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THE MONUMENTALITY OF GLADIATORIAL GRAFFITI IN THE FLAVIAN AMPHITHEATRE: A CONTEXTUAL APPROACH

by Alessandra Tafaro

The present article offers a new interpretation of the gladiatorial graffiti preserved within the Flavian Amphitheatre from a contextual perspective. Although recent scholarship has set a solid foundation for investigating the role and nature of gladiatorial graffiti, a contextual examination of this epigraphic category represents a major desideratum. *The article investigates graffiti within the epigraphic environment of the Flavian Amphitheatre. It examines the juxtaposition of graffiti and official inscriptions, their interaction with spatial and material surroundings and their distinctiveness as visual and material media with which to perpetuate the fleeting arena performances. By combining close reading with a new visual representation of gladiatorial graffiti – created digitally upon autoptic study – the article provides the reader with the first systematic analysis of this exceptional epigraphic record. Challenging critical notions of impermanence and instability, the article explores strategies of memorialization and techniques of temporality performed by graffiti, inviting reflection on the negotiation of and paradoxical takes on the contradictory concept of monumentality in the arena.*

Il presente contributo propone una nuova lettura dei graffiti gladiatorii conservati presso l'anfiteatro Flavio, prestando attenzione al contesto di rinvenimento. Studi recenti hanno posto in evidenza il ruolo e la natura dei graffiti gladiatorii. Tuttavia, l'analisi di questa categoria epigrafica nel suo contesto di appartenenza rappresenta ancora un desideratum. Il presente articolo si propone pertanto di esaminare il rapporto fra i graffiti e le iscrizioni ufficiali dell'anfiteatro, nonché l'interazione fra i graffiti e il contesto spaziale e materiale in cui sono stati rinvenuti, suggerendo l'unicità di questa fonte epigrafica commemorazione eterna delle performances dell'arena. Il contributo integra l'esame autoptico in situ e una nuova rappresentazione digitale dei graffiti, offrendo il primo studio sistematico di questo unicum epigrafico. Mettendo in discussione le nozioni di instabilità e estemporaneità tradizionalmente associate ai graffiti, l'articolo esamina le strategie di commemorazione e la negoziazione del tempo performate dai graffiti, sollecitando nuove riflessioni sul rapporto, i paradossi e le contraddizioni implicite nella relazione fra graffiti e il tropo della monumentalità.

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INTRODUCTION

The art exhibition 'All Capitals' by Swiss designer Julia Born, held from 21 June to 9 October 2022 at Rome's Museo d'Arte Contemporanea (MACRO), offers modern viewers a unique perspective on the graphic panorama of the city of Rome, a creative reflection on and immersion in the conflicting and intersecting messages that today's wanderers consume across the streets of the capital.[1] By collecting written fragments which span a range of different eras, styles and techniques, Born transforms the exhibition walls into a visual snapshot of the interplay between monumental words and extemporary texts composed in the here and now, problematizing the tension between official letters squarely sculpted out of marble and ephemeral, un-authorized graffiti, between public and private forms of communication which characterize the writing culture of today as much as that of ancient Rome. Official inscriptions engraved on Trajan's Column, dedications on the Arch of Titus and the Roman Pantheon, as well as monumental epitaphs and names of contemporary brands, intermingle with gladiatorial graffiti, footprints, scribbles, money tags and the so-called 'scratchiti', messages incised on the windows of public transport. Born investigates the value of capital letters and power relations, the bodily experience of viewers embedded in a written landscape, shedding new light on the complex interactions between public spaces and authority, the monumental and the temporary, the official and the un-authorized. Ultimately, as Born perceptively suggests, words incised on stone and extemporary forms of writing share the paradoxical idea of surviving the ephemeral present and become, to an extent, 'monumental'.

Born's exhibition of fragments composed in capital letters and her take on the contradictory concept of monumentality constitute a timely premise for this article. In particular, the presence of a gladiatorial graffito alongside official inscriptions in this artistic exhibition deserves special attention. Carved on the marble slabs of the steps of the Flavian Amphitheatre's *cavea* by spectators of the arena shows, the graffito depicts two gladiators, a *retiarius*, armed with a trident and a weighted net, and a *secutor*, armed with a shield and a rounded helmet, engaging in a combat. Born's strategic inclusion of a gladiatorial graffito in her exhibition closely responds to my own agenda in this article. Despite its ephemeral form and extemporary nature, the gladiatorial graffito has left an indelible mark on the marble surfaces of the Flavian Amphitheatre, by capturing the momentary spectacle in a visual snapshot, which functions as a mnemonic aid for a public of vicarious viewers. Graffiti writing, as I will argue, embeds a paradoxical idea of monumentality and enacts crucial commemorative functions which are traditionally associated with monumental inscriptions (Cooley, 2012: 119). While graffiti are hastily composed as ephemeral divertissements, they eternally memorialize the arena shows, offering a unique

[1] https://www.museomacro.it/it/in-design-it/julia-born-all-capitals/ (accessed on 30 August 2023).

perspective on imperial *munera* and on the ways in which spectators experienced gladiatorial combats.

The Flavian Amphitheatre constitutes a privileged site from which to investigate gladiatorial graffiti in context. Exceptional examples of gladiatorial graffiti have been found scratched onto the marble surfaces of the Flavian Amphitheatre. Prompted by the arena shows, spectators depicted in the here-and-now the highlights of gladiatorial spectacles, either as endorsements of their favourites, or as impromptu memorials. The graffiti disseminated across the Flavian Amphitheatre raise crucial questions about the culture of graffiti-writing, urging us to investigate the extent to which the monumental context in which they survive challenges scholarly perceptions of graffiti as 'ephemeral, informal and unsophisticated' (Baird and Taylor, 2011: 5).[2] Via a comparison with contemporary graffiti-writing culture, often targeted as expression of political transgression and violence, twentieth-century scholarship has interpreted ancient graffiti as 'evidence of the less educated', a subversive expression from lower strata of society.[3] The archaeological context in which graffiti have been found, however, demonstrates that graffiti writing transcends educational, class and geographical boundaries (Benefiel, 2011).

Recent scholarship has set solid foundations for investigating the role and nature of gladiatorial graffiti. Inscriptions relating to the amphitheatre and gladiators have been collected in the volumes entitled *Epigrafia anfiteatrale dell'occidente romano* (*EAOR*). Studies on the epigraphic representations of gladiators from the Graeco-Roman world have significantly advanced our understanding of the social position, juridical status and constructed identities of gladiators and have offered new details on the organization of *munera*.[4] Yet, despite the renewed focus on gladiatorial graffiti, this epigraphic category still seeks critical reappraisal. Orlandi (2004–*EAOR* VI) has recently included gladiatorial graffiti in her landmark work about the Amphitheatre's epigraphic record (*EAOR* VI), examining textual aspects and chronology, while Langner (2001) has offered a well-documented catalogue of ancient graffiti drawings, including a substantial variety of gladiatorial graffiti from across the empire. Yet, a systematic analysis of gladiatorial graffiti within the monumental feat of the Amphitheatre, their interaction with the epigraphic environment and their specificity *qua* visual and material media with which to

[2] On graffiti's satirical takes on monumentality and concerns about their temporal durability see Baird and Taylor, 2011: 12 and Milnor, 2014: esp. 67–71.

[3] The traditional distinction between inscriptions and graffiti is to a certain extent justifiable, for, in contrast to inscriptions, graffiti were scratched on surfaces directly by their authors, their nature was temporary and they left a mark on surfaces not intended for writing. See Wallace, 2005; Cooley, 2012: 211–13.

[4] See, for instance, Langner, 2001; Orlandi, 2004. Studies on gladiatorial inscriptions and graffiti have increased in recent decades. Besides the volumes of *EAOR*, crucial contributions on gladiatorial epigraphic records and the culture of graffiti writing include: Solin and Itkonen Kaila, 1966; Maulucci Vivolo, 1993: 9–69; Sabbatini Tumolesi, 1988; Hope, 2000; Gregori, 2001; Jacobelli, 2003; Garraffoni and Funari, 2009; Keegan, 2014; Solin, 2020; Kontokosta, 2021. Fundamental works on gladiators are: Robert, 1940; Ville, 1981; Wiedemann, 1992.

capture the arena performances represent a major *desideratum*, which will add a missing chapter in the flourishing field of studies on gladiators.

In this paper I offer a new interpretation of the gladiatorial graffiti currently preserved in the Flavian Amphitheatre from a contextual perspective. I shall investigate the official epigraphic record of the Amphitheatre and explore the ways in which monumental inscriptions and graffiti intermingle in the same writing space, articulating dissonant epigraphic voices and performing different kinds of authority (Section 1). Discussion will then move on to the examination of gladiatorial graffiti from Pompeii, which will support the hypothesis that the culture of graffiti-writing was active in the Flavian Amphitheatre as early as its inauguration and will reveal key strategies of memorialization and techniques of temporality which graffiti implement as a medium. Analysis of Pompeian epigraphic evidence will shed light on the prominent question of visibility and iconography and invite reflection on ancient perceptions of and engagement with the act of inscribing graffiti (Section 2). Finally I will investigate gladiatorial graffiti preserved in the Amphitheatre, arguing for their distinctiveness as a writing form with which to perpetuate the memory of the arena spectacles in comparison with and contrast to further visual and material media, which miniaturize amphitheatrical games (gladiatorial *munera*) into exchangeable *munera*, souvenirs to be taken away (Section 3).

1. ARTICULATING THE OFFICIAL VOICE OF THE FLAVIAN AMPHITHEATRE – THE ORIGINAL DEDICATION AND THE *LOCA* INSCRIPTIONS

The tension displayed by graffiti between, on the one hand, impermanent nature and, on the other, a concern with inscriptional durability is problematized when considered in unison with the dissonant epigraphic voices of the Flavian Amphitheatre: that of official inscriptions, which respond to political and ideological needs; and that of graffiti, which survive as impromptu memories of the imperial games. The numerous official inscriptions of the Flavian Amphitheatre offer insights into the building phases of the monument, its political significance and the organization of *munera*. Examination of the dedication of the monument and of the inscriptions engraved on the risers of the *cavea* steps relating to the *loca* is central to understanding the monumental context in which gladiatorial graffiti survive.

Upon his return from the campaign in Judaea in AD 71, Vespasian greeted a Rome ravaged by the Great Fire of AD 64, the civil conflicts of the years AD 68–69 and marked by Nero's architectural exaggerations.[5] Rome's new monuments, which acted as visual reminders of the Flavian recovery of the

[5] *LTUR* I s.v. *Amphitheatrum* (R. Rea) I.30–5; Darwall-Smith, 1996: 76–90; Packer, 2003: 167; Chomse, 2018.

empire from its momentary collapse, were imbued with a spirit of renewal.[6] Inaugurated by Titus in AD 80, the Amphitheatre stood at the heart of Rome as a message of imperial euergetism and was carefully presented as the material outcome of the Flavian victory in Judaea.

The original dedicatory inscription of the Amphitheatre, which Alföldy (1995) restored, responds to the Flavian propagandistic manoeuvre:[7]

> *I*[*mp*(*erator*)] *T*(*itus*) *Caes*(*ar*) *Vespasi*[*anus Aug*(*ustus*)]
> *amphitheatru*[*m novum* (?)]
> [*ex*] *manubIs* [*fieri iussit* (?)].
>
> *CIL* VI 40454b[8]
>
> The emperor Titus Caesar Vespasianus Augustus ordered the new amphitheatre to be constructed out of the spoils of war.[9]

The epigraphic text identifies the spoils of the Judean war, brought to Rome in a triumphal procession in AD 71, as the financial resource for the monument (Orlandi, 2001: 100–1).[10] The dedication in bronze letters has been reconstructed from the peg-holes still visible on the surface of a fifth-century inscription engraved on a marble block which commemorates the restoration of the Amphitheatre by the urban praefect Rufius Caecina Felix Lampadius during the reign of Theodosius II and Valentinian III.[11] As Coleman (2006: lxvi) argues, the inscription constitutes a 'double palimpsest'.[12] The dedication of the monument was first ascribed to Vespasian. It was later credited to Titus through the insertion of the *praenomen T*(*itus*) between Vespasian's official titles, *Imperator* and *Caesar*. Placed physically and ideologically within the urban fabric of Rome, the Amphitheatre signified the political superimposition of the Flavians on Nero's Golden House and fostered (the desired) connections with the Julio-Claudian dynasty. A profound sense of impermanence pervades the Amphitheatre, a (monumental) meeting place between the dying and the

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[6] Suet. *Vesp*. 8.1; Chomse, 2018: 388.

[7] Alföldy 1995: 195–226 and *EAOR* VI 39–41 cat. 1a = EDR092904. Alföldy's interpretation and reconstruction of the text is now widely accepted. Titus completed and inaugurated the Amphitheatre after Vespasian's death in March AD 79. The two phases of the Flavian inscription read: *CIL* VI 40454a. *I*[*mp*(*erator*)] *Caes*(*ar*) *Vespasi*[*anus Aug*(*ustus*)] / *amphitheatru*[*m novum* (?)] / [*ex*] *manubIs* (vac.) [*fieri iussit* (?)]; *CIL* VI 40454b. *I*[*mp*(*erator*)] *T*(*itus*) *Caes*(*ar*) *Vespasi*[*anus Aug*(*ustus*)] / *amphitheatru*[*m novum* (?)] / [*ex*] *manubIs* (vac.) [*fieri iussit* (?)]. See also Coleman, 2006: lxv–lxvi.

[8] Unless otherwise specified, all texts of prose inscriptions are from the *CIL* = (1862–) *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*. Berlin.

[9] Translation from Coleman, 2006: lxv.

[10] *EAOR* VI 41 cat. 1a. For the dedication of Trajan's Forum and the expression *ex manubiis* referring to the Dacian wars, see Gell. *NA* 13.25.3.

[11] *EAOR* VI 41 cat. 1a: *fieri iussit* is an expression commonly found in private funerary inscriptions. Only rarely is it deployed for imperial dedications of streets, sacred buildings and monuments of public utility. For the fifth-century inscription (*CIL* VI 1763 = *CIL* VI 32089a), see *EAOR* VI 42–3 cat. 3.

[12] See discussion in Alföldy, 1995: 195–226; *EAOR* VI 39–41 cat. 1a.

living.[13] By preserving the memory of gladiatorial fights through pictorial and verbal graffiti, the Amphitheatre becomes itself a gigantic metaphorical tombstone, a *monumentum* for the lives of gladiators and *venatores*.

The Amphitheatre hosts a uniquely rich and heterogeneous epigraphic record. A set of inscriptions from the *cavea*, the so-called '*loca* inscriptions', demonstrates that social hierarchies and power relations were enforced in the monumental space of the arena (Gunderson 1996: 133). These texts, engraved on the risers of steps, allot seating spaces to different segments of society according to the *lex Iulia theatralis* (Suet., *Aug*. 44) and the *lex Roscia theatralis* revived under Domitian, including delegations from outside Rome.[14] The inscriptions are currently located in the reconstructed sector of the *cavea* near the entrance by the *Ludus Magnus*, and date to between the first and fifth centuries AD. An entry in the *Acta fratrum Arvalium*, a fragmentary marble inscription dated to AD 80 (*EAOR* VI 167–71 cat. 13 = *CIL* VI 2059 = 32363 = *ILS* 5049), is the oldest attestation that traditional repartition of the *cavea* into *ima*, *media* and *summa* synthetized and responded to rigid hierarchical and societal divisions (Scheid, 1998: 125 nr. 48; Pesando, 2001: 183). As appears clear from line 15 (*loca adsignata in amphitheatro*), the inscription specifies the sector (*cuneus* and *tabulatio*), number of steps and the allotted space along each step reserved to the *collegium* across the seating orders of the *cavea* (*maeniana*).

Extant inscriptions are heavily fragmentary. They feature collective names in the dative and more rarely in genitive or nominative case of specific groups of spectators, followed by the measurement in feet and subdivisions of a foot (*uncia*, *semuncia*, *sicilicus*) of the width of seating spaces. *Equites*, *praetextati*, *paedagogi*, *clientes*, *Gaditanes* are all represented in the epigraphic record of the Amphitheatre. *Urbs* and *orbs* conflate in the gigantic structure of the Amphitheatre, in a paradoxical remake of Ovid's hyperbolic *nempe ab utroque mari iuvenes, ab utroque puellae / venere, atque ingens orbis in Vrbe fuit*, 'Why, youths and maidens came from either sea: the mighty world was in our city' (*Ars am*. 1.173–4).[15] By representing an ecumenic and heterogeneous audience, the '*loca*' inscriptions blur the boundaries between Amphitheatre and Rome and advertise the idea of the imperial capital as a microcosm of the empire. As Hardie (2012: 322) puts it, 'the circular form of the Colosseum already evokes the *orbs* over which the emperor rules'. The arena offers, therefore, an ideological space where identities, the relationship between

[13] On the complex symbology, contradictions and hierarchies associated with the Flavian Amphitheatre, see Gunderson 1996 and 2003.

[14] For a survey, see Orlandi, 2001: 89–103. For social seating within the Amphitheatre, see *EAOR* VI 167–83 cat. 13 and cat. 14.1–23; Ville, 1981: 433–9; Darwall-Smith, 1996: 88–9; Gunderson, 1996: 123–6; Coleman, 2006: 40. The *lex Iulia theatralis* was applied in amphitheatres and theatres across the empire. See *CIL* XI 432d+b (Rimini) in *EAOR* II 93–4 cat. 76 a-b-c; *CIL* XII 714; 3316–17 in *EAOR* V 59–63 cat. 40 and 43–4.

[15] Latin texts throughout are from *Oxford Classical Texts* and translations from Loeb Editions, unless otherwise specified.

observing and being observed, spectacle and spectator are constantly put into play.[16]

The inscription *EAOR* VI 174–5 cat. 14.2 = *CIL* VI 32098b = *ILS* 5654b = EDR172964 reads *Equiti*[*bus*] *Rom*[*anis*], proving that the *lex Roscia theatralis* (67 BC, L. Roscius Otho), according to which the first fourteen rows were assigned to the *equites* (the knights), was observed as early as the inauguration of the Amphitheatre. The inscription *EAOR* VI 176 cat. 14.5 = *CIL* VI 32098e = *ILS* 5654e = EDR172968, found engraved on step number five of the *cavea*, reads [*Hos*]*pitib*[*us publicis*] and confirms that such seating blocks were reserved for delegates who entertained a privileged relationship with Rome (*hospitium publicum*) (Darwall-Smith, 1996: 88–9). Similarly, *clientes* coming from colonies and *municipia* under the jurisdiction of Rome and the *Gaditani* (inhabitants of *Gades*, the modern Cádiz), who had their own official representatives in Rome, were entitled to occupy specific sectors of the *cavea*, as further *loca* inscriptions demonstrate (*EAOR* VI 176–8 cat. 14.6 = *CIL* VI 32098f = *ILS* 5654f = EDR173065, step 6; *EAOR* VI 179 cat. 14.11 = *CIL* VI 320981-m = EDR100772; EDR100682, steps 11–12).[17] With its representation of such an international audience, this exceptional epigraphic testimony supports Gunderson's remark on amphitheatrical politics (1996: 133): 'Rome was a small point at the centre of a vast empire. This physical relationship was inverted, however, on the day of the show: an orderly construct of Roman society ringed its own empire, contained, controlled and choreographed.'

Although palaeographical analysis suggests that the majority of *loca* inscriptions were inscribed by individual spectators, rather than members of the central administration, they express the authoritative voice of the Amphitheatre's official epigraphic testimony and share their writing space with graffiti.[18] The *cavea* steps become a site for negotiating a performative tension between authorized and subjective forms of writing, official inscriptions versus instantaneous graffiti. Unlike monumental inscriptions, graffiti articulate the spectators' interaction with and commemoration of the amphitheatrical shows and gain meaning from the physical context in which they are inscribed. Yet, despite the competing formal characteristics and conflicting messages, graffiti's embeddedness in the space of the Amphitheatre, their association with marble and the related contradictions clustering around physical monuments, predicated upon intended permanence and yet, instability, vulnerability and material decay, make them to an extent no less monumental than official

[16] Rimell, 2008: 120. On the simultaneous existence of *spectare* and *spectari* in the arena, see Plaut., *Poen.* 337: *sunt illi aliae quas spectare ego et me spectari volo* and Ov., *Ars am.* 1.99: *spectatum veniunt, veniunt spectentur ut ipsae*.

[17] *Clientes*: *EAOR* VI 176_8 cat. 14.6 = *CIL* VI 32098f = *ILS* 5654f = EDR173065 *Client*(*ibus vel -es*)[- - -]; -]; *Gaditani*: *EAOR* VI 179 cat. 14.11a = *CIL* VI 320981-m = EDR100772 *Gaditanorum* [- - -?]; 14.11b = EDR100682 *Gaditan* [*orum* - - -?].

[18] On the different kinds of authority performed by monumental inscriptions and graffiti, see Milnor, 2014: 2–3. See also Garraffoni and Funari, 2009: 186.

inscriptions.[19] Before turning to the examination of gladiatorial graffiti within the Amphitheatre, evidence from nearby Pompeii, where the culture of gladiatorial graffiti is attested between the first century BC and the first century AD, merits closer consideration. It makes us appreciative of the formal characteristics, distribution patterns and strategies of commemoration fulfilled by gladiatorial graffiti and illustrates the important critical and hermeneutical consequences of investigating graffiti writing contextually.

2. STRATEGIES OF MEMORIALIZATION AND TECHNIQUES OF TEMPORALITY – THE GLADIATORIAL GRAFFITI FROM POMPEII

Pompeii preserves for us a valuable epigraphic testimony for grasping the socio-political status of gladiators and the organization of *munera* in the ancient world. Graffiti ascribed to gladiators or spontaneously scratched by supporters, *libelli gladiatorii*, and announcements of spectacles painted on the walls of the city (*edicta munerum*) testify to the widespread excitement engendered by gladiatorial shows. As Kellum (1999: 291) notes, 'the gladiatorial combats in the amphitheatre, the circus games, the theatrical performances were not spectacles that existed apart from and in opposition to the quotidian world of streets, but rather ritualised extensions of a spectacular culture that pervaded all aspects of Roman urban life'.

Gladiatorial graffiti express the audience's heterogeneous perspectives on, engagement with, and singular commemoration of gladiatorial shows. Simultaneously, they put on display the complicated relationship between the act of inscribing graffiti, strategies of commemoration and advertisement of amphitheatrical performances and techniques of temporality.[20] Ranging from depictions of standing or victorious gladiators to complex scenes of combats, from single elements of armour and equipment to acclamations for successful combatants, gladiatorial graffiti record a ubiquitous and common leisure culture across the social scale (Keegan, 2014).

With their large number of graffiti scratched by spectators who attended the performances, the walls of the corridor leading to the Large Theatre (VIII.vii.20) and the plaster of the external wall of the Small Theatre (VIII.vii.19) constitute a close precedent for the culture of graffiti-writing within the Flavian Amphitheatre, unveiling parallel mechanics of memorializing the

[19] On the notorious instability of material monuments and the paradoxical trope of monumentality, see Fowler, 2000: 211. On the monumentality of inscribed texts and authority claimed by official inscriptions, see discussion in Woolf, 1996: esp. 28.

[20] See Maulucci Vivolo, 1993; Kellum, 1999; Langner, 2001; Jacobelli, 2003: 47–51; Garraffoni and Funari, 2009: 187 ff. for gladiatorial graffiti within Pompeii's Amphitheatre; Keegan, 2014.

spectacles and comparable ways of preserving the arena performances.[21] Walkways and entranceways of private houses in Pompeii furnished visitors with a space in which to wait before being received. Clusters of numerical, textual and figural graffiti suggest that inscribing graffiti on vestibules was a customary activity for visitors as much as inhabitants who gathered in that area (Benefiel, 2011). Similarly, the corridor between the theatres, where spectators engaged socially before taking part in the shows, was imagined as an ideal setting in which to scrawl graffiti. The pictorial repertoire on the masonry includes an exceptional bulk of graffiti.

Amongst the total of 156 graffiti recorded in the corridor, 84 are figural and the remaining are verbal. More rarely, graffiti combine images with words. Depictions of single gladiators, gladiatorial duels, theatrical scenes, ships, profiles of human heads, circles drawn with a compass, animals, but also brief verbal messages, greetings, erotic messages and names populate this setting. The corridor yields a total of six gladiatorial graffiti, which are almost exclusively pictorial.[22] These graffiti drawings, of which three represent single gladiators, two depict gladiatorial matches and one features a helmet, display key iconographic elements which characterize the graffiti preserved in the Flavian Amphitheatre. Furthermore, this epigraphic testimony reveals that spectators used to deploy venues of spectacle to commemorate or support gladiators.

The graffito AGP-EDR167858 (Fig. 1), scratched along the northern wall of the corridor between the theatres, for instance, displays two gladiators, both armed with helmets and shields, on the verge of assaulting each other.[23] Brandishing a short sword, the figure on the left can be identified with a *murmillo*, while the figure on the right, holding a long spear, represents a Samnite. Analysis of the gladiatorial graffiti present in the corridor shows that draughtsmen shared a common iconographic repertoire and visual language which enabled them to represent different combat situations (Benefiel, 2018: 107). Although this representation is quite stereotypical and is scrawled quickly, the rendition of helmets, weapons and gladiatorial equipment enables viewers to identify easily the gladiators' armour category.[24] Unlike the majority of gladiatorial graffiti from the Flavian Amphitheatre, which associate texts with images, these graffiti are not labelled, suggesting that viewers were not

[21] See Maulucci Vivolo, 1993; Langner, 2001: nos 783 and 785 (standing gladiators); 853; 938; 1005; 1013 (fighting scene); 1083; 1157–8.

[22] See *CIL* IV 2414 = EDR167700; *CIL* IV 2451 = EDR167857; EDR167858; EDR167859; *CIL* IV 2438 = EDR167675; EDR167698.

[23] The present and following line drawings have been designed by the author using Adobe Illustrator 2024 software. Autoptic examination of extant gladiatorial graffiti currently preserved in the Archaeological Park of Pompeii and the Flavian Amphitheatre in Rome was conducted in May 2022. AGP-EDR167858, *The Ancient Graffiti Project*, http://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/graffito/AGP-EDR167858 [accessed: 29 January 2024]; Maulucci Vivolo, 1993: 32–3; Langner, 2001: nr. 1005.

[24] For detailed discussion of the development of armour categories, see Coarelli, 2001; Jacobelli, 2003.

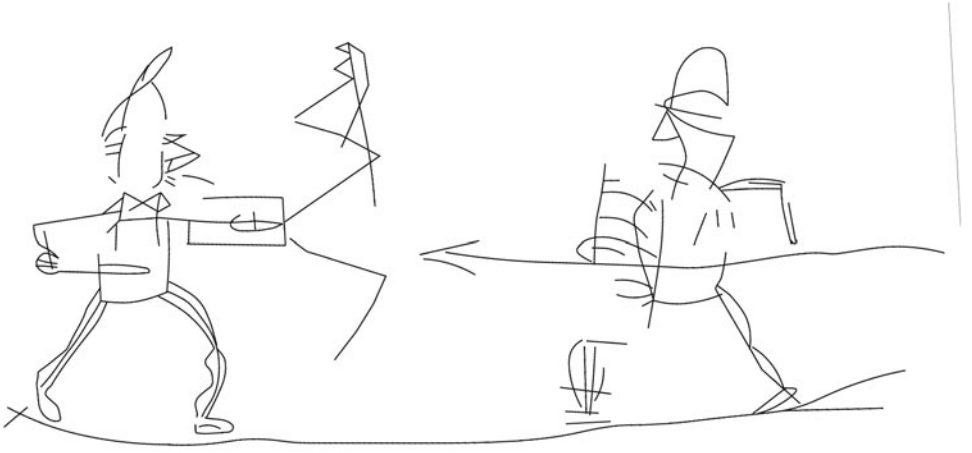

Fig. 1. Line drawing of a graffito representing gladiatorial combat, Pompeii, Theatre Corridor (VII.vii.20), between AD 1 and AD 79 (AGP-EDR167858).

committed to reproducing the outcomes of a particular combat. Rather, as Benefiel (2018: 107) argues, 'sometimes figures which are depicted without labels may signal a general interest in the games'.

While graffitied gladiatorial fights may be prompted by and recall actual spectacles, demonstrating the commemorative functions performed by graffiti, images of standing or victorious gladiators respond to a more generic iconography, testifying to spectators' enthusiasm for gladiatorial *munera* and their desire to support amphitheatrical heroes. The graffito AGP-EDR167857 (= *CIL* IV 2451) (Fig. 2) captures well the spectators' celebration of their favourites. With its height of 15 centimetres, it features a *murmillo* armed with a crested helmet, brandishing a sword with his right hand in combat posture, and defending himself with a long shield.[25] Although sketched rapidly and despite its modest dimensions, the graffito carefully depicts the gladiatorial equipment, including loincloth and ribbons, the crest on the helmet and the fringes on the armour (Niccolini, 1986, vol. IV: 18, Table vi.6). A series of names followed by numerals (AGP-EDR167898), which critics have interpreted as a list of gladiators accompanied by the number of their victories, appears in the immediate surroundings of the gladiator.[26] Although these two graffiti are not the product of the same hand, it can be inferred that anonymous authors were receptive to the content and physical environs of graffiti. The juxtaposition of the gladiatorial drawing with the list of gladiators, followed by the number of victories, as is customary in *libelli gladiatorii*, does not seem to

[25] AGP-EDR167857, The Ancient Graffiti Project, http://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/graffito/AGP-EDR167857 [accessed: 29 January 2024]; Langner, 2001: nr. 783.

[26] AGP-EDR167898, The Ancient Graffiti Project, http://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/graffito/AGP-EDR167898 [accessed: 29 January 2024]; Niccolini, 1986, vol. IV: 18.

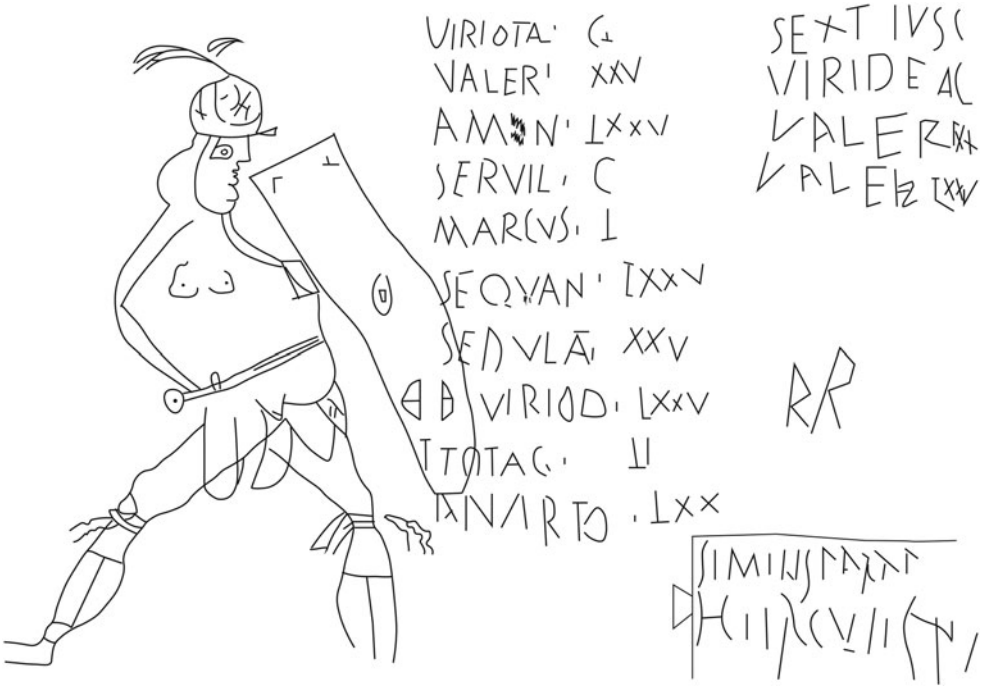

Fig. 2. Line drawing of a graffito representing a *murmillo*, Pompeii, Theatre Corridor (VII.vi.20), between AD 1 and AD 79 (AGP-EDR167857).

be coincidental. It enables us to infer that spectators conceived of theatres and amphitheatres as appropriate spaces in which to leave their own intimate mark and recollection of the games. In contrast to the graffiti of the Flavian Amphitheatre, as we shall see in the section to follow, Pompeian examples in the Theatre corridor are generally smaller in size, and, therefore, less prominently visible. Nonetheless, as I have discussed, the rendering of gladiatorial equipment is particularly accurate, exhibiting the viewers' genuine interest in and knowledge of different fighting categories.

The strategies of temporality implemented by the graffiti examined so far, which is predicated upon excited speed and temporal suspension, extemporaneity and durability, constitute a fitting antecedent to the graffiti of the Flavian Amphitheatre. The short timespan between the spectacles is occupied by the swift composition of gladiatorial graffiti, which, by acting as proxies for memory, recall a single transient moment in the arena. The pace of the performance is simultaneously accelerated and decelerated. Graffiti condense the transient combat into a visual snapshot. Yet, they serve a narrative function which enables viewers to re-enact – potentially, an indefinite number of times – the spectacle. By crystallizing the climactic instant of the combat into visual and verbal forms, graffiti generate a temporal suspension and achieve a durability for the show. Within the graffito the time of the performance is both compressed and stretched. On the one hand, the temporal progression of the

combat is synthetized into a single gladiatorial drawing. On the other, the crystallization of gladiators in combat posture, in the act of assaulting the opponent, renders the acme of the show infinitely repeatable and, to an extent, eternal. In the section to follow, I shall offer detailed analysis of extant graffiti in the Flavian Amphitheatre, examining the ways in which this medium articulates time and spurs viewers to remember gladiatorial performances.

3. THE GLADIATORIAL GRAFFITI OF THE FLAVIAN AMPHITHEATRE – LONG-LIVED MEMORIALS OF IMPERIAL *MUNERA*

Dated to between the fourth and fifth centuries AD, numerous gladiatorial graffiti have been rediscovered in the Flavian Amphitheatre (Sabbatini Tumolesi, 1988: 91–100). The great fire of AD 217 and many rebuilding phases and progressive spoliation of the monument in later centuries may account for the late dating of the verbal and pictorial graffiti preserved across the Amphitheatre's seating orders (Darwall-Smith, 1996: 76). The aforementioned epigraphic record from Pompeii, along with the inscriptions of *loca* dating to the first and second centuries AD, enables us to infer safely that a graffiti culture was active as early as the opening of the Amphitheatre.[27] Spectators responded to the wondrous realities of the arena by capturing climactic moments of the spectacles unfolding before their own eyes in verbal and pictorial graffiti. *Tabulae lusoriae*, checkboards, board games of various kinds and graffiti depicting gladiatorial engagements provide evidence for the ways in which the audience experienced the arena games. Scribbling graffiti across the *cavea* was perceived of as an entertaining activity, a means by which to fend off boredom and express subjective feelings and excitement for the arena shows.[28]

Part of this epigraphic evidence is currently on display in the second order of the Amphitheatre, revealing the width and types of graffiti that spectators scratched with sharp objects on the surfaces of the monument. The Flavian Amphitheatre has yielded a total of sixteen graffiti.[29] Ten of the surviving graffiti can be ascribed to the gladiatorial world with certainty. While a small percentage is figural, the majority intermeshes depictions of gladiators with explanatory texts, revealing a fluid relationship between words and images that is quintessential to graffiti culture.[30] In what follows, I shall focus attention on

[27] Note that the earliest surviving *loca* inscriptions are datable to between the first and second centuries AD. The practice of inscribing (both officially and less officially) the seats of the Amphitheatre, we can safely argue, was already widespread during the first phases of life of the monument.

[28] *EAOR* VI 531 cat. 30 = *CIL* VI 32357. For further *tabulae lusoriae*, see *EAOR* VI 143 cat. 10.27 and a marble step which was rediscovered in 2001 (Inv. 441375).

[29] *EAOR* VI 523–4 cat. 18–33.

[30] Depictions of gladiators and gladiatorial fights without inscriptions: Langner, 2001: nos 838; 1018; 1105–7; depictions of gladiators and gladiatorial pairs labelled by inscriptions: *EAOR* VI

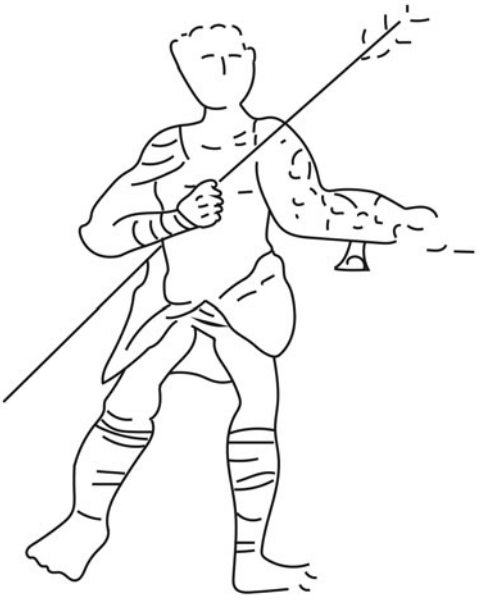

Fig. 3. Line drawing of a graffito depicting a *retiarius*, Rome, Flavian Amphitheatre, fourth–fifth century AD (Inv. 375836).

the verbal and visual language of such spontaneous forms of writing. After a glance at three pictorial graffiti, I shall examine graffiti combining representations of single gladiators with short inscriptions, before turning to graffiti of gladiatorial combats in comparison with and opposition to three-dimensional material renditions of gladiators from across the Roman world. Comparative reading of graffiti along with further material and visual media will emphasize the double-edged nature of graffiti as simultaneously material as much as textual artefacts and stimulate new perspectives on the different techniques of perpetuating the memory of gladiatorial performances.

Pictorial graffiti reveal the spectators' excitement for gladiatorial games. Fans and spectators could represent in the here and now well-known gladiators and capture the particularity of a moment. A *retiarius* (Inv. 375836) (Fig. 3), a light-armed gladiator with trident and net, high-knee greaves and bandages on his arm and ankles (*manica*), is graffitied on a marble slab on the steps of the *cavea* (La Regina, 2001: 342 fig. 41; Langner, 2001: Taf. 43 nr 838). Unlike many gladiatorial graffiti from Pompeii, which represent gladiators facing left, on the verge of assaulting opponents (e.g., AGP-EDR167857), the *retiarius* is depicted in the typical posture of successful fighters, facing the viewer (Langner,

523–8 cat. 18–-25 = Langner, 2001: nos 928; 930–1; 943–4; 948. Graffiti whose ascription to the gladiatorial world is uncertain: *EAOR* VI 523–31 cat. 26–31. Graffiti of uncertain interpretation: *EAOR* VI 532–4 cat. 32–3. The *Ludus Magnus* preserves two graffiti: see *EAOR* VI 535–7 cat. 34–6.

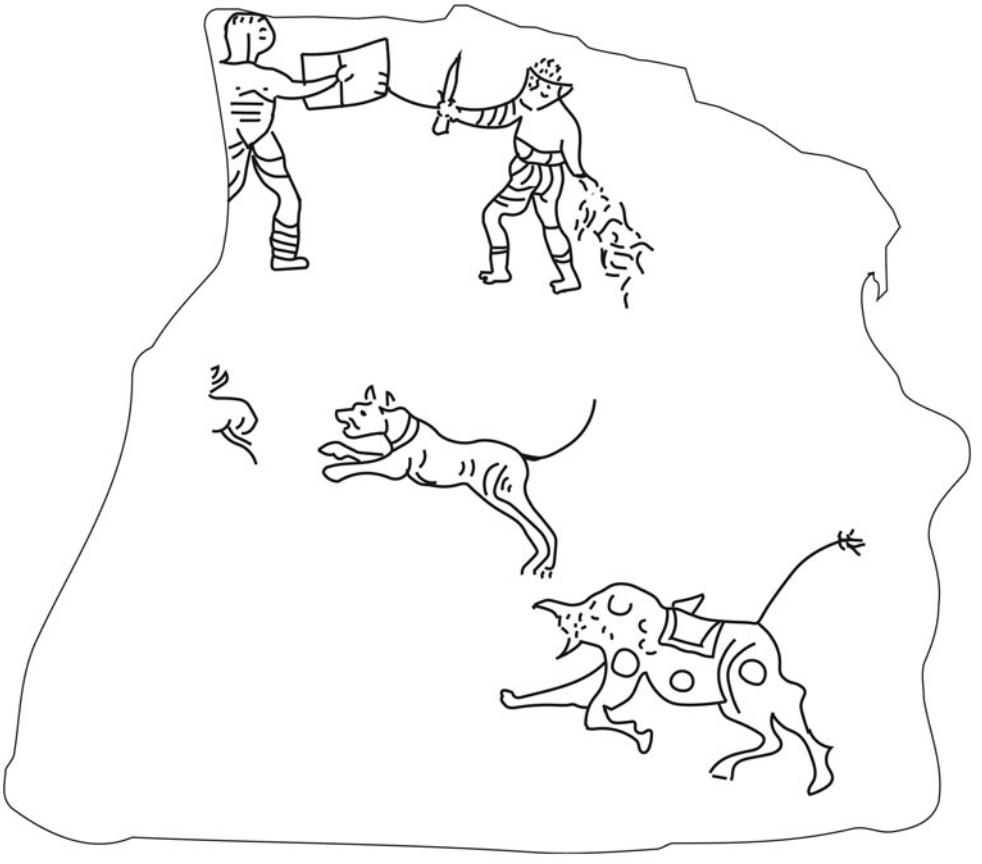

Fig. 4. Line drawing of a graffito representing a gladiatorial contest and a hunting scene, Rome, Flavian Amphitheatre, fourth–fifth century AD (Inv. 375838).

2001: 48). He triumphally wields his weapons, which are carefully portrayed. Although no name labels the fighter, it is possible to assume that spectators wished to recall the memory of an extraordinary performance within the Amphitheatre, paying their own tribute to and showing their excitement for this anonymous victorious gladiator.[31]

Two complex fighting scenes are carved on one of the Amphitheatre's marble seats (Inv. 375838) (Fig. 4).[32] The upper register of the slab represents a gladiatorial spectacle, reproducing one of the most popular visual schemes across the existing evidence: a *retiarius*, armed with trident and net, engages in a fight with a *secutor*, armed with a rectangular shield and a helmet. Both fighters, each depicted as a single figure in combat posture, charge against each

[31] As Langner, 2001: 46 notes, only one-third of gladiatorial graffiti labels the gladiator with their names.

[32] La Regina 2001: 342 fig. 43; Langner 2001: nos 1018 (gladiatorial combat); 1105–7 (hunting scene).

other in full armour. The absence of the inscriptions and the perfect visual parallelism between the two gladiators prevent us from knowing the engagement's outcome. As discussed in Section 2, the fast timespan of the gladiatorial combat is captured within the temporal fixity of the gladiatorial drawing. Yet, the decisive instant of the fight's acme expands across time. With its highly symbolic language, the graffito activates a narrative, by spurring the viewers to partake *in absentia* in the spectacle.

The lower register of the marble slab displays a hunting scene: a dog, which chases a gazelle, and an enraged bull are captured in their eternal mad dash. The resolution of the *venatio* is left to the viewer's imagination. Both graffiti are the product of what seems to be an experienced hand. Whether the two scenes are to be interpreted as belonging to the same arena performance remains open to speculation. The present pictorial graffito elucidates the complex ways in which this epigraphic medium negotiates time and temporality and reveals a paradoxical monumentalization of deeds in the arena. In these iconographic renditions of the amphitheatrical marvels, as the Pompeian testimony has already revealed, the time of shows is simultaneously crystallized and expanded, shrunk down and magnified, becoming a support for memory as much as imagination.

Yet, the best evidence of gladiatorial graffiti preserved for us in the Amphitheatre intermeshes texts with images. At the juncture between visual and verbal artefacts, graffiti which label gladiators with their name and number of victories differ qualitatively from pictorial graffiti. The explanatory texts display a memorializing function which rescues the figures from a status of anonymity and oblivion (Cooley, 2012: 111). Three of the surviving graffiti depict standing gladiators accompanied by the name of the combatant and augural expressions, such as *feliciter*.[33] The fragment belonging to a marble slab of one of the Amphitheatre's banisters (*EAOR* VI 523–4 cat. 19 = EDR189591, fourth–fifth century AD), currently exhibited in the second order of the Amphitheatre, records the *cognomen* Delicatus (*Ḍelicatus* [- - - ?], Fig. 5; Fig. 6). The inscription stands above the head of a figure without a helmet, whom critics have alternatively identified as a *retiarius* or *bestiarius*.[34] Since the upper left margin of the marble slab is fragmentary, the first capital letter of the *cognomen* is difficult to read and has been interpreted variously. Langner identifies the letter 'h' as the first capital and restores the gladiator's name to Hicatus.[35] By reading the initial capital as 'd', Orlandi convincingly reconstructs the gladiator's *cognomen* as Delicatus.[36] Autoptic analysis of the graffito

[33] *EAOR* VI 523 cat. 18 = EDR189590; *EAOR* VI 523–4 cat. 19 = EDR189591; *EAOR* VI 528 cat. 25 = *CIL* VI 32261c = EDR189593.

[34] Sabbatini Tumolesi, 1988: 95 fig. 5; Langner, 2001: Taf. 46 nr 931 with the incorrect transcription of the *cognomen*; La Regina, 2001: 340 fig. 36.

[35] Langner, 2001: Taf. 46 nr. 931.

[36] *EAOR* VI 523–4 cat. 19. See also Sabbatini Tumolesi, 1988: 95 for the reading Delicatus as the gladiator's *cognomen*.

Fig. 5. Line drawing of a gladiatorial graffito representing the head of a *retiarius* accompanied by the inscription *Delicatus*, Rome, Flavian Amphitheatre, fourth–fifth century AD (EDR189591).

Fig. 6. Photograph of a gladiatorial graffito representing the head of a *retiarius* accompanied by the inscription *Delicatus*, Rome, Flavian Amphitheatre, fourth–fifth century AD. Photo by Bruno Angeli. (Archivio-Moderno-Fotografico, Foro-Romano, Palatino, Colosseo, Colosseo-Museo-Permanente, DSC, 2985, Bruno-Angeli) (su concessione del Ministero della Cultura, Parco Archeologico del Colosseo).

enabled me to agree with Orlandi's reading. Comparative evidence from Pompeii, such as *CIL* IV 5279 and *CIL* IV 5282 (*tu mortu(u)s es / tu nugas es*), and from the Amphitheatre, such as *EAOR* VI 526–7 cat. 22 = *CIL* VI 32260a = EDR171489 (*Iocus Quintus*) and *EAOR* VI 528-529 cat. 26 = Inv. 375842 (*Antonini nugas*), does not rule out the possibility of the name Delicatus to be read as an invective directed against an unfavoured opponent.[37] The letters, roughly sketched on the stone, imply that the draughtsman rapidly produced the graffito in the *hic et nunc*, as his own immediate reaction to a spectacular gladiatorial fight. The specimen reveals the sense of speed and excitement which

[37] See discussion in *EAOR* VI 526–7 cat. 22 and 528–9 cat. 26.

Fig. 7. Line drawing of a gladiatorial graffito representing the bust of a gladiator, accompanied by the name Blastus, Rome, Flavian Amphitheatre, fourth–fifth century AD (EDR189590).

characterized the performances of the Amphitheatre. Graffiti authors responded to and interacted with the visual environment and thrilling atmosphere of the arena, by scrawling quips and sketches of their favourite moments of the games. Writing on stone, even in desultory ways, becomes a means for spectators to offer their own intimate perspectives on the fast succession of the shows, and, simultaneously, a form of entertainment as well as a social activity.

The bust of a gladiator wearing the *galerus* (*EAOR* VI 523 cat. 18 = EDR189590) features in the right section of the upper register of a marble step, which is currently situated in one of the storerooms in the first order of the Amphitheatre (Fig. 7).[38] The posture of the gladiator is stereotypical. The capital letters are carved unevenly across two distinct lines, as follows:

[38] *EAOR* VI 629 Table 27 fig. 1. Direct analysis of the present graffito was not possible, since it is currently stored in an inaccessible section of the Amphitheatre. I was able to examine a photograph

Ḅlas=

[t]us.

The name Blastus, which appears above the fighter's bust on the left, can be restored from the remaining visible letters (*EAOR* VI 523 cat. 18). Graffiti from the Theatre corridor in Pompeii, where drawings of gladiators survive in conspicuous numbers (e.g., AGP-EDR167857), and across the Amphitheatre, prompt us to argue that the present example either commemorates the heroic deeds of a gladiator or wishes Blastus well for future successful fights.[39] Unlike Pompeian graffiti, nevertheless, which are rarely labelled, the presence of the gladiator's name suggests the spectators' familiarity with, and explicit support for, this arena hero. Furthermore, given its large dimensions (25×38×51 centimetres), the graffito was particularly visible. By combining textual and visual elements, it becomes a token for memory or an augural amulet, spurring viewers to remember, re-enact and imagine the gladiators' spectacular arena performances.

In a similar fashion, the crowd's acclamations for their favourites find several testimonies in extant graffiti. Crowns, palms, laurels, exclamations such as *feliciter* or augural monograms, often accompany representations of victorious gladiators. The following example (*EAOR* VI 528 cat. 25 = *CIL* VI 32261c = EDR189593, fourth–fifth century AD), on display in the second order of the Amphitheatre, highlights the question of the visibility of gladiatorial graffiti within the arena and invites further considerations on the act of producing graffiti (Fig. 8; Fig. 9).[40] A successful standing *retiarius* is depicted on a slab of 'cipollino' marble, a fragment of a banister. The gladiator wears a *subligaculum* and high-knee greaves, holds a palm leaf in his right hand and a spear in his left hand. Despite the slab's fragmentary status, the letters *T*, *E*, *R* are still visible, allowing for its restoration as the enthusiastic acclamation *Feliciter* for the combat's successful outcome ([- - - ? *felici*]*ter*). The accurate representation, the lines neatly incised on stone, along with the location of the graffito and the height of the gladiator (approximately 113 centimetres), support the hypothesis that these graffiti were highly visible, so difficult to ignore, and testify to a flourishing graffiti-writing culture in the Amphitheatre.[41] Furthermore, the location of the graffito on a banister, a very visible architectural part of the monument, leads us to infer that scrawling graffiti was neither a hidden nor a prohibited activity. Rather, it was a collective and collaborative effort, far

taken by Professor Orlandi. Although I agree with Orlandi's reading of the *cognomen* Blastus, the letter 'u' was not easily discernible from the pictures. We could assume it has progressively faded away. I therefore decided not to reproduce it in the line drawing of the graffito.

[39] See also the very well-known representation of two sets of gladiator graffiti in the House of the Ceii (*CIL* IV 8055–6): see discussion in Benefiel, 2018: 105–8 and Lohmann, 2018: 156–60. Labels complete gladiatorial graffiti also in the graffiti sketched on the necropolis outside the Nucerian Gate: see Benefiel, 2018: 104–5.

[40] Langner, 2001: Taf. 46 nr 928; La Regina, 2001: 342 fig. 42.

[41] For analysis of the spatial impact of graffiti in private buildings, see Benefiel, 2011.

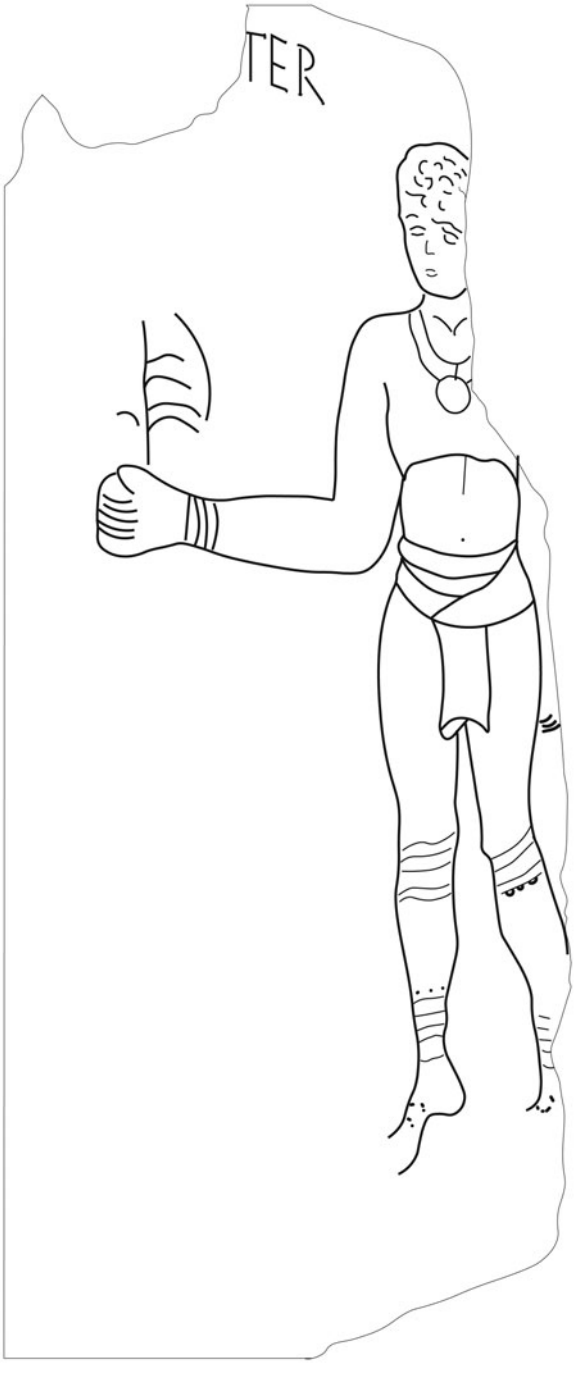

Fig. 8. Line drawing of a gladiatorial graffito representing a standing *retiarius*, holding a palm and a spear, Rome, Flavian Amphitheatre, fourth–fifth century AD (EDR189593).

Fig. 9. Photograph of a standing *retiarius* holding a palm and a spear, Rome, Flavian Amphitheatre, fourth–fifth century AD (EDR189593). Photo by Bruno Angeli. (Archivio-Moderno-Fotografico, Foro-Romano, Palatino, Colosseo, Colosseo-Museo-Permanente, DSC, 2985, Bruno-Angeli) (su concessione del Ministero della Cultura, Parco Archeologico del Colosseo).

removed from modern conceptualizations of graffiti as politically transgressive, as acts of defacement.

Investigation of Pompeian evidence proves that gladiatorial graffiti often appear in central spaces of private residences, where the act of inscribing is clearly visible and conceived of as an authorized pastime (Benefiel, 2011; Lohmann, 2018). As one among a broad range of possible examples, a scene found in the courtyard of the House of the Ceii (I.vi.15) in Pompeii epitomizes the spatial impact of gladiatorial graffiti on their material surroundings. The south wall of the 'porticus r' of the House of the Ceii hosts two pairs of fighting gladiators, each labelled with their own names and the number of their victories. The location of gladiatorial graffiti at a considerable height and above a bird which is central to the wall decoration, gestures towards the possibility that graffiti, sketched by anonymous draughtsmen (be they visitors or the house owners) wandering in the courtyard, were the product of a deliberate choice and were designed to become a complementary decorative motif.[42] 'The act of inscribing graffiti', Benefiel

[42] See detailed discussion in Benefiel, 2018: 105–8; Lohmann, 2018: 156–60.

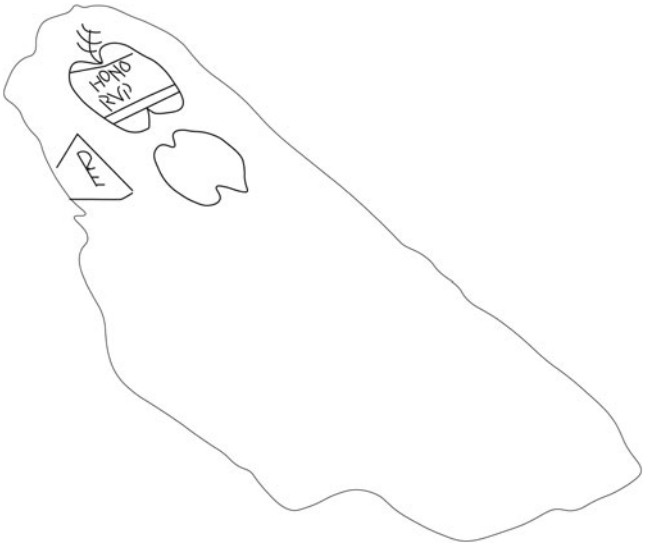

Fig. 10. Line drawing of a gladiatorial graffito featuring augural monograms and inscriptions, Rome, Flavian Amphitheatre, fourth–fifth century AD (EDR189592).

(2011: 36) concludes, constitutes 'an addition to domestic space that did not require an immediate redecoration'. Similarly, it is safe to argue that graffiti such as the present one were considered to be integral to the monumental feat of the Amphitheatre. Gladiatorial graffiti and official written messages alike construct the heterogeneous epigraphic record of the Flavian Amphitheatre. Intermingled with *loca* inscriptions along the steps of the Amphitheatre, graffiti, with their own prominence, association with marble and physical proximity to official inscriptions, lay claim to a form of authority and monumental status. The materiality of the medium of writing, namely marble, and the existence within an 'epigraphic environment', make these graffiti assert permanence and durability, transcending their occasional nature and subjectivity (Woolf, 1996: 28).

The spectators' excitement for the games, the permeable relationship between verbal and pictorial elements, are both encapsulated in a further graffito, scratched on a fragmentary slab found in the Amphitheatre (*EAOR* VI 524 cat. 20 = *CIL* VI 32261b = EDR189592, fourth–fifth century AD) (Fig. 10; Fig. 11).[43] The present specimen demonstrates a collapse between iconographic and textual elements that is typical of graffiti, where 'the visual and the verbal could be turned into one another before the very viewer's eye' (Kellum, 1999: 291). The graffito features two inscriptions:

a) [- - -] ((palma et laurus?))
b) *Hono=*
rus.

[43] Sabbatini Tumolesi, 1988: 92 fig. 2; La Regina, 2001: 341 fig. 40; Langner, 2001: Taf. 47 nr 948.

Fig. 11. Photograph of a gladiatorial graffito featuring augural monograms and inscriptions, Rome, Flavian Amphitheatre (EDR189592). Photo by Bruno Angeli (Archivio-Moderno-Fotografico, Foro-Romano, Palatino, Colosseo, Colosseo-Museo-Permanente, DSC, 2985, Bruno-Angeli) (su concessione del Ministero della Cultura, Parco Archeologico del Colosseo).

On the left, it is possible to read the augural monogram *PE*, which appears to be inscribed in a *tabula ansata* and reads as either *p*(*alma*) *e*(*t*) *l*(*aurus*) or *p*(*alma*) *e*(*t*) *f*(*eliciter)*.[44] This monogram, which results from the combination of the letters *P*, *E/F* and *L*, achieved wide currency in the late-antique iconography of gladiators as a formulaic acclamation to celebrate past victories or wish well for future successful engagements.[45] On the right, the name Honorus, possibly a wrong transcription of the otherwise attested *cognomen* Honorius, is engraved within the upper of the two laurel crowns, each accompanied by palm leaves.[46] The

[44] *EAOR* VI 524–626 cat. 20–1. Similar exhortations can be found in *CIL* VIII 10479; *CIL* X 8303, *Limeni nika* / *Limeni ζ*[*ή*]*σ*[*ης*] / *Λιμένι ζήσες*; *CIL* X 8059; *CIL* X 2061. As Gigante, 1979: 48 suggests, *νίκα* is traditionally deployed in inscriptions which record chariot races or are related to the circus. It appears as an invocation of victory in Pompeii for the actor Paris and Glaphyrinus (*CIL* IV 1664: *Nica Glaphyrine*).

[45] Orlandi, 2001: 98 and *EAOR* VI 524–7 cat. 20-21-23. See discussion of the monogram in Sabbatini Tumolesi, 1988: 92–4.

[46] Sabbatini Tumolesi, 1988: 92 fig. 2; La Regina, 2001: 342 fig. 40; Langner, 2001: Taf. 47 nr 948.

Fig. 12. Line drawing of a gladiatorial graffito representing two gladiators labelled by inscriptions, Rome, Flavian Amphitheatre (EDR171489).

augural monogram, crowns and palm leaves iconographically synthetize the gladiatorial victory. The material objects of successful fights morph into highly visual symbols, with letters transforming into pictorial elements and vice versa.

Scenes of gladiatorial combats are numerous in the extant epigraphic evidence. Currently on display in the second order of the amphitheatre, the graffito *EAOR* VI 526–7 cat. 22 = *CIL* VI 32260a = EDR171489 depicts two gladiators (Fig. 12; Fig. 13).[47] The inscription a) *iocus* / *Quintus* labels the figure on the left, which appears rotated by 90 degrees, while inscription b) *Vindicomus* / ((*theta nigrum*)) identifies the gladiator depicted on the lower level of the marble slab.[48] Part of the *galerus* and the trident allow us to identify Vindicomus as a *retiarius*. The Latin word *iocus* is engraved within the bust of the gladiator Quintus on the upper section of the stone and works as a caption. As Orlandi

[47] Sabbatini Tumolesi, 1988: 95 fig. 4; La Regina, 2001: 342 fig. 44; Langner, 2001: Taf. 46 nr 930 (representing only B).

[48] The name Quintus occurs several times in the Amphitheatre, suggesting that he was a famous and well-known gladiator. In further instances it seems plausible that Quintus is appended to the graffiti as the signature of the draughtsman: see *EAOR* VI 524–5 cat. 21 = *CIL* VI 32260b = EDR171488; *EAOR* VI 531 cat. 30 = *CIL* VI 32257 = EDR171490; *EAOR* VI 531 cat. 31 = *CIL* VI 32258 = EDR171491.

Fig. 13. Photograph of gladiatorial graffito representing two gladiators labelled by inscriptions, Rome, Flavian Amphitheatre (EDR171489). Photo by Bruno Angeli. (Archivio-Moderno-Fotografico_Foro-Romano_Palatino_Colosseo_Colosseo-Museo-Permanente_DSC_2985_Bruno-Angeli) (su concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico del Colosseo).

(2004: *EAOR* VI, 526–7) argues, the epithet *iocus* can be interpreted as an invective to the detriment of the fighter, namely 'object of derision'. Similarly, Vindicomus is the gladiator's *nomen artis*, a compound of the adjective *vindex* and the name *comes/comis*, namely 'avenging comrade' (Sabbatini Tumolesi 1988: 95). The *theta nigrum* symbolizes the outcome of the show and the death of the gladiator, as is customary in epitaphic rhetoric, wittily counterbalancing the promising fighter's *nomen artis*. Ironically, the extempore graffito provides contemporary viewers with a permanent record of the combat, exemplifying the contradictory temporal mechanisms and memorializing functions which define graffiti writing. Despite its occasional nature and its formal characteristics which differ from monumental inscriptions, the graffito's deployment of epitaphic conventions and its embeddedness in the marmoreal architecture of the Amphitheatre morph it into an epitaphic memorial that perpetuates the memory of the deceased gladiator across centuries. As the *theta nigrum* demonstrates, the graffito performs crucial commemorative mechanics which are germane to epitaphs.[49] Graffiti, therefore, gain meaning from and, in turn, offer new purpose to the spatial environments and material contexts in which they survive.

Scratched onto the arena's seats and currently on display in the second order of the Amphitheatre, the graffito *EAOR* VI 524–6 cat. 21 = *CIL* VI 32260b = EDR171488, dating to the fourth–fifth century AD, is particularly striking for its visual symmetries and the relationship between iconographic and textual elements (Fig. 14; Fig. 15) (Langner, 2001: nos 943–4). Two standing gladiators, both awarded with the *rudis*, are surrounded by symbols of acclamations and victory (crowns, palms and laurels) and accompanied by three inscriptions:[50]

[49] On gladiators' epitaphs, see Hope, 2000.

[50] The text is reported as in *EAOR* VI 524–6 cat. 21. *CIL* VI 32260b reads: *iVHIOR / Limeni Nika PE / Quintus vicit*. Although the two figures are commonly identified as gladiators, the

Fig. 14. Gladiatorial graffito depicting two standing gladiators, each accompanied by augural symbols, Rome, Flavian Amphitheatre, fourth–fifth century AD (EDR171488).

a) [- - -] + *li mor*=
[- - -]*us*
R. 1: [*I*]*unior*
b) *Limeni*
nika
PE
c) *Quintus*
vicit.

depiction of them holding wands (*rudis*) raises the possibility of identifying them as arbiters of gladiatorial fights (*adiutores*). See discussion in Sabbatini Tumolesi, 1988: 94–5.

Fig. 15. Photograph of a gladiatorial graffito depicting two standing gladiators, each accompanied by augural symbols, Rome, Flavian Amphitheatre, fourth–fifth century AD (EDR171488). Photo by Bruno Angeli. (Archivio-Moderno-Fotografico_Foro-Romano_Palatino_Colosseo_Colosseo-Museo-Permanente_ DSC_2985_Bruno-Angeli) (su concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico del Colosseo).

The fragmentary status of the stone does not allow for a reconstruction of inscription a) which should label the figure on the left. What seems readable is *-iutor*. As Orlandi (2004: *EAOR* VI, 525) observes, comparison with examples of wishes for defeat found within the Amphitheatre suggests, however, that inscription a) can read as an invective against the adversary.[51]

Inscription b) offers an example of exhortation for the victory of Limenius, whose name is combined with the Latin transliteration of the Greek verb *nika* and the monogram *PE*. The material objects of gladiatorial reward, such as palms and laurels, visually conflate in a highly symbolic letter, while each gladiator is accompanied by a convex object adorned with small circlets that can be identified with a crown and a *rudis*.[52]

Inscription c) has been interpreted as the addition of a different hand and has been read as *Quintus vicit*. Autoptic examination of the graffito, however, reveals instead the reading *Quintus fecit*, which might signal the graffitist's signature.[53] Two additional testimonies from the Amphitheatre corroborate this hypothesis. The graffitied inscriptions *Lupercus fecit* (*EAOR* VI 529–30 cat. 28 = EDR131530) and the cognomen *Quintus* scratched upon a *tabula lusoria* (*EAOR* VI 531 cat. 30 = *CIL* VI 32257 = EDR171490) demonstrate that

[51] *EAOR* VI 524–6 cat. 21; *EAOR* VI 526–7 cat. 22 (*iocus*); 528–9 cat. 26 (*nugas*). See Gregori, 2001: 23 on the *tabellae defixionum*.

[52] *EAOR* VI 117 for the various interpretations proposed for the monogram. For a similar synthetical representation of a laurel wreath via the monogram, see *EAOR* VI 524 cat. 20.

[53] Langner, 2001: nos 943–4. Despite the fading status of the letters following the proper name Quintus on the lower section of the stone, autoptic examination of the marble slab allows us to identify the letter preceding *-C, I, T* as an *E* instead of an *I*, suggesting the reconstruction '*Quintus fecit*' instead of '*Quintus vicit*'.

graffiti authors were inclined to claim authorship over their own creations, leaving an indelible mark of their presence in and perspectives on the performances taking place within the Amphitheatre *qua* spectators.[54]

As this paper has argued, gladiatorial graffiti perform an unconventional memorialization of gladiatorial fights. Although graffiti are not physical monuments *stricto sensu*, they show a concern for their own monumentality. Engraved on marble, unlike the majority of existing graffiti from Pompeii and Rome, juxtaposed to official inscriptions within an epigraphic environment, graffiti assert intended permanence and achieved durability. The famous Pompeian graffito *CIL* IV 8899 well exemplifies the collision of graffito, epitaph and monument and their functions:

> *Hospes, adhuc tumuli ne meias, ossa prec*[*antur*]
> *Nam, si vis* (*h*)*uic gratior esse, caca.*
> *Urticae monumenta vides, discede, cacator.*
> *Non est hic tutum culu*(*m*) *aperire tibi.*
>
> Traveller, the bones beg you, do not urinate against this tomb, for if you want to be dearer to this man, defecate. You look at the monument of Urtica, leave, defecator. It is not safe for you to open your ass here (Milnor, 2014: 65).

Urtica, speaking from the dead and mimicking the epitaphic *discede morator*, urges the *cacator* to leave her monument. As Milnor (2014: 66–8) argues, the joke resides in the fact that this is not a funerary monument, but rather a *monumentum lato sensu*, a graffito chiselled on a stretch of wall which is (mis) appropriating epitaphic authority. Similarly, gladiators are immortalized not only in stone epitaphs in elegiac couplets, the metrical form of epitaphic commemoration par excellence, but are also preserved in comparable ways in (marmoreal) graffiti.

The performative tension between (achieved) monumentality and reification, aggrandisement and downsizing of the arena spectacles sheds light on the complex meanings enclosed in the word *munus*. Imperial *munera*, which are recorded in the graffiti scribbled across the marble surfaces of the Amphitheatre, morph into all forms of every-day minutiae. Gladiatorial statuettes offered as gifts for the Saturnalia, small-scale gladiators accompanied by Priapus, apotropaic *tintinnabula*, representations of gladiatorial engagements on oil lamps and glass vases not only testify to the fascination exerted by gladiatorial games, which permeated every aspect of ancient life and nurtured the imagination, sexual imaginary and religious beliefs, but also signify a paradoxical reification of the arena games into three-dimensional, 'take-away' gifts (*munera*).[55] Five clay

[54] *EAOR* VI 529–30 cat. 28: a) [- - -]*ticianus* [- - -]+*us*; b) *Lupercus fecit*. La Regina, 2001: 341 fig. 38. This can be interpreted as the author's signature on the drawing in a proclamation of authorship. Similarly, *EAOR* VI 531 cat. 30.

[55] A survey of gladiatorial representations on utensils and material objects in Ville, 1981; Jacobelli, 2003: 99–105 with pictures.

statuettes from the Tomb of the Blue Glass Vase outside the Nucerian Gate and the House of Marcus Lucretius (IX.iii.5) in Pompeii represent *oplomachi* in combat posture, dressed with *subligaculum* and brandishing a *gladium*, captured in the climactic moment of assaulting their opponents.[56] Numerous figurines of this kind have been found in private houses and tombstones in Pompeii and ancient Italy, suggesting that they were exchanged during the Saturnalia as *ex voto*, cheapened versions of imperial *munera*.

Besides decorative and commemorative purposes, a number of gladiatorial representations are associated with apotropaic functions (Kellum, 1999: 287; Jacobelli, 2003: 99–105). The case of a bronze statue of a gladiator, depicted as fighting with his phallus which takes the shape of a panther, is exemplary.[57] Large-scale apotropaic devices were generally placed at the entrance of private residences and shops or at crossroads (*compita*, VIII.v.37; IX.iii.13; IX.xii.7) to ward off malignant influences and wish well to inhabitants and visitors. The association of gladiators with the cult of the *lares* and Priapus, and their presence on tombstones, in private houses and in shops emphasize the protective force which was ascribed to these fighters and their heroic deeds.[58] Material objects show the enormous popularity, pervasiveness and attraction of gladiatorial games and the role of gladiators as symbols of bravery and heroism. On the one hand, gladiators' endeavours are permanently captured in graffiti, small-scale, unconventional 'monuments' carved out of marble. On the other, they continue to exist in all forms of art objects, gifts for exchange, reified and portable versions of imperial *munera* which have endured over time.

CONCLUSIONS

As I have argued, the analysis of gladiatorial graffiti in the epigraphic environment of the Flavian Amphitheatre disrupts critical assumptions about graffiti as impermanent media and cheap versions of their monumental counterparts. Instead, graffiti disclose techniques of temporality and strategies of memorialization of the arena games which are closely comparable to official

[56] The statuettes are currently preserved in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples: Inv. 20341; Inv. 20259; Inv. 20260; Inv. 20247; Inv. 20340. Pictures in La Regina, 2001: 363–4 figs 80–4. A further clay statuette of an *oplomachus* was found in the necropolis of Tarentum and is currently preserved in the National Archaeological Museum of Tarentum (Inv. LG: 4066). Picture in La Regina, 2001: 365 fig. 85. Gladiatorial graffiti have been found scratched on the surfaces of the tombstones in the necropolis outside the Nucerian Gate: see detailed discussion in Benefiel, 2018: 104–5.

[57] The bronze statue is currently preserved in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, Inv. 27853. Picture in La Regina, 2001: 366 fig. 86 and Jacobelli, 2003: 101 fig. 81.

[58] The statue representing the gladiator and Priapus was found in the so-called 'Caupona of the Gladiator' (I.xx.1) in Pompeii and is currently preserved in the archaeological deposit of Pompeii, Inv. 11739. Picture in La Regina, 2001: 366 fig. 87 and Jacobelli, 2003: 101 fig. 83. Discussion of the apotropaic function of the statue in Jacobelli, 2003: 100–5.

inscriptions. By playing on visual symmetries and iconographical elements converting into verbal elements, graffiti recall the memory of the fleeting show, stimulating the audience to mentally relive the experience. As I have discussed, the Amphitheatre appears as a writing environment, in which spontaneous and ephemeral wall-writings have become integral to its marmoreal architecture. Within the monument, the authority of official inscriptions recording the building phases and architecture of the amphitheatre and extempore graffiti all share the same representational space, a venue that physically reinforced social hierarchies. Graffiti are densely material and yet, scratched onto marble surfaces along with *loca* inscriptions, are endowed with a longer-lasting legacy. Although the extant graffiti evidence within the Amphitheatre is scarce and mostly dates to the fourth–fifth century AD, it is not hard to imagine how the games would have stimulated similar responses in previous centuries and to interpret graffiti as an immediate reaction to the wondrous realities of the arena. Responding to the visual environment of the arena, graffiti-writers offer a wicked twist to monumentality, preserving spectacles via a medium which is by nature occasional and 'impermanent', yet which becomes marmoreal and monumental. As I have suggested, many contradictions cluster around the concept of *munus*: gladiatorial *munera*, which progressively move away from their origin as *ludi funebres*, nonetheless retain the association between spectacle and death, prefiguring the gory sacrifices of the lives of gladiators in the arena. Yet imperial *munera* are reified into exchangeable gifts with apotropaic and protective purposes, demonstrating the ubiquitousness of gladiators across all aspects of ancient culture. By capturing the particularities of a moment in time and stimulating the viewer's recollection of the amphitheatrical marvels, graffiti, which show a flexible relation between the visual and the verbal, act as proxies for memory, textual as much as visual objects capable of rescuing the otherwise forgettable protagonists of the arena from oblivion.

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Abbreviations

AGP Ancient Graffiti Project http://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/
CIL *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*
EAOR I = Sabbatini Tumolesi, P. (1988) *Epigrafia anfiteatrale dell'occidente romano. I*. Roma. Quasar.

EAOR II	= Gregori, G. L. (1989) *Epigrafia anfiteatrale dell'occidente romano. Regiones Italiae VI-XI*. II. Roma, Quasar.
EAOR V	= Vismara, C. and Caldelli, M. L. (2000) *Epigrafia anfiteatrale dell'occidente romano. V. Alpes Maritimae, Gallia Narbonensis, Tres Galliae, Germaniae, Britannia*. Roma, Quasar.
EAOR VI	= Orlandi, S. (2004) *Epigrafia anfiteatrale dell'occidente romano. VI. Roma. Anfiteatri e strutture annesse con una nuova edizione e commento delle iscrizioni del Colosseo*. Roma, Quasar.
EDR	Epigraphic Database Roma http://www.edr-edr.it/
ILS	*Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*
LTUR	*Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae*, ed. E.M. Steinby. Roma, Quasar.

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