

Grace Gibson
Summer 2016

For several weeks in May and June, I participated in the 2016 field season of the Herculaneum Graffiti Project in the ruins of Herculaneum. Working with a group of about twenty Classics professors and students from Millsaps College, the University of Richmond, Washington and Lee University, and Sewanee: The University of the South, I helped locate, measure, document, and digitize some of the hundreds of ancient graffiti in the city. As a 21-year-old full-time student who attends Sewanee on a full scholarship, I would not have been able to travel to Italy or participate in this field season without the generous support of the American Friends of Herculaneum.

Each day in Herculaneum began on site in the hot Campanian sun, as my group located graffiti previously recorded in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*—a collection of all known Latin inscriptions—as well as some graffiti included in the works of scholars such as Antonio Varone and Martin Langner. After we had located these previously-published graffiti, we noted the condition of each graffito, measured the dimensions of each line in the graffito including the widths and heights of each letter, wrote detailed information on how to find the graffito in the future, took multiple photographs of each graffito using varying levels of raking light, and created drawings of the graffiti. In some cases, we also used Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI)—a computational photography technique—to capture particularly faint graffiti often on difficult surfaces, such as rounded columns. In the afternoons and evenings, we brainstormed ways to make the Ancient Graffiti Project's online search engine of the graffiti more helpful, mostly by identifying tags and categories for each graffito--e.g. a graffito of a gladiator helmet might be tagged as "gladiator" so that students and scholars researching the topic can sort through the material more easily. We also had the opportunity to hear lectures from the HGP leadership team as well as some visiting scholars, Dr. Claire Holleran (U. of Exeter), Amy Coker (U. of Reading), and Hilary Becker (U. of Mississippi). Some of the most interesting topics to me were pigment, papyrology, and flaws in our identification system for ancient buildings—for example, what if Roman *tabernae* do not fit our contemporary concept of shops?

Although graffiti are easy to overlook and even easier to disregard as unimportant, they can provide valuable information about the lives of those who inhabited the ancient city. Graffiti on one of the columns in the *Augustalium*, for example, could shed light on what the controversial building was actually used for. Graffiti are also some of the only traces left of the lives of children, slaves, and women, whose words are recorded not in the canons of Latin literature but scratched onto deteriorating walls.

Aside from igniting my interest in epigraphy, this field season allowed me to work closely with professionals in the field who all offered me valuable advice about my hopes and dreams of becoming a classicist in academia. I also seized upon the

opportunity to practice my Italian and improve my proficiency in the language while seeing how contemporary Italians relate to their historic landscape. Additionally, my time in Herculaneum exposed me to the emerging field of digital archaeology, which will likely play a large role in the discoveries of my generation. As I continue researching and logging Herculaneum's graffiti in an independent study with my mentor, Dr. Jacqueline DiBiasie, this fall, I will strive to carry out the American Friends of Herculaneum's mission to conserve and promote Herculaneum's treasures—even the tiny, scratched ones.