

In Stone and Story

EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN THE
ROMAN WORLD

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Looking Ahead

An Introduction

A little painting on the wall of a small house in Pompeii is one of the most delightful artifacts among the many treasures buried by the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in the late first century. The painting (shown below) depicts two little cupids pulling rings and a mirror out of a jewelry box and examining them with curiosity.

That charming vignette can serve as an analogy of what transpires in this book. Like those two cupids, the chapters of this book pull out selected archaeological resources from the treasure chest of Vesuvian artifacts, examining them for what they reveal about the ancient Roman world. Moreover, when configured in relation to selected texts of early Christianity, those artifacts (graffiti, inscriptions, statues, temples, paintings, tombs, and more) help to foster fresh angles of vision regarding the slow but steady rise of early Jesus-devotion within its earliest historical contexts. Relating texts of the early Jesus-

movement to selected Vesuvian resources offers the opportunity to explore ways in which Jesus-devotion was getting a foothold within that world and, at times, infusing fresh resources into it.

In the process, readers of this book may learn as much about Pompeii as they do about the early followers of Jesus and the theological library they bequeathed to the world (that is,



Figure Intro.1. Two cupids inspecting jewelry and a mirror (from the House of the Prince of Naples in Pompeii, located at 6.15.8; for an explanation of this numbering system [Fiorelli's], see chapter 3 under the heading "Designations Frequently Used")



Figure Intro.2. Mount Vesuvius today rising above the Bay of Naples (see credits)

the New Testament). That will be no bad thing, since understanding how an ancient urban center “worked” will inevitably help to highlight the issues of Christianity’s emergence within similar urban centers throughout the Mediterranean world of the first century.

If readers of this book are anything like the author of this book, they will find what lies ahead to be a stimulating journey of discovery. I am sometimes asked whether I consider myself to be a researcher of early Christianity

or of the Vesuvian towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Because the two are not mutually exclusive, I usually respond by saying that I consider myself to be a better scholar of early Jesus-devotion precisely because I am also a scholar of the Vesuvian towns. It is my hope that readers of this book will also come to a better understanding of the early Jesus-movement as the Vesuvian towns become increasingly familiar.

PART ONE

Protocols of Engagement

Human Meaning in Stone and Story

1

Throughout history, people have told stories to help them interpret their lives within the cultures in which they were embedded. These were stories about who they were, where they came from, what's wrong with the world, how they were connected with other people, how they were different from other people, and where things were going. The more those stories could explain their world, the more powerful they proved to be; the more powerful those stories were, the more useful they were for interpreting people's life stories.

Earliest Christianity, even in its various forms, began to get a foothold in a world very different from our own. It told its stories in a context far removed from the twenty-first century. Appreciation for the contributions of early Christian voices to the articulation of human meaning grows when those voices are heard in relation to their own world—the Greco-Roman world of the first century. That world was animated by a tournament of narratives about the world and its supposed deities. It was in relation to that tournament that a small number of Jesus-followers began to tell stories alongside the many others that were already on offer. Arguably, if Christian

stories can contribute to the quest for meaning in contexts other than the first-century world, their potential is augmented when those stories are informed by an understanding of their significance within their original context.

There are a number of ways to become immersed in that first-century world. Two standard methods for approaching the Roman world include (1) the study of ancient classical texts and (2) the study of archaeological discoveries from that ancient world. This book primarily adopts the second of these—exploring the material culture of the Roman age through the illumination provided by the archaeological site of Pompeii, with assistance from Pompeii's sister town, Herculaneum (and at times artifacts from nearby first-century Vesuvian villas). Literature from the Roman age will be referenced occasionally, in instances when it significantly aids interpretation of the material evidence of the two Vesuvian towns.

Through these two spellbinding Vesuvian sites, the first-century configuration of Roman culture comes to life in concentrated form. No other ancient site comes close to offering the vast historical resources that the Vesuvian towns offer. Roughly 150 miles south of the



Figure 1.1. Two photos depicting Mount Vesuvius behind the material remains of Pompeii today

bustling city of Rome, these two towns died when their local mountain, Mount Vesuvius, erupted in the year 79 CE. Volcanic debris from that eruption suffocated the Vesuvian towns, burying them under heavy blankets of volcanic pumice (in the case of Pompeii) and flows of dense pyroclastic ash (in the case of both Pompeii and Herculaneum). Now largely uncovered by archaeologists, these first-century towns sit on the doorstep of our twenty-first-century world, boldly displaying much of what life was like in two small urban contexts of the Greco-Roman world.

This book will offer windows into the Greco-Roman context in which Jesus-devotion was getting its initial foothold. It will do this by highlighting selected Vesuvian artifacts that best illustrate aspects of the Roman world and that, in turn, impact our understanding of early Christian texts and phenomena. Pompeii and Herculaneum were, after all, urban centers vibrantly alive at the very time that the early Jesus-movement was

first getting some traction in urban centers of the Roman world. The Vesuvian remains are a treasure trove of life from two urban centers and various rural villas of the first century CE. They access that ancient world in a way that matches anything we might wish for, and they supplement the great literary texts of Greek and Latin writers with the everyday life of ordinary people who would otherwise be largely invisible to us. Moreover, Vesuvian artifacts reveal Greco-Roman contexts in an organic, interrelated fashion; the inner sinews connecting first-century urban culture are on display at Vesuvius's base in a fashion unequalled at any other ancient site. In short, when it comes to understanding the world of the first century, no other urban site offers anything close to the Vesuvian resources of Pompeii and Herculaneum.

In addition, today there are exciting opportunities for exploring those Vesuvian towns by means of internet resources. Those opportunities allow people with curious minds

to delve deeply into the Vesuvian archaeology from the window of their own digital screens, making the study of the Roman world easier than ever before. More will be said about this in chapter 3.

Before we get too far, however, I want to highlight my motivation for writing this book by recalling the words of one of my former undergraduate students. Toward the end of a university course I had taught, I asked my students to write reflections on what they had learned about the early Christian texts in their historical context. One perceptive undergraduate included the following in her larger reflections: “I’m starting to realize that taking these [New Testament] writings and directly applying them to our modern context without thinking about the ‘interpretative bridge’ of time and culture is about as helpful as taking a scale to the moon. Weight is going to be different there, because gravity is different there!”

Much might be said in relation to this observation, but this is not the place for that. Instead, borrowing this student’s analogy, I simply note my hope that this book will help readers construct that “interpretative bridge” to the Roman world, in the enterprise of reading early Christian texts in their first historical

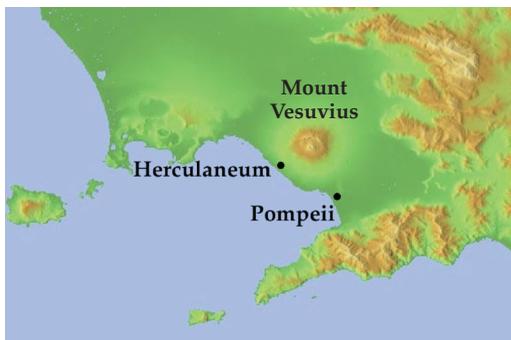


Figure 1.2. Map showing the location of the towns Pompeii and Herculaneum on the seacoast and in their proximity to Mount Vesuvius

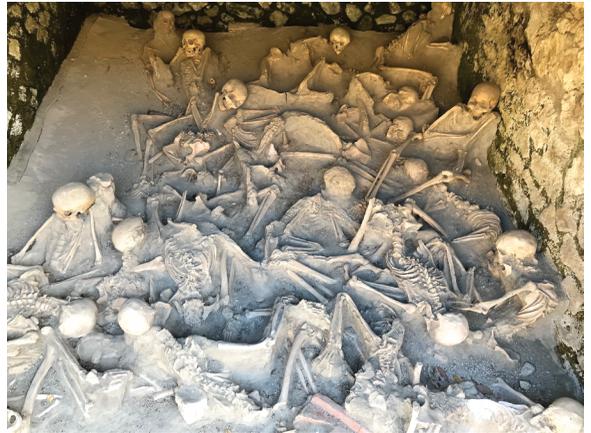


Figure 1.3. Skeletons of some of the people killed in the eruption of Vesuvius, who had sought shelter in the storage bays on the seafront at Herculaneum

contexts. Placing early Christian discourse in its historical setting will allow the force of that discourse to be more readily apparent. And in this task we will be assisted by those people of Pompeii and Herculaneum who will act as our guides, our “key informants” of the Roman world, even though many of them lost their lives in a horrific tragedy of unimaginable proportions.

A Glance at Our Guides

In this book, we will have the honor of entering into the Roman world through the lives and lifestyles of the people who populated the residences of Pompeii and Herculaneum. These people, who were often neighbors to each other, will act as our guides into a world that had at least as many differences from our own world as similarities. We will recognize many parts of their world, but at times we might also scratch our heads and wonder about other aspects. Within this very foreign world, some people had big dreams, clear

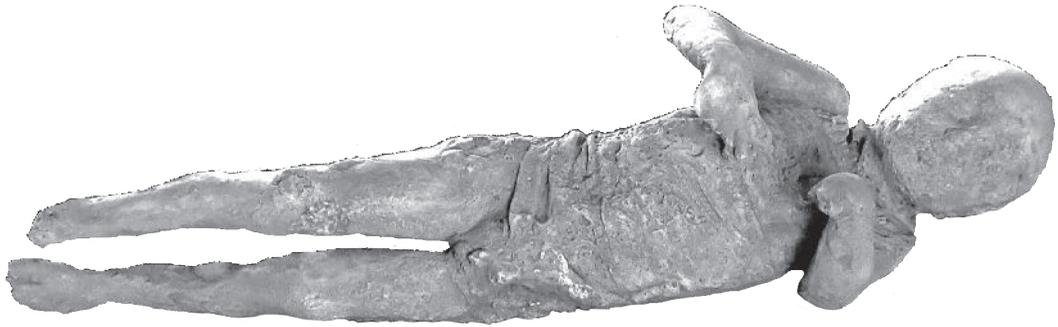


Figure 1.4. A plaster cast of a young child whose body decomposed in the volcanic debris (from the House of the Golden Bracelet, 6.17.42)

schemes, and high hopes for the future, while many others must have been discouraged by the drudgery of their situations. Some of them were eager to think through the complexities of life. Some of them looked forward to the next party they would attend. Some of them expressed their hatred for their competitors. Some of them were desperately in love. Some of them were stuck in loveless marriages, and some of them were desperately bitter at the way love had treated them. These aspects of their lives, and more, are on display as we enter the spaces of the Vesuvian residents.

At times we get glimpses into their ordinary lives by means of graffiti that they left on walls throughout their towns. The Roman biographer Plutarch encouraged his readers to avoid glancing at the graffiti all around them, since those graffiti only encouraged “the practice of inquiring after things which are none of our business” (*On Curiosity* 520E). But “the practice of inquiring after things” like first-century graffiti is precisely the “business” of historical inquiry. Those graffiti give us access to first-century lives, revealing the everyday occurrences of ordinary people. So, for instance, out of the thousands of graffiti from the Vesuvian towns, one graffiti reads: “A copper pot went

missing from my shop. Anyone who returns it to me will be given 65 bronze coins [literally, *sestertii*]; twenty more will be given for information leading to the capture of the thief” (*CIL* 4.64; for an explanation of the “*CIL*” enumeration, see chapter 3). Some of the residents of these towns were honest and helpful, as in this graffiti: “If anyone lost a mare laden with baskets on November 25, apply to Quintus Decius Hilarus, freedman of Quintus . . . at the Mamii estate on the other side of the Sarno Bridge” (*CIL* 4.3864).

Many graffiti were not so courteous, as in this one directed to someone named Chios: “I hope your hemorrhoids rub together so much that they hurt worse than they ever have before!”



Figure 1.5. Portraits (with damage to the right portrait) of two children (boy on the left and girl on the right) depicted on the walls of their bedroom (from Pompeii’s House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, 5.4.a)

(*CIL* 4.1820). Still other graffiti get to the point even more quickly: “May you be crucified” (*CIL* 4.2082); “Curse you” (*CIL* 4.1813); and “Samius to Cornelius: go hang yourself” (*CIL* 4.1864). In some ways, the world has not changed very much from the days when early Christianity was struggling to get a foothold within first-century society.

Nowhere is that more clear than in graffiti about love. “No young buck is complete until he has fallen in love,” one Pompeian resident advised (*CIL* 4.1797). Around the town, graffiti reveal that the town’s residents were often enmeshed in relationships of love. One man described his darling as the “sweetest and most lovable” girl (*CIL* 4.8177), while another referred to his sweetheart Noete as “my light” (*CIL* 4.1970). A man named Caesius declared that he “faithfully loves” his partner, whose name has not survived beyond the first letter, *M* (*CIL* 4.1812). Yet another gave a wonderful compliment to his partner, referencing a famous painting in the Temple of Aesculapius on the island of Cos that was greatly discussed

in the ancient world: “Anyone who has not seen the painting of Venus by Apelles should take a look at my girl: she is equally radiant” (*CIL* 4.6842).

Clearly, then, there were romantics among the population of the Vesuvian towns. One of them saluted another with this little gem, written on a column in the back of a Pompeii residence: “May you, girl, thrive, and may you have the goodwill of Pompeian Venus” (*CIL* 4.4007). One graffito illustrates how someone would have willingly compromised his/her own prospects in order to be with the love of his/her life: “Love dictates what I write, and Cupid guides my hand: I would rather die than be a god without you” (*CIL* 4.1928). On another occasion, a woman named Livia posted greetings to a man named Alexander, adding that if his life should start to falter, she would “come running” (*CIL* 4.1593).

Love was a fragile thing in many circumstances, especially for slaves embedded within households. Two graffiti that speak of “the vetoing of love” seem to capture this point.

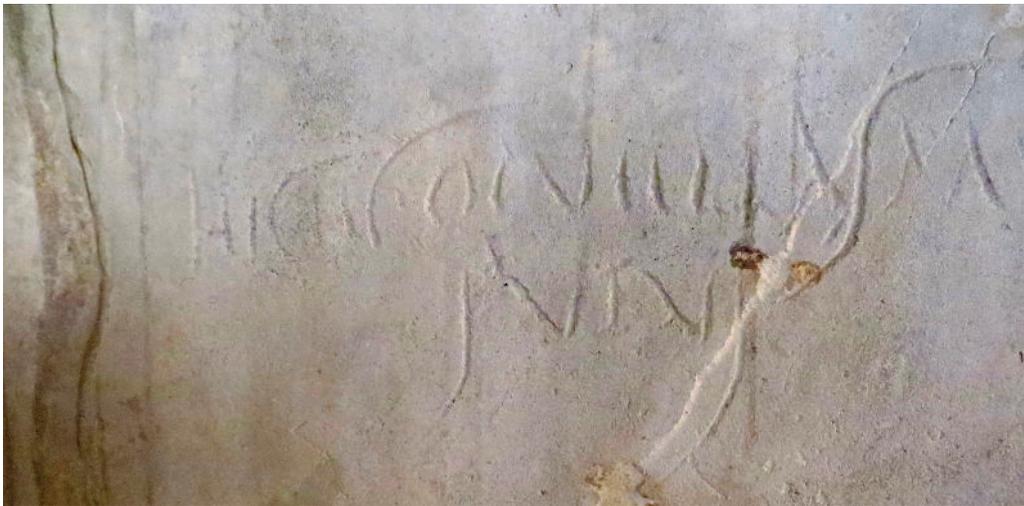


Figure 1.6. Part of a Latin graffito scratched onto a Pompeii wall (*CIL* 4.2175)



Figure 1.7. A fresco depicting the myth of the cupid Eros being led into the presence of Venus, who will reprimand him for shooting his arrow of love at the wrong target; his brother, the cupid Anteros, looks on from behind Venus with seeming amusement at the punishment of his brother (from 7.2.23, MANN 9257; for an explanation of the MANN numbering system, see chapter 3 under “Designations Frequently Used”).

On the wall of the residence of one of Pompeii’s private auctioneer-bankers, someone scratched this catchy memo: “May prosperity come to those who love; may death come to those who cannot love; and may those who veto love die twice” (*CIL* 4.4091). Another graffito tells us that the attempt to veto love was not an uncommon thing: “He who vetoes love, he who keeps a watch on lovers . . . is by no means unique” (*CIL* 4.4509). The phrase “to veto love” may refer to the efforts of any householder who prevented romance to develop either (1) between slaves within his own household or (2) between a slave in his household and a slave belonging to a different household. But love often transpired among slaves nonetheless, as in the case of

the female slave Methe (who was literate) and Chrestus (whose status is uncertain but who was most likely servile as well): “Methe of Atella, slave of Cominia, loves Chrestus. May Venus of Pompeii smile favorably on their hearts and let them always live in harmony” (*CIL* 4.2457). Love can sometimes take hold in even the most difficult of situations. One Pompeian resident claimed that the power of love could never be held back, making the point with poetic sarcasm: “He who dissuades lovers can also fetter the winds and stop the perennial flow of spring” (*CIL* 4.1649).

Sometimes graffiti testify to affection between partners who lived near each other. On the exterior wall of one residence, a man named Secundus declared his love for his mistress Prima (“Secundus greets his Prima everywhere; I beg you, my mistress, to love me”; *CIL* 4.8364, outside 1.10.7), and four doorways down the street Prima seems to have responded favorably (“Prima sends very many greetings to Secundus”; *CIL* 4.8270, outside 1.10.3).

Sometimes graffiti testify to affection between partners who were spread out over the miles. One woman inscribed a wish about her lover who was soon to make a sea voyage (he may have been a merchant or a sailor on a merchant vessel). The woman, named Ario, fears that while he is away he will find many alluring sexual temptations: “Venus is a weaver of webs; from the moment that she sets out to attack my dearest, she will lay temptations along his way: he must hope for a good

voyage, which is also the wish of his Ario” (*CIL* 4.1410, depicted in figure 1.9). Ario’s clever intellect is evident in this short graffito. In her prose, the motif of distance acts both literally (her lover is physically going away on a journey) and metaphorically (he might lose sight of his affection for her, in view of the web of sexual temptations that Venus will weave for him along the way). At the metaphorical level, the phrase “he must hope for a good voyage” moves from being about physical safety to being about his emotional fidelity, as does the closing sentiment, “which is also the wish of his Ario.”

Another graffito articulates passion over the miles of separation and expresses the desire for relational reunion. Although it was inscribed on a wall in Pompeii, the graffito voices the emotion of being distant from a specific Pompeian resident:

Wagon driver, if you could only feel the fires of love, you would increase your speed to enjoy the pleasures of Venus. I love my young Charmer, so please get the horses going; let’s get on! You’ve had your drink, let’s go. Take the reins and crack the whip. . . . Take me to Pompeii, where my sweet love lives. (*CIL* 4.5092)

Of course, in many instances love was not all it was advertised to be. Whereas one romantic person held the view that “lovers, like bees, lead a honeyed life,” below that graffito someone else added the words, “If only that were true” (*CIL* 4.8408a and b). And heart-break is all over this brave inscription against Venus, the deity of sexual passion and love: “Let all who love go to blazes! As for Venus, I want to break her ribs with cudgel blows and maim her loins. If she can pierce my tender



Figure 1.8. A stylized fresco of a couple in amorous flight (from 6.9.6, MANN 9135)

heart, why shouldn’t I split her head with my stick?!” (*CIL* 4.1824).

The people who will be our guides into this first-century world are people who loved, often passionately, often caringly. They had hopes and dreams of one kind or another. They philosophized about life. One of them offered this observation: “To be discerning in life, one must know something of death” (*CIL* 4.8832). Another, this: “Whoever disdains life will easily despise the divine” (*CIL* 4.5370). One captured the ironies of progress: “Nothing is as hard as stone, and nothing is as soft as liquid; and yet, hard stones are hollowed out by soft water” (*CIL* 4.1894).

We will see more of our guides’ graffiti in the following chapters. Along the way, as we enter their world cognizant of some of its particular strengths and peculiar weaknesses, we should also enter the world of their lives respectfully. Sometimes even their wisdom



Figure 1.9. Ario's inscription appears on the left of this fresco (CIL 4.1410); the fresco itself (MANN 4694) is from the House of Hercules (6.7.3).

overreaches the boundaries of their world. Consider, for instance, this poetic reflection on the changing tides of life (CIL 4.9123, a graffito found at 9.13.4):

Nothing can last for all time:
The dazzling sun returns to the
ocean;
The once-full moon wanes to a
crescent;
The most passionate of storms often
becomes the lightest of breezes.

Before we begin exploring the historical context of early Jesus-devotion by way of the Vesuvian towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum, a few things need to be set out in advance to ensure the maximal effectiveness of our journey. The next chapter (chapter 2) highlights a central feature of Roman society—what has been called “the fire in the bones” of those



Figure 1.10. An artist's depiction of the excavations of Pompeii with Mount Vesuvius in the distance (by Giuseppe LaeZZa [1835–1905], now in the public domain; see credits)

who lived in the world that we will be exploring. That chapter stands at the outset of our journey because, in many ways, it is the glue that holds together many aspects of the case studies that follow. Having registered that central feature of the first-century world, the subsequent chapter (chapter 3) lays out a few

of the “tools” necessary to access the first-century world. With those preliminaries in hand, the chapters that follow will explore life in a Vesuvian town in order to capture a sense of the world in which Christianity began to emerge, telling its controversial stories about new opportunities to live meaningfully.

2

Fire in the Bones

It will be helpful to foreground at the outset what is arguably the most important social phenomenon of the ancient world: status capture. The acquisition and accumulation of status was central to the main workings of the Roman world. Cicero (the popular philosopher, orator, and politician, 106–43 BCE) said it like this: “By nature we yearn and hunger for honor. Once we have glimpsed . . . some part of honor’s radiance, we are prepared to bear and suffer anything in order to secure it” (*Tusculanae disputationes* 2.24.58).

Simply put, the world of the first urban Jesus-followers was a world enmeshed in the quest for status. It is only the slightest exaggeration to say that no matter what ancient stone you uncover, no matter what ancient inscription you decipher, no matter what ancient painting you interpret, status capture lies at the heart of it. The people of the Roman age saw status as the essential commodity of life. The more status someone could accumulate, the more power and security he or she would stockpile. Conversely, people with lesser status were usually more vulnerable to forces beyond their control.

Differences in status are on display everywhere in the Vesuvian towns, as we will see

throughout this book. One intriguing example will suffice for now. One of Pompeii’s most powerful politicians prior to the eruption of Mount Vesuvius was a man named Gaius Julius Polybius, who lived in one of Pompeii’s finest houses (at 9.13.1–3). As he walked from his residence to the town’s main forum, Polybius and his entourage would have passed some political endorsements that encouraged other residents of the town to vote for him in a forthcoming election. One of Polybius’s supporters was a woman named Zmyrina. Her endorsement of him was painted on the external wall of a small pub where she and other women worked. (The endorsement has the inventory number *CIL* 4.7864, and the inventory number of the pub is 9.11.2; these enumerations will be explained in chapter 3.) Although Zmyrina was probably a barmaid, her endorsement testifies to Polybius’s prominence among the townspeople, since the endorsement references him not by name but only by the three initials of his Roman name. Curiously, however, after Zmyrina commissioned her endorsement, someone covered her name with plaster (faint traces of the plaster were still visible when archaeologists first excavated the site). This

meant that the endorsement of Polybius no longer mentioned this particular endorser. Evidently the status differential between Polybius and Zmyrina was too great in Polybius's eyes, causing him to have her name struck out of the endorsement, since she was a lowly barmaid and unworthy to be included in his sphere of influence. (For a Pompeian fresco of a barmaid, see figure 15.8.)

In this instance, we first see a low-status woman articulating her political preference. In that action, however, she was simultaneously attempting to elevate her own status as someone whose opinion might be worthy of some public notice. But her efforts were derailed when the very man whom she had supported took steps to remove her name from public discourse, while simultaneously accepting her public praise as a means of elevating his own status. Status capture is all over this single graffito.

That is not the last we hear of Zmyrina, however. In a later election, another barmaid named Asellina, who worked in the same tavern, decided to express her support for a different political candidate (this time, Gaius Lollium Fuscum). This election endorsement included a clause that suggested, "Zmyrina is back; you can't keep a good woman down" (literally, "Asellina asks you to elect Gaius Lollium Fuscum, not without Zmyrina"). This endorsement (see figure 2.1), which was placed near Zmyrina's earlier endorsement, has the effect of reasserting this barmaid's significance, despite Polybius's earlier attempt to remove her voice from the canvassing of political opinion.

People everywhere did whatever they could to leverage increasing amounts of status for themselves. Some had little or no chance of doing this. Others had a variety of strategies



Figure 2.1. The second political endorsement mentioning Zmyrina, this time with Asellina (spelled "Asellinas"); the top line still reveals a part of the name of her preferred candidate (the "Loll . . ." of "Lollium," for instance), while the third and fourth lines read "Asellinas rogant [plural] nec sine Zmyrina" (translated in the main text; *CIL* 4.7863, at 9.11.2, in situ).

for capitalizing further on whatever status they already had in order to heighten their standing among their peers.

It was the civic elite who benefited from having a variety of strategies for capitalizing on their status. Because they had significant control of social structures, numerous options were at their disposal to ensure that their public status was reinforced and augmented at every turn. For instance, when people attended gladiatorial contests in Pompeii's amphitheater or dramatic presentations in Pompeii's theater, a prescribed seating plan ensured that the civic leaders were in prominent positions. In Pompeii's amphitheater, the elite sat in a separate section closest to the action in the arena (in what today might be called "box seats"), while others sat in the rows behind, leading all the way to the upper seats, where those with the lowest configuration of status would have sat (see figure 2.2).

Moreover, the non-elite walked up the huge external staircases to get to the sections of



Figure 2.2. The stratified seating in Pompeii's amphitheater; the elite sat in the section reserved for them closest to the action, while people with lesser status sat higher up behind them.

the amphitheater where they were to sit; the elite, however, accessed their privileged seating through special internal tunnels attached to separate entrances, ensuring that the elite did not have to mix with the ordinary people of inferior social status (see figure 2.3).

Status came in a variety of kinds. In one sense, certain kinds of status were configured as binary opposites—for instance, slave or free. People were either one or the other, never both simultaneously in different mixtures of each. The binary contrast between



Figure 2.3. Left: the public access by means of the exterior staircases; right: elite access by means of the interior passageways leading to the amphitheater's front seats

these two particular kinds of identity is evident in a public inscription placed near a water tower in Herculaneum. The inscription, erected by two local magistrates, was an official decree against leaving garbage at the base of the water tower, and it itemized the penalties for failing to comply with the order. Those penalties were articulated with reference to whether a person was free or in servitude: “We declare a fine of twenty denarii for free citizens . . . [and] we will punish slaves with lashes” (*CIL* 4.10489; a similar decree appears in *CIL* 4.10488, shown in figure 2.4). These contrasting penalties (monetary fines versus physical floggings) differentiated the binary opposites of free or freed persons on the one hand and slaves on the other. Perhaps this differentiation was thought to be necessary in view of the fact that many slaves would not have had economic resources of their own, thereby requiring that their punishment be physical in nature rather than economic.

Other kinds of status were not as contrastive, being configured along a spectrum. For instance, one’s family heritage, occupation, or



Figure 2.4. A public notice (now highly damaged and faded, with an Italian translation on its protective glass) placed on a street column, detailing the punishments to be meted out to individuals who dumped garbage at this public place in Herculaneum (*CIL* 4.10488)

age in relation to others—these were generally spread out across a spectrum of honor.

But, in fact, even within most forms of status, there was often a kind of spectrum of identity. For instance, there was a variety of slave identities, since the spectrum of servile tasks and positions varied widely. And there was a spectrum of status within the category of those who were “free,” since (all else being equal) those born free were superior to those who were born in slavery and later freed.

There was also variety within the category of “citizen.” Two episodes from the narrative of the Acts of the Apostles make the point with clarity, highlighting both the binary dimension of citizenship and non-citizenship on the one hand and the spread of status within citizenship on the other hand. The binary contrast between citizen and non-citizen is evident in this exchange between the apostle Paul and city magistrates:

Paul said to the officers: “They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. . . .” The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison. (Acts 16:37–39 NIV)

This story illustrates that citizenship was a status-enhancing commodity in binary or contrastive fashion over against non-citizen identity. If magistrates in the story deemed it acceptable to beat someone whom they took to be a non-citizen, they would never knowingly have permitted such a punishment to be meted out on a citizen.

In another episode from Acts, however, two different forms of citizenship are displayed along a spectrum of status:

The commander went to Paul and asked, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?” “Yes, I am,” he answered. Then the commander said, “I had to pay a lot of money for my citizenship.” Paul replied, “I was born a citizen.” (Acts 22:27–28 NIV alt.)

This story illustrates that there were variables even within citizenship status. Though citizenship was a status-enhancing commodity, there were nonetheless degrees of status even within that form of identity.

This is where the first-century audience hearing this story would be intrigued, since social nuances of challenge and contest animate this encounter. The two men are not just trading information casually. Instead, a Roman commander is seeking to outdo Paul with regard to citizenship status. First-century audiences would have heard his statement “I

had to pay a lot of money for my citizenship” as an attempt at one-upmanship. The commander must have assumed that Paul’s citizenship had been acquired cheaply—perhaps as an inexpensive payoff to a poor master who needed quick access to resources and therefore agreed to release a slave in return for a small payment. The commander is, in effect, insulting Paul and trumpeting his own claim to status over what he assumed to be Paul’s inferior claim. Paul’s simple reply, however, put an end to the contest: “I was born a citizen.” Paul did not acquire citizenship through strategic means. He inherited it by birth within a Roman family. Paul’s citizenship, then, ran deeper than the commander’s. An audience sympathetic to Paul is given the opportunity to chuckle as they watch a Roman commander initiate a contest of status, only to lose that contest to their hero,

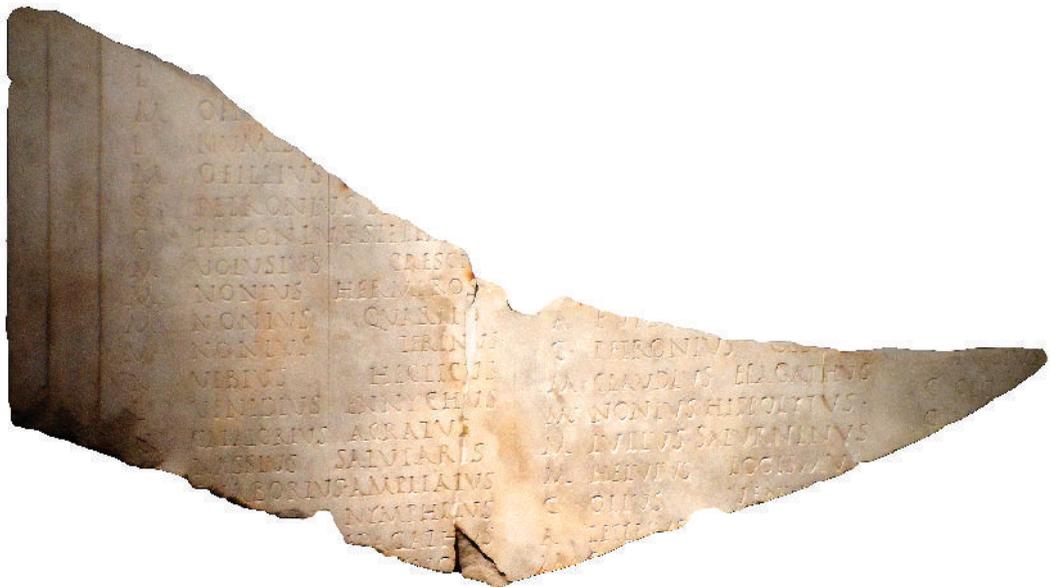


Figure 2.5. A list of names of the local male citizens who were eligible to vote was inscribed in marble and hung in the basilica of Herculaneum; this broken fragment is only a small part of that lengthy list, which was a very public record of a certain form of civic status.

Paul, in his understated yet poignant riposte to the commander.

One of the best ancient examples of status differentiation, even within a single category of identity, comes from the case of one man who once resided in Herculaneum. A few particulars about the man will help us to understand his fuller story. He had once been a slave. When he earned his freedom, his slave name (Ennychus) was joined to the first two names of his master (Lucius Venidius), giving him the new name Lucius Venidius Ennychus. Whereas slaves almost always had only one name (a common slave name being Felix, ironically meaning “happy,” or Faustus, meaning “lucky”), freemen and freedmen had at least three names (for example, Gaius Julius Caesar). So upon earning his freedom, Ennychus gained a fully Roman name to match his Roman citizenship (since slaves freed by masters who were Roman citizens usually gained Roman citizenship in the process of being released from slavery, unless they had been notably insubordinate at any point during their time of slavery).

But as we have already seen, there were various kinds of Roman citizenship, and this is where Ennychus’s story becomes interesting. Ennychus’s problem was that he had been freed from servitude before his thirtieth birthday. This meant that his citizenship was deemed by his peers to be second-rate, more like a pseudo-citizenship. Upon gaining his freedom, Ennychus would have had the status of a “Junian Latin”—that is, he had gained a form of citizenship, but it was inferior to full citizenship (because he was younger than thirty when he gained his freedom). The origins of this category of citizenship lay in the fact that some influential people felt that ex-slaves were becoming Roman citizens far too

easily, leading to a growing number of people who could boast of possessing citizenship. Because of that concern, the category of Junian Latin was created to introduce further stratifications of status and, ultimately, to try to protect the currency of full Roman citizenship. The path of Ennychus’s upward advancement was blocked at the level of a Junian Latin unless or until he could remove that stigma and move forward to become a full Roman citizen.

This is where a stash of documents from Herculaneum’s House of the Black Salon helps shed light on Ennychus’s story. Of the thirty-nine wooden tablets found in that house, three of them record various business transactions and important moments in Ennychus’s life.

- One document was dated July 24 in the year 60. It recorded the birth of Venidia, a baby girl, to Ennychus and his wife, Livia Acte.
- A second document was dated July 25 in the year 61, a year and a day after the first document. In it, the magistrates of Herculaneum certified that the baby Venidia had survived beyond her first birthday.
- The third document was dated March 22 in the year 62. It recorded the decision of an official in Rome, who had been approached by magistrates of Herculaneum regarding the status of Lucius Venidius Ennychus and Livia Acte. The official in Rome confirmed three things: (1) Venidius Ennychus and Livia Acte had a legitimate marriage; (2) their daughter had survived beyond the age of one year (as testified to by the first and second documents); and (3) as a consequence, Venidius



Figure 2.6. Part of the courtyard in the House of the Black Salon, where Venidius Ennychus, Livia Acte, and Venidia resided

Ennychus was now a full-fledged Roman citizen, no longer a Junian Latin.

From this point forward, a considerable obstacle in Ennychus's rise in social status was removed, and he was free to rise to further challenges as he ascended to the next level of Roman society. The story of Ennychus gives us unique insight into one of the many complexities of status and status manipulation in the Roman world.

We have seen that status capture ran through the veins of many in the Roman age. It was the

“fire in the bones” that drove the machinery of the world that the early Jesus-movement was infiltrating. In some very practical and challenging aspects, the message proclaimed by early Jesus-followers ran against the cultural grain of the Roman world. The texts of early Christianity often depict moments in which the relationship between the “good news” (or “gospel”) and Roman culture is being negotiated. As we will see, early Jesus-followers did not apply an overarching template to every situation. When considering particular issues that faced the nascent Jesus-movement, apostolic voices sometimes spoke with a fair degree of unanimity; certain theological perceptions were foundational for shared forms

of discourse (for instance, early Christian discourse about the Greco-Roman deities; see the chapters in part 2). But on other pressing issues, their reflections sometimes differed, with the mixture of theological ingredients being combined in different ways (as we will see in certain chapters of part 4 especially). This is one of the things that makes early Christian

texts so engaging—a “one size fits all” master stencil was rarely overlaid onto every situation. Instead, a spectrum of voices sought to negotiate the impact of Jesus-devotion within the Roman culture that early Jesus-followers were beginning to infiltrate, challenge, and, at times, perhaps even enhance.