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الكتابات التذكارية (الجرافيتي)

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GRAFFITI (FIGURAL)

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Eugene Cruz-Uribe

Bildgraffiti
Graffiti (Figuratifs)

Some of the earliest evidence for written communication in Egypt derives from figural graffiti—a variation of rock art. These texts are evidenced from many sites in Egypt, especially the Western Desert.

تعود أقدم الأدلة التي تشير إلى الإتصالات المكتوبة بمصر إلى الجرافيتي المصور الذي يعتبر نوع من النقوش الصخرية. هذه الكتابات تأتي من مواقع كثيرة من مصر، بالأخص الصحراء الغربية.

F rom earliest times, figural graffiti, a probable derivative of rock art, were a significant means of recording religious, totemic, gender, and territorial boundaries throughout Egypt, the Near East, and Africa. In Egypt, numerous sites with figural graffiti have been found along the Nile Valley and in the Eastern Desert; however, the largest number of sites with collections of prehistoric rock art comes from Nubia and the Western Desert. The locations of these sites coincide with known prehistoric "occupation" and usage areas (such as camp sites, watering holes, and sources of flint). The surveys and excavations by Schild, Wendorf, Mills, Darnell, Klemm, and many others have enriched the corpus of known rock-art sites (see Friedman 2002). The Nubian salvage operations in the Nile Valley—especially those of the Čzech concession (Červíček 1974: 98 - 138; 1978, 1982) and, more recently, of the Belgian team (Huyge 1998a, 1998b, 1998c)—have reported major sites that have evoked comparisons with the Lascaux galleries in France.

Analysis of the figural graffiti found at these sites has developed slowly. While earlier publications focused mainly on cataloguing and describing the finds, and while figural graffiti that have an accompanying (textual) inscription have often been fronted in discussions (Peden 2001), it is important to emphasize that both textual graffiti and figural graffiti are grapholects of the Egyptian communication system as a whole (Houston et al. 2003). Representative of figural graffiti are boat drawings, discussed by Červíček (1974, 1978), who established criteria with which to place these items within a concise chronological framework (fig. 1). The studies by Huyge (1998a, 1998b) have expanded our understanding of these and other types of images. Huyge (1998c) has suggested that we can analyze certain non-textual graffiti using ethnographic markers and textual references, especially for interactions between (ancient) non-literate Bedouin populations and settled literate groups within the Nile Valley. Among these representations we find boxes surrounding textual graffiti. The significance

Figure 1. Scene of Abdel Qurna boat graffiti.

Figure 2. Foot graffito with text and box around it.

of such boxes has not been studied in depth, but their presence may prove useful for dating and placement purposes and may also provide a means of connecting textual graffiti with figural forms. We also find numerous signs of religious significance, such as pilgrims' feet in and around pilgrimage destination sites (mainly tombs and temples), and religious images on the exterior walls of temples (such as the Khonsu Temple at Karnak), where the general populace honored the local temple gods (fig. 2).

Figure 3. "Emulation" of Khonsu bark figure. West exterior wall of Khonsu Temple, Karnak.

The range of figures bearing figural graffiti is immense and often exhibits some connection to the location in which the figures were found. Thus sites that had religious significance, such as temples and shrines, may feature a large number of representations of deities—either anthropo-morphic images or examples of animals sacred to the local deity (rams, vultures, falcons, bulls, and the like are all seen in various contexts). One complicating aspect of the role of figural graffiti in temple areas is the question of whether the exterior walls, where most of these graffiti are found, bore official decoration (scenes and/or hieroglyphic inscriptions), for we find examples where people emulated already existing decorations by replicating, for example—and usually on a smaller scale—a deity (standing or seated on a throne), an offering table, a sacred bark (fig. 3), or a flower bouquet. In many cases the quantity and size of the graffiti were contingent on the amount of relatively flat space available. In quarries and in way-stops on caravan routes, figural graffiti depicting the "composer" are common (fig. 4), as are depictions of desert animals, cattle, donkeys, and camels.

Figure 4. "Composer" graffito from Hatnub.

Over time some sites became contested areas, competed over by several parties. A classic example of this is the Temple of Isis on the island of Philae (Cruz-Uribe 2002; Frankfurter 1998), where Egyptians, Nubians, Greeks, Romans, and later Coptic Christians, each claimed access and rights to all or part of the island. Each group had its own priority and wrote its own culturally designated graffiti there (mostly textual, although some figural examples are present). A similar situation can be found in the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings: on the tomb walls we frequently find examples of textual graffiti left by Greek, and Greek-speaking Egyptian, visitors, as well as some figural graffiti. Later the Coptic Christians usurped these spaces, converting the tombs into sites dedicated to local martyrs (for example, the martyr Appa Ammonias in the tomb of Ramses IV) by drawing abundant crosses and figures of the local saint (fig. 5).

Certain sites may prove over time to have greater significance as we learn more of the nature of figural graffiti in their original context. What may have motivated the composers of these graffiti is often not

known. One site that may prove instructional with further study is the quarry of Abdel Qurna just north of Asyut on the Nile's east bank (Cruz-Uribe 2004). The site contains a large number of both figural and textual graffiti. On the face of the cliff is a "wall" of boat graffiti, where over the centuries visitors continually expanded the number of examples of boats portrayed. Preliminary dating suggests that the boat graffiti include a range of examples dating from late Predynastic times through the Late Period. It is possible that later visitors to the site found the earlier boat graffiti and emulated them with contemporary examples. We do not yet know why boat graffiti are displayed at this particular site. What we can say is that in the New Kingdom and Late Period the site was principally a limestone quarry, similar to a number of adjacent sites. Over time numerous groups came to quarry stone for official uses and left remains of their visits, as evidenced by the graffiti.
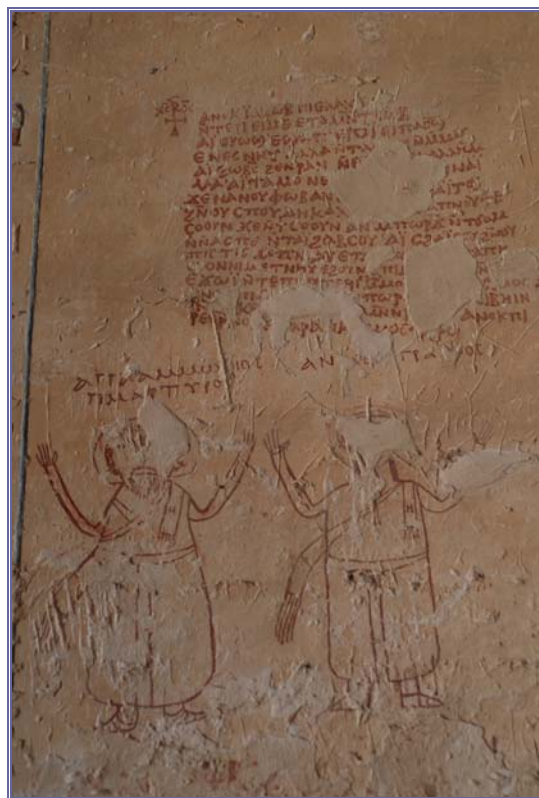

Figure 5. Coptic graffito from KV2 (North wall just inside entrance).

In Egypt it appears that, over time, the number of figural graffiti decreased. One could argue that this indicates that earlier communication methods (including figural graffiti) were being replaced by textual graffiti and subsequently hypothesize that, as the culture became more literate, figural graffiti were abandoned in favor of textual forms. However, the Egyptian evidence shows that this cannot be the case. Since the hieroglyphic writing system remained figural in essence until the Coptic stage of the language, the appearance of "textual" graffiti in Egypt was simply an extension and continuation of the figural graffiti forms within the Egyptian context. Thus at the quarry of Abdel Qurna we have the 19th-Dynasty stela of the scribe Mehy and a cartouche of 26th-Dynasty pharaoh Apries. Each is in essence a figural graffito, as the images (a figure of Mehy adoring Wepwawet and the cartouche of Apries) represent an aspect of the individual (or agents of the individual) visiting the site. That both contain "texts" simply indicates that they can be considered a different variety of figural graffiti. Hieroglyphs—in which text and picture are one—are thus, in a sense, an advanced form of figural graffiti.

When we analyze most sites where graffiti are found (in the present context, "graffiti" refers to unofficial inscriptions), we can see that Egyptian culture was unique in its ability to pass seemlessly from rock art to text over time in a way that only cultures utilizing figural writing systems could. That Coptic graffiti are also found at the site of Abdel Qurna may indicate that even after the figural system had passed away, the alphabetic system utilized earlier scriptural techniques and locational criteria.

Bibliographic Notes

This author's volume (Cruz-Uribe 2008) deals with the publication of a large corpus of textual and figural graffiti. The second chapter presents an extensive discussion on the nature of graffiti in the Egyptian context. Huyge (2003) provides an in-depth survey of the recent research on figural graffiti. Darnell (2002b) provides a fine example of a holistic campaign to study all the figural and textual graffiti in their field context. In addition, Vanderkerckhove and Müller-Wollerman (2001: esp. 1 - 11) provide a good examination of textual and figural graffiti at El-Kab. Darnell (2002a) critiques Peden's volume (2001) and considers the numerous aspects of figural graffiti that must be analyzed.

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Figure 1 Scene of Abdel Qurna boat graffiti. Photograph by the author.

Figure 2 Foot graffito with text and box around it. Adapted from Jacquet-Gordon 2003, pl. 104, no. 271.

Figure 3 "Emulation" of Khonsu bark figure. West exterior wall of Khonsu Temple, Karnak. Photograph by the author.

Figure 4 "Composer" graffito from Hatnub. Adapted from Anthes 1928, pl. 24, no. 48.

Figure 5 Coptic graffito from KV2 (North wall just inside entrance). Photograph by the author.