

GRAFFITI CONFERENCE

Scribbling through history: A comparative study of graffiti from Ancient Egypt onwards

September 2013, University of Oxford

In Ancient Egypt, as in many societies, people left countless graffiti on natural sites and public monuments. Graffiti can be hammered, scratched, incised or ink drawn; they can be monumental or hasty; they can glorify a ruling king or display a pornographic message. In spite of this variety, they can be defined as secondary inscriptions, which are not part of the primary state/function of their environment. Varying from crude drawings to stele-shaped funerary texts, they constitute an under-studied field of expression bearing witness to key aspects of human experience. They mark a position in time and history, a relation to space and a territorial claim; they are material displays of individual identity and social interactions.

This conference aims to explore the early forms of graffiti from Ancient Egypt onwards within a comparative framework. The graffiti from a specific site are often published as part of a monograph on this site or considered independently in relation to punctual prosopographic, onomastic or chronological questions, but they have rarely been considered in a holistic manner as a specific cultural practice. This conference specifically aims to define tools that address graffiti as cultural and anthropological objects.

We shall invite scholars to consider the genre of graffiti through case studies from their areas of expertise. It is hoped that it will be possible to establish a typology of graffiti, depending on their genres, styles, media and content. The following core-questions should be considered.

➤ **Self-fashioning and group identity**

Self-fashioning is a key concept that describes how individuals relate to their social environment, or how they fashion a distinctive experience of the world they inherit as their past and geography. As secondary inscriptions, graffiti are a display of this individual experience in a monumental context.

The wide dissemination of 'wall-writing' through history witnessed to a broad human need. In that sense, the expedition scribe of Ancient Egypt who left a prayer to his own benefit on a desert road and the modern user of Facebook have a lot in common. They share the same need for fashioning their social identity and for public perpetuation of self and memory. This constitutes a profoundly political practice, aiming at asserting one's position in the community, at celebrating one's social presence in the group to which one belongs.

Typically appearing in clusters, graffiti show group cohesion as well as social competition. To inscribe a testimony on a wall among others can be to participate in the building of a community. These graffiti can also be created in a semi-official context (temple, royal expeditions...) and be addressed to higher authorities. Therefore, graffiti can be studied as testimonies of how the members of a group (pilgrims, scribes, members of expeditions...) negotiate the fashioning of an individual identity within social relations to their contemporaries and their supervisors but also to kings and gods.

➤ **Space appropriation**

Central to the interpretation of graffiti is their physical setting within their natural or architectural environment. Graffiti create territories (understood as a space appropriate by human communities): They don't belong in the original architectural program or primary usage of a site, but they take part in reshaping and redefining this space. They attest to the

process of territory construction and appropriation of various environments and landscapes by men. Themes that are the literary translation of this phenomenon are present and can be studied, such as nostalgia, alienation, local colour, etc.

Nevertheless, although graffiti are inherently bound to a physical context, we find several instances where they are copied and disseminated: books of graffiti in China and in the Arab world further demonstrate the need for perpetuation beyond the boundaries of a unique place.

➤ **Posterity and temporality of writing**

Graffiti show that shaping and displaying one's self and life often interconnect with the display of religious concerns. Writing on the wall answers the human need for survival in social memory. Inscriptions of graffiti take place within a specific anthropology of writing; they are both a performative act and an open communication (thanksgivings, offerings, ex-voto, etc.). Such inscriptions also display an acute sense of the specific temporality of writing, which will survive its writer and create a place in the social memory for him.

➤ **Literacy and manuscripts' culture**

Graffiti are understood here mostly as textual inscriptions. Primarily textual graffiti will be taken into consideration, although drawings may be considered for their relation to 'written' graffiti. In the Ancient and Medieval world, they must be understood in the frame of a scribal society, i.e. in a society with a low literacy rate where the elite held *de facto* a monopoly on writing. It follows that most graffiti in traditional societies have no subversive aspect and obey formal expectations. In a manuscript culture, writing on a wall is the closest equivalent to publication. Graffiti, *ex voto* and rock inscriptions (both a formal and functional typology will be needed) are testimonies to literacy skills and the diffusion of literary culture within a society. Conversely, they also use forms borrowed from other genres. They hint at the function of the inscription but can also be a demonstration of an individual's fine education with quotations and allusions.

Papers should address as much as possible the four themes isolated above, along with key-features if necessary. Participants will be invited to give an overview of graffiti in their area of expertise, before addressing these particular issues through a case study and specific examples, formulating their examinations in terms broad enough to allow for an interdisciplinary dialogue. A substantial amount of time will be allowed for discussion after each paper. (1 hour slot: paper + question + coffee break).

The papers will be published along with an analytical introduction and conclusion so as to offer a cultural handbook in graffiti practices in traditional societies.

Date: 4th week of September, 2,5 days (12 papers)

Place: Oxford University, venue to be defined

Confirmed participants

Prof. John Baines, Oriental Institute, University of Oxford (Ancient Egypt)

Prof. Roger Bagnall, Leon Levy Director, Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University

Prof. Patricia Crone, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton University (Islamic studies, Medieval arab travellers' graffiti)

Prof. Glen Dudbridge, Oriental Institute, University of Oxford (China)

Dr. Elizabeth Froom, Oriental Institute, University of Oxford (Ancient Egypt)

Prof. Christian Jacob, EHESS (anthropology of learned practices)

Prof. Richard Salomon, Asian Languages and Literature Department, University of Washington (Ancient India travellers' calligraphic graffiti)

Prof. Mark Smith, Oriental Institute, University of Oxford (Demotic graffiti in graeco-roman Egypt)

Dr. Karen Stern, Brooklyn College, New York (visitors' graffiti in ancient Jewish tombs in Palestine)

Prof. Pierre Tallet, University Paris Sorbonne (expeditions' graffiti in Egypt)