

Most students in classics have little idea of the wealth of information about Roman life that is available in inscriptions. Many of the Romans seem to have had an almost compulsive urge to record information in a permanent form by putting it on stone, and as happens today there were also characters who daubed their messages on walls in public places. The sheer mass of material is staggering: there are monumental inscriptions put up by the imperial government; there are countless grave markers which after many centuries still voice the sorrow of bereavement, and, especially at Pompeii, where so much was preserved by a blanket of volcanic ash, there are graffiti of all kinds. These include an interesting series which shows that a town election campaign was going on, and that election promises and abuse of other candidates were well-known. One candidate is described as giving good bread, and another is said to be supported by various shady types, including the late drinkers (SERI BIBI) and the petty thieves. The best guess is that this inscription was put up by a rival who wanted to undermine his opponent's character.

Many inscriptions show how the spelling and pronunciation of Latin were changing. How many would recognize a word like COZUX in isolation? The complete inscription makes the answer clear: ONAGER QUI VIXIT ANNIS XXXVI VIXIT CUM COZUCE ANNOS III COZUX FECIT BENEMERENTI. It seems that Onager lived 36 years and lived 3 years with his wife (COZUCE = CONIUGE), and that she had put up the memorial to her well-deserving husband. Linguists know that the old V became a B in many dialects, and there are frequent examples of this change preserved. There is a BALENTINA who died VI KAL. MARTIAS DIE BENERIS.

We often think of the Romans as rather formal folk, but there were shameless ones as well, as is indicated by the threat on a burial marker from the capital: QUI HIC MIXERIT AUT CACARIT HABEAT DEOS SUPEROS ET INFEROS IRATOS. Some inscriptions leave questions even when they can be read. C. Curtius Protus raised a memorial to himself and his freedmen, and describes himself as INTERPETES DE ISULA. In Classical spelling, he was INTERPRES DE INSULA, but what does that mean? Was he a functionary in an apartment building? He could have been an agent or broker, a messenger, a soothsayer, a translator or a tour guide. We simply cannot tell. One inscription might be the equivalent of signs put up by the telephone company: FOSSOR VIDE NE FODIAS: DEUS MAGNU OCLU ABET. The first part clearly tells any excavator to see that he doesn't dig here, while the second suggests that God is watching (MAGNUM OCULUM HABET).

Most inscriptions, of course, are not quite like the ones mentioned here, but none the less there are enough oddities in the collection to amuse or intrigue any reader, as well as to provide a great data-bank for historians and philologists.

Announcement of Games at Pompeii  
(ca.50-60 A.D.)-----

A · SVETTI · CERTI  
AEDILIS · FAMILIA · GLADIATORIA · PUGNAB · POMPEIS  
PR · K · IVNIAS · VENATIO · ET · VELA · ERUNT