

Cultic Graffiti in the Basilica of Saint Felix, Cimitile

In recent years, ancient graffiti has received greater attention as a tool to reconstruct linguistics, spatial relations, and topics important to the masses. Graffiti can be understood as an individual contribution to a larger epigraphic and social landscape (Felle and Ward-Perkins, 2021). Graffiti, in its own way, is an example of religious expression, and in its physical context, graffiti can also be an indication of a visitor's relationship to the religious environment of that space.

In the summer of 2022, I undertook research of the pilgrim graffiti left upon the walls of Basilica of Saint Felix at the *Complesso Basiliche Paleocristiane* in Cimitile, Italy. Cimitile's toponym reflects the land's ancient purpose; it served as Nola's cemetery, as it was Roman custom to bury their dead outside of their city walls. Nola's cemetery would hold some important tombs starting in the second century. Namely, Cimitile was the resting place of saints Felix and Paulinus. This complex acts as a resting place, a major center of pilgrimage, and an outpost of the Christian faith in a polytheistic-dominated area during a period of major religious transition.

Following Paulinus's arrival and championship of Saint Felix, he set out to renovate the exterior of Felix's grave and to build a grand complex in his honor that could serve as an outpost of Christianity in the region. According to Dennis Trout, "the countryside was seen by bishops and town dwellers as the final preserve of paganism" in the end of the fourth century, and the Campania was, fittingly, a rich, large, and agricultural region (Trout, 1999). The Basilica Vetus and Basilica Nova at Cimitile, one transformed and the other built entirely under Paulinus's direction, included *cellae* (sleeping quarters) for monks and pilgrims, an expansion of the areas reserved for prayer, and frescoes depicting the important moments of the Old and New

Testament (Kiely, 2004). As a center of outreach in Campania, Paulinus enticed pagan people to visit and experience Christianity in the basilica while encouraging Christians to interact with their faith, increase their understanding, and introduce them to ascetic life (Jefferson and Jensen, 2015). It is in this context that the epigraphic culture of the Basilica of Saint Felix becomes clearer and significant.

The Basilica of Saint Felix was built during the fourth century, and over the course of nearly sixteen hundred years, most of the plaster that hung on its walls has fallen off or become heavily degraded (Brandenburg and Ermini Pani, 2003). As of 2022, there is only one, small area of the basilica that has its original, unrestored plaster. This section is close to the doorway of the basilica, presumably a high-traffic area within the building. This wall near the threshold is less than fifteen feet or five meters from the tombs of both Felix and Paulinus. The graffiti left at the Basilica offer a unique look into the pilgrims' experiences and interactions with the physical space. In this basilica, there are eight hand-written wall inscriptions of graffiti left out of one hundred thirty-four inscriptions found at the site. This small sample size allows for a generous treatment and investigation for the graffiti and their individual significance in the context of this basilica. Some of the graffiti feature prayers to Felix and names of the visitors.

The graffiti found at Cimitile can deepen our understanding of literacy, agency, and socioeconomic status of pilgrims to this fourth century Southern Italian sanctuary, and how this basilica is an example of the way Roman religious and social practices were intentionally reapplied in an early Christian context.

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