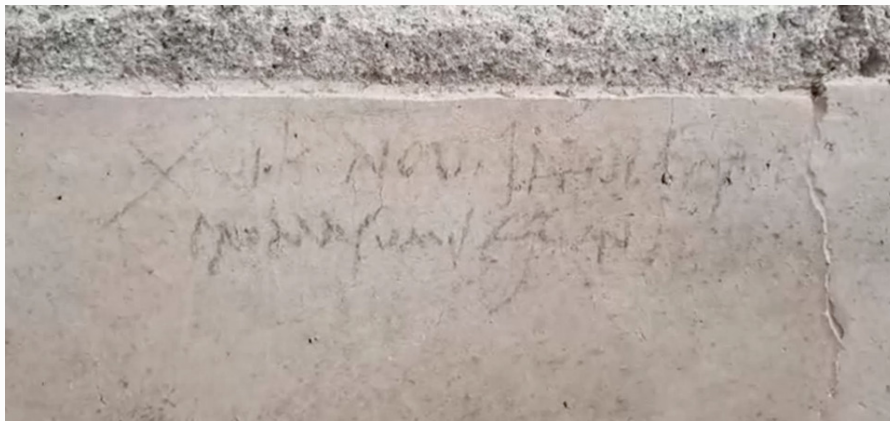


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# New Pompeii Graffiti May Rewrite History In A Major Way



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New graffito from Pompeii PARCO ARCHEOLOGICO DI POMPEI

Excavations ongoing at the archaeological site of Pompeii outside Naples, Italy, have revealed new graffiti that could put an end to scholars' debate about the exact historical date of the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius that destroyed the city in 79 AD.

The recording of Vesuvius's destruction by the Roman author Pliny the Younger happened 25 years after the fateful event, in response to a request by the historian Tacitus for information about the death of Pliny the Elder, his uncle. In one letter, Pliny the Younger wrote that the date of the eruption was *nonum kal. Septembres* which, in Latin dating convention, means nine days prior to September 1 -- or August 24.

That late summer date had long been accepted as conventional by historians, archaeologists, and philologists, until research into botanical remains and clothing began. The presence of fresh pomegranates and walnuts at Pompeii suggests an autumn date, as does wine made from grapes that likely would not have been harvested until September. Additionally, some experts say the warm clothing evident in the famous casts of the volcano's human victims also more closely matches autumnal garb.

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Today's announcement from the [Parco Archeologico di Pompei](#) of a line of graffiti from Pompeii may finally put an end to the August vs. October debate. Written in charcoal on the wall of a room in the Regio V area of the city that is actively being excavated, it reads: XVI K Nov, which means the 16th day before the kalends (first) of November, or October 17.

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The new graffito does not have a year listed; however, the nature of the writing suggests it was done just before the eruption of Vesuvius. It was found in an area of a house that was in the process of being renovated, likely just before the volcano erupted. But it is also done in charcoal, which is fragile and unlikely to have been preserved for years prior to the utter destruction of Pompeii. Of course, it is not known whether the Oct 17 graffito referred to that day, or a day in the past or the future.

On his [Instagram](#) this afternoon, Prof. Massimo Osanna, director of the Parco Archeologico di Pompeii, posted the full inscription:

XVI (ante) K(alends) Nov(embres) in[d]ulsit pro masumis esurit[ioni].

Il 17 ottobre lui indulse al cibo in modo smodato.

On October 17, he over-indulged in food. [My English translation from the Italian/Latin.]

This new archaeological evidence of a piece of daily life much later than the canonical August 24 date may finally lead scholars of ancient Rome to change the history books. It also means that next Wednesday would be the 1,939th anniversary of the destruction of Pompeii, Herculaneum, and the outlying villas in the Bay of Naples.

*Read More:* [Mt. Vesuvius Eruption Exploded Skulls and Vaporized Bodies](#)

Update (12:04 pm) -- Since posting this, I have been asked about my professional opinion on the importance of the date debate. Many scholars don't see the two-month difference in dates as terribly important in the two millennia scheme of things, but as a bioarchaeologist, I do. Here's why: these Bay of Naples sites - Pompeii, Herculaneum, Oplontis - are catastrophic mortality sites rather than true cemeteries. As such, they're incredibly important for understanding both demography and disease ecology in the early Roman Empire. Currently, those discussions are largely structured by historians using tombstone data. But [my work at Oplontis](#) over the last two years has shown that the age-at-death distribution is exactly like a living population and very different from the cemetery populations [I've studied in Rome](#). My current work at Oplontis also involves pathogen DNA analysis of skeletons to find out the pathogen load of the population, in order to contribute to a discussion of disease ecology, pathogen evolution, and mortality. Since many diseases are seasonal, or at least peak in certain seasons (like the current flu season), a difference of two months -- from late summer to early fall -- is

incredibly important to researchers like me who deal with the analysis of organic remains. This new graffito may not rewrite history, but I am more convinced than ever that an early fall date for the eruption is the one I should use when formulating hypotheses about and interpreting data from the human skeletal remains.

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As a bioarchaeologist, I routinely pore over the skeletons of ancient populations so that I can learn about their health, diet, and lifestyles.

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