GRAFFITI THAT

REWRITES

HISTORY

UNDERGRAD CLARE JOHNSON TELLS STORIES OF THE FORGOTTEN WOMEN OF ANCIENT ROME TO GIVE THEM A VOICE—A VOICE LONG OVERDUE.

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In 79 AD Pompeii, a once boisterous Roman city situated in southern Italy, was destroyed by a volcanic eruption in hours, trapping the city and its people in nine feet of ash and pumice. Since then, excavation efforts have taught historians a great deal about Pompeii and its residents, revealing much about Roman life at the time. Nevertheless, in spite of years of research and study, one ancient group seems to be consistently forgotten, almost as if still buried in centuries-old rock: women prostitutes and slaves.

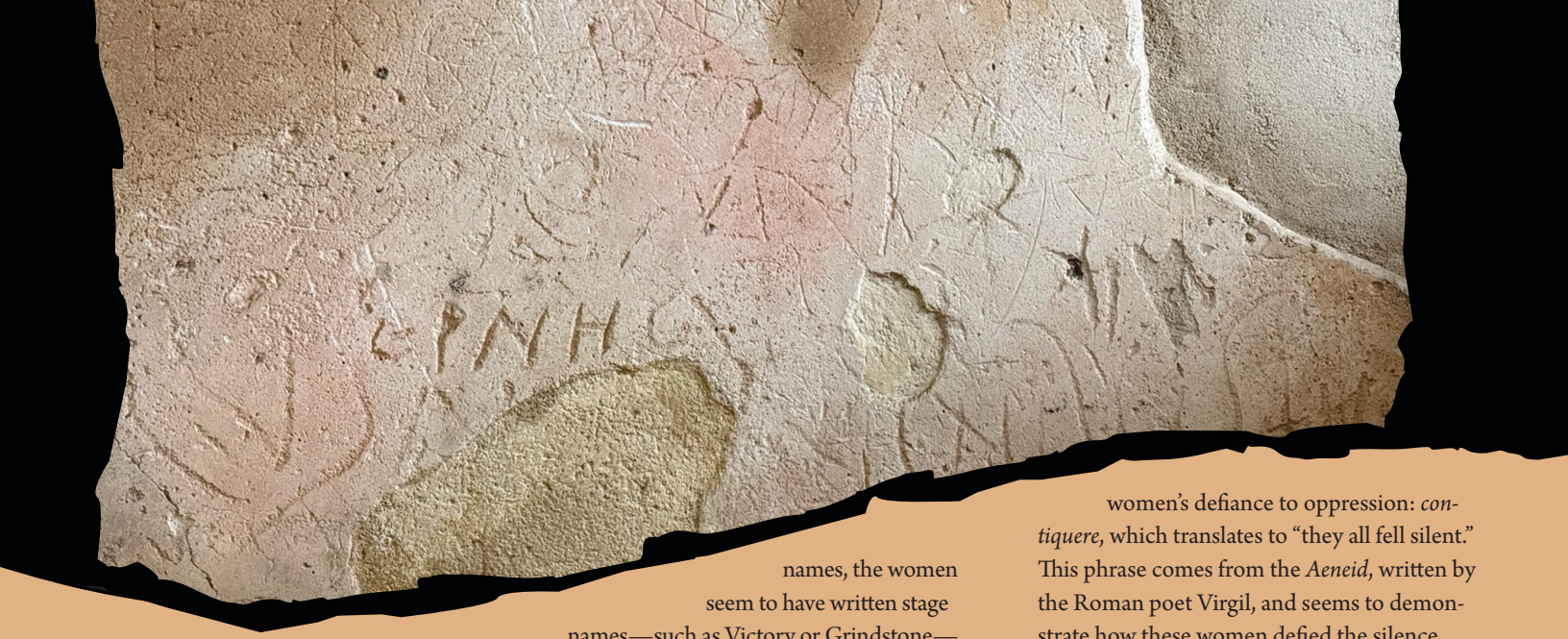
Having noticed this trend and interested in the cultural value of researching these women, Clare Johnson (Classical Studies '25) paired with Classical Studies Professor Thomas Wayment (Papyrology, Ancient Graffiti, Early Christianity) to study graffiti left behind by the prostitutes of the Lupanar, Pompeii's infamous brothel. Johnson's HUM (Humanities Undergraduate Mentor) Grant funds also gave her the opportunity to travel to Pompeii to study the Lupanar's walls in person. By doing so, Johnson hopes to tell the stories of numerous women who called the brothel home and whose voices have been forgotten throughout history.

THE WOMEN OF LUPANAR

Johnson's interest in this area was piqued while combing through ancient Roman papyri in one of her classes looking for any mention of women. "I realized that a lot of the time papyri records would only talk about women if they were a slave or a prostitute," she recalls. HUM Grant in hand, she first examined images of graffiti in the Lupanar in conjunction with papyri from the same period; she later used the grant to visit Pompeii, where she could see and analyze these markings first-hand. "I've really enjoyed being able to shed light on these women's experiences and to give voice to these women who were never given one by their society," she says.

Prior to evaluating the graffiti, Johnson began by studying slavery contracts and laws, most of which were written by men. These documents revealed that prostitution in the Lupanar was often the result of servitude and provided only a meager income for the women affected. For them, life in the Lupanar meant being chosen—like products on a store shelf—based on their appearance or perceived ability to work as prostitutes. Johnson says that their "voice in history is defined by men, defined by the

Banqueters Met, *circa 490 BC, Hieron (potter), attributed to Makron (painter)*, CC by 2.5. Photos courtesy of Clare Johnson



goods they could give, and defined by this reputation of them being lesser than anyone in Roman society."

However, shortly after beginning her research on the graffiti, which was likely written by the women themselves, Johnson found a different story carved into Lupanar's walls—one in which these women donned bravery, power, and strength. As Johnson studied the graffiti, she says "the voice that I have learned throughout all of my history classes kind of shifted for me. And all of a sudden, I saw these women as *real* people."

STORIES RECORDED IN A NAME

Inside the brothel, obscene markings and crude words and phrases have been immortalized on the Lupanar's walls, along with the names of men who entered the building and of the women who likely resided in it. "You would think that in such a seedy place people wouldn't come and leave their names behind," Johnson states. "For the men, it was an assertion of power, and for the women, it was an insistence on being seen and remembered and heard."

Johnson believes the women's names offer unique insight into the power these prostitutes sought, because instead of writing their given Latin or Roman names, the women seem to have written stage names—such as Victory or Grindstone—given to them by their procurer. Though the names represent the cruel and violent lives these women were forced to lead, they also show the women's insistence on their lives being remembered—even if only by the hardship and oppression they faced.

THE STRENGTH OF SILENCE

According to Johnson, one word of graffiti, hidden under a window in the brothel's first room, highlights the women's defiance to oppression: *contiquere*, which translates to "they all fell silent." This phrase comes from the *Aeneid*, written by the Roman poet Virgil, and seems to demonstrate how these women defied the silence forced on them by writing on the walls. "They might have been silent when they wrote on the walls, but that doesn't mean they'll forever be silent," Johnson notes. "Their human experience was terrible, but it was still *theirs*, and it still happened."

Johnson hopes her analysis of this graffiti will provide insights on the lives of lower-class women in ancient Rome: "The Lupanar has become a tourist destination, but people don't really understand the place they're walking through," Johnson says. "They don't realize that the graffiti isn't just scribbles; they are the lived experiences of women who were silenced by history, silenced by the people who would live there, and, in a way, silenced by themselves because they couldn't speak out."

Through her research, Johnson wants to commemorate the women's lives and experiences by recognizing both their hardships and their strength. Her findings were published in the Harvard undergraduate classics journal, *Persephone*, which came out summer 2025. "These marginalized women weren't forgotten," she concludes. "They were just *voiceless*; and, they weren't given the opportunity to let their stories be known"—until now.

Left: Clare Johnson stands in front of the Lupanar in Pompei, Italy. Top: Close-up of Lupanar graffiti.