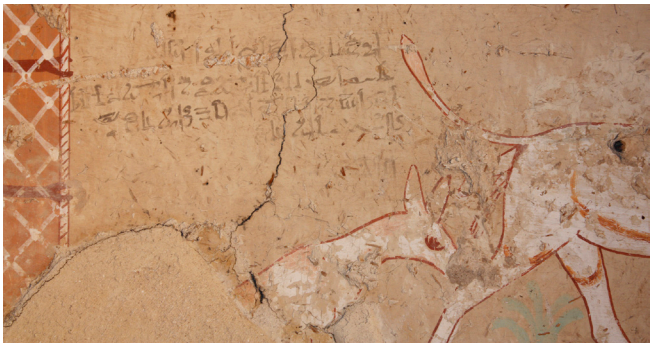
Writing on the wall: two graffiti projects in Luxor

At an EES Seminar in June 2012 (available to view at: www.ustream.tv/recorded/23505099) **Chloé Ragazzoli** and **Elizabeth Frood** presented their work on the study of ancient graffiti. Here they describe their respective research projects in Theban tombs and at the temple of Ptah at Karnak.

Ancient graffiti practices are very distant from modern stereotypes of furtive, subversive scribblings and vandalism. In antiquity, literacy was an elite privilege and writing on the wall was an accepted way to fashion and display one's identity.The study of ancient graffiti, a rapidly developing area of research, offers a range of insights into the meaning, development, and appropriation of space.

Leaving one's name in a place is a way to appropriate it. For example, Egyptians carved thousands of graffiti along desert expedition routes and in mining and quarry sites, laying claim to strategic places that were at the margins of their political and cultural control. Comparable practices existed in built environments such as temples and tombs. Two projects in Luxor - in Theban tombs and in the temple complex of Karnak - study how graffiti created 'contact zones' in which social groups presented crucial aspects of their identity. The use and meaning of graffiti also changed over time, as did the use and perception of the spaces in which they were inscribed.

Visitors' inscriptions in Theban tombs are ink graffiti (also called *dipinti*) that were left by those who 'came to see the tomb', to quote the texts themselves. Current work



Tomb of Antefiqer, corridor, north wall, scene of hunting: the graffito, containing an offering formula, is inscribed on the top of a calving oryx

on related contexts in Memphis by Hana Navrátilová and in Asyut by Ursula Verhoeven shows the extent of the practice in the New Kingdom. Since 2010, Chloé Ragazzoli has been collecting graffiti in Theban tombs, focusing on their integration within previously existing decorative programmes. Written in elegant hieratic, these graffiti interact directly with tomb decoration, using depictions of prayer and offerings on behalf of the tomb owner and of those who inscribed the graffiti, who often added their own names and biographical epithets. These



Entrance of the tomb attributed to Antefiqer (TT60) on the hill of Sheikh Abd el-Qurna. Photograph by Dimitri Laboury

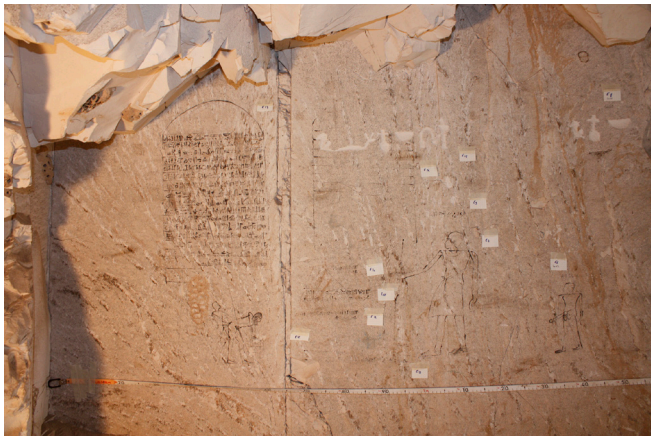


Tomb of Antefiqer, corridor, south wall, scene of pilgrimage to Abydos: the graffiti are inked at the stern of Antefiqer's boat

authors usually present themselves simply as 'scribes' and do not indicate what institution they belonged to. All can be dated to the New Kingdom, when a new social prestige was attached to scribal status, and scribes had a pre-eminent role in literary texts, especially the Late Egyptian miscellanies. The study of graffiti allows us to observe the cultural and social identity promoted in these literary works in an archaeologically secure context.

Two tombs, among many included in the project, illustrate this potential. Work in the tomb attributed to Antefiqer, vizier of Senwosret I, already known for the thirty-six graffiti published by Alan H Gardiner in 1920, yielded thirty-one additional inscriptions. This tomb on the top of the hill of Sheikh Abd el-Qurna is the only surviving decorated chapel from the Middle Kingdom in the necropolis and may have been unique already in the New Kingdom. This case shows how those who left the graffiti in the New Kingdom could enhance their shared high-cultural identity through appropriating a place that was already to them a historical monument.

An unfinished tomb (MMA 504 = Carter 82) above the temples of Deir el-Bahri (see photograph on p.1) offers a different case of a professional community adopting a space as their own. The tomb is known locally as the 'dirty cave' because of two erotic graffiti inked on its walls. Seventy-four graffiti have now been copied from this tomb, including drawings, scenes modelled on traditional



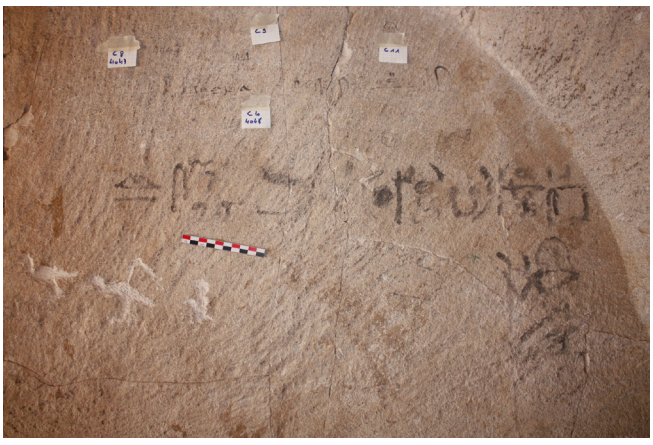
MM504 – a section of the eastern wall with a variety of graffiti, including two erotica



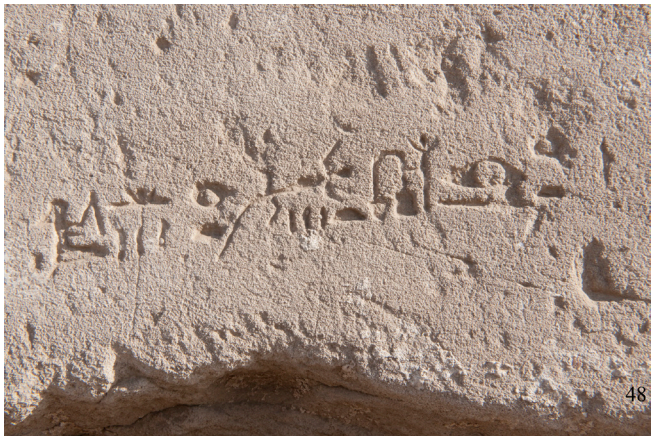
Tomb of Antefiqer, corridor, north wall, scene of fowling and fishing: visitors inked their graffiti between the legs of the three fishermen



MM504 – west wall, near the entrance: a representation of Senenmut drawn according to traditional rules of monumental display



MM504 – west wall, cluster of graffiti. To the right there is a praying figure accompanied by the name of Aakheperresoneb, priest of the funerary temple of Tuthmosis I



Hieroglyphic graffito of the scribe Ashakhet on the south exterior wall of the Ptah temple, Karnak. Photograph:© CNRS-CFEETK/Pauline Batard

types, signatures, and funerary offerings, in addition to the erotica. Many visitors signed their graffiti with their titles, which show that most of them belonged to the staff of the nearby funerary temples of Tuthmosis I, Hatshepsut and Tuthmosis III. These men may have appropriated this place because of its pleasant view across the valley and the shade and fresh breezes it provided. Although it might seem surprising to find prayers and offerings together with more secular drawings, the ensemble shows how graffiti can display the interests and preoccupations of a particular community: an erotic graffito creates a feeling of connection between the graffitist and his intended audience, as can the appeals to scribes that are included in two of the more 'traditional' graffiti. We hope to continue work at Deir el-Bahri in spring 2013, as well as to record further tombs in the Theban necropolis and at Deir el-Medina.

The graffiti recorded by Elizabeth Frood in the precinct of Amun-Re at Karnak transformed temple areas in ways comparable to those in tombs, but the temple texts are often more laconic. Her project builds on the extensive work on the Karnak graffiti undertaken by Claude Traunecker, who has donated the related archive, including photographs, drawings and analyses, to the Griffith Institute, Oxford. The first phase of the project centres on the hieroglyphic, hieratic and figural graffiti on the gates and exterior walls of the temple of Ptah in the northern area of the precinct. The demotic graffiti are being studied by Didier Devauchelle and Ghislaine Widmer. Recording the temple of Ptah has been a major project of the Franco-Egyptian team at Karnak since 2008 (see *EA* 38, pp.20–24), and their continuing work in this area will influence the interpretation of the graffiti.

Over a hundred graffiti have been recorded in the temple. Most were inscribed during the first millennium



Recarved graffito scene of Thoth before Ptah and Hathor, surrounded by and overlaying hieratic and hieroglyphic graffiti, on the south exterior wall of the Ptah temple, Karnak. Photograph:© CNRS-CFEETK/ Pauline Batard



Graffito scene of Thoth and Ptah, surrounded by other hieratic and hieroglyphic graffiti, on the south exterior wall of the Ptah temple, Karnak Photograph:© CNRS-CFEETK/Pauline Batard

BC, and all are incised rather than inked, although some bear traces of paint and plaster, and included elements that had been inlaid. The majority, which cluster on the temple's south exterior wall, probably date between the late New Kingdom and the Late Period. These graffiti mostly consist of hieratic or hieroglyphic personal names accompanied by the titles 'scribe' or '*wab*-priest' without any institutional affiliation. In this they resemble the tomb graffiti; perhaps these titles were all that was needed to assert status and membership of the small community of temple staff who moved through and were active in the area. Some exceptions carved high on the wall include filiations, titles connected with the temple of Khonsu and the treasury, and a record of involvement in an unspecified, probably ritual, event. Their elevation indicates the presence of buildings, or the use of scaffolding or ladders to reach the blocks, so their carving was not clandestine.

The most prominent graffiti are two formal scenes carved near the original ground level. One, which was recarved extensively, shows Thoth standing before Ptah and Hathor, while the other shows effigy-form figures of Thoth and Ptah. Both were carved over earlier graffiti. The scenes were brightly painted, and both are surrounded by holes, perhaps drilled to support frames or other additions. All this points to much investment in their visual impact. A 'graffiti zone' belonging to the temple staff who worked or rested in this area was formalised into a focus of religious action and devotion through the addition of scenes. It is not yet clear whether the less formal graffiti were visible during the 'life' of the scenes. During the September 2012 season, photographer Kathryn Howley experimented with highlight reflectance transformation imaging (RTI) for some graffiti. This photographic technique, which creates detailed models of surfaces, offers much promise for clarifying the relative chronology of overlapping graffiti and whitewashing, as well as securing readings for very faint or palimpsest inscriptions.



Hieratic graffito of the scribe Prenakht high on the south exterior wall of the Ptah temple, Karnak, mentioning his parents and dated to year 15, last day of the 4th month of peret. Photograph:© CNRS-CFEETK/ Pauline Batard



Kathryn Howley and Julia Troche taking Highlight RTI captures of graffiti on the south exterior wall of the Ptah temple, Karnak, in September 2012

These diverse, yet complementary, *corpora* illustrate how texts and images assert claims to space by individuals and groups. The study of graffiti makes it possible to map their circulation within monuments and to assess changes in the way these spaces were used. Finally, graffiti reveal a spectrum of writing practices in monumental contexts, blurring boundaries between formal hieroglyphic and informal hieratic inscriptions.

❑ Chloé Ragazzoli is the Lady Wallis Budge Junior Research Fellow in Egyptology at University College, University of Oxford. The work at Deir el-Bahri is now a project of the Polish Centre for Mediterranean Archaeology. She would like to thank the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, the Polish Centre for Mediterranean Archaeology, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (UMR 8167) and the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres for support of her project. Elizabeth Frood is University Lecturer in Egyptology at the University of Oxford. Her work at Karnak is a project of the Centre Franco-Égyptien d'Études de Temples de Karnak (Ministry of State for Antiquities-Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique USR 3172). She would like to thank Claude Traunecker for initiating the project, and Ibrahim Soliman, director of the temples of Karnak, Christophe Thiers, director of the USR 3172-CFEETK, Pierre Zignani, Sébastien Biston-Moulin, Awad Abdel Radi Mohamed and everyone in Karnak for their help and support, and Kathryn Howley and Julia Troche (Brown University) for their work on the project. Photographs by the writers unless otherwise indicated.