



VERNAE AND PROSTITUTION AT POMPEII*

ABSTRACT

Vernae—often but not exclusively taken to be home-born slaves—are usually thought to have had a privileged role within the ancient Roman household. While previous studies have highlighted how these individuals were represented with affection or as surrogate members of the freeborn family, this article uses epigraphic evidence from Pompeii to argue that the reality for at least some vernae was much more grim. A full examination of Pompeian attestations of the word *verna* reveals that there was a connection to prostitution in over seventy per cent of extant appearances of the noun. Furthermore, contextualizing this phenomenon within the corpus of prostitution-related graffiti more broadly reveals that *verna* was the single most commonly used descriptor in advertisements for sexual services at Pompeii. Ultimately, the epigraphic evidence from Pompeii suggests that vernae were not safe from sexual exploitation, and it may have been their status as vernae that made them attractive to those wishing to purchase sex.

Keywords: epigraphy; exploitation; graffiti; Pompeii; prostitution; Rome; slaves; *vernae*

Recent epigraphic studies of *vernae* (a term that could refer to home-born slaves among other meanings; see more below) have argued that these individuals occupied a relatively privileged position in the Roman household. They were described in affectionate terms, could be treated as surrogate children or siblings for free members of the household, and were sometimes manumitted at a young age. Hanne Sigismund-Nielsen, for example, notes that young *vernae* are ‘frequently commemorated affectionately as “dear small children”’, as in the epitaph from Ostia in which Junia Eutychia marks the death of Aphrodite, her almost-two-year-old ‘sweetest *verna*’ (*vernae dulcissimae*, *CIL* 14.592).¹ As noted by Beryl Rawson and Sigismund-Nielsen, some epitaphs go further and present *vernae* as equivalent to freeborn children, as in the parallel funerary commemoration of Publicia Glypte’s son and her *verna* as togate children with scrolls (*CIL* 6.22972), or the epitaph that states that the *verna* Aulus Furius Crassus ‘was considered in place of a son’ (*loco filii hab(itus) es(t)*, *CIL* 6.18754 Add. p. 3915).² Moreover, the *tria nomina* of the latter *verna* implies that he had been manumitted (perhaps informally) much younger (in this case, by his death at 4 years, 6 months and 29 days old) than the legal threshold for manumission, a not infrequent practice that has been attributed to the *verna*’s ‘favored position in the household’.³

* I thank the anonymous reviewers for comments and suggestions.

¹ H. Sigismund-Nielsen, ‘Slave and lower-class Roman children’, in J.E. Grubbs and T. Parkin (edd.), *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World* (Oxford, 2013), 286–301, at 294.

² B. Rawson, ‘Degrees of freedom: *vernae* and Junian Latins in the Roman *familia*’, in V. Dasen and T. Späth (edd.), *Children, Memory, and Family Identity in Roman Culture* (Oxford, 2010), 195–221, at 198; Sigismund-Nielsen (n. 1), 294.

³ Sigismund-Nielsen (n. 1), 294; also Rawson (n. 2), 196, 203.

This article offers a less rosy view of those represented as *vernae*, building on the observation made by Jana Képartová, Elisabeth Herrmann-Otto, Michele George and Polly Lohmann that some Pompeian graffiti attest to the prostitution of *vernae*.⁴ In what follows, I first examine all epigraphic attestations of the word *verna* at Pompeii, highlighting how depictions of prostituted *vernae* were much more prevalent than other types of representations (such as funerary commemorations). I then contextualize these prostituted *vernae* within the milieu of Pompeian prostitution more broadly, ultimately suggesting that it was their identification as *vernae* that made these individuals marketable as providers of sex.

EPIGRAPHY OF *VERNAE* AT POMPEII

A search of the Epigraphic Database Claus-Slaby (EDCS) for variations of the word *verna* at Pompeii yields twenty-one occurrences. Seven of these attestations refer to individuals with the cognomen Verna, and will be described rather briefly. A certain Verna champions his preferred political candidate in a painted electoral advertisement from the Via dell'Abbondanza near its intersection with the forum: *Capellam · d(uo) · v(irum) · i(ure) · d(icendo) · o(ro) · v(os) · f(aciatis) · || Verna cum / discent(es) · faç[it]*, 'I ask that you make Capella duumvir for proclaiming the law. Verna makes this with his students' (*CIL* 4.694 Add. p. 461, p. 1247; exterior of VIII.3.2).⁵ In another case, a certain Lucius Aelius Verna is listed as a witness on a heavily damaged wax tablet from Caecilius Jucundus' archive of auction receipts (*CIL* 4.3340.79 [= t. 79]).⁶ One graffito, from the exterior of the basilica along the Via Marina, just has the cognomen Verna listed twice, one above the other (*CIL* 4.3076 Add. p. 1783; VII.1.2),⁷ while in a graffito from near the entrance of the house of Pinarius Cerialis, a certain Verna is greeted (*Vern(a) va(le)*, 'hey Verna!', *CIL* 4.8846; III.4.b).⁸ The cognomen also appears in a list of three different men—*Nauplius / Onesim>us / Verna* (*CIL* 4.5175)—on the exterior of IX.6.5,⁹ and *CIL* 4.1334 Add. p. 1647, from an unknown location along the

⁴ J. Képartová, 'Kinder in Pompeji: eine epigraphische Untersuchung', *Klio* 66 (1984), 192–209, at 196; E. Herrmann-Otto, *Ex ancilla natus: Untersuchungen zu den 'hausgeborenen' Sklaven und Sklavinnen im Westen des römischen Kaiserreiches* (Stuttgart, 1994), 344; M. George, 'The lives of slaves', in J.J. Dobbins and P.W. Foss (edd.), *The World of Pompeii* (London, 2007), 538–49, at 539; P. Lohmann, *Graffiti als Interaktionsform: Geritzte Inschriften in den Wohnhäusern Pompejis* (Berlin, 2018), 349.

⁵ For the location of the advertisement and the use of *cum* with the accusative, see V. Weber at Add. p. 1247; the phrase *cum discent* is attested in other *programmata*, such as *CIL* 4.275. The candidate is likely to be Lucius Caecilius Capella, who ran for office in the Flavian era; see P. Castrén, *Ordo populusque pompeianus: Polity and Society in Roman Pompeii* (Rome, 1975), 145; Weber at Add. p. 1247. For Verna as a cognomen here, see Képartová (n. 4), 196.

⁶ *Q(uinti) Coeli [–] / L(uci) [–] / M(arci) · Holconi · Proçul(i) / L(uci) · Magulni · Dona[ti] / [–] Çaeli Primog[enis] / P(ubli) Mulvi Frontoni[s] / L(uci) Ae[li] Verna[e]*. There may have been one additional line after this that is not preserved (according to the *CIL*). At least five Lucii Aelii are known from Pompeii, according to Castrén (n. 5), 130–1.

⁷ For Verna as a cognomen here, see Képartová (n. 4), 196. Solin (at Add. p. 1783) suggests it might also read *Verna verna*, that is, 'Verna [i.e. the cognomen] the *verna*'.

⁸ The *CIL* notes a portrait of a youth facing left adjoining the greeting; see also M. Della Corte, 'Scavi sulla via dell'Abbondanza. (Epigrafi inedite)', *NSA* 6 (1927), 89–116, at 106; perhaps the inscribed portrait depicts Verna (see, however, R.R. Benefiel, 'Dialogues of ancient graffiti in the house of Maius Castricius in Pompeii', *AJA* 114 [2010], 59–101, at 77 on the difficulty in connecting names in graffiti to inscribed drawings of faces).

⁹ For Verna as a cognomen here, see Képartová (n. 4), 196.

east side of the Via di Mercurio,¹⁰ records a certain *Verna Vernionis*, ‘Verna [the son of] Vernio’.¹¹ Finally, one graffito from the south side of insula IX.6 seems to offer sexual services from Verna: *Verna aeris · I*, ‘Verna for 1[?] coins’ (*CIL* 4.5206 Add. p. 1874).¹²

In the remaining fourteen occurrences, *verna* appears as a noun. Antonio Varone and Lohmann take *verna* in Pompeian graffiti to indicate a home-born slave and I am inclined to agree, although we cannot rule out other possible meanings of the term, including native (freeborn) inhabitant (Lewis and Short s.v. *verna* IIa).¹³ Indeed, Rawson has shown that *verna* was used in unexpected ways in the epigraphic material, as in some funerary epitaphs from Rome where a freed *verna* is commemorated as *verna suus*, ‘their own *verna*’, by an individual who cannot have been the formal manumitter (that is, the *verna* bears a different *nomen* than the commemorator). One explanation for this (albeit rare) phenomenon is that *verna* denotes some sort of affective connection rather than legal ownership.¹⁴ I refrain, therefore, from translating *verna* in the examples below.

The noun appears once in a funerary epitaph from the *fondo Santilli* beyond the Porta Stabia, referring to a *verna* of a family otherwise unknown at Pompeii: *Fortunatus / Pisulliae · vern(a) · / vix(it) · ann(os) · IIII*, ‘Fortunatus, *verna* of Pisullia, lived four years’ (*NSA* 1897 276.7).¹⁵ A *verna* named Severus is hailed in a graffito from the peristyle of the House of the Painters at Work (*Severus verna val(e)*, ‘hey *verna* Severus!’ *AE* 2000, 328; IX.12.19),¹⁶ while a graffito in the rear peristyle of the House of the Faun mentions a *verna* of Papius; according to Heikki Solin (at Add. p. 1664), the name of the *verna* was probably written in the poorly preserved second line (*Papi virna / ...*, ‘... , *verna* of Papius’, *CIL* 4.1480 Add. p. 207, p. 1664; VI.12). In a

¹⁰ This would be the west side of insula VI.9 or VI.10.

¹¹ For this reading—that is, taking Verna as a cognomen and supplying *filius*—see Solin at Add. p. 1647. The name Secundus was written twice below and to the right with smaller letters; while it is included under the same *CIL* number, it was most likely written by a different person than whoever wrote the first line (see further *CIL* ad loc. plus Solin at Add. p. 1647; cf. A. Varone, ‘Organizzazione e sfruttamento della prostituzione servile: l’esempio del lupanare di Pompei’, in A. Buonopane and F. Cenerini [edd.], *Donna e lavoro nella documentazione epigrafica* [Faenza, 2003], 193–215, at 209, who takes it as one graffito indicating that Secundus was a *verna*).

¹² A. Varone, *Erotica pompeiana: Love Inscriptions of the Walls of Pompeii*, transl. Ria Berg (Rome, 2002), 144 n. 243 and Solin at Add. p. 1874 list the location as IX.6.a–b. The mark indicating the price is not clear. For the use of the cognomen here, see Solin at Add. p. 1874. Herrmann-Otto (n. 4), 345 n. 9 reads *CIL* 4.5205 and 5206 together, taking the name Rufinus from 5205 and identifying him as the *verna* in 5206 (as also A. Mau, ‘Scavi di Pompei’, *Bullettino dell’Istituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica* [1881], 22–32, at 32; Mau clearly wanted *CIL* 4.5206 to use the same format seen in *CIL* 4.5203 and 5204); however, the original publication of these graffiti in 1879 (i.e. Sogliano’s report quoted in G. Fiorelli, ‘Gennaio’, *NSA* [1879], 3–28, at 21) and the entry by Mau in *CIL* in 1909 seem to confirm that the two graffiti are to be read separately. *CIL* 4.5205 may also include an abbreviated greeting (*s<a>!(utem)*) after the name that would complicate reading this graffito together with 5206.

¹³ Varone (n. 12), *passim*; Lohmann (n. 4), 333 and *passim*. For scholars who equivocate about whether the noun *verna* in Pompeian examples means ‘home-born slave’ or ‘native (freeborn) inhabitant’, see S. Treggiari, ‘Lower-class women in the Roman economy’, *Florilegium* 1 (1979), 65–86, at 84 n. 36 (who adds ‘in this context the two [definitions] would come to the same thing’); Herrmann-Otto (n. 4), 345; T.A.J. McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World: A Study of Social History and the Brothel* (Ann Arbor, 2004), 29.

¹⁴ Rawson (n. 2), 201–18.

¹⁵ For the *nomen gentilicium*, see Castrén (n. 5), 204; H. Solin and O. Salomies, *Repertorium nominum gentilium et cognominum Latinorum* (Hildesheim, 1988), 144.

¹⁶ See also A. Varone, ‘Inscrizioni parietarie inedite da Pompei (*REG. IX, INS. 12*)’, in G. Paci (ed.), *ΕΠΙΓΡΑΦΑΙ: Miscellanea epigrafica in onore di Lidio Gasperini* (Rome, 2000), 1071–93, at §66.

fragmentary graffito from the peristyle of the House of M. Vesonius Primus (*CIL* 4.4512 Add. p. 1837; VI.14.20), Hermas the *verna* is listed along with several other individuals:

Felicitas) · Primi
 Heros · Pagiao [*sic*]
 Hermas · *verna*
 ...¹⁷

These other individuals probably were enslaved; line 1 records ‘Felicitas [slave] of Primus’—probably M. Vesonius Primus, according to the *CIL*—and line 2, according to Solin, probably records ‘Heros [slave] of Paccia’.¹⁸

The remaining ten occurrences link *vernae* to sexual activity or the sale of sex, either implicitly or (more often) explicitly. One example, from the rear room of taverna I.3.1, contains a list of names and prices, including ‘Chresimus, *verna*, for 4 *asses*’ (*CIL* 4.3964 Add. p. 1795):

Communis a(sses) III¹⁹
 Successus a(sses) III
 Nicep(h)or sex²⁰
 Amunus a(sses) IV
 C(h)resimūṣ v[e]r[n]a a(sses) IV²¹

Two other graffiti were written just next to or just inside the entrance of house V.I.15 along the Via del Vesuvio: *Felicia virna a(ssibus) II*, ‘Felicia, *verna*, for 2 *asses*’ (*CIL* 4.4023 Add. p. 1799) and *Successa verna V / bellis moribus / ...*, ‘Successa, *verna* with charming ways, for 5 [*asses*]’ (*CIL* 4.4025 Add. p. 1799).²² The latter was accompanied by imagery including a palm branch, activating the well-known association between sexual activity and victory, and we find Successa’s name repeated directly below in another graffito (*CIL* 4.4026 Add. p. 1799).²³

The entryway of the House of the Vettii (VI.15.1) attracted two more examples. One reads *Eutyichis / vern<a> a(ssibus) II / moribus bellis*, ‘Eutyichis, *verna* with charming

¹⁷ The graffito continues for another four short lines, of which only line 5 (*Primogenes*) is understandable; see further at Add. p. 1837.

¹⁸ Solin at Add. p. 1837. Could *pagiao*, alternatively, be a misspelling of Greek πῦγαιος, referring to someone who likes to be anally penetrated? Either for that reason, or because the original transcription of line 2 in *CIL* reads *II Eros* (seeming to indicate a price of two *asses* for Eros’ services), Herrmann-Otto (n. 4), 345 n. 9 classifies Hermas the *verna* as a male prostitute.

¹⁹ For the name, see Solin at Add. p. 1795.

²⁰ The reading of the price is not clear; see further the *CIL*.

²¹ The reading of the last line is my own. The *CIL* records *Cresi mu vern[a](?) A IV*, which is often restored as *C(h)resi Mu(la) verna* (see EDCS, for example). However, the name *C(h)resim(us)* most likely appears on the very same wall in *CIL* 4.3965 Add. p. 1795, and Chresimus is a cognomen with at least four attestations at Pompeii (plus a fifth whose reading is uncertain; see *CIL* p. 748). Herrmann-Otto (n. 4), 345 n. 9 similarly takes the *verna* as Cresimus.

²² On the third line, centred between a drawing of a crown and a palm branch, were the letters *A P* (see *CIL* and Add. p. 1799).

²³ For the metaphor of sexual activity as military conquest, see D. Fredrick, ‘Reading broken skin: violence in Roman elegy’, in J. Hallett and M. Skinner (edd.), *Roman Sexualities* (Princeton, 1997), 172–93, at 179–90; R.O.A.M. Lyne, ‘The life of love’, in P.A. Miller (ed.), *Latin Erotic Elegy* (London, 2002), 348–65, at 353–9. A third graffito on this wall offered sexual services on similar terms, but not from a *verna*, as far as we know: *Menander | bellis moribus | aeris ass(ibus) II*, ‘Menander with charming ways for two bronze *asses*’ (*CIL* 4.4024 Add. p. 1799); a graffito recording *Men* appears on the other side of the entranceway (*CIL* 4.4022 Add. p. 1799) and may refer to this same individual (as Solin at Add. p. 1799 likewise thinks).

ways, for 2 *asses*' (*CIL* 4.4592 Add. p. 1841).²⁴ At some point, someone carefully altered the word *verna* to *Graeca*, changing the meaning of the graffito to 'Eutycthis the *Greek* with charming ways, for two *asses*'. The other offers a *verna*—perhaps Eutycthis, with her name spelled differently—for two *asses*: *Eutictis verna a(ssibus) II* (*CIL* 4.4593 Add. p. 1841).²⁵

Another two graffiti appear on the south side of insula IX.6.²⁶ There is *Logas / verna / (a)eris VIII*, 'Logas the *verna* for 8 bronze coins' (*CIL* 4.5203 Add. p. 1874) and a *verna*, whose name is not extant, for 5 coins (... / *verna aeris V*, *CIL* 4.5204 Add. p. 1874).²⁷ Other sexual graffiti include *Optata / verna a(ssibus) II*, 'Optata the *verna* for two *asses*' (*CIL* 4.5105 Add. p. 1871) from the exterior of IX.5.16,²⁸ and *Euclie / [[[ve]]]/rna / [[[aeris]]] a(ssibus) II*, 'Euclie the *verna* for 2 *asses*' (*CIL* 4.5345 Add. pp. 1881–2), from the exterior of IX.7.12.²⁹ Finally, one statement was written on the back side of the House of the Vettii, along the Vicolo del Labirinto. It reads *Isidorus / verna Putiolanus / cunnuliggeter / geter*, 'Isidorus, the Puteolean *verna*, lickingly ingly cunt' (*CIL* 4.4699 Add. pp. 1844–5). Isidorus' name appears in isolation elsewhere on the same stretch of wall, closer to the southern corner of the insula (*CIL* 4.4700 Add. p. 1845).

The prose of these attestations is spare, making the fact that so many of them mention sexual activity and/or prices striking. In total, seventy-one per cent (10/14) of Pompeian attestations of the noun *verna* suggest that these individuals sold sex. I turn now to advertisements of sexual services, seeking to assess the terms with which individuals offered sexual services and the role of *vernae* within this larger milieu of Pompeian prostitution.

EPIGRAPHY OF PROSTITUTION AT POMPEII

Pier Guzzo and Vincenzo Scarano Ussani have compiled a list of forty-seven Pompeian graffiti that offer a named individual or sexual act for a specific price.³⁰ Since many of the graffiti that constitute their data set are poorly written or poorly preserved, alternative readings are possible that affect a final count of this type of graffiti, and where available I use the updated readings by Solin in *CIL* 4 Supplement 4.2. I subtract five graffiti from Guzzo and Scarano Ussani's catalogue that do not seem to mention a price,³¹ and add

²⁴ Solin (at Add. p. 1841) suggests that the end of the second line might be *aer(is) II*; this would not affect the interpretation of the graffito offered here.

²⁵ For this reading of the name, see Solin at Add. p. 1841. This graffito is listed under the category of *verna meretrix* by Herrmann-Otto (n. 4), 344 n. 9, but with unknown price; perhaps this is because the two lines indicating a cost of two *asses* might have been written by someone else, as Mau (see *CIL* ad loc.) suggests.

²⁶ Varone (n. 12), 144 n. 243 and Solin Add. p. 1874 list the location as IX.6.a–b.

²⁷ The first line of *CIL* 4.5204 has six or seven letters, most of which are indecipherable (see further the *CIL*).

²⁸ For the location, see Varone (n. 12), 144 n. 243 and Solin at Add. p. 1871.

²⁹ The beginning of lines 2 and 3 were erased in antiquity. Mau (*CIL* ad loc.) restores the second line as *verna*, which others, including Herrmann-Otto (n. 4), 344 n. 9, follow. Euclie's name appears again on the same wall (*CIL* 4.5346 Add. p. 1882). For the location, see Solin at Add. p. 1881.

³⁰ P.G. Guzzo and V. Scarano Ussani, *Ex corpore lucrum facere: La prostituzione nell'antica Pompei* (Rome, 2009), 121–2 (tabellae 1 and 2); cf. the catalogue in McGinn (n. 13), 42, which includes prices in Pompeian graffiti and as represented in literature.

³¹ *CIL* 4.4523 (see Solin at Add. p. 1838 for two possible readings, neither of which includes a price); 4699 Add. pp. 1844–5 (on which, see above); 5048 Add. p. 1868 (see Solin's reading of

two from the purpose-built brothel (VII.12.18–19) that Guzzo and Scarano Ussani list as ‘casi incerti’³² as well as one additional graffito from the above analysis of *vernae* (CIL 4.4025 Add. p. 1799)³³ for a total of forty-five examples examined in this section.³⁴ While most of these graffiti are taken as straightforward advertisements for sexual services, a few—especially those with male names offering cunnilingus—could alternatively (or additionally) be understood as defamatory in intent.³⁵

As with the epigraphy of *vernae* discussed in the previous section, the epigraphy of prostitution is fairly laconic, with many texts including only a name and a price. It is especially interesting and informative, then, when graffiti do include additional information. Most common (eleven examples) is specification of the type of sexual act (usually oral sex).³⁶ The next most common descriptor identifies the individual selling sex as a *verna* (nine examples).³⁷ Finally, five examples describe the individual with the phrase *bellis moribus*, ‘with charming ways’ or ‘with good manners’.³⁸ If each type of sexual act in the first category is tallied and considered separately—five offers of fellatio, three for

the first line at Add. p. 1868); 5061 Add. p. 1868 (Solin at Add. p. 1868 reads the final line as *Veneriae* rather than *Veneria [assibus] II*); 8225 (a fragment of tile from the House of the Four Styles [I.8.17] with a fragmentary set of numbers but no sexual acts, names, or any other information).

³² CIL 4.2228 Add. p. 1744 (*A · V* at the end of the graffito probably does indicate *a(ssibus) V*); CIL 4.2279 Add. p. 216, p. 1751 (for the difficulty in reading the word[s] before the price, see Guzzo and Scarano Ussani [n. 30], 122 and Solin at Add. p. 1751). At present, I do not include CIL 4.2189 Add. p. 1738 from the brothel (*Helpis B*), although it is possible that the Greek beta after the name indicates a price of two *asses* (see S. Levin-Richardson, *The Brothel of Pompeii: Sex, Class, and Gender at the Margins of Roman Society* [Cambridge, 2019], 206 n. 44; cf. Solin’s hesitation at Add. p. 1738), nor CIL 4.2289 Add. p. 1753 (*Cor Is* [?]), which may indicate a price of 1.5 *asses* if the final letter is in fact an *s* (as Levin-Richardson [this note], 161 has it; see also Guzzo and Scarano Ussani [n. 30], 122), and not a *c* as Solin (at Add. p. 1753) prefers to read it.

³³ The price in this graffito is indicated with a partially written (or partially preserved) *V* at the end of the first line (see e.g. Varone [n. 12], 144 n. 243), which may not have been noticed by Guzzo and Scarano Ussani.

³⁴ CIL 4.1307 Add. p. 1644; 1751 Add. p. 211, p. 464, p. 1686; 1784 Add. p. 1689 (note that the end of the graffito, which Guzzo and Scarano Ussani [n. 30], 121 interpret as a price of 11 *asses*, is not very clear, however); 1969 Add. p. 1720; 2193 Add. p. 1739; 2228 Add. p. 1744; 2279 Add. p. 216, p. 1751; 2450 Add. p. 1772; 3964 Add. p. 1795; 3999 Add. pp. 1796–7; 4023 Add. p. 1799; 4024 Add. p. 1799; 4025 Add. p. 1799; 4150 Add. p. 1808; 4259 Add. p. 705, pp. 1819–20; 4277 Add. p. 1821; 4439 Add. p. 705, p. 1832; 4441 Add. p. 1832; 4592 Add. p. 1841; 4593 Add. p. 1841; 5105 Add. p. 1871; 5127 Add. p. 1872; 5203 Add. p. 1874; 5204 Add. p. 1874; 5206 Add. p. 1874; 5338a Add. p. 1881; 5345 Add. p. 1882; 5372 Add. p. 1883 (the price might be one or two *asses*, depending on the reading; see further Solin at Add. p. 1883); 5408 Add. pp. 1887–8; 7068 Add. p. 1909; 7339; 7764; 8034; 8160; 8185; 8224; 8454; 8465a; 8483; 8511; 8812; 8939; 8940; 10078; Varone (n. 16), no. 40.

³⁵ Graffiti often play with personas and voices, making their relationship to truth or transparency especially complicated; see further C. Williams, ‘Sexual themes in Greek and Latin graffiti’, in T.L. Hubbard (ed.), *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities* (Malden, MA, 2014), 493–508, *passim*. For some of these graffiti as possible defamation, see e.g. McGinn (n. 13), 43–4.

³⁶ Fellatio (n=5): CIL 4.1784, Add. p. 1689; 1969 Add. p. 1720; 5408 Add. pp. 1887–8; 8160; 8185; cunnilingus (n=3): CIL 4.3999 Add. pp. 1796–7; 8939; 8940; other (n=3): CIL 4.1751 Add. p. 211, p. 464, p. 1644 (*future*); CIL 4.2193 Add. p. 1739 (*future*); CIL 4.8483 (*mentula*); one might add CIL 4.10078 (*cinaede*).

³⁷ CIL 4.3964 Add. p. 1795; 4023 Add. p. 1799; 4025 Add. p. 1799; 4592 Add. p. 1841; 4593 Add. p. 1841; 5105 Add. p. 1871; 5203 Add. p. 1874; 5204 Add. p. 1874; 5345 Add. p. 1882.

³⁸ CIL 4.4024 Add. p. 1799; 4025 Add. p. 1799; 4592 Add. p. 1841; 5127 Add. p. 1972; Varone (n. 16), no. 40. For the translation of this phrase as ‘with charming ways’, see Williams (n. 35), 497, and for the use of this phrase at Pompeii, see R. Berg, ‘Introduction: unveiling Roman courtesans’, in R. Berg and R. Neudecker (edd.), *The Roman Courtesan: Archaeological Reflections of a Literary Topos* (Rome, 2018), 43–63.

cunnilingus, three for other sexual acts—designation as a *verna* becomes the single most common attribute in our data set with nine attestations.

CONCLUSION

When *verna* is used as a noun in Pompeian epigraphy, a clear majority of extant occurrences (10/14 or 71%) connect those so identified with a sexual act or price. *Verna* is also the most common descriptor in prostitution-related graffiti at Pompeii. It seems likely that the inclusion of the term *verna* was a way to attract attention from potential clients, and to differentiate these sex workers from those who were not *vernae*.³⁹

However we might understand or translate the term *verna* in the examples above, we are left with a stark image of *vernae* being sexually exploited—a scenario also present in some literary representations—for profit.⁴⁰ Indeed, it seems to have been their identification as *vernae* that made these individuals marketable as purveyors of sex.⁴¹ Ultimately, the Pompeian evidence adds nuance to the current scholarly understanding of *vernae* as occupying a privileged position in the Roman household (as discussed at the beginning of this article). Alongside slaveholders' representation of their affection for, and family-like treatment of, *vernae*, the majority of Pompeian graffiti highlight how *vernae*, like so many low-status and enslaved individuals, were vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

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³⁹ See also Kepratová (n. 4), 196, who comments that the inclusion of the term *verna* must have been beneficial or else it would not have been included. Cf. Berg (n. 38), 56 on the role of *bellis moribus* in Pompeii's prostitution graffiti: 'Manners, then, may clearly distinguish the more exclusive courtesan from the streetwalker ...'.

⁴⁰ e.g. Hor. *Sat.* 1.2.114–19.

⁴¹ George (n. 4), 547 n. 4 suggests that '[t]he use of "*verna*" in advertisements indicates that some customers valued the sheltered background of the house-born slave over the unknown origins of foreign-born prostitutes.'