

**Gil RENBERG**

**The Living Among the Dead at Pompeii's Via Nucerina Necropolis**

In contrast to today's cemeteries, which are set off from areas frequented by the living and rarely visited, Roman cemeteries lined roads leading to or away from cities and therefore were fairly bustling with activity. This fact, well known from both archeological and literary evidence, is uniquely illustrated at Pompeii's Via Nucerina necropolis by the presence of 189 graffiti painted and scratched onto its monumental tombs, which reveal it to have been a densely trafficked area. Graffiti from within the city walls of Pompeii have at times been used to reconstruct the nature of daily life in particular neighborhoods, but these 189 texts provide a rare glimpse of life beyond the walls, and demonstrate that this cemetery was itself a distinct neighborhood, though one integrated with the city itself. And, just as the walls of houses in the city were often covered with graffiti, so too were these houses of the dead, indicating that the exterior facades of private tombs, like those of domestic residences, were treated as public space. Through different approaches to studying both the painted texts (*dipinti*) and those scratched into or onto the plaster surfaces (*graffiti*), it is possible to gain insights into the types of people who might have passed through or lingered in the area and their reasons for having done so.

A third of these texts are advertisements painted by hired workers to promote political campaigns and upcoming spectacles, but the remaining texts were not painted for pay, and instead were composed spontaneously by those who were passing time in the area. In addition to numerous graffiti containing greetings or insults for friends or acquaintances, a significant number reveal the presence of two distinct groups: fans of gladiatorial combat and fans of theatrical performances. Many of them, no doubt, traveled along the Via Nucerina in order to attend the events held in Pompeii's amphitheater or theater, both easily accessed through the Porta di Nocera. The graffiti, several of which honor particular gladiators or performers suggest that some fans gathered in the area of the tombs before or after these events; indeed, clusters of the theater-related graffiti on certain tombs indicate the precise area they favored. There are even indications that certain members of one pantomime troupe themselves spent time there, perhaps mingling among their ardent admirers.

The physical context of the graffiti is in some respects as instructive as their content, since the different physical properties of the graffiti reflect their respective purposes, as is evident from the size and quality of the letters, placement of the messages, and types of writing material used. Thus advertisements and announcements were painted in large, clear letters easily seen from the road, and were placed where they would be most visible, while *graffiti* were targeted at specific individuals or groups who were expected to be spending time among the tombs and therefore these messages could be smaller and need not have been visible from the road. In contrast to the *dipinti*, the *graffiti* appear to have been produced spontaneously, using whatever materials were at hand. Both the contents and placement of texts, therefore, reveal this extramural area to have been a heretofore overlooked neighborhood.