestra* of a gymnasium, even if the original text says that Aeneas explores the coast of Latium, and with his bow and arrow he slays some deer. (2) A line from Nisus’s prayer to the Moon in *Aen.* 4.404 was found scratched onto a wall outside a cookshop (Pompeii VII.3.24): *tu Dea, tu pr(a)ese(ns), nostro succurre labor(i)* (CIL IV 2310k: ‘you, goddess, be present, assist [us] in our work’). Della Corte sees this in its graffiti form as an invocation of the goddess to look after the shop’s business, which is by no means impossible, says Milnor.⁵⁴ (3) Finally, there is a controversial but very interesting graffito from the House of the Gladiators (V.5.3) which was converted to a gladiatorial training school (*ludus*). The late nineteenth-century excavations unearthed architecture, wall paintings, artifacts, and more than 140 instances of graffiti written by and about the gladiators who lived and trained there.⁵⁵ The line *QVOS EGO SED* (CIL IV 4409) can be found to the right of the exedra which opens off the back of the peristyle near the right corner, and according to Della Corte, other graffiti also belong to this group, e.g., CIL 4. 8798 (*Sever(us): / ego quos / Pompei(i)s*) and 8641 (*QVOS*). These all refer to the line *Aen.* 1.135: *quos ego—sed motos praestat componere fluctus*, in which Juno threatens the winds for not helping Aeneas’s ships.⁵⁶ The threat itself, *quos ego*, viz. “I’ll give it to you!”, fits perfectly into the milieu of a gladiator school.

It is evident that graffiti was not present solely in Pompeii; in fact, its occurrence was pervasive throughout regions where house walls have endured with minimal damage from antiquity. Thus, in Dura-Europos, Rome’s fortress on the Euphrates which is also known as the ‘Pompeii of the Syrian desert,’ a large number of graffiti and dipinti have been found on walls.⁵⁷ “[A]t Dura we find the Roman military taking control and inscribing themselves all over the city, on its gates, along the city walls, in houses, and in temples, demonstrating a particular relationship with their urban environment.”⁵⁸ As far as I know, two quotations from Virgil have been published so far, and they are found on the walls of Dura-Europos: *Aen.* 2.1 (AE 1937, 238) and *Aen.* 1.1–3 (AE 1954, 263). One of the quotations was found in the Palace of the Dux Ripae and the other in E4, the barracks area (TEAD-IX.3: No. 960; TEAD-VI, p. 48, no. 628).

Now let’s jump over to the other corner of the Roman Empire, to a civilian environment. At Otford, now in the county of Kent in England, a Roman villa of the second century CE has been found to house remains of plaster showing parts of small-scale human figures and letters

⁵⁴MILNOR (2014) 256.

⁵⁵GARRAFFONI–LAURENCE (2013) 128–132.

⁵⁶DELLA CORTE (1940) 172. Milnor does not accept the identification but without explanation, see MILNOR (2014) 265.

⁵⁷BAIRD (2010, 2018).

⁵⁸BAIRD (2018) 25. The author found that the density of graffiti is related to the presence of soldiers: “It is no surprise to find that many soldiers scratched or painted their names into the stone of the main city gate, the Palmyrene Gate and its towers, where they would have been posted on guard. They would have been stationed there for hours on end and would have doubtless been bored a lot of that time.” In 1928 and 1929, when the Palmyrene Gate was excavated, 166 instances of Greek graffiti were counted.

which include one piece with the right arm and side of a warrior wielding a spear and three joining fragments carrying the legend *BINA MANV L[—]* from *Aen.* 1.313 (*bina manu lato crispans hastilia ferro*, RIB II, p. 67, no. 2447.9), which refers in one context to Aeneas exploring the land around Carthage in company with Achates. Taking account of the other fragments, one can postulate a series of scenes from the *Aeneid*, perhaps a continuous frieze, with a commentary in the form of quotations from the poem; the quotations would probably have been placed above the heads of the figures.⁵⁹ Here we must also mention an elegiac couplet which provides a literary gloss to the scene of the rape of Europa in the mosaic of the dining-room in the Lullingstone Villa (fourth century CE), also in Kent.⁶⁰ The text runs as *invida si tā[uri] vīdisset Iuno natatus / Iustius Aeolias isset adusque domos* from *Aen.* 1.50 ('If jealous Juno had seen the swimming of the bull, more justly would she have gone to the palace of Aeolus', RIB 2448.6 = AE 1951, 131 = TM 159164). The purpose of the message, which was oriented towards an apse with a broad border for a dining couch, was presumably to appeal to the taste of educated guests, who would have recognised the allusion to events described in *Aeneid* I. Our last example comes from *Gallia Belgica*: the excavations of Gerard Dufour revealed in 1979 a *titulus pictus* on the outer wall of the first construction of the great Vendeuil-Caply theatre. In fact, the *vicus*, built in Augustan times on the territory of the *civitas Bellovacensis*, has two theatres, only 700 m apart. The smaller one was built in the last third of the first century, the larger one somewhat later and restored under Marcus Aurelius. The graffiti painted in huge (21 cm high) red letters between the two entrance doors dates from this period. It used to be read as a personal name, *RIS FILIVS*, viz. [...]*ris filius* [...], but recently it was suggested that this is rather [...]*C**RISPANS* [...] from *Aen.* 1.313 (*[bina manu lato c]rispans [hastilia ferro]*), which is the same line we saw at the Otford villa, but this reading is not convincing on a palaeographical basis.⁶¹

5.2. Virgilian graffiti and dipinti on petroglyphs

The oldest writing material known to humankind is that of natural stone. The reason why historians of Greco-Roman antiquity forgot for so long to research petroglyphs may be due to the fact that they had such an abundance of other writing materials at their disposal: papyrus, parchments, writing tablets, ostraca, etc. Notwithstanding, the research on rock-carvings is also interesting for the study of literacy. In the Iberian Peninsula, more than fifty rock sanctuaries have been identified to date, with more than three hundred rock-cut inscriptions written in Iberian, Latin, and Greek scripts.⁶² A considerable number of the inscriptions are religious in nature (mostly votives). Of particular note are the Iberian alphabet-inscriptions (*abecedaria*), which may also be related to religion.⁶² Peñalba de Villastar is perhaps the most significant rock sanctuary of the neighbouring ethnic group known as the Celtiberians, both because of its dimensions (over 3 km in extent) and the richness of its ancient inscriptions, which are currently

⁵⁹LING (2007) 76–77.

⁶⁰LING (2007) 78–79.

⁶¹HOËT-VAN CAUWENBERGHE (2020).

⁶²SINNER–FERRER I JANÉ (2022).

⁶³VELAZA (2012).

estimated to include over twenty texts. Among the petroglyphs there is a quote from the *Aeneid*, now completely lost: *tempus erat quo prima quies mortalibus aegris inc[ipit]* from *Aen.* 2.268–9 (CLEHisp 139 = CLE Hisp TE1 = TM 236966).⁶⁴ The interpretation of the Virgilian verses which are spatially linked to the Latin graffiti NESICIO QVI is problematic. The Virgilian text has been interpreted as an erudite sign of *Romanitas*,⁶⁵ but perhaps it could also be the spontaneous reflection of the writer's state of mind, overwhelmed by such a captivating and tranquil place. For most scholars, NESICIO QVI is just the ironic answer of a disrespectful visitor.⁶⁶ Some thirty-nine Latin poetic inscriptions have been found in the Cueva Negra de Fortuna rock-shelter sanctuary, and research is still ongoing.⁶⁷ What is certain is that the cave was visited by people who expressed not only their feelings (e.g., their love of the landscape) but also their literary culture in the *dipinti* painted on the rock face.⁶⁸ Some called themselves *sodales Heliconi*: "Drops fall from the vault in the grotto and the nymphs are always distilling, happy in their cave; in this grotto a serpent has dwelt, for as long as anyone can remember. Here come those who are healthy, enjoy themselves and return often. May he be happy who has done it, may our companions of the Helicon be happy" (inscription #30, translation is mine).⁶⁹ The elegiac distich #13—*Numpharum latices, alios restinguitis ignis. / Me tamen at fontes acrior urit Amor* ['Waters of Nymphs, put out other fires! Let the fiercer fire of Cupid burn me at the fountain!']—probably contains an allusion to *me tamen urit amor* (*Ecl.* 2.68), although the contrast between water and fire in the context of love also appears in other Roman poets.⁷⁰ It is notable that inscriptions #33, #38, and #41 constitute reiterations of the same poem, each instance being repeated three times: *est in secessu montis sub rupe cavata / intus arboribus scopulis pendentibus antrum* ['is in the secluded mountains below a crevasse, a cave among the trees growing on the steep cliffs']. These two lines seem to be composed from different quotations from the *Aeneid*, like a *cento*:⁷¹ *scopulis pendentibus antrum* (*Aen.* 1.166), *sub rupe cavata* (*Aen.* 1.311; 3.229), *in secessu longo sub rupe cavata* (*Aen.* 3.229), etc. Obviously, the poem is an independent work of art, and its author(s) must have had a deep knowledge of Virgil's texts. The *dipinti* of the Cueva Negra de Fortuna are very likely to have been carved into the rock by civilians, who may have been Romans but could also have been natives.⁷² The following inscription was engraved by a soldier of *Legio VI Victrix Pia Fidelis* in a quarry near Hadrian's Wall in Britain (Lodge Crag, Brampton, Cumbria, 207

⁶⁴MAYER (1995) 862; ALFAYÉ–MARCO (2008).

⁶⁵ALFAYÉ–MARCO (2008); and some researchers see this as evidence that the Roman education system was already well established here: ARINO ET AL. (2019).

⁶⁶On these inscriptions, see TOVAR (1959) 361; MARINER (1985–86) 134–135; NAVARRO CABALLERO (1994) 153–156; LLORIS (1996) 304–306.

⁶⁷There is extensive literature on the function of the cave and the texts found there, see VIVANCOS (2003) for a bibliography of research over the past twenty-five years. Publication of the Latin *dipinti*: MAYER (1996).

⁶⁸Love of the landscape: LÓPEZ (2003); literary literacy: MAYER (1992); BLANCO (2003; CRISTÓBAL (2003); FRÍAS (2003); GÓMEZ (2003).

⁶⁹For a detailed commentary, see BAÑOS BAÑOS (2003).

⁷⁰CHAO FERNÁNDEZ (1987).

⁷¹STYLOW–MAYER (2003) 254–256.

⁷²The cave was originally used as a sanctuary by the indigenous Iberian tribes: COLMENERO (2003). The Latin text also shows some Iberian influence: SANMARTÍN (1987).

CE). It was originally an altar cut on the rock-face (reported as early as 1694), now totally lost. The dactylic hexameter runs as *AVREA PER CAELVM VOLITAT VICTORIA PENNIS* (CIL VII 844a = RIB I 1954 = TM 156447: ‘Golden Victory flutters through the sky with her wings’) and is a possible reminiscence from *Aen.* 4.700: *ergo Iris croceis per caelum roscida pennis*. Peter Kruschwitz rightly recalls that this “Latin verse thus emerged barely a mile away from what was then the north-westernmost frontier of the Roman Empire.”⁷³

5.3. Virgilian graffiti and dipinti on bricks and tiles

In the Roman Empire, millions of bricks (*tegula*) and roof tiles (*imbrex*) were produced, on which we very often find engraved texts. Prior to the firing process (*ante coctionem*), the inscriptions, written in the still soft clay, were made in the *figlinae* and written by the craftsmen (*figuli, laterarii*) themselves, who could be women and men, soldiers and civilians, free persons and slaves.⁷⁴ The inscriptions are of many different types: they may be texts relating to the production process (*recensio* or *probatio operis*); in other cases they were used by workers to record messages, as a kind of ‘bottle mail’, since the bricks were taken away after firing.⁷⁵ They could include names, greetings, pranks, magical letters, palindromes, alphabets, board games, or even Christian symbols.⁷⁶ After the firing process (*post coctionem*), graffiti on brick and tiles could of course be created anywhere, but mostly at the place of use. The following concise catalogue should not be employed to derive statistical inferences; however, certain characteristics can be discerned.⁷⁷

1. Italia / Roma: *arma [virumque cano] / troiae [qui primus a]/b oris* [‘Arms and the man I sing, who first made way ... from the Trojan shore’, translated by Theodore C. Williams (in other cases as well).] *Aen.* 1.1 (CIL XV 6129)
2. Pannonia / *Valcum* (Keszthely-Fenékpuszta): *arma virumque / arma viru* [‘Arms and the man; Arms and the ma...’] *Aen.* 1.1 (CLEPan p. 134)
3. Pannonia / *Sirmium* (Sremska Mitrovica): *protinus Aeneas procedere / longius iras* [‘Forthwith Aeneas + willed to make a stay to so much rage’] *Aen.* 5.485 + 5.461 (CIL III 10717)

⁷³KRUSCHWITZ (2020) 185–186.

⁷⁴Animal and human traces were also left in the pits waiting to be burnt. According to researchers, out of five footprints and seven shoeprints found in Roman bricks from Bracara Augusta (Braga), five belonged to women, see MARADO–RIBEIRO (2018).

⁷⁵It is not related to Virgil, but I know of no more shocking message on a *tegula* than the one found in Villafranca de los Barros (Badajoz) at the end of the nineteenth century. The text informs us how a slave girl, who had recently given birth to a child, was forced to work and died of hard labour (AE 1899, 107). Emil Hübner had drawn attention to this inscription at an early stage: HÜBNER (1899). Cf. GORDILLO SALGUERO (2013) 1603–1608.

⁷⁶For an overview of text types on the basis of the Gallic inscriptions, see: CHARLIER (2004).

⁷⁷The basis for the compilation for Spain: MAYER (1995); VELAZA (2016). For Pannonia, see BILKEI (1983); CUGUSI–SBLENDORIO CUGUSI (2007).

4. Pannonia / Keszthöl: *adque ea diversa penitus dum parte [geruntur] / irim de caelo misit Saturnia I[uno]* [‘While thus in distant region moves the war, down to bold Turnus Saturn’s daughter sends celestial Iris’] *Aen.* 9.1–2 (AE 1983, 772; CLEPann p. 134).⁷⁸
5. Hispania / Italica (Santiponce): *arma virumque cano troiae qui / primus ab oris italiam fato profugus / lavinaque v* [‘Arms and the man I sing, who first made way, predestined exile, to the Lavinian’] *Aen.* 1.1–2 (CIL II 4967,3 = CILA II,2 583 = CLE 1786 = HEP 2005, 328)⁷⁹
6. Hispania / Concordia (Teja): *[ars nobi]s et vera fides duo cum bona constant / [cedet l]ivor iners fama perennis erit / [me si fata me]is paterentur ducere vitam / [auspiciis e]t sponte mea componere curas / [C(aio) Luccio Telesi]no C(aio) Sueto[nio Pa]ullino co(n)s(ulibus)* [‘Had my destiny decreed, that I should shape life to my heart’s desire’] *Aen.* 4.340–341 (CIL Suppl Ital. 417; CLE 922; AE 2002, 512; AE 2007, 264)
7. Hispania / Aceuchal (Badajoz): *interea med[i]um Eneas iam / clase tenebat + chrismon* [‘Meanwhile Aeneas, now well launched away, steered forth with all the fleet to open sea’] *Aen.* 5.1 (CLE 2293; AE 1950, 25)⁸⁰
8. Africa / Hadrumetum (Sousse): *arma viru(m)qu[—] / di venique La[—] / iactatu[s —]* [‘Arms and the man . . . made way to the La[vinian strand . . . smitten (of storms)]’] *Aen.* 1.1–3 (in private collection)⁸¹
9. Britannia / Atrebatum (Silchester): *pertacus perfidus / campester Lucilianus / campanus conticuere omnes* [‘a general silence fell’] *Aen.* 2.1 (EE IX, 1293 = RIB II 2491.148)⁸²
10. Raetia / Tasgetium (Stein-am-Rhein): *[O]ceanum interea s[urg]ens A<u>rora reliquid (sic) / [Aene]as [q]ua<m>q[u]a et [sociis] d[are] te[m]pus h[umandi]* [‘Up from the sea now soared the dawning day: / Aeneas, though his sorrow bids him haste to burial of the slain’] *Aen.* 11.1–2 (AE 1993, 1229 = CLE 1786)

First, it can be observed that all the quotations are from the *Aeneid* and that the number of quotations from the beginning of each book are very high: seven out of ten (three times from Book I, and once each from the first verses of books II, V, and IX). In the other three cases, quotations are from the middle of books IV and V, but we can say that these are also quite well-known lines. It is also interesting to note that in several cases the quotation is interrupted before the end of the poem, either before the predicate that gives meaning to the sentence or even without the word ending. Javier Velaza is seeking to attribute some religious meaning (most likely apotropaic or divinatory) to these graffiti, but in my opinion, there is no reason to do so: the quotations are predominantly Virgilian tags, just like the majority of the graffiti found on the walls. In the *figlinae* there were idle workers, just as in the garrisons, where—as we saw in the case of Dura-Europos—bored soldiers carved Virgil’s texts on the wall.⁸³ Most texts are of a

⁷⁸BILKEI (1983) 68.

⁷⁹MAYER (1995) 860–861; CARANDE HERRERO–FERNÁNDEZ MARTÍNEZ (2005). (Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid).

⁸⁰MAYER (1995) 861–862.

⁸¹VELAZA (2020).

⁸²KRUSCHWITZ (2020) 199. The author dates the graffiti to the second century CE and writes that the verse “has been adopted and wittily recontextualized in what may have been a quasi-curse.”

⁸³VELAZA (2016) 412 also uses the frequent occurrence of abecedaries and palindromes, or “magic letter-squares” on the *tegulae* to support his theory. While I acknowledge that these may have been apotropaic in nature, this does not exclude the possibility that they were scrawled in the clay by the workers out of mere boredom.

relatively low literacy level, with frequent and serious spelling, grammatical, and syntactical errors. The Latin of the *figuli* was, in fact, consistent with that expected of a social class that had no access to higher education yet demonstrated a keen interest in literacy.

5.4. Virgilian graffiti and dipinti on pottery

Finally, we should briefly consider the quotations from Virgil which have been discovered by researchers of scratched graffiti or painted dipinti on pottery. It is important to note that no previous collections on this subject have been utilised as a point of reference. Consequently, the following discussion will be based on only three fragments that have already been published.

The first is a Dragendorff 31 type Samian bowl with *CRACVNA* stamped on it found in 1988, which was probably made around Trier (today in the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden). The well-known quote from the *Aeneid* is engraved *ante cocturam* at the bottom of the bowl—*Conti< c>uere omnes / intentique ora tenebant. Inde* (*Aen.* 2.1–2)—accompanied by a personal note, *Ama, ille amor meus*, which is presumably a non-literary quotation. In his study of the graffiti, Dutch archaeologist Julianus Egidius Bogaers interpreted the text as a kind of ‘bottle post’ written by an amorous worker of the *officina* in the hope that it would reach his lover.⁸⁴ There is no evidence to support this hypothesis, although it would explain why the text was placed on the bowl before it was burnt.

The second is a fragment of a shallow bowl found unstratified in a rubbish-pit ten yards south of the outer circuit of the theatre at Verulamium (St. Albans), now in the Verulamium Museum. The text was placed inside the bowl and written *ante cocturam* (RIB II 2502.51 = TM 166467).⁸⁵ The cursive is fluent and practised, but the first four lines are fragmentary and some letters (or symbols) are difficult to read. The fifth and sixth lines read [. . .] *cinticue*[. . .] / [. . .] *INT* . . . [. . .] which is probably the same Virgilian line (*Aen.* 2.1: *conticue[re omnes] int[entique ora tenebant]*) as we saw above on the *terra sigillata* bowl found in the Netherlands.

The third fragment relates to the valley of Betis (Guadalquivir), which was the single most important centre of olive oil production in the Roman Empire, where the amphorae used for transport were also made in bulk. El Bramadero (Noguera) was one of these amphora workshops, where Dressel 20 pots were made. One of the ceramic fragments, dated to the second to third centuries CE, preserves two separate writing blocks.⁸⁶ Both have been traced to the same hand and from the same time (the incisions are equal in depth). The texts are carved into the clay *ante cocturam* with a *stylus*. The recently published fragment reads: *Avoniam [pingui] / glandem m[utavit] / aresta, poq[ulaque] / [inven]tis Aqu[eloia] / [miscu]it [uvis]*. This is a *Chaoniam pingui glandem mutavit arista, / poculaque inventis Acheloia miscuit uvis* (*Georg.* 1.8–9: ‘[The earth] changed the Chaonian acorn for the plump ear of wheat / And mixed the waters of Achelous with the newfound grape’, translated by A. S. Kline). This is the first known example of a literary engraving on an *amphora*. Thanks to the epigraphic evidence of Monte Testaccio (Rome), Emilio Rodríguez Almeida was able to distinguish with some accuracy the functional characteristics of these cursive *ante cocturam* graffiti, which were always placed on

⁸⁴Bogaers (1989).

⁸⁵Tomlin (2015) 419.

⁸⁶The amphora fragment was found in 2016 in Hornachuelos, Córdoba, Spain, during an archaeological survey by the OLEASTRO project, see Tobar et al. (2023).

the amphora base and occur in different types and formulas.⁸⁷ These graffiti can be classified into three large groups: those with a calendar date, those of solitary names, and those which are anecdotal in nature. From our point of view, the latter is particularly interesting since, theoretically, we might expect literary quotations to occur here, but the material tends to be personal commentary.⁸⁸ Consequently, this amphora fragment is special. Researchers suggest that the engraving was not intended to be seen, as it was written in the cursive script of everyday use on the lower part of the amphora where it would not have been visible to merchants or consumers. The words were probably engraved there by someone working in the amphora factory, perhaps a skilled worker noting it down from memory or a child practising their writing.⁸⁹ The engraver made a few mistakes (*aresta* instead of *arista*; *poqu(la)* instead of *pocula*; *Aqu(eloia)* instead of *Acheloia*), but clearly whoever carved this inscription into the unfinished *amphora* was more educated than such rural workers are commonly thought to have been. This rare discovery also represents an important resource for research into epigraphy and colloquial Latin. Needless to say, the discovery of a vessel inscribed with a passage from the *Georgics* is unusual. Perhaps given the rural area where the amphora was produced, the agricultural theme of the *Georgics* seemed most fitting, which in turn indicates not only knowledge of the literary text but also a high level of awareness in its application.⁹⁰

The paucity of quotations from Virgil among the graffiti/dipinti on pottery is a curious phenomenon.⁹¹ In the largest Gallic *terra sigillata* workshop at La Graufesenque, archaeologists uncovered more than two hundred examples of graffiti inscribed on cooking vessels. However, these examples did not contain any quotations from Virgil or any other literary text.⁹² On the one hand, the reason for this absence may be simply technical: the rudimentary nature of the processing of the huge quantities of pottery. Another possible reason might be that the pottery fragments were not used in the same way as ostraca in the East—schoolchildren went to school with wooden writing tablets rather than broken pots. However, the examples of graffiti on pottery, tiles, and bricks, as well as *instrumenta domestica*, are a very important source for determining the average level of literacy, but it is important to take into account Tomlin's reservations: "Nor can I answer questions about the degree of literacy: whether, for instance, someone who could write his name could also read Virgil. A box-tile from Silchester and a bowl from St. Albans both make this claim, but the craftsmen's names are accompanied by that most

⁸⁷RODRÍGUEZ ALMEIDA (1993) 104–105.

⁸⁸For a vulgar comment, see, e.g., CIL XV 3612. For hilarious comments, see BROEKAERT–BERNI–MOROS DÍAZ (2015).

⁸⁹"Teniendo en cuenta que el primer libro de las Geórgicas de Virgilio está dedicado a la agricultura, y que nos allamos en una zona eminentemente rural, su uso pedagógico no nos parece descabellado, máxime teniendo en cuenta la presencia notable de niños en las figlinae," quoted from TOBAR ET AL. (2023) 18. The presence of children in the ceramics factories of Gaul is attested, see GOULPEAU–LE NY (1989) 111 (also refers to the footprints). In another workshop in Baetica, the presence of children was confirmed by fingerprints: BOURGEON ET AL. (2019).

⁹⁰According to the publishers, the change of *Avoniam* (instead of *Chaoniam*) is not accidental: "Auonia is the ancient name of Boeotia, an area in northern Greece where Mount Helicon, the abode of the Muses, is located; Boeotia is also the homeland of Hesiod, an author who also mentions the acorns, arranged by nature for righteous men, those who lived in the golden age" (Hes. Op. 232–232, see TOBAR ET AL. (2023) 10–11). This change is attributed to the work of a potter with a poetic sense.

⁹¹See DI STEFANO MANZELLA (2019).

⁹²BÉMONT (2004).

banal of quotations, *conticuere omnes* (*Aen.* 2.1).⁹³ Silence may be our portion also if we pursue this particular line of inquiry, but there is ample evidence that civilian tilemakers were at least able to write dates and batch-totals (RIB II/5 2491).⁹⁴

6. DISTRIBUTION AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE VIRGILIAN QUOTATIONS

The spread of Virgil's texts around the Roman Empire, as seen in the multitude of quotations in popular contexts, has been seen as an index of the success of the cultural project to bind people together by means of a common culture, a project which some critics famously attempted to replicate for post-war Europe, as for, most notably, T. S. Eliot.⁹⁵

Given that graffiti today is a fundamentally urban phenomenon, one would think that it was no different in antiquity. This picture would be reinforced by the fact that more than 11,000 graffiti have been found in Pompeii.⁹⁶ Among these texts, Milnor registered sixty-nine direct quotations from Virgil, of which fifty-three came from the *Aeneid*.⁹⁷ There are slight concentrations in Regiones 1, 6, and 9, but generally the graffiti are fairly widespread. As with most graffiti, Virgilian quotations in the public sphere appear in areas of heavy traffic, such as in/on buildings along the main thoroughfares and public buildings like the Large Palaestra.⁹⁸ Moreover, Harris asserts that the quotations of Virgil on the Pompeian walls were probably school exercises because of the frequency of the first lines of books I and II, but these lines, though a significant portion of the total number of quotations (30 = 45%), make up less than half of the sixty-nine quotations found in the city (domestic quotations show exactly the same proportion: 14 = 45%). According to Milnor, Virgilian quotations have been found inside twenty-five houses in Pompeii, which were medium or larger *domuses*. Nine of the thirty-one Virgilian graffiti are found on minimally decorated columns. Rebecca Benefiel has found that the graffiti writers in the House of Maius Castricius often actively avoided writing over decoration, which may explain why so many graffiti found throughout the city appear on columns.⁹⁹ Virgilian quotations tend to appear in *atria* and garden spaces, which seems logical because these rooms would be frequented by visitors and inhabitants alike, and they provide good light by which to write. Interestingly, *Aen.* 1.1 and 2.1 incipits only appear in *atria* or garden spaces, while other *Aeneid* quotations mostly appear in rooms outside of these two spaces. Quotations from the *Eclogues* appear nearly evenly in *atria*, garden spaces, and other types of rooms alike.

⁹³This Virgilian 'tag' is common as a graffiti at Pompeii and "represents the lowest common denominator of literary taste in Britain," see BARRETT (1978) 307–308.

⁹⁴TOMLIN (2018) 202. For the use of graffiti on pottery in research on literacy, see EVANS (1987); CHARLIER (2004).

⁹⁵What is a Classic? In: ELIOT (1957) 53–71.

⁹⁶KRUSCHWITZ (2010); BAIRD–TAYLOR (2011); KEEGAN (2011); BENEFIEL ET AL. (2019).

⁹⁷MILNOR (2014) 233–272. Of the fifty-three quotations from the *Aeneid*, sixteen are from the first line of Book I (30%), fourteen are from the first line of Book II (26%), and the remaining twenty-three quote various lines throughout the work (44%). Thus, the claim found in previous discussions that the first lines of *Aeneid* books I and II make up the "vast majority" of Virgilian quotations at Pompeii is clearly not true, see MURRAY (2023) 23.

⁹⁸MURRAY (2023) 22.

⁹⁹BENEFIEL (2011).

That the majority of Virgilian graffiti in domestic spaces do not come from the easily quotable first lines of books I and II, and that about a quarter of the quotations do not appear in the more public-facing rooms like atria and garden spaces point to a deeper interaction with Virgil than merely as a school text.¹⁰⁰

Virgil was known not only to the inhabitants of the towns but also to the owners and personnel of the villas. This is not surprising in the case of the suburban villas as these mostly luxurious building-complexes near the cities were owned by the urban or provincial elite. Stabiae is most famous for the Roman villas found near the ancient city which are regarded as some of the most stunning architectural and artistic remains from any Roman villas. The area contains the largest concentration of enormous, excellently preserved, elite seaside villas known in the Roman world. The Villa San Marco was a large leisure villa where at least two Virgilian graffiti were found. The first text is carved in elegant cursive writing on the wall about 120 cm above the floor and reads *VOBIS PICTA CROCO*, the first three words of a quotation from *Aen.* 9.614: *vobis picta croco et fulgenti murice vestis*. It is interesting that the first two words of the quotation were found elsewhere in the same building, written in a different hand, and also 117 cm from the ground, which leads Varone to conclude that it was young people who scratched it into the wall.¹⁰¹ Based on quotes from an otherwise unusual Virgilian context, Varone concluded that other graffiti found in the Villa San Marco might also refer to Virgil, such as the inscription *MOPSE* scratched on a column, which could be a recurring character in the *Eclogues* (e.g., *Ecl.* 5.1: *Cur non, Mopse, boni quoniam convenimus ambo*; *Ecl.* 8.29: *Mopse, novas incide faces, tibi ducitur uxor* etc.). Another name from the villa, *RVSTICVS*, is also mentioned in *Ecl.* 2.56: *Rusticus es, Corydon; nec numera curat Alexis*, although in the latter two cases it is almost impossible to decide whether the graffiti concern living persons or evocations of fictional literary heroes. In favour of the latter would be that the first three words of *Ecl.* 2.56 have been found elsewhere in Pompeii (in the form *Rusticus est Corydon* CIL IV 1527, Casa degli Scienziati VI.xiv.43). In summary, Varone says, “The recognition of such graffiti in the villa of San Marco, however, now certainly allows us to state that in Stabiae, as in Pompeii, the presence of Virgil’s verses was alive and active.”¹⁰²

In the *villae rusticae* excavated in the north-western provinces of the Empire, relatively few graffiti and *instrumenta inscripta* have been found, and only a small percentage of household utensils (between 0.1 and 8%) bear the inscribed names of their owners.¹⁰³ Styluses, inkpots, wax spatulas, and seal-boxes are evidence of the spread of literacy.¹⁰⁴ From the main house of the villa Am Silberberg near Bad Neuenahr-Ahrweiler comes a two-verse graffito on wall plaster, which thematises the relationship between teacher and pupil, *qui bene non didicat carrulus esse*

¹⁰⁰“This also indicates authors of varying backgrounds with different levels of knowledge of Virgil writing for a variety of audiences,” says MURRAY (2023) 45.

¹⁰¹VARONE (2003) 188.

¹⁰²“Il riconoscimento tuttavia di tali graffiti nella villa di San Marco consente ora in ogni caso senz’altro di affermare che anche a Stabiae, così come a Pompei, la presenza dei versi di Virgilio fu viva e operante,” as stated by VARONE (2003) 191.

¹⁰³SCHOLZ (2015) 68–70.

¹⁰⁴There is a vast literature on the subject. For a comprehensive overview, see, e.g., BOŽIČ–FEUGÈRE (2004); SCHALTENBRAND OBRECHT (2012); ANDREWS (2013); ECKARDT (2018). For a very instructive summary of the northern provinces (especially Britain), see MULLEN (2021).

solet (sic) [‘those who have not learnt well tend to be garrulous’], and under it, *scriptu(m) me docuit Grati crudelis habena* [‘the whip of the cruel Gratus has taught me to write’]. The content of the two-line incised inscription at least suggests the possibility that private lessons were given on site for the children of the owner or tenant family.¹⁰⁵ A fragment of wall plaster with similar graffiti was also found in the main building of the villa near Salet Wagen (Sankt Gallen, Switzerland): *Masclus permisit nato tran[scribere versum] (?)* [‘Masclus has allowed his son [to copy a verse]’ (?)].¹⁰⁶ Although no graffiti of Virgil has been found in any *villa rustica* to my knowledge, I should mention here that, so far, mosaics of Virgil have been found in six villas. The mosaics depict scenes from the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*, sometimes with quotations.¹⁰⁷ A mosaic from the villa at Frampton, Dorset, preserved now only in drawings, contained a striking scene from *Aeneid* Book VI of Aeneas grasping the Golden Bough. At the villa in Lullingstone, Kent, which lies not far from Otford, a mosaic is found in the *triclinium*, built about 330 CE. The mosaic represents the familiar scene of Europa’s abduction by the bull, and above the semicircular mosaic a 1.9 m-long mosaic inscription can be read: *Invida si ta[uri] vidisset Iuno natatus / Iustius Aeolias isset adusque domos* [‘If jealous Juno had seen the swim-mings of the bull / more justly would she have gone to the halls of Aeolus’], RIB 2448.6).¹⁰⁸ The elegiac couplets contain clear reference to the *Aeneid* where Juno, seeing Aeneas at sea with his fleet, visits Aeolus to demand a storm to drown him (*Aen.* 1.50–2: *Talia flammato secum dea corde volutans / nimborum in patriam, loca feta furentibus austris, / Aeoliam venit* [‘So, in her fevered heart complaining still, / unto the storm-cloud land the goddess came, / a region with wild whirlwinds in its womb, / Aeolia named’, translated by Theodore C. Williams]). Here the reference is jestingly transferred to Jupiter’s escapade with Europa, whom he carried off by sea in the guise of a bull. Although the allusion is Virgilian, Barrett notes the Ovidian quality of the versification. The lines are otherwise unknown and may well have been composed for the room. Here we see a fine example of Virgil’s text being creatively rewritten, as well as the ‘fullo-hymn’ in the House of Ululitremulus at Pompeii, although this verse suggests a deeper knowledge of the *Aeneid*. Unfortunately, we cannot say who could have written the text or whether it had anything to do with the residents of the Lullingstone Villa.

Finally, a word about Virgil’s texts found in the military milieu, aptly called “Virgil of the armies” by Scappaticcio. Among other examples of lines of Virgil found in documents from a military context, the following are of note. (1) P. Tebt. II 686 = ChLA V 304 = PLP II.1 11: the first two lines of *Georgica* book IV written six times on a discarded account, assigned to the second century. (2) P. Masada 721: *Aen.* 4.9 with a portion of an unidentified hexameter on the other side which, of necessity, is dated not later than 75 CE. (3) O. Claud. 190: *Aen.* 1.1–3, dated to the early second century. We should also compare (4) PSI XIII 1307 (= ChLA XXV 786 verso), a first-century writing exercise on the back of a military document containing the two words *AENEAS DARDANIAE*, words which are undoubtedly Virgilian even though they do not form part of any known line of Virgil; and (5) RIB I 1954, an altar with the inscription *AVREA*

¹⁰⁵SCHOLZ (2015) 79.

¹⁰⁶DRACK–FELLMANN (1988) 148, Fig. 105.

¹⁰⁷PALLARÉS (2015) 55–62: AE 1968, 610 (Sullechtum); CLE 295 (Cartenna-Tina); AE 1927, 15 (Cherchell); AE 2001, 1236a (Estada Huesca); AE 1951, 131 (Lullingstone); AE 2015, 574 = G. 4.353–4 (Caserío Silverio).

¹⁰⁸BARRETT (1978).

PER CAELVM VOLITAT VICTORIA PENNIS which, again, is not a known piece of Virgil but is reminiscent of *Aen.* 4.700 (*ergo Iris croceis per caelum roscida pennis*). Ever since the publication of Edward Best's classic article "The Literate Roman Soldier," it has become common knowledge that the Roman army as an institution and the Roman soldier as an individual could not have functioned without the written word.¹⁰⁹ Best's pioneering study relied primarily on literary sources, but since then an impressive amount of papyrological, epigraphic, and artefactual sources have been turned up that have focused research attention on the relationship between literacy and the army: papyri and ostraca from Dura-Europos on the Middle Euphrates, Bu Njem in North Africa, and many sites in Egypt, e.g., Primis (Qasr Ibrim), *praesidia* of the desert roads, Mons Claudianus, etc.; writing tablets from Vindolanda on Hadrian's Wall, and Vindonissa in what is now Northern Switzerland, and so forth. However, not all categories of texts have received the same degree of scholarly interest. Soldiers' private letters and documents, for instance, have not yet been systematically collected, studied and analysed by historians of ancient Rome. Documents from the army's administration have attracted more attention.¹¹⁰ Yet the extent of private correspondence between soldiers proves that literacy was widespread in the army, where Latin may have been taught.¹¹¹ In fact, some Roman soldiers were not only able to read and write private letters but could also create literary works. Officers in particular—especially centurions—excelled in poetry.¹¹² In light of this, it is not at all surprising that so many quotations from Virgil are found in a military context. Furthermore, it appears that Martial's lines do not consist solely of boastful empty rhetoric: "[M]y book is thumbed amid Getic frosts, near martial standards, by the stern centurion; and even Britain is said to sing my verses" (*sed meus in Geticis ad Martia signa pruinis / a rigido teritur centurione liber, / dicitur et nostros cantare Britannia versus*, *Epigrams* 3.11.3–5, translated by Walter C. Ker).

7. TO WHAT EXTENT DO VIRGILIAN QUOTES REFLECT THE LEVEL OF LITERACY?

Although Nicholas Horsfall explicitly stated that "[t]he Virgil graffiti have little bearing on current discussion of literacy and educational levels in the Roman world," it is worth taking a closer look at this question.¹¹³ Firstly, it is essential to acknowledge that a quantitative analysis of inscriptions and graffiti is unlikely to provide meaningful insight. Such a large percentage of epigraphic material has been destroyed over the millennia that it is not worth fabricating

¹⁰⁹Best's article posits that within the Roman army, orders and watchwords were circulated on writing tablets known as *tesserae militares*. Consequently, it is deduced that soldiers were compelled to possess at least a rudimentary level of literacy. In general, see PHANG (2007), SPEIDEL (2018).

¹¹⁰Three sentences quoted verbatim from SPEIDEL (2018) 181.

¹¹¹For private correspondence, see ZERBINI (2015).

¹¹²At Bu Njem (Gholaia) we have poems set up on stone in the name of two centurions, both of them acrostics which spell out the centurions' names. The first, in iambic senarii and dated 202/203 CE, has the name of Q. Avidius Quintianus; the second, dated to early 222 CE, has that of M. Porcius Iasucthan; *Iasucthan* is of Libyan origin, see ADAMS (1999). For the literary productions of soldiers stationed in Pannonia, see FEHER (1998).

¹¹³HORSFALL 1995: 251, referring to HARRIS (1989) 261.

statistics from the random fragments that have survived. It is better to look at types, trends, and contexts, and draw conclusions from them.

When evaluating quotations from Virgil, it is important to consider that his works became a school-text in his lifetime (Suetonius, *Gramm.* 16). Even Orosius, who lived in the fifth century CE, emphatically associates his knowledge of Virgil with the *ludus litterarius*, and his phrasing suggests that the acquaintance was not limited to odd lines excerpted for the copy-book but was as thorough as that received in the grammarian's school.¹¹⁴ This is nothing new. Quintilian lays down (Inst. 1.8.5) that school reading should begin with Homer and Virgil, at the outset imperfectly understood; no matter, *neque enim semel legentur*. The reading of Virgil began at a very young age, as Augustine reported: "There is Virgil, who is read by boys, in order that this great poet, this most famous and approved of all poets, may impregnate their virgin minds, and may not readily be forgotten by them, according to that saying of Horace, 'The fresh cask long keeps its first tang' (Hor. *Ep.* 1.2.69)" (translated by Marcus Dods).¹¹⁵ Virgil was also read very slowly which may explain the preponderance of *Aen.* 1.1–2 among the graffiti. Those who persevered might, surprisingly, come to love Virgil, notwithstanding such exercises as the prose paraphrase of Virgil, the metrical reworking, and the Virgilian declamation. The survivors had memorised the text amazingly well, at least in some cases.¹¹⁶

Nevertheless, Virgil's knowledge extended beyond the confines of the elementary school curriculum, and often expresses much more than "Gee, I can write!". Milnor, in her study of the Virgilian graffiti at Pompeii, argued that this phenomenon is also an expression of higher education in what might be called "literary literacy."¹¹⁷ Milnor asserts that the fragments of Virgil's *Aeneid* found on Pompeian walls must be seen as part of a wider culture of literary consumption. "The canonization of the first words of the *Aeneid* made them both deeply meaningful and completely meaningless, a shorthand way of gesturing to a wider Roman literary culture. At the same time, however, quotations from other parts of Virgil's epic text, as well as from his other works, show a broader knowledge of Rome's most canonized poet, but one which focuses on the use and meaning of individual lines and phrases rather than of the work as a whole. Ultimately, the culture of literary quotation in the streets of Pompeii turns out to be one which prioritizes the quoted fragment as a means of communication, so that the *Aeneid* speaks in this popular context not as a single, unified, and canonized poem, but as an atomized and utilitarian series of pieces of text."¹¹⁸

At the same time, the creative rewriting of the Virgilian verses (e.g., on the Lullington Villa mosaic) may suggest the opposite. Sometimes we also find that the graffiti writers are aware of the broader context of the quotes. The 'tagger' in the Casa della Venere in Conchiglia (IL.i.iii.3) also avoided any decoration by tucking away their Virgilian graffiti in a closet-like space to the

¹¹⁴Adv. Pag. 1.18.1: the tale of Aeneas's labours *ludi litterarii disciplina nostrae quoque memoriae inustum est*, KASTER (1983) 334.

¹¹⁵*Vergilium propterea parvuli legunt, ut videlicet poeta magnus omniumque praeclarissimus atque optimus teneris ebibitus animis non facile oblivione possit aboleri, secundum illud Horati: quo semel est imbuta recens servabit odorem testa diu*, August. *De civ. Dei* 1.3.

¹¹⁶HOOGMA (1959) xii.

¹¹⁷MILNOR (2009); WOOLF (2009); KOLB (2018).

¹¹⁸MILNOR (2014) 233–272.

east of the peristyle, but the writer of this quotation may have been responding to their surroundings. The quotation, inscribed very lightly, reads *[a]rm[a vi]r[um]que* (CIL 4.10111a) with *cam* (CIL 4.10111b) written beneath, which may have been the misspelled beginning of *cano*. The writer has chosen Virgil's opening words, "I sing of arms and a man," a reference to Aeneas just feet away from a painting of the hero's mother. This shows a familiarity with the content of the *Aeneid*, or at least the Aeneas-story, beyond a memorisation of the first words. Gazing upon the goddess, the graffiti writer was inspired to write this quotation specifically, showing intentionality in quoting Virgil.¹¹⁹

Finally, let us not forget that the *Aeneid* is "a poem of national identity," as formulated by Katherine Toll, or, according to Charles W. Hedrick, "a national epic ... a common base of knowledge and culture shared by every Roman, drawing together the disparate population of the empire and helping to create a sense of community."¹²⁰ However, Virgil's oeuvre is not only a basic narrative of Roman nationalism—whatever we mean by that—but also of the Empire and the imperial power. Virgil employs themes as the boundlessness of the Roman Empire in space and time (*imperium sine fine dedi*, 'I have given you empire without end', *Aen.* 1.279); the exercise of power as the Roman art *par excellence* (*haec tibi erunt artes: pacique imponere morem / parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*, 'These shall be your arts: to add *mos* [i.e. civilized traditional customs] to peace, to spare the subjected and to vanquish the disdainful', *Aen.* 6.851–3); or the standard Roman triad of virtues: *virtus* (courage and strength), *pietas* (correct attitudes and behaviour towards gods, kin, and associates), and *fides* (honesty and constancy), plus the Caesarian fourth, *clementia* (clemency). To these it adds the large general notion that the good life seeks distinction in the service of the state, and the woman's special virtue, *pudor* (continence).¹²¹ Despite the fact that these quotations are not among the customary ones found on inscriptions, papyri, and graffiti, it is probable that when the well-known incipit *Arma virumque* was inscribed by anyone, it was intended to evoke the profound impact of the *Aeneid* on Roman identity in general.¹²² This may also explain the great popularity of the work among the military, since soldiers learned not only Latin in the army but also imperial consciousness.

8. CONCLUSION

Harris, among others, identified the lack of standardised and compulsory education as one of the reasons why he believed literacy in the Roman Empire to be somewhere around 10% of the adult population.¹²³ This extremely low percentage and Harris's methodology to arrive at it have

¹¹⁹MURRAY (2023) 35.

¹²⁰TOLL (1997) 42; HEDRICK (2011) 168.

¹²¹TOLL (1997) 50.

¹²²For example, the unifying effect which was highlighted by TOLL (1997) 40–41.

¹²³HARRIS (1989) 269–277.

been criticised by many over the past decade.¹²⁴ At the same time, even the most daring and astute critics, such as Keith Hopkins, have not dared to question the 10%, which has become a kind of ‘sacred number’ for books on Roman imperial culture.¹²⁵ Tomlin was also cautious when saying, “[l]iteracy in Roman Britain can only be illustrated, not quantified, but the low assessment in Ancient Literacy can be nudged cautiously upward.”¹²⁶ In this article, we have examined the writing materials on which quotations from Virgil appear in the Roman imperial period (first to sixth centuries CE) and the social contexts in which they were found. What is striking is that Virgil was quoted continually by everyone and everywhere. As Horsfall in one of his seminal papers on Virgil’s impact on Roman society put it, “Virgil was known at all levels of society.”¹²⁷ It seems as if the works of Virgil were indeed the most important standardised texts for learning Latin—first of all the *Aeneid*, of course, and secondly the *Georgics* and the *Eclogues*, but also the *Appendix Vergiliana*, today mostly considered to be pseudo-authored. However, the prevalence of these texts also indicates that Virgil’s works were not just boring required school material for students but also identity-forming texts that were deeply embedded in people’s consciousness. If this is not right, it is hard to explain why bored soldiers in distant garrisons or gladiators preparing for battle in the dressing rooms of the Pompeii amphitheatre scratch highly contextualised lines of poetry that are appropriate to their current situation. It is precisely this ubiquity of Virgil that draws attention to the fact that literacy was a not insignificant part of *Romanitas*, and in all social strata, which Harris did not consider at all when he put the literacy level in the Roman Empire at around 10% while also stating that it was mainly limited to the upper social strata. Thus, a re-examination of Virgil’s quotations may also compel a reconsideration of the prevailing view on the low level of literacy in the Roman Empire.

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¹²⁴In my opinion, Harris’s methodology was fundamentally flawed, and this was equally characteristic of Moses I. Finley’s research, as exemplified by *The Ancient Economy* (first published in 1973), in which he portrayed the ancient economy (from 1000 BCE to 500 CE) as extremely primitive. (Incidentally, Harris himself based his analysis of literacy on this presumption.) In their research, both Finley and Harris placed significant emphasis on literary texts, with a lesser regard for stone inscriptions. Harris did not consider examining other sources such as graffiti, papyri, ostraca, writing tablets, and *instrumenta domestica*, not to mention archaeologically known artefacts, such as *stili*, inkpots, seal boxes, etc. This oversight can be attributed to their dismissive attitude towards these “ephemeral sources,” cf., e.g., FINLEY (1986) 27–46.

¹²⁵HOPKINS (1991).

¹²⁶TOMLIN (2018) 201.

¹²⁷HORSFALL (1984) 50. Elsewhere, he stresses that the knowledge of Virgil was not the exclusive privilege of an educational elite, see HORSFALL (1995) 251.

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