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Graffiti and secondary epigraphy in Deir el-Medina

A progress report

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1. INTRODUCTION

A Deir el-Medina conference is the occasion for all modern Deir el-Medina dwellers to present what is going on in the village nowadays. In this perspective, the coming pages present a progress report about a modest epigraphic project that I started in Deir el-Medina in 2013. This paper has thus no ambition to present exhaustive results; its aim is chiefly to bring some work in progress to the attention, as well as its focus and methodological framework.

This study is focussed on graffiti and secondary epigraphy in a built environment. The expression ‘secondary epigraphy’ is here used for inscriptions that were not part of the initial definition/programme of a building or any environment, but that contribute to the appropriation of the latter and redefine it. The secondary epigraphy considered here consists in graffiti *stricto sensu* (‘scratched/incised inscriptions’) as well as in dipinti. Graffiti and dipinti can be textual or figurative, or both.

The epigraphic work I have conducted so far in Deir el-Medina is part of a larger research project devoted to secondary epigraphy in the Theban necropolis, more specifically in the Theban Tombs¹. One of the main focuses of this project is to study visitors’ inscriptions and the literate practices of the scribes who left them. Dated mainly to the first part of the New Kingdom these ink graffiti are found in the public part of the funerary monuments that these scribes were used to visit². This practice seems to be attested in most of the necropoleis that were accessible in this period and the study is parallel to those currently carried on by U. Verhoeven in tomb N13 in Assiut³ or H. Navratilova in the Memphite area⁴ for example. These graffiti were often carefully traced in a beautiful literary hieratic and had nothing transgressive neither in form nor content. They made a place for themselves within the decoration of the tomb, whose reading they seem to register – the wishes addressed to the deceased witness to it⁵: thus they fulfilled the expectations that are expressed in the appeals to the livings⁶. In a two-ways process, the graffitist was in the same time also using the efficient and public space of the tomb to his own benefit by leaving his name and prayers for himself and his circle⁷.

¹ Presentation of the project in Frood & Ragazzoli 2013. Published results: Ragazzoli 2011; 2013; under review.

² Helck 1952; Wildung 1975; Philips 1997; Negm 1998; Navratilova 2007.

³ Verhoeven 2008.

⁴ Navratilova 2007; Navratilova 2011.

⁵ E.g. Davies 1920, 28, no. 17; 29, no. 33, no. 36. See Ragazzoli 2013, 306–7; 313; 315–6.

⁶ Ragazzoli 2013, 282–286.

⁷ e.g. Davies 1920, 28, no. 15–16 ; Ragazzoli 2013, 305–306.

The case of Deir el-Medina is fairly different and can be used as a counterpoint to the corpus of visitors' inscriptions, since it covers graffiti and epigraphy produced by a resident community on their home monuments – houses and chapels – and not by visitors. Deir el-Medina graffiti also appear at a later date, the 20th and, in a lesser extent, the 21st dynasty. But, like visitors' graffiti, they witness to self-fashioning, place making and community building.

New graffiti are collected in situ while the already published inscriptions are re-examined. The space considered in this study is the site of permanent occupation by the inhabitants of Deir el-Medina, i.e. the village and its necropolis and votive zones. The extensive corpus of the graffiti in the Theban Mountain corresponds to distinct practices⁸.

In the short report below, I start with some brief and methodological considerations which inform the framework in which I collect and study these graffiti, whose meaning is not limited to their semantic content but is strongly dependant on context and practices. In the second part, I present the categories of graffiti that are encountered in the settlement of Deir el-Medina.

2. GRAFFITI AS GRAPHIC OBJECTS AND CULTURAL PRACTICES: PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS

The term 'graffiti', though of scholarly origin – the discovery of Pompeii⁹ – has been hijacked by modern street culture and tends to suggest to the modern mind ideas of transgression and popular culture. Such conceptions are easily projected to the Ancient world, with a heavy risk of anachronism: they constitute a 'graffiti bias', which associates graffiti with subversion, social margin and defacement¹⁰. Yet, in scribal and literacy-short societies, where literacy is a privilege and part of the elite self-definition, graffiti are in themselves status-markers for those who are able to trace them. In scribal worlds, graffiti are also a widely accepted practice organic to literacy: they appear from the origins of Egyptian history onwards and are ubiquitous throughout the Egyptian territory¹¹. Graffiti witness to a wide range of human practices and attitudes, which can be difficult for historians to grasp in other contexts: votive practices, appropriations of marginal spaces and borders, appeals to the posterity, to quote only a few examples.

To unravel elements of meaning in graffiti beyond the mere semantic content of words and images, it is important to study these texts and images both as practices and as objects.

As **graphic objects**, graffiti share with the rest of epigraphic artefacts the fact that they are made and conceived to be seen and displayed. All visual information is to be taken into account; this covers the script (hieroglyphs, cursive hieroglyphs, hieratic), the technique (scratching, ink, incision, etc.) and the exact position of the graffito on the wall and its environment. The choice of script informs on the status of the text: some use hieroglyphs in an attempt to emulate traditional epigraphy while other use literary hieratic referring to manuscripts and scribal identity. Locating precisely graffiti in their environment show with what they interact – and reveal to us the reading of their environment by its users.

Thus, graffiti appear as **practices**, involving actors in a specific timeframe. Graffiti are indeed a way to embody spaces and to make place. As such they can be highly performative. Addressed to a reader they are socially connective, and may be a way for individuals to negotiate their belonging to a community, to say through the signature of their names on a wall 'I was here'. They raise the question of reception and access. They involve specific gestures, communities and audiences. Inhabiting a settlement like Deir el-Medina, as A.-C. Salmas shows in this volume, is dependant on much more

⁸ See Dorn in this volume.

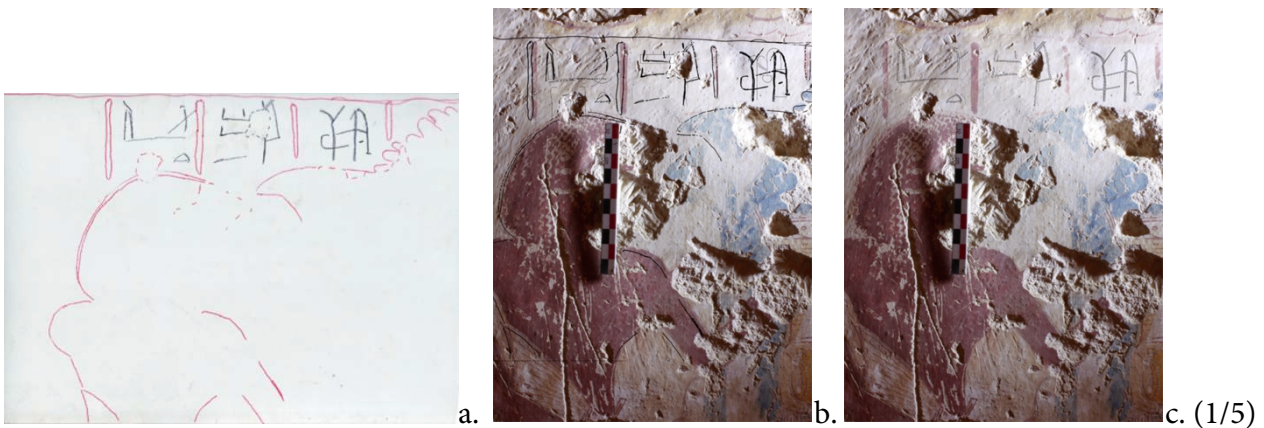
⁹ Baird et Taylor 2011, 1–2.

¹⁰ Baird et Taylor 2011, 3–4.

¹¹ e.g. Franke 2001.

than just 'being there', and includes many social and cultural interactions. Graffiti register and constitute such interactions, and they therefore constitute a first-choice source to study the embodiment and appropriation of the various spaces. As Salmas underlines it, graffiti indeed can be read as *speech-acts* through which people define and appropriate this space¹². For the historian, they reveal the circulations within the village and how its different parts – houses, tombs, and votive chapels – were connected to each other.

In concrete terms, for this study, this theoretical perspective is translated into the methodology. Published graffiti are located on their walls and context of apparition. For unpublished graffiti they are recorded both with a direct facsimile on plastic film and with high-resolution photographs. When this is possible, orthophotography is used thanks to O. Onézime, topographer at the IFAO. The graffiti is then drawn with the software Adobe Illustrator© using both the photograph and the hand-record. The various graffiti on the same wall are located on the same document.



¹² Salmas in this volume and Tilly 1994, 28–30.

Figure 1. Technique of graffiti recording: hand-facsimile made on plastic film on site (a); digitisation of the facsimile imported on a photograph with raking light (b.); computer drawing of the graffito (c); positioning the graffito on the scene (d). (scales: a, b, c: 1/5; d: 1/10)

3. SECONDARY EPIGRAPHY AND GRAFFITI SPACES IN DEIR EL-MEDINA

The little world of Deir el-Medina is often associated with graffiti, thanks to the colossal survey initiated by J. Cerny in the Theban Mountain, showing the pregnancy of the epigraphic habit among the workmen¹³. The graffiti *in* the village are far less numerous, and they are rarely commented on for the specific literate and social practices to which they witness. On the one hand, there may be an effect of sources in this discrepancy since, unlike secondary epigraphy in a wild environment, graffiti in a settlement are all ephemeral to some extent, disappearing when spaces are reused and walls repaired and white-washed. On the other hand, this discrepancy may also inform us on the rationale behind most graffiti practices, which appear to be visit-bound: fewer graffiti are thus to be expected in a domestic environment. In this context, all datable graffiti seem to date to the end of the Deir el-Medina occupation, namely to the 20th dynasty¹⁴.

Graffiti appear in an array of places in Deir el-Medina, both in the village and in the religious/funerary area. These various places belong to different categories of space, with different levels of access.

<p>In the village:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - in private houses (2 graffiti) <p>Outside of the village:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - in tomb chapels (41 graffiti to date) - in votive chapels (25 graffiti to date)

Figure 2. Graffiti spaces in Deir el-Medina with indicative figures (survey still in progress)

The record of all the graffiti in the village is still in progress, but it will also be important to locate these graffiti at the scale of the village to see whether they reveal specific circulations.

¹³ Černý et al. 1969–1983; Desroches-Noblecourt 1972: 181–183.

¹⁴ See Peden 2001: 175, 219–20, 256–7.

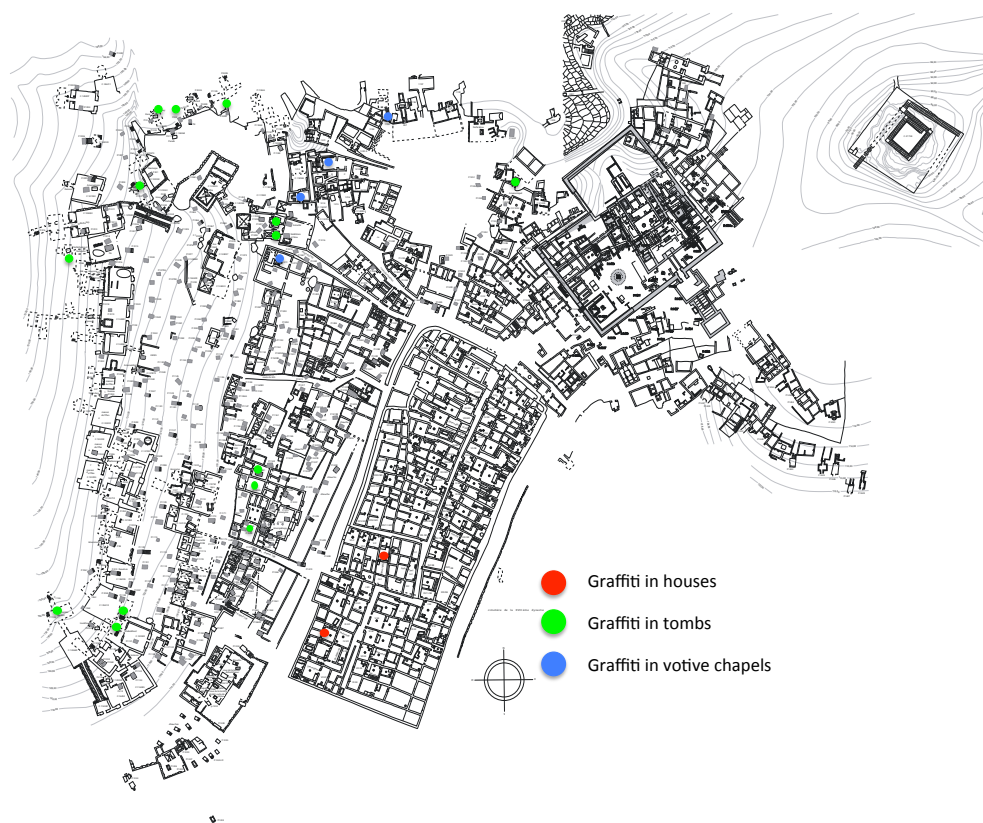


Figure 3. Location of graffiti in Deir el-Medina (in 2014, survey in progress)

3.1. Village houses

Two houses show traces of secondary epigraphy on their walls. Although there are only two, these graffiti are significant for their decorum and the station they occupy in these houses. I present them below as examples of how graffiti can be related to performance and embodiment of space.

The more ancient of the two graffiti comes from Central House IV (C.IV), and is recorded on the West wall of the second room¹⁵. The text is written in a very cursive hieratic in black ink, which is evocative of administrative writing of this time. It can be attributed to the Scribe of the necropolis Amennakht, son of Ipuy. The latter praises himself for giving clothes to someone in prison¹⁶.

The second case can be dated to a generation later, and is signed by the son of Amennakht, Horysheri, in his own house, South West II (S.O.II). Here again the dipinto is found on the west wall of the second room. The text is dated to year 3 of Ramesses IX. Unfortunately, the subject matter is now erased. It is this signature that led to attribute this house of this scribe, whose house is mentioned both in the Journal of the necropolis and in the Late Ramesside Letters¹⁷. The text obviously records an event whose nature is now lost. This graffito stands out through its graphic appearance: in red ink, the writing is of a beautiful hand, reminiscent of the ‘uncial’ found on some literary manuscripts of the Ramesside Period.

¹⁵ Bruyère 1939, 16, 303–4; Černý 2001: 349; Valbelle 1985: 122; Romer 1984: 207.

¹⁶ To be related to O. Gardiner 4, which records a theft of clothes by the daughter of Amennakht son of Ipuy? cf. Černý 1927: 179.

¹⁷ Černý 2001: 229, n. 7.

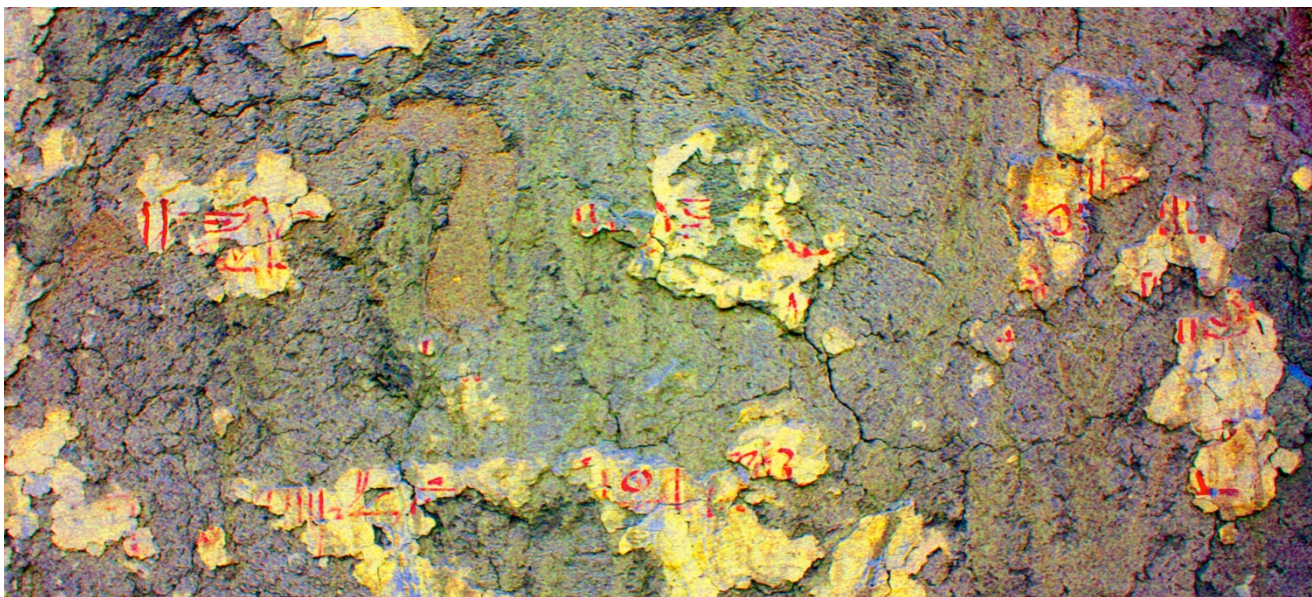


Figure 4. Graffito on the west wall of the third room in House S.O. II (photographed in 2014, enhanced with D-Stretch)

These large characters can be used for prestige texts, such as the great Papyrus Harris or for royal protocols within larger texts: this is the case for example within the collections of texts known in this period as *Late Egyptian Miscellanies* (e.g. P. Anastasi VI, 1-6; P. Sallier IV, v° 16 and 17; P. Leiden I 348, v° 5, 1-6).

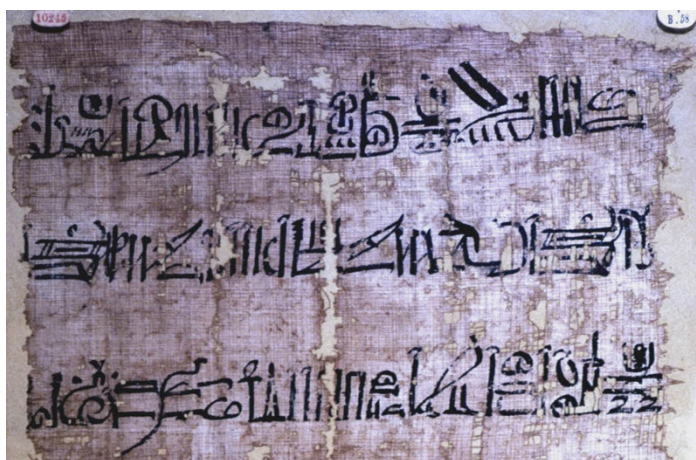


Figure 5. Royal protocol at the beginning of P. Anastasi VI (Sethy II) © The Trustees of the British Museum

The writing here testifies to scribal skills and may be part of the self-fashioning of the owner and writer, the Scribe of the Tomb, Horyshery.

These two inscriptions have a lot of features in common. They both seem to be signed by the owner of the house; they both record an event. They also appear in a similar spot of the house, on the west wall of the room that Bruyère christened 'salle du divan' (mastaba room).

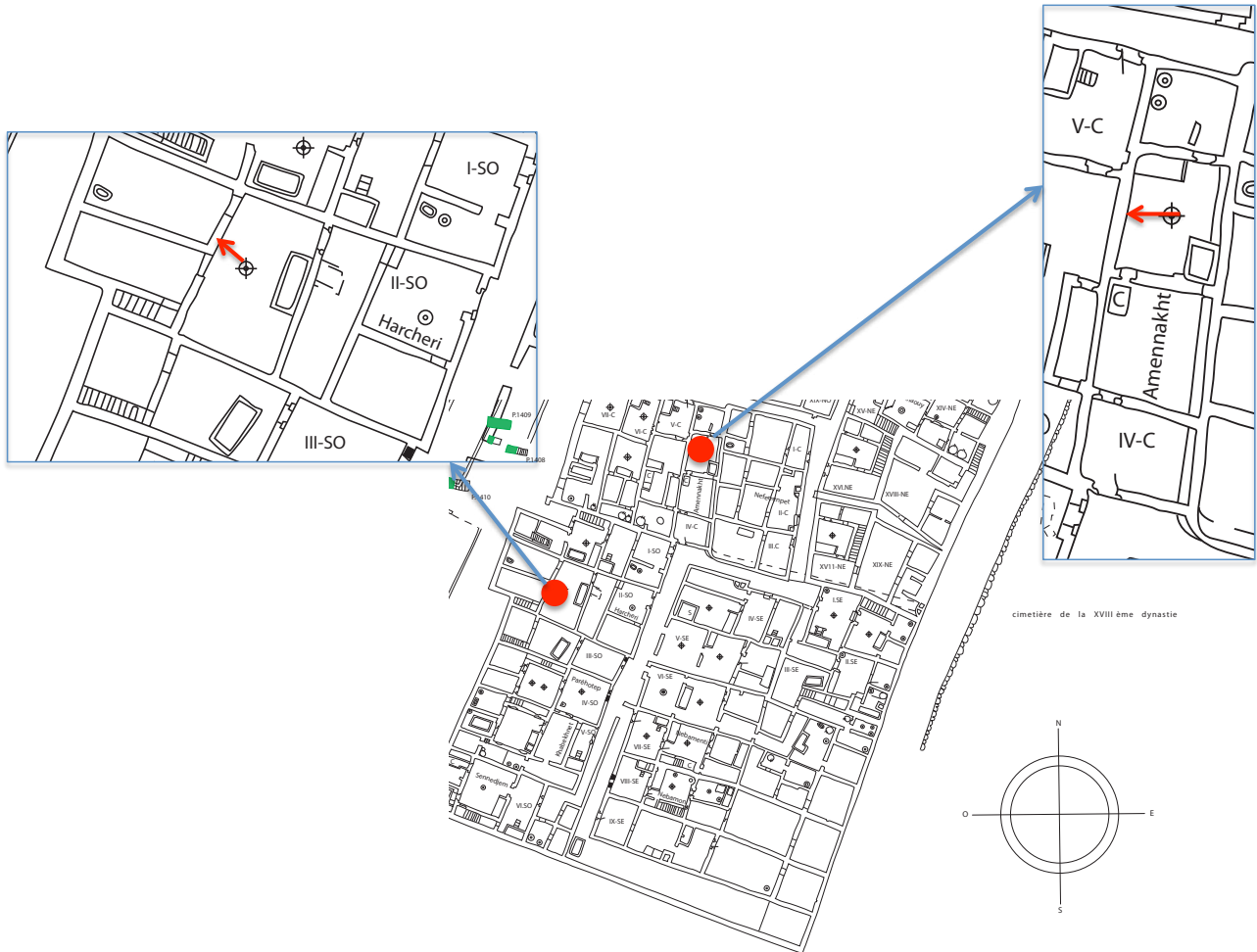


Figure 6. Position of the graffiti in houses S.O II and C.II

This second room, usually adorned with lintels and a column in the middle, had a divan against one wall. This space is usually defined as the room for official reception by the master of the house: ‘sur le divan, le maître de la maison siégeait pendant le jour pour travailler, prendre ses repas et recevoir ses hôtes; la nuit il y étendant une natte ou posait un *angareb* pour dormir en gardant l’entrée de la cave¹⁸. As such, it is adorned by markers of the social status of the owner and how he wants to fashion himself to the community¹⁹. The use of flourish calligraphy specific to literary texts should be thus interpreted. The function of display of this room is echoed in these graffiti stating events and addressed to an audience. One can also raise the question of the performance, in which context the graffiti got inscribed: the first graffiti, in rapid hieratic could indicate a quick record in a public context.

These domestic dipinti witness to the social function of these rooms (not exclusive of others, it must be said), and stand for social interactions between their scripters and their audience. Writing on one’s wall may be a phenomenon difficult to relate to for the modern spectator, who lives in a world where white walls are sanctified and where children are taught from a very early age not to write on the wall. Yet it may be useful to remember, in order to free our historical reflexion, that this is a recent and western posture. In many societies, writing on one’s walls or on the walls of one’s host is a socially accepted way of celebrating an event or appropriating a place. In Pompeian aristocratic villas for example, numerous graffiti are found in the reception areas of the house, where they register wishes

¹⁸ (Bruyère***).

¹⁹ Meskell 1998: 229; Meskell 2002: 71-74.

from the host to his guests and *vice versa*²⁰. Similar practices are found in ancient Greece, Elizabethan England²¹ or even modern Egypt.

The link between graffiti and social interactions underline a definitional character of graffiti, which must be understood both as a practice and an event. The framework of ‘performance’ can be fruitfully applied to the study of graffiti, which can thus be understood as the traces of the ways people engage with their space and use graffiti as a place-making device in the space they live in or visit²².

3.2. Tombs and tomb-chapels

Graffiti in tomb chapels illustrate the performative aspect of graffiti that constitute a specific category of speech-acts deposited in efficient places, contact zones between this world and the sacred one. In this perspective, the necropolis of Deir el-Medina is where the survey has so far been the most extensive taking the number of tombs known to have graffiti from seven to fourteen²³: this number will probably increase in the future.

Tomb graffiti appear in the chapels, that is to say, once again, in the public part of the tomb. As such they register visits and belong to a range of practices that are also found with visitors’ inscriptions. We find graffiti of very different kinds, indicating a wide spectrum of practices and interactions between the people of Deir el-Medina and their funerary landscape. I give below examples for each kind of inscriptions:

- figurative incisions: a large number of graffiti are mere incisions. They are usually figurative and may be of impressive size. This explains that they were usually overlooked in publications. Without any text, they are usually difficult to date and interpret, but they witness an intense circulation within the chapel space. Usually of awkward quality, they may reveal an attempt to appropriate sacred space but also an iconographic repertoire. The incisions on the three walls of the very ruined chapel of a ramesside anonymous tomb (n° 1331) constitute a good example of this phenomenon (cf. fig. 7): the three walls are occupied by four representations of boats or sledges laden with funerary equipment, drawing on a common theme of funerary iconography.
- Records of actions taken in the tomb: to the north of the entrance of TT 321, a black dipinto registers the transfer of the tomb to Lady Taouertherti in year IV of Ramesses VII by the scribe of the Necropolis Horysheri²⁴.
- Visitors’ inscriptions: one of the features of visitors’ inscriptions is the interaction of the visitor with the decoration of the tomb, which he reads and uses to his own benefit, exploiting the efficiency of a sacred place to leave his own name. The signature of scribe Amennakht (fig. ***) is one of these: it reused the blank space left by unfilled text column to integrate a row of people making offerings to the deceased. More elaborate is the prayer addressed to Osiris in the memory of the late Butehamon by his son Ankhfenamon: this one has been drawn in a particularly efficient space of the chapel of the Tomb of Nakhtmin (TT291), on the north wall of the chapel, in front of Osiris above an offering table²⁵.

²⁰ Benefiel 2011.

²¹ Fleming 2001: 37–38.

²² See e.g. Froot 2013.

²³ TT 2 ; TT 2B ; TT6 ; TT 10 ; TT 215 ; TT 290 ; TT 291 ; TT 292 ; TT 321 ; Tomb Deir el-Medina nos. 1331 ; 1332 ; 1338 (maybe a votive chapel) ; C120.888 ; C123.680.

²⁴ Peden 2001: 220; Kitchen 1989: 368; Valbelle 1985: 288, n. 10).

²⁵ Bruyère 1926: 56–62, pl. 6, 9; Černý [1973] 2001: 373; Peden 2001: 257.



Figure 7. Chapel no. 1332, incision of a boat/sledge on West wall

3.3. Graffiti in votive chapels

If graffiti are social practices, their appearance in spaces dedicated to the celebration of the community should not be surprising.

Fieldwork at Deir el-Medina has recently focussed on votive chapels (see Gobeil in this volume). These so-called ‘chapelles de confrérie’ are not associated with any burial arrangements and were dedicated to local divinities (Meretseger, Amenhotep I, Thot). They share common architectural features, defined by B. Bruyère, namely 1/ one or two forecourts; 2/ range(s) of mastaba or seats along the wall; 3/purification basins; 4/ a sanctuary with a pronaos or several naos; 5/ service building(s)²⁶.

Several of these chapels are inscribed with graffiti, usually names²⁷ and in one case the record of the initiation of a new member²⁸. Their dedication to local cults and seating arrangements indicate that they are places of social interactions. These social interactions are reflected in the epigraphic activities. A. Gasse noted a few years ago that a substantial number of ostraca, mainly literary excerpts, came from an area of votive chapels, the *kôm* K2. Furthermore many of these ostraca are of rather untrained hands and show corrections, whilst other are clearly exercises²⁹. Without turning the area in question into a formal school (a likely anachronism for Ancient Egypt), they testify to scribal activities and interactions, such as scribal training, in these places.

Similar questions can be raised for the so-called ‘chapelle des trois loges’ (no. 1211), where a full archaeological study is currently in process on site³⁰. South of TT 290 and 291 (Nakhtmin and Arynefer), leaning against the hill on its West side and orientated to the East, chapel 1211 was partially

²⁶ Bruyère 1930: 5–17.

²⁷ Chapel n° 1190: Bruyère 1930: 7; chapel no. 1212: Bruyère 1930: 18–19.

²⁸ Chapel no. 1194: Bruyère 1930: 7; 46; Bruyère 1939: 16, 360; Peden 2001: 220; Kitchen 1970: 667, 11.

²⁹ Gasse 2000, 118.

³⁰ see Gobeil in this volume.

cleared in 1918 and Bruyère finished excavating it in 1923³¹. It is constituted of a forecourt, a vaulted room and three little niches.

Figure 8. View of the 'chapelle des trois loges' after 2015 cleaning

Besides the epigraphic study of its graffiti (see below), the whole monument was also cleaned and conserved in 2015, and a complete architectural record performed. The 3D reconstitution will allow us to replace the graffiti in their three-dimensional context and address gestures and practices.

The three loggias are indeed remarkable for their graffiti. A fine coating is still in place on most of the walls of the three lodges but no traces of decoration can be detected. Therefore these blank walls offer a very appropriate surface for secondary epigraphy and more than twenty dipinti, mostly in red are there traced. No text is found although some traces of black ink of the south wall of the south lodge could be interpreted as hieratic. A minority are very crude and do not witness to any professional draughtsmanship; they are more reminiscent of doodling as can be found on some ostraca. The rest of the sketched may seem drafty but clearly respect conventions and canons. These graffiti include standing figures, often men engaged in votive activities, religious objects, and representations of Horus. It is to be noted that parallels can be found on ostraca, excavated in other votive chapels as well as on ostraca found in the huts of workmen decorating the tomb of Ramses X:

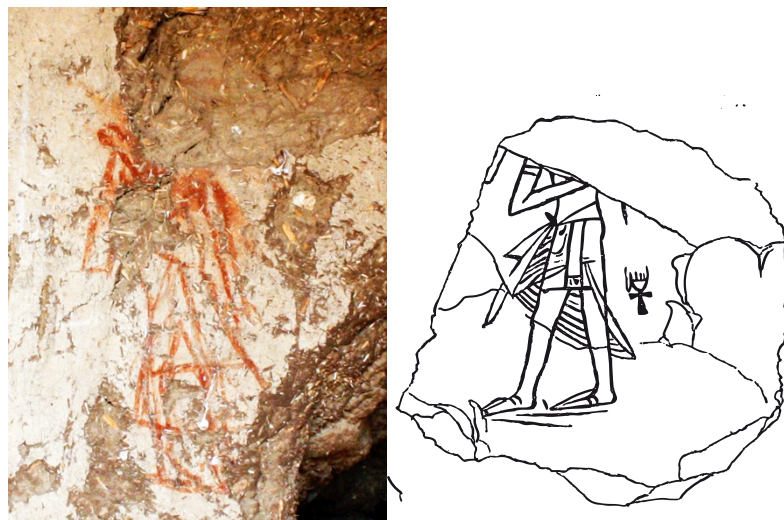


Figure 9. Graffito in south loggia, west wall; ostracon found in the courtyard of votive chapel no. 1216 (Bruyère 1930, 59, fig. 7, no. 4)

³¹ Bruyère 1930: 17–18.



Figure 10. Graffito in central loggia, north wall and ostraca from workmen huts (Dorn 2011, III, 41, 389)

This paper has no other ambition to offer a survey of the types of graffiti that can be found in Deir el-Medina and to present the work currently conducted and its methodology. These graffiti are considered as the sign of social interaction and performance and witness to the appropriation of the living spaces by the community and groups within this community

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