Pompeii's Safaitic Graffiti*

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ABSTRACT

In 1987, nine groups of graffiti written in Safaitic were published from Pompeii's theatre corridor (VIII.7.20). Safaitic, a south Semitic script used to record a dialect of Old Arabic, had never previously been documented in the West, and the appearance of these inscriptions at Pompeii since their publication has largely remained a mystery. I argue that Pompeii's Safaitic graffiti were inscribed by nomads from the Ḥarrah who had been incorporated into the Roman army, and who marched into Italy with Legio III Gallica *during its campaign to install Vespasian as emperor.*

Keywords: Latin graffiti; Safaitic; epigraphy; Pompeii; the Ḥarrah; Roman army

In 1987, Calzini Gysens published nine graffiti from the north wall of Pompeii's theatre corridor. These inscriptions, among the best kept secrets of Pompeian epigraphy, were written in Safaitic, a south Semitic script that records a dialect of Old Arabic. The script was used by pastoralist nomads in the Ḥarrah, a basalt desert in what is today southern Syria, northeastern Jordan and northern Saudi Arabia.[1] While over 34,000 Safaitic inscriptions, usually dated between the first century B.C.E. and the fourth century C.E., have now been documented in and around the Ḥarrah, the script is only very rarely found beyond the desert's black rocks.[2] The discovery of Safaitic within the city of Pompeii was, therefore, absolutely unexpected, and these graffiti remain the only known examples of the script from the western Mediterranean.

However, despite their uniqueness, there has been little work done on Pompeii's Safaitic texts since their publication by Calzini Gysens, and even less has been done to try to explain their presence at Pompeii.[3] The current working hypothesis is that these graffiti were inscribed by long-distance traders who, after landing at Puteoli, visited Pompeii sometime before the eruption. Here, I present a new explanation for the appearance of Safaitic at Pompeii. I argue that these graffiti were written by nomads from the Ḥarrah who had been incorporated into the Roman army and came to Pompeii with *Legio III Gallica*. These men travelled with *Gallica* into Italy during the civil war of 69 C.E. and left their marks at Pompeii between 20 December 69 and the end of January 70, while the legion was wintered in Campania. The argument advanced here has the goal not

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[1] Al-Jallad 2019 is the most recent treatment of the language.

[2] Macdonald 1993: 311; Al-Jallad 2015: 21–2; 2019: 342–4; Macdonald and Al-Manaser 2019: 209.

[3] Calzini Gysens 1987; 1990.

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necessarily of being the final word on Pompeii's Safaitic graffiti, but of supplanting the long-distance trade hypothesis as the best working account of these inscriptions.

I INTRODUCTION TO POMPEII'S SAFAITIC GRAFFITI

As Pompeii's Safaitic graffiti are little-known to most classicists, I begin with a brief introduction. The texts were inscribed on the north wall of the theatre corridor (VIII.7.20), a passageway connecting the Via Stabiana to the east with Pompeii's theatre complex.[4] Although the texts were recorded as early as 1832, they remained a mystery until 1987, when Calzini Gysens published her *editio princeps*; an *editio altera* followed three years later.[5] Since Calzini Gysens' breakthroughs, the texts have received almost no attention, with two notable exceptions. First, Varone included five photographs of the Safaitic in his 2012 photographic survey of the graffiti published in *CIL* 4.[6] Second, Al-Manaser and Macdonald included Pompeii's Safaitic in the Online Corpus of the Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia (OCIANA), which is now the standard database for Safaitic.[7]

As published originally by Calzini Gysens, the Pompeian Safaitic graffiti were construed as nine inscriptions, but two of these texts have been split in OCIANA, resulting in a total of eleven distinct texts.[8] The texts are written right to left, and are well incised into the plaster that covers the north wall of the theatre corridor, though damage and loss of plaster have affected some of the inscriptions. All are clustered in close proximity to one another.[9] As for their date, in her *ed. alt.*, Calzini Gysens suggested 80 B.C.E.–C.E. 62, on the basis of proposed archaeological time stamps for the construction and use of the corridor, and following Maiuri's hypothesis that the theatre complex ceased to be used after the 62 earthquake.[10] However, according to more recent archaeological work, it seems instead that use of the larger theatre and the corridor continued, and thus the *terminus ante quem* for the corridor's graffiti can be extended to the date of the eruption itself.[11]

In terms of content, all of Pompeii's Safaitic graffiti record simple, commemorative signatures by their authors ('by X') or very brief patrilineal genealogies ('by X, son of Y'). Such texts are the most common type of Safaitic inscription in the Ḥarrah, where these genealogies can extend up to a remarkable twenty generations.[12] At Pompeii there are, at most, two generations represented (author and father). Moving across the wall from east to west and from top to bottom, I reproduce here the texts following OCIANA's editions and translations. Note that editorial conventions for Old North Arabian epigraphy differ considerably from those of Latin and Greek texts: so, for

[4] For recent work on the theatre district at Pompeii, see Letellier-Taillefer 2019; Letellier-Taillefer and Chapelin 2019; more generally, Eschebach 1993: 391.
[5] First recorded by Wordsworth, who visited Pompeii during summer 1832 (Wordsworth 1837: 1). Mau republished Wordsworth's line-drawings as *CIL* 4.4961–4962; neither was aware of the language of the inscriptions.
[6] Note that it was Varone 2012: 2.414 who first connected Wordsworth's line-drawings in *CIL* 4.4961–4962 to the texts published by Calzini Gysens.
[7] Al-Manaser and Macdonald 2017. OCIANA is maintained at http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/
[8] Distinct graffiti are sometimes mistakenly grouped together; on this phenomenon, see Benefiel 2008 and further Section II below.
[9] Calzini Gysens 1987: 108–9 provides a line-drawing with an overview of all of the texts. On graffiti clusters, see Benefiel 2010: 87.
[10] Calzini Gysens 1990: 3–4.
[11] See Letellier-Taillefer 2019: 182–4; Letellier-Taillefer and Chapelin 2019: 15.
[12] Al-Jallad and Jaworska 2019: 10.

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instance, curly braces indicate doubtful readings (like the Leiden underdot), while four hyphens indicate one *or more* unreadable characters.[13]

CGSP#	Transcription	Translation	OCIANA link
1	*l {ʾ}tbt*	By {ʾtbt}	http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/corpus/pages/OCIANA_0018578.html
2	*l ----hb*	By ----hb	http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/corpus/pages/OCIANA_0018579.html
3	*l tm*	By Tm	http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/corpus/pages/OCIANA_0018580.html
4	*l ----{k}t*	By ----{k}t	http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/corpus/pages/OCIANA_0018581.html
5	*l s²ms¹{g}rm*	By {s²ms¹grm}	http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/corpus/pages/OCIANA_0018582.html
5.1	*l {m}{d}*	By {Md}	http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/corpus/pages/OCIANA_0018583.html
6	*l ʾnʿm bn k{ʿ}z*	By ʾnʿm son of {Kʿz}	http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/corpus/pages/OCIANA_0018584.html
7	*l {ʾ}s¹lm*	By {ʾs¹lm}	http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/corpus/pages/OCIANA_0018585.html
7.1[14]	*l s²---- bn gs²m*	By S²---- son of Gs²m	http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/corpus/pages/OCIANA_0018586.html
8	*l ʾ{t}*	By {ʾt}	http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/corpus/pages/OCIANA_0018587.html
9	*l ṣhb w hʾ{s¹}ys¹ {b} ny {ḥ}nn ----y*	By Ṣhb and {Hʾhys¹} the sons of {Ḥ}nn {h} y----[15]	http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/corpus/pages/OCIANA_0016571.html

While not all of the readings are completely secure, what is clear enough are the names of twelve individuals who were once present in the theatre corridor. Two of the inscriptions include genealogies, and in the case of CGSP 9, we seem to have two brothers, Ṣhb and (possibly) Hʾhys¹. Among the names that are fairly securely read, most are well attested elsewhere in the Safaitic corpus from the Ḥarrah. For example, querying the OCIANA onomastics database for *ʾnʿm*, the author's name in CGSP 6, returns hundreds of hits.[16] On the other hand, several names are rarer. For example, *kʿz*, the name of the father of ʾnʿm in the same inscription, otherwise appears only once in the corpus.[17] *ʾtbt*, read

[13] For a complete set of conventions, see Al-Manaser and MacDonald 2017: xii.
[14] I am not entirely persuaded by OCIANA's reading of this inscription. I can clearly see a case for dividing CGSP 7, reading first, *l {ʾ}s¹lm*, as OCIANA does, but the text that remains for 7.1 then looks like *l ṯs²m*. I do not understand what characters are being read *l s²---- bn* nor do I see space for those markings on the wall.
[15] Tentatively suggested in the OCIANA *app. crit.*
[16] http://krcfm.orient.ox.ac.uk/fmi/webd/ociana (accessed 17 April 2021).
[17] Winnett and Harding 1978: no. 1803.

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only with difficulty in CGSP 1, is so far unique to Pompeii.[18] Thus even if individual readings cause some difficulties, the identification of the graffiti in the corridor as Safaitic is secure. Yet the very existence of these texts at Pompeii raises more questions. Who were Tm, Ṣhb, and their companions? How did they end up at Pompeii?

Outside Pompeii, Safaitic graffiti are almost exclusively found cut into the basalt rocks of the Ḥarrah, and scholars studying this corpus have been able to reconstruct a great deal about the lives of their authors.[19] These were pastoralist nomads, whose livelihoods came from breeding camels, sheep and goats, and who migrated across the Ḥarrah according to the seasons, the availability of water and the rhythms of life in the black desert. So far, only Calzini Gysens has attempted to explain how these nomads might have made it to Pompeii, though she offers 'only hypotheses … with the greatest caution': she tentatively suggested that the nomads might have been 'slaves, political hostages, or just travellers, probably coming from nearby Puteoli'.[20] In the absence of any particular evidence for the authors being slaves or political hostages, Calzini Gysens highlighted the possibility that these men were eastern merchants, and this seems to be the best working explanation hitherto.[21] Against this, it might be said that we have no evidence for nomad involvement with trade in Puteoli — or, in fact, with trade of any kind, not even the caravan trade in Syria.[22] But, after all, Calzini Gysens advanced her hypothesis only *exempli gratia*. Still, with so much recent progress on the study of ancient graffiti, both Pompeian and Safaitic, I believe that it is now possible to do better.

II THE THIRD LEGION: A NEW HYPOTHESIS

The starting point for a new hypothesis is the north wall of Pompeii's theatre corridor. Though published in isolation, Pompeii's Safaitic graffiti have many neighbours.[23] The theatre corridor was — and is — a densely inscribed space, whose plaster walls seem to have served as an inviting epigraphic canvas for passers-by.[24] Roughly 150 additional graffiti have been identified here, and recent restudy of this material by Benefiel in her Ancient Graffiti Project (hereafter AGP) has made these inscriptions more accessible than ever.[25]

The majority of non-Safaitic graffiti in the corridor are, in fact, figural. These include a wide variety of drawings, from boats to gladiators to animals, including horses, fish and the occasional unidentifiable quadruped.[26] Among textual graffiti, Latin dominates, but there are also seven inscriptions either in Greek or appearing with a combination of Greek and

[18] Cf. the OCIANA *app. crit.*, where Macdonald mentions the possibility of reading this name as *ktbt*.
[19] Macdonald 1993.
[20] Calzini Gysens 1990: 5.
[21] For eastern traders in the region, see Terpstra 2015 on Nabataeans at Puteoli and Tran Tam Tihn 1972 for catalogues of relevant material. There are some examples of self-identified Nabateans using the Safaitic script in the East (Al-Jallad 2015: 18–19), but such cases are few. While language is not necessarily the property of any particular ethnic group, Nabataean authorship is not the working assumption with Safaitic, even when the inscription might mention Nabataeans. See further Macdonald, Mu'azzin and Nehmé 1996: 447–9; Macdonald 1998: 185–6; cf. Norris and Al-Manaser 2018.
[22] Macdonald 2014: 156: 'we have no evidence that the nomads who carved these graffiti were involved in the caravan trade and, given that they describe many of their other activities, it would be strange if they were entirely silent about this'.
[23] On studying graffiti in context, see Benefiel 2010; Baird and Taylor 2011.
[24] Graffiti as social enterprises: Benefiel 2010; cf. Stern 2018: 17.
[25] AGP's database is maintained at http://www.ancientgraffiti.org All of the corridor's graffiti can now be browsed through AGP's Interactive Maps feature: http://www.ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/results?property=162 On AGP in the theatre corridor, see Benefiel and Sypniewski 2020: 4–5.
[26] AGP helpfully unifies the figural and textual graffiti in one location. For the corridor, most of the figural texts were published in Langner 2001; see further Benefiel and Sypniewski 2016.

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Latin characters.[27] As for Latin, there are around fifty-seven inscriptions that exhibit a considerable variety in kind. Many — not unlike the Safaitic — simply record names. Among others, Felix, Gaius Ovius, Faustus and Fadius Nasso all commemorated their visits to this space, the last apparently providing a self-portrait.[28] Some graffiti are more complex. The enslaved woman Methe, for example, recorded a prayer to Venus Pompeiana on the corridor's south wall.[29] Elsewhere, a trio of men — self-styled as the *Geryones* — left behind a pair of graffiti, one of which records (with a precise date) their liaison with a certain Tyche on 22 November 3 B.C.E.[30]

Regarding the mystery of the Safaitic, however, two Latin inscriptions demand particular attention. Both are on the north wall, and are located close to the Safaitic, just *c.* 1.5 m to the east, heading toward the Via Stabiana, only three or so paces away.[31] But neither inscription is entirely straightforward. I present both texts below, according to recent updates by AGP.[32]

(1) *CIL* 4.2415, cf. p. 223 = AGP-EDR161769[33]

Tertian<i> hic <h>abitaru<n>t [+1?+]ITICES verpa va(le)

The men of the Third were here … ITICES (?) farewell, prick.

(2) *CIL* 4.2421 = AGP-EDR166493[34]

Tertiani
hic ḥa̲bita[r]unt
Rufa ita vale quare bene fel<l>as

The men of the Third were here. So, farewell, Rufa, since you suck well.

Both texts exhibit the sort of variation in orthography that is common in Vesuvian graffiti. The loss of the final *–i* in *Tertiani*, for example, should probably be understood as an elision before *hic*, with the initial *h* of that word perhaps not pronounced (it is, indeed, unwritten in the verb form that follows: *<h>abitaru<n>t*).[35] In *<h>abitaru<n>t,* the loss of *n* before *t* is stranger, but can also be paralleled in the Pompeian corpus, while the loss of a geminated consonant like *l* in *fel<l>as* is more common.[36]

Turning to content, the pair are similar. Each begins with an announcement of the presence of the *Tertiani*, 'the men of the Third', whose identity I will return to shortly. On the basis of palaeography, it may be the case that the *Tertiani* sections of each inscription were written by two different hands. In (1), for example, the writer uses E *capitalis*, whereas in (2) we find a two-stroke E (‖) (though such variation is also possible in the same hand). Following this name, each text offers a deictic *hic*, referring passersby to the corridor itself. Next comes a form of the verb *habitare*, here meaning simply 'to be present'.[37]

[27] For Greek graffiti at Pompeii, see e.g. Solin 2012.
[28] For Nasso, see *CIL* 4.3204.
[29] *CIL* 4.2457.
[30] *CIL* 4.2450; for prostitution in such locations, see McGinn 2004: 22–3; Levin-Richardson 2019: 2–5.
[31] For measurement data, see Varone 2012: 2.414, 2.417, 2.420; AGP's commentaries also indicate proximate inscriptions.
[32] All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.
[33] http://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/graffito/AGP-EDR161769 (Benefiel and Helms).
[34] http://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/graffito/AGP-EDR166493 (Benefiel and Helms).
[35] For elision of *-i*, see Väänänen 1966: 40; for loss of initial *h*, Väänänen 1966: 58.
[36] Väänänen 1966: 67; cf. *CIL* 4.2, *indices* p. 779; Väänänen 1966: 60.
[37] See *CIL* 4.2, *indices* p. 759 s.v. for other examples of the verb.

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Following the *Tertiani* section, each inscription includes a phrase involving *vale*. In (1), the word preceding *verpa* is a crux and the extant traces on the wall admit no secure solutions, though one might expect a name here. The valediction that follows addresses someone referred to as a *verpa*. This is an example of an anatomical term used *pars pro toto* either as a term of general abuse, or, as is possible with *verpa*, as a disparagement of the addressee that insinuates that they are a *pedicator* or *irrumator*.[38] The farewell to Rufa in (2) offers more detail. The citation of her prowess at *fellatio* has landed her on McGinn's register of 'possible prostitutes at Pompeii', where she shares the company of Tyche, mentioned above; on the other hand, whether this reference to Rufa is actually evidence for prostitution or simply verbal abuse seems to me far from obvious.[39] Either way, since Zangemeister's edition in *CIL*, it has been suggested that Rufa's valediction in line 3 should actually be severed from the *Tertiani* altogether and be read separately as its own inscription, a suggestion that has had its followers.[40] The same thing might also be the case for the final *vale*-phrase at the end of (1), although the palaeography is indecisive. Be that as it may, the reason that these two inscriptions matter for the present argument is the presence of the *Tertiani*.

As Zangemeister noted in his *addenda* to (1) in *CIL*, the reference to the *Tertiani*, 'the men of the Third', seems to relate these graffiti to the Third Legion. While there were several legions in the Roman army numbered 'the Third', Zangemeister made a crucial suggestion as to which one could have been responsible for these graffiti. Tacitus records that *Legio III Gallica* was in Capua during late 69 and early 70. Given that we know of no other opportunities for members of legions numbered 'the Third' to visit Pompeii, Zangemeister suggested that this moment likely provided the window of opportunity for the men of the Third to leave their marks here.[41]

Zangemeister was, of course, not familiar with the then-indecipherable Safaitic graffiti when he made this observation, but his connection between the *Tertiani* and *III Gallica* matters a great deal, because it places in this corridor members of a Roman legion that had recently arrived in Italy from Syria, the distant homeland of writers of Safaitic. I argue that this connection provides the crucial link between Pompeii and the Ḥarrah. *Gallica* had been stationed in Syria for nearly a hundred years prior to 68, when it was moved, first to Moesia just prior to Nero's death, and then into Italy, at the head of the Danube legions, marching towards Rome on Vespasian's behalf.[42] Once Flavian forces had secured the City, shortly after 20 December, *Gallica* was billeted in Capua as punishment for the Vitellian sympathies of the Capuan aristocracy during the civil war.[43] Thus, the Third, previously a mainstay in Syria, found itself in Campania. Its stay was short-lived, and *Gallica* was sent back to its long-time home sometime in January 70.[44]

Gallica would have drawn manpower from its occupation zone in the years prior to its travels to Campania. This manpower could well have included nomads from the Ḥarrah —

[38] Adams 1982a: 12–14; 1982b: 37–8.
[39] McGinn 2004: 301.
[40] Line three is printed as a separate inscription in Varone 2002: 77 and Weeber 2003: 48, 143.
[41] Note that Hunink 2011: 274–5 does not follow Zangemeister's suggestion, nor does he understand *Tertiani* to be the 'men of the Third'. Instead, Hunink translates the relevant sections of these inscriptions as 'Hier wohnen die Brüder Tertianus' and 'Die Brüders [sic] Tertianus / haben hier gewohnt'. I cannot entirely rule out the possibility that the men that wrote these inscriptions were two brothers, each named Tertianus. Still, against this interpretation (which is advanced without argument), one might note that *Tertianus* as a name appears nowhere else in Pompeian graffiti, at least among those collated by Mau in his *indices* to *CIL* 4.2. The only other published translation of the text is vague on this point: 'Hier haben die Tertiani gewohnt' (Weeber 2003: 143).
[42] On *III Gallica*, see, conveniently, Dąbrowa 2000.
[43] See Wellesley 2000: 212; Tac., *Hist.* 4.3.1.
[44] Tac., *Hist.* 4.39.4; cf. Morgan 2006: 260.

and, in fact, there is evidence, which I discuss below, that suggests that the Ḥarrah was a recruiting ground for the Roman army. Building on Zangemeister, I argue that it was during this narrow timeframe that the authors of the Safaitic left their marks at Pompeii. Rather than looking for Safaitic-literate merchants, I believe the army was the most probable source of this most improbable epigraphic moment. But how exactly might *III Gallica* have incorporated the nomads?

III FROM THE ḤARRAH TO POMPEII

There are at least two ways that nomad recruits might have fallen in with the legion. First, and simply, the nomads may have served as legionaries themselves in the Third. Alternatively, the nomads could have been auxiliaries that marched with *Gallica*. In the final analysis, the evidence is not decisive. But what emerges is a reminder of the flexibility of the Roman army and the diverse ways that it could incorporate local populations. The issue is not that there were no opportunities for nomads to be included in the army; rather, there are too many alternatives to provide a firm conclusion here.

To start with the legionary option: Rome's legions became increasingly provincial under the Empire, from about fifty per cent provincial under Claudius and Nero until, under Trajan, legionaries of provincial birth outnumbered Italians 4:1 or 5:1.[45] In the case of *III Gallica*, we actually have explicit testimony regarding the effect of provincial recruitment on the unit — and for precisely the time period of interest. About two months prior to the arrival of *III Gallica* at Pompeii, the men of the Third sowed some productive confusion at the onset of the Second Battle of Bedriacum on 24 October. Tacitus records the episode:

> undique clamor, **et orientem solem (ita in Syria mos est) Tertiani salutavere**. vagus inde an consilio ducis subditus rumor advenisse Mucianum, exercitus in vicem salutasse. gradum inferunt quasi recentibus auxiliis aucti, rariore iam Vitellianorum acie, ut quos nullo rectore suus quemque impetus vel pavor contraheret duceretve.
>
> Everywhere there were shouts of acclamation, and **the men of the Third saluted the rising sun, as is customary in Syria**. As a result, there rose an uncertain rumour — unless it was fabricated according to the plan of the commander — that Mucianus had arrived, and that the forces had greeted one another in turn. The troops advance as if they had been reinforced by new forces, while the line of the Vitellians was now thinner, as is natural for men that were all — in the absence of a leader — being driven together or led away by impulse or fear.[46]

Thus, according to Tacitus and consistent with shifts in legionary demographics, *III Gallica* contained a significant element that was culturally Syrian.[47] Aside from this passage, we largely lack evidence for the *origines* of the *Tertiani* during our time period, but it should be noted that recruitment of legionaries from areas in contact with Safaitic-literate populations is quite well documented later. In the third century, for example, *III Cyrenaica* drew a significant number of troops from 'Semitic-speaking populations of Auranitis, Trachonitis, and the area around Bostra'.[48] Ancient Auranitis included the Ḥarrah, and inscriptions that suggest nomad contact with Bostra are also known.[49] Finally, in the light of Seyrig's study of heliolatry in Syria, the religious detail

[45] See Forni 1953: 65–6 and 1974; Mann 1983; Roselaar 2016: 139–43. For Syria, see Pollard 2000: 113–34.
[46] Tac., *Hist.* 3.24.3–25.1. The text of the *Histories* is from Wellesley's Teubner (1989).
[47] Wellesley 2000: 149; Morgan 2006: 175. Cf. Dio 64.14.3 = Xiph. 198.
[48] Mann 1983: 42.
[49] See Macdonald 1993: 309–10 with n. 39.

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mentioned in Tacitus' passage above should instill confidence in the historian's report.[50] In sum, the extant evidence seems compatible with the hypothesis that *Gallica* included local, Syrian recruits among its ranks as it marched into Italy in 69 — and these men could have included nomads from the Ḥarrah.[51]

The other possibility is that the authors of Pompeii's Safaitic were auxiliaries, who might have fought alongside *III Gallica*.[52] Though there was no standing policy of moving locally recruited *auxilia* over long distances, pressing security threats — in our case, conflict on the Danube, then civil war — could spur their relocation, and examples of long-distance redeployment of auxiliaries are indeed known from the civil war of 69.[53] Further, Tacitus himself mentions *auxilia* fighting with the *Tertiani*, though he does not specify a particular, named auxiliary unit.[54]

There is also considerable evidence for recruitment of auxiliaries within Syria that makes the nomads good candidates, so to speak, for serving in such units. As Kennedy has noted, 'with few exceptions the Syrian auxiliary regiments came from that section of the population which lived along the desert's edge and in the more isolated and difficult terrains of the Syrian desert itself and the lava country of the Hauran and Trachonitas'.[55] The evidence from within Syria's 'lava country' is even more suggestive. In 2014, Macdonald argued that a number of challenging terms in Safaitic inscriptions point to the incorporation of nomads within the Roman army, serving in a cavalry unit, for example, or patrolling near Roman outposts in the greater Ḥawrān.[56] Macdonald suggested no specific named *alae* or *cohortes*, and it should also be emphasised that the texts involved cannot be dated much better than within the first four or so centuries C.E. But he did suggest that such nomads might have been organised in some less formal 'ethnic unit' (*natio*, ἔθνος or *ms¹rt* in Safaitic) or perhaps even a *cohors equitata*.[57]

A number of Greek inscriptions from the region also relate to this question.[58] These texts mention, for example, a 'general of units of nomads' (στρατη[γ]ὸς παρε[μ]βολῶν [ν]ομάδω[ν]), and another names an 'ethnarch, general of nomads' (ἐθνάρχου, στρατηγοῦ νομάδων).[59] According to Macdonald, phrases like παρεμβολὴ νομάδων were most likely 'Roman administrative terms for military units raised from the nomads'.[60] Another text mentions a certain στρατηγός of the Αουιδηνῶν, identified by Sartre with the nomadic tribe ʿAwidh, which is well known from the Ḥarrah.[61]

[50] Seyrig 1971: e.g. 364–5. Tacitus' characterisation of heliolatry as a Syrian religious tradition has been challenged by Millar, but his objection is more against 'the notion that there was a "Syrian" culture', i.e. a unified, homogenous set of beliefs and practices: see Millar 1993: 74–5, 522 and 493. Cf. Tacoma and Tybout 2019: 60: 'Soldiers from the Near East became Syrian or Arabian when they served Rome'.

[51] Though it is sometimes said that legionary recruits from Syria in the early empire were largely from Hellenised or 'Romanised' urban areas (Kennedy 1980: 9; Pollard 2000: 116–17). Pollard indeed seems sceptical of Tacitus' testimony here due to lack of epigraphic confirmation, but the fact is that, for our period, only one inscription survives for *III Gallica* that may attest to a recruit's *origo* (*CIL* 12.2230; Mann 1983: 144). While Roselaar (2016: 141) estimates that 'for only 0.1% of all legionaries we have information about their geographical origin', for the *Tertiani* it seems to be much less even than that.

[52] On *auxilia* and legions, see (still) Cheesman 1914: 49–52; cf. Spaul 2000: 6; for recruitment, see Kennedy 1980; Haynes 2013: 103–34.

[53] See Haynes 2013: 121–2; Ivleva 2016: 161 with n. 17. For units involved in the civil war, see Spaul 1994: 262 and e.g. the case of *ala Siliana* in Spaul 1994: 200–3.

[54] Tac., *Hist.* 1.79.1. For *auxilia* in Syria, see Dąbrowa 1979 and catalogues in Spaul 1994 and Spaul 2000.

[55] Kennedy 1980: 270.

[56] Macdonald 2014.

[57] Macdonald 2014: 156–8, 160–1. Cf. *SEG* 64.1851, 61.1493, and 43.1088. For *cohors equitata*, see Holder 1980: 7. There is debate on the use of ἔθνος as a military term in these contexts: cf. *SEG* 45.2026 and 65.1791.

[58] See discussion in Macdonald 2014; Sartre 2015; cf. also Sartre 1982: 122–8.

[59] *PAES* IIIA, nr. 752, lines 1–5 = Dussaud and Macler 1901: 147, no. 7; Waddington 1870: no. 2196 = Graham 1859: 297 no. 27. Cf. *SEG* 65.1831.

[60] Macdonald 2014: 156–8; see further in Macdonald 1993: 368–77; 2009b: 9–11.

[61] Sartre 2015: 45–6.

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According to Sartre, the epigraphic evidence demonstrates 'sans aucun doute' that the Romans recruited nomads as 'troupes auxiliaires'.[62] Finally, a recently published assemblage of graffiti from the Ḥarrah has been said to provide 'the first concrete evidence for the activities of Roman auxiliary military units raised from the nomadic tribes of the *ḥarrah*'.[63] The texts (five Safaitic inscriptions and one Arabic-Greek bilingual) appear to reveal that a certain Ẓ ʿn son of Kḥ s¹mnʾ served in the military and, importantly, that one of his comrades was *gyṣ d̲ ʾl rm,* 'Gaius of the people of Rome'.[64]

While the evidence for nomad auxiliaries thus seems to be mounting, it is, admittedly, difficult to assess how securely this can be related to 69 and the *Tertiani* at Pompeii. Overall, the legionary option would be the simplest explanation, while, for *auxilia*, Macdonald's suggestions of a national *numerus* of nomads or some similar irregular equestrian unit, or perhaps a *cohors equitata*, are as close to definitive as the present evidence permits.[65] In the final analysis, there were multiple pathways for incorporating Rome's subjects into her army. One can hope that further clarity will be forthcoming from the black desert, given that — even 34,000 inscriptions later — 'the majority of the Ḥarrah remains unexplored'.[66]

IV CONCLUSION

The Roman imperial army had the ability to move people incredible distances.[67] Such movement also created opportunities for language contact, and the effects of this, I argue, remain visible today in Pompeii's theatre corridor.[68] Still, supposing that the 'third legion hypothesis' is accepted, there remains something quite unusual about Pompeii's Safaitic graffiti. The present hypothesis accounts for how Ṣhb and his comrades might have ended up in Pompeii — but it does not explain the motives that lay behind their commemorations. After all, why inscribe a text that would be inevitably incomprehensible (at least in antiquity) to passers-by? What might have spurred these men to leave their marks — and in their own tongue and script?

On the one hand, though occasional Arabic-Greek bilingual inscriptions have emerged from the Ḥarrah, the nomads in the army may have had quite uneven knowledge of Latin or Greek — to say nothing of their literacy in those languages.[69] But in terms of audience and intelligibility, Adams has suggested a path forward for interpreting cases like these, viz. purposefully inscribed texts in languages that, given their surroundings, would have been hopelessly unintelligible. Writing about a famous Palmyrene-Latin commemoration from South Shields, Adams reasons that, in the absence of a larger Palmyrene community nearby, the Palmyrene text cannot have been intended for any wider audience.[70] Rather, Adams suggests, the author's decision to leave behind the text in Palmyrene conveys his own 'ethnic pride'.[71]

[62] Sarte 2015: 47, but not all agree: see *SEG* 65.1791.
[63] Al-Jallad *et al.* 2020: 360.
[64] Translation from Al-Jallad *et al.* 2020: 357.
[65] For *numeri* serving as extra forces already in the early Empire, see Southern 1989: 86.
[66] Al-Jallad and Jaworska 2019: 20.
[67] See Roselaar 2016; Ivleva 2016; cf. Woolf 2016: 454–5. More generally on ancient mobility, see De Ligt and Tacoma 2016; Lo Cascio and Tacoma 2016; Yoo, Zerbini and Barron 2019.
[68] Adams 2003: 761. For mobility and language contact, see Clackson *et al.* 2020.
[69] Adams 2003: 20 n. 61; see Haynes 2013: 301–36 on Latin and Greek in the *auxilia*. For nomads learning Greek, see Al-Jallad and Al-Manaser 2015: 63. Cf. Al-Jallad and Al-Manaser 2016. For Graeco-Safaitica, see the catalogue in Al-Jallad 2020: 111–23. On nomad literacy in the Ḥarrah, see Macdonald 2018: 67–8.
[70] *RIB* 1065 in Adams 2003: 32–3.
[71] Adams 2003: 32.

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Pompeii's Safaitic could be interpreted in much the same way: these men were proud of their identities and their language. One also wonders whether there was an aspect of competition. Were the nomads inspired to leave their own marks after seeing their comrades scratch *Tertiani* into the plaster?[72] This too seems possible. If, however, we are ultimately only able to offer informed speculation about the private motives behind these texts, it remains remarkable that the inscriptions left behind by ʾnʿm and his messmates still survive at Pompeii at all — surely beyond their authors' own expectations. If nothing else, Pompeii's Safaitic graffiti commemorate a strikingly imperial moment: when nomads walked on the Bay of Naples.

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[72] Writing about dedications by different ethnic units within *cohors II Tungrorum equitata* at Birrens near Hadrian's Wall, Haynes 2013: 231 asks: 'Were some elements within the regiment inspired to assert their identity in this way after witnessing the group dedication of another contingent?' Cf. Ivleva 2016: 174–5.

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