Christian Horrors in Pompeii: A New Proposal for the *Christianos* Graffito

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The Discovery of the Graffito

In 1862, the eminent Neapolitan archaeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli,¹ with his team of archaeologists, excavated a large building between Vico del Balcone Pensile (Alley of the Overhanging Balcony) and Vico del Lupanare (Alley of the Brothel). The building, located in Region VII Insula 11 and characterized by two entryways (11 and 14), was properly identified by Fiorelli² as a grande *caupona* (large inn) and, due to the remarkable finding that he made inside it, became further known as *Hospitium Christianorum* (Hotel of Christians). ³ Indeed, during excavations, on a wall in the *atrium* of the inn Fiorelli uncovered a charcoal graffito seemingly including the word *Christianos* (Christians).

Within a few days the graffito had already begun to fade due to exposure to the elements, but before it completely vanished another Neapolitan archaeologist, Giulio Minervini, "warned of the finding, rushed to Pompeii and . . . with diligent care and without any concern to read a meaning rather than another, sketched the signs appearing on the wall." In the same year, shortly after Minervini's trip, another copy of the graffito was made by the German archaeologist Alfred Kiessling, who was the last scholar to see the artifact in person and the first to publish the related news that ". . . a charcoal inscription

¹ Fiorelli was professor of archaeology at Naples University and director of excavations at Pompeii from 1860 to 1875. He also reorganized the excavations, dividing the town into a system—currently in use—of *regiones, insulae*, and *domus*, and numbering each building entrance in order to precisely locate every artifact.

² G. Fiorelli, *Gli scavi di Pompei dal 1861 al 1872. Relazione al Ministro della Istruzione* (Napoli, 1873) 25.

³ For an exhaustive discussion on the characteristics of this building see T. Wayment and M. Grey, "Jesus Followers in Pompeii," *JJMJS* No. 2 (2015): 120–38.

⁴G. B. de Rossi, "Una memoria dei Cristiani in Pompei," *Bullettino di Archeologia Cristiana* 2 (1864): 71.

was found, unfortunately largely vanished. . . . As far as I know, this is the first of the monuments found in Pompeii, referring to the Christians. . . . 5

In the *Bullettino* of 1862, Kiessling provided the transcription of the two lines, which, presumably, concerned the Christians.

Two years later, in 1864, Fiorelli and Giovanni Battista de Rossi, at that time the highest living authority on the study of Christian antiquity, visited the *caupona* in Vico del Balcone Pensile where the inscription was found, but by then the charcoal graffito had completely disappeared.

De Rossi, however, gathered Fiorelli's testimony of the reading of the inscription, made by him immediately after the discovery, and also obtained from Minervini his sketch traced few days after the finding. The knowledge of the charcoal graffito is thus based on the evidence of three different archaeologists of known reputation. This was perfectly clear to Karl Zangemeister who, in 1871, authored the official edition of the graffito for the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (CIL IV.679), also publishing Kiessling's apograph (Tab. XVI.2) for the first time. Unfortunately, Zangemeister's transcription of the graffito—even though supplied with a thorough apparatus of notes and annotation—was essentially based on Kiessling's apograph, the later testimony.

This study will focus only on the two lines most probably referring to Christians (the fourth and the fifth lines of the whole graffito), of which a visual comparison between the drawings of Minervini and Kiessling is proposed in the figures below.

⁵ A. Kiessling, "Scavi di Pompei," *Bullettino dell'Instituto di corrispondenza archeologica per l'anno 1862* 5 (Roma, 1862): 92.

⁶ See de Rossi, "Una memoria dei Cristiani in Pompei," 71.

⁷ K. Zangemeister, *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1871), IV.679.

⁸ Zangemeister's reconstruction does not include the word *Christianos* even though, in his analysis, the German scholar did not exclude the possibility that this word originally belonged to the graffito: "Hoc unum igitur non improbabile esse largiemur, fuisse in pariete .HRISTIAN.. (quamquam sat repugnante Kiesslingii apographo), hoc vero, quod vix aliter restitui possit quam *c*HRISTIAN.., non cognomen esse *Christianus* i.e. *Chrestianus* . . . sed ad fidem Christianam pertinere."

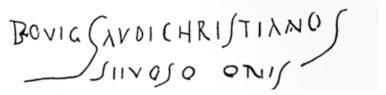


Fig. 1: Line drawing of the *Christianos* graffito made in 1862 by Giulio Minervini and published in 1864 by Giovanni de Rossi.

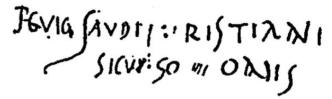


Fig. 2: Line drawing of the *Christianos* graffito made and partially printed in 1862 by Alfred Kiessling.

De Rossi, on the basis of Minervini's transcription, recognized that the artifact actually consists of two graffiti written by separate individuals, the part mentioning the Christians being the lower portion. De Rossi's assessment has been confirmed by the two most important scholarly studies on the subject carried out by Guarducci and, more recently, by Wayment and Grey.

The similarity between the two eyewitness apographs is patent, while their discrepancies confirm that the deterioration of the graffito was in progress, since some letters had vanished in Kiessling's later transcription.

⁹ De Rossi, "Una memoria dei Cristiani in Pompei," 71: "Da questo fac-simile è chiaro che due iscrizioni diverse abbiamo sott'occhio: l'una in lettere più alte, più spaziate, e divisa in tre righe; l'altra di scrittura più serrate e di righe probabilmente più lunghe della prima." ¹⁰ M. Guarducci, "La più antica inscrizione col nome dei Cristiani," *Römische Quartalschrift* 57 (1962): 120: "Sembra anzitutto probabile, a giudicare dai due apografi a noi pervenuti, che le iscrizioni siano, come pensava il de Rossi, più di una: cosa, del resto, naturalissima, trattandosi della parete di un'osteria, su cui diverse mani, munite di stilo o di carbone, possono aver lasciato le proprie scritture più o meno corrette. Ad uno dei testi sembrano appartenere le II. 1–3, evidentemente mutile a sinistra: ad un altro invece sembrano spettare le II. 4–5."

¹¹ Wayment and Grey, "Jesus Followers in Pompeii," 115: "We are fairly confident that two different graffiti are evidenced here. The upper one is more upright and crude in its letter forms. The lower tends to slant slightly to the right."

The First Line

De Rossi explained that Fiorelli "read at the end of the first line . . . HRISTIANOS or . . . HRISTIANVS." 12

Few traces of the H had remained on the charcoal graffito when Kiessling visited the *caupona*, whereas the H was still complete when Minervini read the inscription. The Neapolitan scholar was also the only one able to detect, before the H, the C of *Christianos* (read as a single vertical tract, similar to a I, by Kiessling), but the fact that Fiorelli, the first eyewitness of the graffito, did not recognize this letter suggests that it was not as clear as it appears in Minervini's apograph.

The first letter of the latter is a B, while—probably because of the fading of the lower curved segment—it appears to be a P in Kiessling's sketch. At the end of the line, the final S had disappeared from Kiessling's apograph, and even of the O—the second to last letter of the first line read by Minervini—only a single tract had remained, thus making it appear to be an I.

The transcription of the first line provided by Kiessling¹³ read as follows:

PG · VI GAVDI . . HRISTIANI

This reading clearly shows that the German archaeologist didn't recognize the sign immediately before the first A of his own apograph as being an S (probably because the final S, so similar in shape, was already faded when he made his drawing). Kiessling was also the first scholar to propose an interpretation of the line. Since the cursive form of E consists of two vertical lines (II), if only a single line remains, it can be interpreted as either an E or an I. Kiessling, connecting the sentence to the famous Neronian persecution, suggested restoring the line as:

[IGN]I GAVD[E C]HRISTIAN[E] Rejoice in the fire, Christian

When de Rossi published Minervini's apograph in 1864, the arbitrariness and inaccuracy of Kiessling's reading became patent. De Rossi, even if unable to

¹² Fiorelli later declared his skepticism about the existence of the name Christians, being instead inclined to interpret the whole graffito as an inscription containing *vina varia* (various kind of wine); see G. Fiorelli, *Gli scavi di Pompei dal 1861 al 1872. Relazione al Ministro della Istruzione Pubblica* (Napoli, 1873), 91. On the possible reasons for this turnaround see Guarducci, "La più antica inscrizione col nome dei Cristiani," 120.

¹³ Kiessling, "Scavi di Pompei," 92.

propose a solution for the beginning of the line,¹⁴ offered the reading of the remainder of the first line that was accepted over the next century by those scholars inclined to see in the graffito an allusion to the Christians.

Interpreting AVDI as an imperative, with CHRISTIANOS its direct object, de Rossi read:

AVDI CHRISTIANOS Listen to the Christians

De Rossi's reading was surpassed almost a century after the discovery of the graffito, when the Italian paleographer Margherita Guarducci published what can be considered the most important 20th-century academic study of the Pompeian inscription. Guarducci's most valuable contribution to the understanding of the graffito was the identification, at the beginning of the first line, of the name "Bovios," uncommon but attested even in Campania in its Latin form. ¹⁵ Analyzing Minervini's apograph, she hypothesized that the sign immediately before the first S of the line, similar to a G in its shape, was instead the remnant of an O, and thus read the line as follows:

BOVIOS AVDI(T) CHRISTIANOS Bovios is listening to the Christians

Hence BOVIOS became the subject of the sentence, and consequently AVDI is present tense in third-person singular. The form -os instead of -us for a personal name in the nominative case, as in Bovios, is not infrequent during the imperial period and probably suggests a Greek origin. It is also attested in Pompeii, ¹⁶ while the elision of the final T as in AVDI is one of the most common features of Latin sermo vulgaris, present in many other graffiti of the Vesuvian city. ¹⁷

Guarducci's reading, even if conjectural, remains the most plausible interpretation of the first line of the *Christianos* graffito.

¹⁴ De Rossi, "Una memoria dei Cristiani in Pompei," 71: "Dopo molto studio nulla oso dire."

 $^{^{15}}$ Guarducci, "La più antica inscrizione col nome dei Cristiani," 122 n. 18.

¹⁶ In its Latin form, see M. Guarducci, "La più antica inscrizione col nome dei Cristiani," 122 n. 19.

¹⁷ V. Väänänen, *Le latin vulgaire des inscriptions pompéiennes, 3ème édition augmentée* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1966), 70–71.

The Second Line

De Rossi asserted that Fiorelli "read at the end of the second line SORORIIS (*sorores*)." ¹⁸ Looking at Minervini's apograph, we understand that this reading is acceptable only if the second R was written differently from the first line, in its cursive form strictly followed by the first straight line of the E. As Guarducci stressed, ¹⁹ "We cannot exclude that two forms of the same letter are alternated in the same text"—all the more so as Kiessling confirmed this reading:²⁰

SICV.SO..ORIIS

Zangemeister proposed a different explanation of the final part of the line. He suggested reading ONIS instead of ORIIS, thus interpreting the supposed cursive R as the two opening segments of an N that is completed by the first straight line of the supposed E, while the second straight line would become an I.

This reading has the serious weakness of being contrary to the interpretation of two eyewitnesses of the graffito, Fiorelli and Kiessling, ²¹ whose apograph Zangemeister used for his transcription.

Both the apographs show between SO and ORIIS (or ONIS) a lacuna of two or three letters. One of these letters, an R, was clearly still visible when Fiorelli, the first eyewitness of the artifact, read the inscription. The logical implication is that this letter had already faded before Minervini made his sketch a few days after Fiorelli's discovery. Nevertheless, this R, coming from the reading of the first eyewitness of the graffito, should be considered a primary clue for the interpretation of the line.

In Kiessling's apograph only a few vestiges of the first O are still extant, while the second straight line of the first E is rendered with a slight curvature, thus allowing for IC instead of E.

¹⁸ De Rossi, "Una memoria dei Cristiani in Pompei," 71.

¹⁹ M. Guarducci, "La più antica inscrizione col nome dei Cristiani," 122.

²⁰ A. Kiessling, "Scavi di Pompei," 92.

²¹ Wayment and Grey, "Jesus Followers in Pompeii," 105–106, erroneously assert that de Rossi published the transcription of Minervini's apograph and that this transcription included, at the end of the second line, ONIS instead of ORIIS (*ores*). De Rossi's article contains only Minervini's apograph and not its transcription. From this drawing, as his interpretation clearly shows, de Rossi, just like his predecessors, read at the end of second line ORIIS (*ores*) and not ONIS. On the other hand, in Minervini's sketch the sign for this hypothetical N is not similar to the N of the first line, so the hypothesis of a cursive R seems more plausible.

De Rossi, resting on Minervini's apograph, was the first scholar to propose a solution for the second line:

S(A)EVOS O[L]ORES Cruel swans

The omission of A in the diphthong AE, as in SAEVOS, is typical in *sermo vulgaris*, and de Rossi limited his intervention to the introduction of a single letter, an L, in the lacuna between the two Os of Minervini's apograph. He reconstructed the two discussed lines as "... AVDI CHRISTIANOS // SEVOS OLORES" ("... listen to the Christians, cruel swans"), meaning that the anonymous engraver was mocking the Christian practice of facing martyrdom singing hymns, like swans with their songs as a prelude to death. One of the first criticisms of this interpretation came from Friedländer,²² who considered de Rossi's reading "more studied than likely" (*quod artificiosius quam probabilius excogitatum est*) and proposed O[S]ORES instead of O[L]ORES, the complete reading becoming "... AVDI CHRISTIANOS // SEVOS OSORES" ("... listen to the Christians, cruel haters"), a solution echoing the Tacitean (Ann. 15.44) "hatred of mankind" (*odium humani generis*) of the Christian "destructive superstition" (*exitiabilis superstitio*).

Due to its unlikely intellectual implications, Zangemeister, followed by most scholars, also dismissed de Rossi's interpretation, defining it *ingeniosa sed parum certa*.

Indeed, there are two technical reasons that make both de Rossi's and Friedländer's solutions barely conceivable: first, the space of the lacuna in both Minervini's and Kiessling's apographs should be filled with two or maybe three letters and not with only one; and second and more importantly, one of these letters should be an R, as Fiorelli's testimony unequivocally states.

With regard to the first, another criticism of de Rossi's reading came in 1886 from *The Church Quarterly Review*,²³ which says: "The next line is read by de Rossi S(A)EVOS O[L]ORES. But the R is quite unlike that in CHRISTIANOS, and the space which he fills by L between the two Os seems to demand two letters. Perhaps SEVOS (=*severos*?) O[BS]ONIIS may be read." Against the right consideration of the space between the two Os to be filled by two letters, other fallacious assumptions act as a counterpoint and undermine the complete

²² L. Friedländer, *Dissertatio de Pomponia Graecina superstitionis externae rea*, (Königsberg: Typis Academicis Dalkowskianis, 1868), 5.

²³ The Church Quarterly Review 22 (London: Spottiswoode and Co., 1886): 395.

reading of the graffito as ". . . AVDI CHRISTIANOS // SEVEROS OBSONIIS" (". . . listen to the Christians, severe upon dainties"). The author hypothesized that some invectives of Christian teachers against luxurious gluttony (*obsoniis*) could have attracted some attention inside the inn. But if we are inclined to consider admissible the reading ONIS instead of ORIIS at the end of the line in spite of the opposing view of the eyewitnesses, the same cannot be said for the reading ONIIS with two Is, the latter being inexplicable from a paleographical point of view. Besides, the reading SEVOS for SEVEROS seems arbitrary without a sign of abbreviation, and, chiefly, neither of the letters included in the lacuna, B and S, corresponds to the R seen by Fiorelli.

For another attempt it would be necessary to wait more than 50 years. Leon Herrmann²⁴ filled the lacuna in the second line with a D, proposing to read O[D]ONIS, which he translated as "Bacchante" and reconstructed the whole couplet as "AVDI CHRISTIANOS // SAEVOS ODONIS" ("... listen to the wild Christians, Bacchante"). Herrmann considered the inscription to be a pagan answer to the Christian cries of triumph over the burning of Rome in A.D. 64. From a textual point of view, this interpretation also does not resolve the two critical points that we have already emphasized: a single letter inserted to fill the lacuna between the two Os, where two or three letters are most probably needed, and disregard for Fiorelli's testimony.

We have already discussed Guarducci's 1961 proposal for the first line. For the second line Guarducci embraced, probably unconsciously, the reading proposed by Friedländer in 1868, bringing along the textual difficulties already discussed. Her complete reading of the couplet is "BOVIOS AVDIT CHRISTIANOS // SEVOS OSORES" ("Bovios is listening to the Christians, cruel haters").

The solution suggested by Marta Sordi²⁵ a few years later seems even more problematic. Accepting the first line's reading from Guarducci, she proposed reading the following one as "S(A)EVOS [S]O[L]ONIS," the whole couplet becoming "BOVIOS AVDIT CHRISTIANOS // SAEVOS SOLONIS" ("Bovios is listening to the Christians, cruel solons." Sordi supposed that due to a popular prejudice against the Christians, the pagans, accustomed to lead a dissolute life, accused them of being harsh censors in the same way they accused stoics of being *aerumnosi solones*²⁶ ("miserable solons"). Independently from

²⁴ L. Herrmann, "Quels Chrétiens ont incendié Rome?" *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* Vol. 27, No. 3 (1949): 648.

²⁵ M. Sordi, "Aerumnosi Solones. A proposito di un pregiudizio popolare contro Stoici e Cristiani in età neroniana," *Aquileia nostra* 45–46 (1974–1975): 277–82.

²⁶ Persius, Sat. III, 79.

historical considerations, the textual evidence appears sufficient to dismiss this interpretation. In fact, even if the reading ONIS instead of ORIIS and the accusative form IS (of *solonis*) instead of ES are admissible, all the problems already highlighted in the previous reading remain unsolved. Worse than this, Sordi added another S (the first one in *solonis*) in a position where both the apographs and Fiorelli's reading had noticed no lacuna.

The latest attempt to interpret the second line of the *Christianos* graffito has come from the work of Wayment and Grey,²⁷ who proposed a solution based on an ingenious partition of the word SEVOS to be read, according to the authors, as SEV OS, engraved in *scriptio continua*.

They suggest reconstructing the line as:

SEV OS O[RATI]ONIS
If the face of the oration

The complete reading of the inscription would then become "... BOVIOS AVDIT CHRISTIANOS // ... SEV OS ORATIONIS // ..." ("... Bovios is listening to the Christians ... if the face of the oration ..."). The supposition is that portions of text are missing at the beginning of the second line and that the text continued in the following line. Regardless of the somewhat obscure meaning of the restored text, ²⁸ the major difficulty with this reconstruction, as the authors admit, consists of having filled the lacuna with four letters (RATI) when the space left blank in both the apographs allows for two or maybe three letters.

A New Proposal

Due to the importance of the time factor in the preservation of the charcoal graffito and the consequent reliability of the readings of the inscription, a valuable criterion in choosing among the different readings proposed by the eyewitness testimonies should be their chronology, thus preferring Fiorelli to both Minervini and Kiessling, and Minervini to Kiessling. Consequently, contrary to what Zangemeister did, we have considered Minervini's apograph as the first choice for the interpretation of the inscription, while at the same time taking due account of Fiorelli's readings when available.

²⁷ Wayment and Grey, "Jesus Followers in Pompeii," 113–20.

²⁸ Wayment and Grey, "Jesus Followers in Pompeii," 119: "Although such a phrase is not attested in literature, it would appear to convey the idea of the beginning of an oration or in light of an oration, which may be appropriate in the context of the previous line which mentions Bovios 'listening' to Christians."

Based on this approach we propose the following reading:

BOVIOS AVDI(T) CHRISTIANOS S(A)EVOS (H)O[RR]ORES Bovios is hearing the savage Christian horrors

In line with the current consensus, we consider Guarducci's reading of the first line the most compelling and have embraced her solution.

For the second line, consistent with the eyewitness testimonies (Fiorelli and Kiessling), we have restored the ending as ORES and, following Minervini's drawing, we have filled the lacuna between the two Os with two letters. Since we know from Fiorelli's original reading (*sorores*) that one of these letters was an R, we have reconstructed the line as SEVOS ORRORES (savage horrors). The omission of H at the beginning of words was very common in Latin *sermo vulgaris*, and the phenomenon is extensively attested also in Pompeii. ²⁹ Thus both *Christianos* and *saevos* should refer, as adjectives, to the word *horrores*. This simple solution has the merit of respecting the above-mentioned criteria and providing a couplet with plain meaning.

At this point we might ask what kind of Christian horrors Bovios was hearing, but of course the explanation must be conjectural.

The graffito was written in the hall of an inn, so it would not be odd if the reference was to some kind of food—and the word *horrores* leads us directly to one of the most ancient accusations against the Christians: cannibalism practiced during ritual meals.

The slanderous accusation of anthropophagy was widely reported by men like Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Tertullian, Origen, and—in great detail—by Minucius Felix. 30

But it is also interesting to remark that even in the first pagan account referring to Christ and Christianity, the famous letter of Pliny the Younger to

²⁹ Väänänen, *Le latin vulgaire des inscriptions pompéiennes* 58; and R. E. Wallace, *An Introduction to Wall Inscriptions from Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Wauconda: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers Inc., 2005), xxix.

³⁰ The bibliography on the topic is extensive. An useful synthesis can be found in J. N. Bremmer, "Early Christian Human Sacrifice between Fact and Fiction," in *Sacrifices Humains, Dossiers, Discours, Comparaisons, Actes du colloque tenu a l'Universite de Geneve, 19–20 mai 2011* (Brepols, 2013), 165–76. Bremmer also provides an exhaustive scholarly reference list on the matter (165–66 n. 4).

Trajan,³¹ written while he was serving as the governor of Bithynia-Pontus, there is a possible connection regarding the ignominious charge of ritual cannibalism. In fact, Pliny refers to the confessions of several Christians describing their religious practices: After pledging themselves to Christ, "it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food; but it was ordinary and innocent food . . . ," as if the accusation against them also concerned the fact that they had consumed meals that were neither ordinary nor innocent.

It is easy, then, to imagine that the *Christianos* graffito was an anti-Christian inscription referring to a pagan individual who was hearing, in this *caupona* of Pompeii and maybe during his own meal, atrocious tales concerning these supposed Christian ritual meals.

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³¹ The letter is generally considered authentic by the scholarly consensus. Recent doubts on the matter, based on a stylometric analysis of the letter, are stated in E. Tuccinardi, "An Application of a Profile-Based Method for Authorship Verification: Investigating the Authenticity of Pliny the Younger's Letter to Trajan Concerning the Christians," *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* (Advanced Access, February 14, 2016); http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/llc/fqw001 [accessed September 15, 2016].