

Personal responses to danger in Greek graffiti: inscriptional formulae and self-expression at three late antique and Byzantine sites*

Rachael Helen Banes 

Austrian Academy of Sciences
rachaelhelen.banes@oeaw.ac.at

Graffiti are often seen as providing a window into the emotions of ancient peoples. However, Byzantine graffiti has been viewed as an exception, with the formulaic Greek texts written between 300 and 1500 taken as evidence of communal identity, rather than individual expressiveness. However, variations in these texts can reveal much about an individual author and their personal experiences. In particular, certain formula suggest the dangerous situation an author survived, including incarceration and sea travel. This paper focuses on Corinth, Syros, and Tinos where individuals experienced danger, and how their fears and needs were manifested in the graffiti they left behind.

Keywords: graffiti; self-expression; Corinth; Syros; Tinos

Ancient graffiti – defined here as an ‘informally-carved text placed secondarily on either living rock, or an existing structure or monument’ – have traditionally attracted attention from scholars for allowing unmediated access to the personal expressions of ancient individuals.¹ For this view, late antique and Byzantine graffiti present a problem. The

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1 Definition: M. A. Handley, ‘Scratching as devotion: graffiti, pilgrimage and liturgy in the late antique and early medieval west’, in K. Bolle, C. Machado, and C. Witschel (eds), *The Epigraphic Cultures of Late Antiquity* (Stuttgart 2017) 555–95 (556). Scholarly approach: A. J. Peden, *The Graffiti of Pharaonic Egypt: scope and roles of informal writings (c. 3100–332 BC)* (Leiden 2001) XXI. Peden describes Pharaonic graffiti as ‘invariably free of ... social restraints’. P. Keegan, *Graffiti in Antiquity* (London 2014) 1 describes the medium as ‘personal’ allowing ‘uninhibited reign into their [ancient peoples’] thoughts’. A summary of this view regarding Pompeian graffiti is provided by J. A. Baird and C. Taylor, ‘Ancient

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informal texts from the fourth to fifteenth centuries are formulaic and repetitive, with the same simple prayers βοήθει ‘help’, ἐλέησον ‘have mercy’, and μνήσθητι ‘remember’ appearing time and again throughout the eastern Mediterranean.² A key question emerges: if personal expression was filtered through socially acceptable formulae, does this material still reveal individual experience? In recent years, scholars have contended with this issue by emphasizing what late antique and Byzantine graffiti can teach us about community practice, rather than individual identity. This is a view espoused throughout the 2021 volume *Cultic Graffiti in the Late Antique Mediterranean and Beyond*. In their introduction, the editors contend that ‘our graffiti writers were not seeking to express individuality, rather they wanted to join an established community’.³ Marlena Whiting emphasizes that through using the same formulae as those who had written their name on architecture before them, a graffito author would contribute to their community.⁴ The general trend is the assumption that whilst late antique and Byzantine graffiti are important evidence, they do not substantially reveal individual expression.

In this article, however, I want to examine the issue from a different angle. Whilst Greek graffiti, and particularly Greek prayer graffiti, from the late antique and Byzantine eras are formulaic, several notable exceptions exist in which we are able to glean an insight into the mindset of the authors. At these sites, the authors often disregard or alter set religious phrases to make explicit the help they need from God. The three sites discussed here, each from within the borders of the modern Greek state, are a prison in Corinth and sites from two Cycladic islands (Syros and Tinos). These three locations have been selected because their graffiti span from the fourth to the thirteenth century and employ many different epigraphic formulae. Furthermore, the graffiti at these sites share a unifying factor: the authors of the graffiti experienced overt or potential danger and expressed their desires for safety explicitly. It should be noted that these texts are not the only examples in which individual emotion can be read into graffiti, but they are some of the most illuminating, with a large corpus of texts worthy of discussion, and therefore have been chosen here to keep a tight focus.⁵

graffiti in context: introduction’, in J.A. Baird and C. Taylor (eds), *Ancient Graffiti in Context* (New York 2011) 1–17.

2 Κύριε, βοήθει, ‘Lord, help’ was the most common phrase in late antique and Byzantine informal inscriptions, however a few other terms also saw frequent usage. Ἐλέησον ‘have mercy’ and μνησθῆ or μνήσθητι ‘Let x be remembered’ and ‘remember’ were popular prayers found carved in the graffiti and in the late antique and Byzantine worlds, and these prayers appear in some form in 30 % of all late antique textual graffiti.

3 A. Felle and B. Ward-Perkins (eds), ‘Introduction’, in *Cultic Graffiti in the Late Antique Mediterranean and Beyond* (Turnhout 2021) xvii–xx (xviii).

4 M. Whiting, ‘Contextualizing Christian pilgrim graffiti in the late antique Holy Land’, in Felle and Ward-Perkins, *Cultic Graffiti*, 17–31 (23–4).

5 An additional site which could have featured in this study is Wadi Hajjaj in the Sinai, a desert pilgrimage route in which the authors also felt danger and inscribed their texts accordingly. However, in order to keep a strict focus I have chosen to focus on graffiti from a limited geographic span (in this instance, the modern

Each site will be examined in context, noting adherence to and divergence from typical prayer formulae. Such decisions by the authors suggest information about their experiences.

Studying graffiti

Before launching into my case studies, it is necessary to comment on some of the methodological problems which accompany the study of graffiti, as well as establish the corpus of data from which I draw. The key methodological issue is dating. It is exceptionally rare for Greek-Byzantine graffiti to be inscribed with a date, meaning scholars are frequently reliant on archaeological context. Other factors such as palaeography can be used to try and date this material, but when graffiti is roughly scratched or painted, or simply poorly preserved, the palaeography can be uncertain. The three sites discussed in this article have all been dated to various periods between the fourth and thirteenth centuries; however, as I will show with a brief discussion of context and content, these dates are rarely secure.

Throughout this article, I will contextualize the case studies I discuss by comparing them to the wider late antique and Byzantine graffiti tradition. For this purpose, I will compare the graffiti to the holistic study from my PhD thesis, where I collected 1733 graffiti from Greece, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Turkey, North Macedonia, and Israel/Palestine.⁶ Of this material 920 inscriptions are both textual and legible, and it is this selection of material I refer to when I discuss percentages and the broader graffiti tradition. This data is not inclusive of later Byzantine traditions; however, a cursory examination suggests a continuation of the same practices.

Corinth: prayers from a Late Antique prison

The late antique graffiti at Corinth were discovered on paving stones in the north-west shops of the agora (Fig. 1), in a room adjacent to the central 'boudroumi vault'. The paving stones appear to have been associated with modifications to the Roman structure in the late antique era.⁷ A similar pavement slab bearing the same material and stylistic qualities was found near the north-west shops, featuring an acclamation

Greek state). I hope to address Wadi Hajjaj, and the complex history of the graffiti, in the future. Another site which may have been worthy of discussion, if more time was available, is a Byzantine era prison at Cherson, For the material from the Sinai, see A. Negev, *The Inscriptions of Wadi Haggag* (Jerusalem 1977). For the prison at Cherson, see A. Vinogradov and I. Polinskaya, *Inscriptions of the Northern Black Sea* <<https://iospe.kcl.ac.uk/5.91.html>> [accessed 10 October 2023].

6 R. H. Banes, 'Scratch that: a comparative approach to graffiti in the late antique eastern Mediterranean c. 300–700 CE', diss. PhD, University of Birmingham 2023.

7 R. L. Scranton, *Mediaeval Architecture in the Central Area of Corinth* (Princeton 1957) 46–57. Scranton places these modifications as post-classical, but prior to the twelfth century. The prison graffiti at Corinth can be found in E. Sironen (ed.), *Inscriptiones Graecae IV Inscriptiones Argolidis*. 2nd edn. Fasc. 3 (Berlin 2016) (hereafter IG IV² 3) nos. 1270–94.

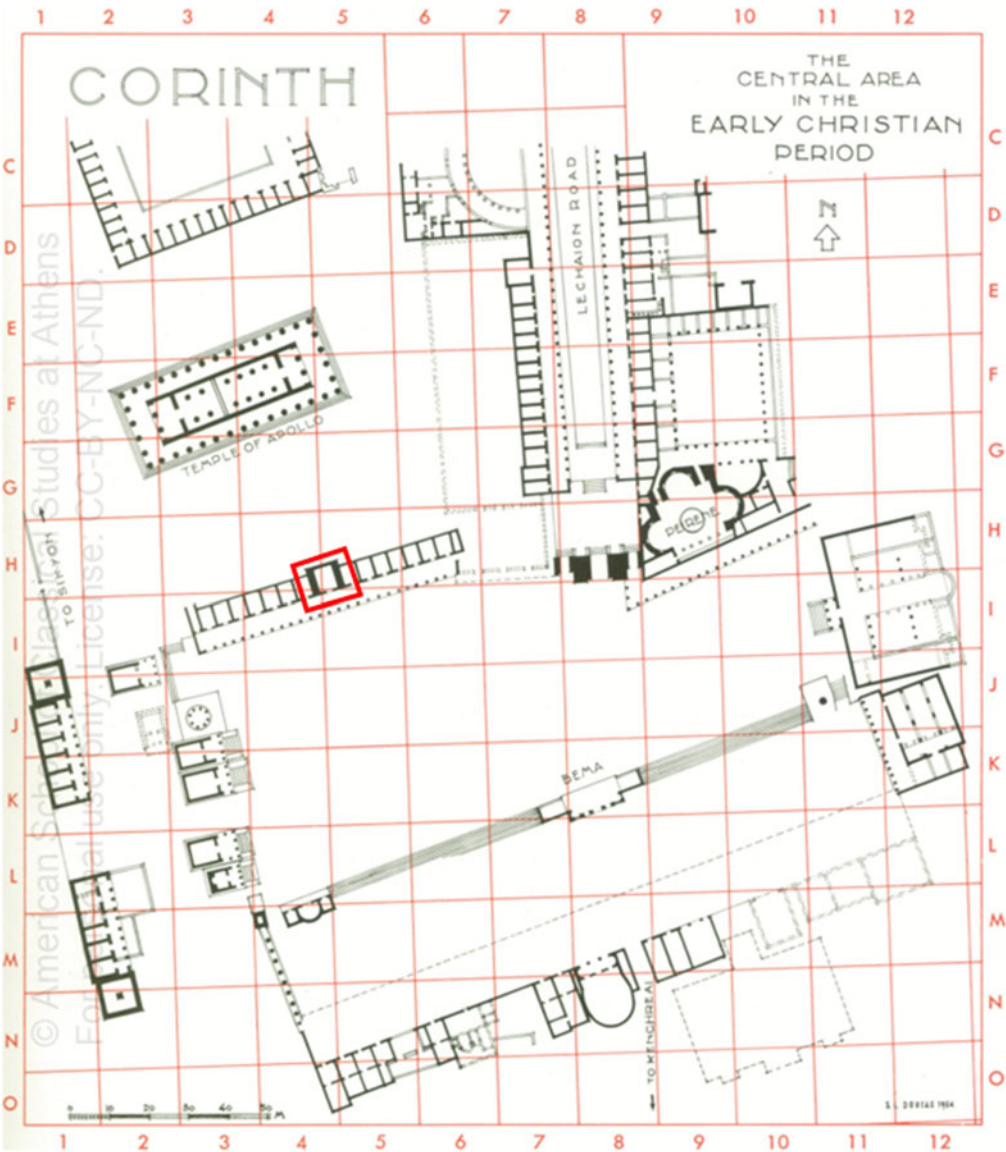


Fig. 1. The Corinthian agora in late antiquity, with the ‘boudroumi’ vault indicated in red. Source: Scranton, *Medieval Architecture*, plan IV.

of the emperors Justin II and Tiberios, which may allow us to narrow down these modifications to the sixth century, assuming the imperial acclamation was added during or shortly after renovations.⁸ The graffiti were discovered in 1901 and first

8 A. Brown, *Corinth in Late Antiquity: a Greek, Roman and Christian city* (London 2018) 105–6. The pavement slab honouring the emperors was reused as a medieval tombstone, and is thus found out of context. For this inscription, see: IG IV² 3, 1266.

published in 1931 by Benjamin D. Meritt, but further examination of the inscriptions in context has been prevented by their removal from the north-west shops to storage.⁹ That this space functioned as a prison can be ascertained from the content of the graffiti, including one reference to βουκελλάριοι ‘guards’ and others to different forms of captivity or restraint.¹⁰ Various dates have been proposed for the graffiti, from the fourth to tenth centuries; though if we accept a sixth century date for the renovations this can be narrowed to the sixth to tenth centuries.¹¹ At first glance, the extant graffiti from Corinth adhere to the prayer formulae we would expect to see in late antique graffiti. There are two examples of the ‘Lord, help’ formula or its variants, for example, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, help your servant Kosmas. Amen’.¹² These inscriptions firmly root the Corinth graffiti within the broader epigraphic landscape of the late antique world.

However, not all prayer texts contain the expected formulae. Some inscriptions instead refer to the explicit dangers faced by those incarcerated at Corinth. The language used was personal and in relation to a specific set of circumstances felt by each prisoner. One text, for example, reads ‘may the fortune triumph ... do not judge unfairly (παραδικάσων) between me and my enemies.’¹³ Παραδικάζω (which Geoffrey Lampe translates as ‘pervert justice’, may also be rendered ‘judge unfairly’) is not seen in graffiti at other sites in the eastern Mediterranean in this period.¹⁴ There is no particular reason that the perversion of justice would be preeminent in the minds of the average pilgrim or urban inhabitant. However, the unfair judgement ‘between me and my enemies’ was a pressing concern for this prisoner – and they necessarily addressed God expressing this concern. Although the verb παραδικάζω does not appear in other graffiti from Corinth, the imperative of ἀπόλλυμι (or ἀπολλύω) ‘destroy’ appears twice. One text wishes destruction on an unnamed enemy, whilst also

9 B.D. Merritt, *Greek Inscriptions*, VIII, 1 (Princeton 1931), nos. 199–220.

10 For βουκελλάριοι see E. McGeer, ‘Boukellarioi’, in A. Kazhdan (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford 1991) 316.

11 Late antique dating: M. B. Walbank, ‘Where have all the names gone? The Christian community in Corinth in the late Roman and early Byzantine eras’, in S. J. Friesen, D. N. Schowalter, and J. C. Walters (eds), *Corinth in Context: comparative studies on religion and society* (Leiden 2010) 250–316 (272). Walbank offers a date of the seventh century, but does not provide his reasoning. See also C. Breytenbach, ‘Christian prisoners: fifth and sixth century inscriptions from Corinth’, *Acta Theologica* 36 (2016) 302–9 (303–4) and J. Judge-Mulhall, ‘A new interpretation of a graffito from a late antique prison at Corinth (=IG IV² 3, 1271)’, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 217 (2021) 89–94 (89–91). Breytenbach and Judge-Mulhall both offer late antique dates based on content; Scranton, *Corinth*, 46 has suggested a date in the ninth or tenth centuries on paleographic grounds, but represents a minority opinion.

12 IG IV² 3, 1272. Κ(ύρι)ε Ἰ(ησο)ῦ Χ(ριστ)έ, βοήθῃ τῷ δούλου σου / Κ Ο C M † † ἀμήν. † The formula ‘Lord, help’ also appears in IG IV² 3, 1271. ΟC † ἔξκουε. auris / † Κ(ύρι)ε, βοήθῃ τοῦ δ-ούλου σο. ‘Listen! Lord, help your servant’

13 IG IV² 3, 1281. νικᾷ ἡ|τύχη ΟΙΥ / ----- -P - / ----- -NE / ----- -KΠΟΥ // Δ[.]I μ[ῆ] παραδικα-/σον ἀνά μέσο(v) / ἐμοῦ κἄ τῶν ἐκθρον / μου.

14 G. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford 1961). s.v. παραδικάζω.

referencing ‘this place’ (as reconstructed by the editor) in which they are imprisoned, highlighting their distress at their incarceration.¹⁵ Their enemy was likely the individual responsible for their imprisonment, probably a certain ‘Marinos’ who is referenced in two other inscriptions. One text also employed the term ‘destroy’ to request that God bring harm to Marinos. It read ‘God of Justice who judges rightly, strike quickly against the Hellenes ... and destroy the hated ...]eros and Marinos the sons of Ioannes the barber.’¹⁶ The epithet ὁ Θεὸς δίκης, ‘God of Justice’ emphasizes that God is invoked in his role as divine arbiter of right and wrong. The term Hellenes is also noteworthy: in late antiquity this term often took on a pejorative meaning against pagans, and thus its appearance here may indicate that the author’s imprisonment was underscored by a religious conflict.¹⁷ (The term was fluid, however, and the appearance may also indicate the author did not consider themselves as having a Hellenic identity.) Another graffito also requests God’s intervention in the conflict between the author, the incarcerated Petrounia, and Marinos, ‘Theotokos, punish Marinos who has thrown us here and release (with) us Petrounia.’¹⁸ One inscription requested Leonianos (who is similarly blamed for the authors imprisonment) is destroyed.¹⁹ Another inscription reads: ‘make them die a bad death’ and may have referred to those who imprisoned the author.²⁰ Throughout this material, texts also explicitly request the author’s liberation.²¹ In these dire situations, it is apparent that the Corinthian prisoners used not only common formulae, but developed their own in response to imminent danger.

Also notable is how the graffiti at Corinth inverted and adapted common late antique prayer formulae and acclamations to fit the circumstances of the author. This is particularly overt in one example: ‘may the fortune of those suffering in this lawless place triumph! Lord, have no mercy on (those who) threw me here’.²² Here, the

15 IG IV² 3, 1280. † ἄγιε ----- / ζωμεν----- / ἀπὸ τοῦ τόπ[ου τούτου] / Ἀνδρέαν, Γεώργιον, --]-- // † τρον, κ(αὶ) ἀπόλεσο[ν --] / ----- . ‘Saint... live (?) ... from this place, Andreas, Georgios... and destroy.’ The reconstruction of τόπου τούτου seems likely, as the same phrase appears in IG IV² 3, 1277 (see n. 23).

16 IG IV² 3, 1279. † ὁ Θε(ε)ς τῆς δίκης τῆς δικα- / ζούσης ὀρθῶς, φλα[γέλ]ωσον τάχος / τοὺς Ἑλληνας τ- -c.5- -ΡΟΥ ποτέ κ(αὶ) ἀπό- / λησον τοὺς ἐχθρ[οὺς] - -c.6- -]ηρου κ(αὶ) Μαρίνου // [τῶν] υἱῶν Ἰ[ωάννου] τοῦ κ[ουρέου]. †

17 A. Kazhdan, ‘Hellenes’ in *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 911–12.

18 IG IV² 3, 1275. The complete inscription read: † Κ(ύρι)ε ὁ Θεὸς ὦ τὸ σκό- / τος διαχορίσας κὲ / φῶς ἀνατήλας διὰ / τῆς ὑκουμένης, ἀπό//δος, Θεοτόκε, ἀπό- / δος Μαρίνου τοῦ / βαλότος ἡμᾶς / ᾄδε κὲ ἴψο τὸς / ἡμᾶς χ’ ἡμᾶ- / ζ τὴν Πετρο- / νίαν. †

19 IG IV² 3, 1276 ii. † Κ(ύρι)ε, ἀπόλεσον Λεωνιανό(ν), διὰ / τίνος ἰσήλαμεν ᾄδε. ‘Lord, destroy Leonianos, through whom we came here.’

20 IG IV² 3, 1273. πόησον Κ(ύρι)ε μόρφ κακῶ ἀποθάνε τους.

21 As in IG IV² 3, 1279 (see f.n. 12) and IG IV² 3, 1270. † Κ(ύρι)ε ὁ Θε(ε)ς καὶ δίκ[ι] κ[α]θ[α]ρά, / λύτροσε τοῦ τόπου τούτου / τοὺς δύο ἀδερφοὺς / ΧΤ ΦΚ Βούδιν καὶ Ἰωάν- / νιν τοὺς βουκελλαρίους / τοῦ ἐπάρχου, ἀμίν. † ‘Lord, God and pure justice release from this place the two brothers, Boudios and Ioannes the boukellarioi of the eparch. Amen.’

22 IG IV² 3, 1277. νικᾷ ἰ τύχι τῶν καταπ- / ονουμένων ἐν τῷ / ἀνόμου τόπο τού- / το· Κ(ύρι)ε, μὴ ἐλείσις τὸν // βαλότα ἡμᾶς ᾄδε.

common prayer ‘Lord, have mercy’ was inverted to wish harm on those who imprisoned the author.²³ The phrase ‘Lord, have no mercy’ indicated the author had a familiarity with the language of inscribed prayer but did not believe it suited their present needs. Rather, they found a way to utilize this formula to relay their desired message to God. The same phenomena can be recognized in the appropriation of the phrase $\nu\kappa\tilde{\alpha}$ ἢ τύχη ‘may the fortune triumph’, which appears in four inscriptions in the prison at Corinth.²⁴ Νικῶ ἢ τύχη was a common phrase in the spoken and epigraphic language of the eastern Roman empire. It appeared in the *Book of Ceremonies*, spoken during the proclamation of Anastasios I ‘may the fortune of the Romans triumph’.²⁵ A variant of this phrase, ‘may the faith triumph’ was also spoken during ceremonies, by the Green and Blue circus factions.²⁶ The individuals who used this term during public ceremonies also carved the phrase in the entertainment venues of the late antique city: for example, a graffito from the theatre of Aphrodisias, which reads ‘may the fortune of the Greens, and the Green mime, triumph’.²⁷ This acclamation, which would have been familiar to the urban inhabitants at Corinth, was appropriated by the prisoners to invoke their own fortune in their treatment by judicial authorities.

The graffiti from Corinth provide a key insight into the personal expression of late antique people.²⁸ The common formulae which existed in the late antique Greek cultural context were used by those incarcerated in order to request divine aid, however they were not used in isolation. The appearance of specific requests is indicative of the fact that when the author of a graffito had a request of God, they deviated from the use of normal epigraphic prayer. Requests for the destruction of those who imprisoned the authors, and fair judgement for the incarcerated, were distinctive

23 Breytenbach, *Christian Prisoners*, 306.

24 See: IG IV² 3, 1274; IG IV² 3, 1276 i; IG IV² 3, 1277; IG IV² 3, 1281.

25 Constantine Porphyrogenitos, *Le livre des cérémonies*, ed. G. Dagron, B. Flusin, and D. Feissel, II (Paris 2020) 431. $\nu\kappa\tilde{\alpha}$ ἢ τύχη τῶν Ῥωμαίων.

26 Constantine Porphyrogenitos, 2, 233. Ὁ Λαός: «Νικῶ ἢ πίστις τῶν Βενέτων.» - Οἱ Πράσινοι: «τῶν Πρασίνων»

27 For inscriptions from Aphrodisias (Hereafter IPh2007), see J. Reynolds, C. Roueché, and G. Bodard (eds), *Inscriptions of Aphrodisias (2007)*. <<http://insaph.kcl.ac.uk/iaph2007>> [accessed 10 October 2023]. The inscription of the mime can be found at: IPh2007 8.104. $\nu\kappa\tilde{\alpha}$ ἢ τύχη / τῶν Πρασίνων / κ(αί) τον μίμον τοῦ / Πρασίν(ου). This acclamation is found carved several other times in Aphrodisias, including but not limited to: IPh2007 1.404; IPh2007 10.32; IPh2007 10.3 Vii. Variants are also attested in a fifth-century theatre from Alexandria, e.g. Z. Borkowski, *Inscriptions des factions à Alexandrie* (Warsaw 1981) no. 24. $\text{Νικῶ ἢ τύχη / τῶν <\nu>\acute{\epsilon}\omega\nu \pi\rho\alpha\sigma\acute{\iota}\nu\omega\nu$ ‘May the fortune of the young Greens triumph’. The phrase is also used to refer to other social groups: at Xanthos in Lycia it appears in a graffito of a social group called the *marianoï*, see E. Hansen and C. Le Roy, ‘Au Létôon de Xanthos: les deux temples de Létô’, *Revue Archéologique* (1976) 317–36 (336).

28 There are parallels to the Corinthian prison in the Byzantine period. A tenth- or eleventh-century prison has been identified at Cherson, where graffiti from the Cherson prison contains a mixture of common prayer formulae, e.g. ‘Lord, help’, and those more relevant to the specific circumstances of the imprisoned, such as a graffito invoking the support of a local official. For this material, see A. Vinogradov and I. Polinskaya, *Inscriptions of the Northern Black Sea* <<https://iospe.kcl.ac.uk/5.91.html>> [accessed 10 October 2023].

of the situation of the imprisoned, and thus their prayers contain similarly unique terminology. The extant graffiti all display the authors' awareness of the common epigraphic formulae of religious and urban environments, and their willingness to appropriate these formulae to wish harm on their enemies or call for their own vindication.

Grammata Bay, Syros: travellers and the dangers of the sea

Grammata Bay, on Syros in the Cyclades,²⁹ is a natural harbour which functioned as a port in antiquity.³⁰ Visitors to the island carved their names and prayers upon the rocks of the harbour, with graffiti dating from the third century through to the medieval era.³¹ The authors of the Christian graffiti were travellers visiting Syros, either as a final destination or as part of a longer journey. The majority of the visitors appear to have been sailors or ship's captains travelling for economic purposes, although some authors identified themselves by their ecclesiastical and professional titles: reader, deacon, goldsmith.³² Others used military and naval titles such as *optio*, a position within the Roman and late Roman army which had several associations.³³ Visitors to Syros appear to have originated from a diverse range of areas, but two main groups emerge. The first is travellers from within the Cyclades, with fifteen texts indicating the author originated from another island.³⁴ The most common of these is Naxos, the largest Cycladic island, named as a place of origin in four inscriptions.³⁵ Smaller Cycladic islands are also referenced, such as Gyaros.³⁶ The second group of travellers are those coming from further distances, including Asia Minor and the near east. One text names Ephesos as a place of origin, whilst others name Tyre and Bithynia (Fig. 2).³⁷ Georges Kiourtzian notes that the lack of female names in the

29 For a detailed discussion of the history of Syros and Tinos see P. Nowakowski, 'Pilgrims and Seafarers: a survey of travellers' graffiti from the Aegean Islands', in Felle and Ward-Perkins, *Cultic Graffiti*, 111–36.

30 G. Kiourtzian, *Recueil des Inscriptions Grecques Chrétiennes des Cyclades, de la fin du IIIe au VIIIe siècle après J.-C* (Paris 2000) 137; Nowakowski, *Pilgrims and Seafarers*, 112–13.

31 Nowakowski, *Pilgrims and Seafarers*, 112.

32 For deacons: Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, nos. 105, 107, 123, 136d and 85. For the goldsmith: Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, no. 93. and Nowakowski, *Pilgrims and Seafarers*, 119.

33 For the *optio*: Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, no. 131.

34 For these texts, see Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, nos. 77, 80, 105, 108, 109, 110, 115, 117, 121, 122, 126, 128, 129, 132 and 136k.

35 See Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, nos. 109, 105, 108 and 110.

36 Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, no. 80. Κ(ύρι)ε βοήθη τῷ δούλῳ / σου Μόσχῳ Γυαρίτου. 'Lord, help your servant Moschos of Gyaros'. Gyaros is also mentioned in Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, no. 117. Κ(ύρι)ε σῶσον τὴν σύμ/ πλυν Ἰσιδόρου / Ἀπικραντίου Γυαρίτου, ἀμὴν Χριστέ. 'Lord, save Isidoros son of Apikrantios of Gyaros and his sailing companions. Amen. Christ.' Travel between Syros and Gyaros must have been a relatively insignificant journey, with the southernmost point of Gyaros being only 15km from Grammata Bay.

37 Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, no. 93; Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, 96. Δόξα τῷ / σώσαντι / ἡμᾶς / ἐν Τύρῳ. 'Give salvation to us, in Tyre.' Nowakowski, *Pilgrims and Seafarers*, fig. 9.4.



Fig. 2. Map depicting origin of travellers to Syros. Source: Nowakowski, *Pilgrims and Seafarers*, fig. 9.4.

inscriptions suggests travellers were unlikely to be motivated by pilgrimage.³⁸ The demographics of travellers generally allows us to reconstruct the visitors to Syros as men motivated to travel for civic, military, or economic reasons.

The Christian graffiti at Grammata Bay have typically been dated to late antiquity. The material, which is abundant and shows a close familiarity with Christian formulae, can likely be dated to a period of relatively high Christianization within the Roman empire. For these reasons, Kiourtzian suggests a dating of the fifth century onwards, with some as fourth-century in origin.³⁹ Kiourtzian generally provides a *terminus ante quem* of the year 649, arguing that the presence of the Arab fleet in the Cyclades would preclude shipping in the region.⁴⁰ This is with the exception of two inscriptions, which Kiourtzian suggests may be twelfth to thirteenth century. However, there is evidence that this reading should be broadened. For example, one graffito lists the naval title κένταρχος ‘kentarchos’, a middle Byzantine title, and Kiourtzian suggests this is the earliest reference to that position.⁴¹ This only follows, however, if one accepts Kiourtzian’s unpersuasive claim that 649 represents a definitive end date for travel within the Cyclades. Whilst the Arab fleet may have disturbed long-distance travel between some of the cities and regions featured in the graffiti (Tyre, Ephesos and

38 Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, 148.

39 Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, 138–41; Nowakowski, *Pilgrims and Seafarers*, 121.

40 Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, 138–41; Nowakowski, *Pilgrims and Seafarers*, 121.

41 Kiourtzian, *Cyclades* no. 133; Kiourtzian, *Cyclades* 197.

Bithynia), there is little reason to think this prevented more local travel in the seventh century and beyond. Archaeological evidence from Naxos indicates that the Cycladic islands remained relatively well-connected to one another and the Greek mainland during the seventh to tenth centuries.⁴² Consequently, even if long distance travel declined, we should not assume a complete abandonment of inter-island travel in the middle Byzantine Cyclades. We might therefore, accept a dating of the graffiti at Grammata as between the fourth and twelfth or thirteenth centuries, with the earlier period being that of greatest epigraphic production.

Again, it is important to read the graffiti from Syros within the context of late antique and Byzantine epigraphic prayer formulae. Requests for divine aid are among the most common Christian inscriptions at Grammata Bay. In total, of ninety-one inscriptions, forty-seven feature either ‘Lord, help’, ‘Christ, help’, or variants. As Grammata was not an urban location with a formal epigraphic tradition, this use of common formulae is revealing: it indicates that early Byzantine individuals were acutely aware of the terminologies which dominated their informal epigraphy, and chose to replicate this language themselves.

However, as with Corinth, the graffiti from Syros contain language which references the danger faced by the authors. In the case of Syros, however, it was not the risks associated with imprisonment and trial, but those associated with sea travel. The sea was represented as a dangerous environment in classical, late antique and Byzantine culture. The threat of storms, piracy, and being cast adrift were ever present. Synesios of Cyrene recorded his own experience of being stranded at sea following a storm and the near-death experience it precipitated; he ended his letter advising his brother ‘may you never trust yourself to the sea’.⁴³ The same fear of harm whilst at sea is manifested in material culture such as pilgrimage tokens. A stamp for creating these tokens depicts Saint Isidore of Chios holding a ship (Fig. 3).⁴⁴ Another pilgrimage token depicting Saint Phokas, who was particularly revered by sailors, standing aboard a ship, complete with oars and a rudder, which acted as a placeholder for the ship a pilgrim would take on his or her journey, whilst the image of the saint invoked his presence and protection.⁴⁵ For the sailors travelling to Syros, it is therefore not surprising they

42 A. Vionis, ‘Island responses in the Byzantine Aegean: Naxos under the lens of current archaeological research’, in J. Crow and D. Hill (eds), *Naxos and the Byzantine Aegean: insular responses to regional change* (Athens 2018) 61–80 (63–5). Vionis notes how ceramics and tableware excavated at Naxos follows types found at many other locations in the Aegean.

43 Synesios of Cyrene, *Epistle 4: To Eutropius. The Letters of Synesios of Cyrene Translated into English with Introduction and Notes*, tr. A. Fitzgerald (London 1926) 80–91 (91). For a discussion of the sea in late antique and Byzantine literature see M. E. Mullett, ‘In peril on the sea: travel genres and the unexpected’, in R. Macrides (ed.), *Travel in the Byzantine World* (Aldershot 2002) 259–85.

44 V. A. Foskolou, ‘“Reading” the images on Pilgrim Mementoos (Eulogies): their iconography as a source for the cult of saints in the early Byzantine period’, in D. Ariantzi and I. Eichner (eds), *Seelenheil und Lebensglück. Das byzantinische Pilgerwesen und seine Wurzeln* (Mainz 2018) 315–27 (319).

45 Foskolou, *Pilgrim Mementoos*; G. Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art* (Washington D.C. 1982) 33.



Fig. 3. Stamp for the creation of a pilgrimage token, featuring Saint Isidore of Chios holding a ship. © The Walters Art Museum. <https://art.thewalters.org/detail/22682/pilgrim-stamp-of-saint-isidore/>. [Accessed 07.11.2023].

expressed fear of sea travel in their prayers. The Cyclades suffers from strong winds and weather variability – particularly in the spring and summer when most shipping would have been taking place, meaning that a desire for protection from storms would have been particularly relevant.⁴⁶ Of inscriptions at the bay 37% carry explicit references to ships or crew.⁴⁷ One text prays for the safety of the ‘Georgios’ ship and Petros the captain with his sailing companions’.⁴⁸ Another two graffiti name the ships which travelled.⁴⁹

The desire for protection whilst at sea is made even more explicit through the use of the term εὔπλοια, ‘fair voyage’. Seven late antique graffiti at Grammata feature some such invocation. For example, a Christian inscription which finishes ‘grant to him good

46 J. Beresford, *The Ancient Sailing Season* (Leiden 2013) 68–9.

47 25 out of 91 graffiti.

48 Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, no. 126. Κύ(ριε) σῶσον τὸ πλῆ[ο] / Γεωγίω<v> κὲ Πέτρο ναυ/κλήρων μετὰ τῆς συ/ πλύ(ας) αὐτοῦ Μιλισίων / (καὶ) Πίλου<μ>(σ)ιανῶ(ν), ἀμήν.

49 Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, no. 103. <KI> *Κ(ύρι)ε σῶσον τὸ / πλοῖον Μαρία / Ἰσ(ι)δόρου Πι/α[ρ]έως. ‘Lord, save the ship Maria of Isidoros from Piraeus.’ And Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, no. 92. Ὁ χωρὸς τῶν ἁγίων ἀποστόλων / σώσα[τ]αί [τὸ] πλοῖον Μαρίαν μετὰ τ(ῶν) / γωμοτῶν ΑΥ... CTIN (καὶ) Ἰωάν[νου] / ναυ<τ>-κλήρου (καὶ) τον συνπλεόντων[ν] // αὐτῶ. ‘Chorus of the holy apostles, save the ship Maria with its cargo... and Ioannes the Captain and his sailing companions.’

sailing, amen’.⁵⁰ Invocations for ‘good sailing’ were neither unique to Syros, nor a Christian innovation. According to the Packard Humanities Institute (PHI) database of Greek inscriptions, εὐπλοια appears in some form in 75 inscriptions (not accounting for spelling variations).⁵¹ Twenty-seven originate in the Aegean islands; others are found along the mainland coastline. For example, of the fourteen inscriptions featuring which the PHI lists in the Peloponnese, thirteen are found on the island of Protis, and one is found at Kolonides on the Messenian coast.⁵² The appearance of εὐπλοια in regions associated with the sea and sea-travel indicates its association with the cultural fear of the sea from this era. At Syros itself, the invocation for ‘good sailing’ appears in explicitly non-Christian texts, for example ‘Good sailing to Ioulianos of Milos the Serapis-lover, son of Artemisios’ highlights the definitive use of the phrase from an era which is certainly earlier than most, if not all, of the Christian invocations.⁵³ The continuation of the use of the ‘Good sailing’ formula, and references to ships and professions in the pre-Christian graffiti from the site into the late antique and Byzantine inscriptions, indicated a universal need of sailors to be protected from dangers of the sea.

Of special note is the use of the σῶσον ‘save’ prayer formula at Grammata. Although the prayer is recognized in multiple contexts in the late antique and Byzantine worlds (both textual and material) it is surprisingly uncommon in graffiti, appearing just thirty-five times, or in roughly 4% of all textual graffiti.⁵⁴ Notably, twenty-three of these appearances are from Syros. We might therefore wonder if requests to be saved carried a special meaning amongst the sailors stopping at this island. I posit that the specific choice of the term ‘save’ was due to the need for physical salvation from the dangers of the sea and sailing, something evident in those texts which mention ships. For example, ‘Lord, save the ship of Georgios and Petros ...’.⁵⁵ Furthermore, whilst none of the pre-Christian inscriptions make use of the term βοήθει, there is a possible pre-Christian use of σῶσον, although it should be noted this text has been reconstructed.⁵⁶ The use of the term suggests it was not exclusive to spiritual salvation,

50 Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, no. 94. [Κ]ύ(ριε) σῶσ(ον) τὸ(ν) δοῦ(λόν σου) / [---] Ν Δ. [---] / [π]αράσχου εὐπλουαν, ἀμήν.

51 Packard Humanities Database of Greek Inscriptions. (Hereafter PHI) <https://epigraphy.packhum.org/search? patt=%CE%B5%CF%85%CF%80%CE%BB%CE%BF%CE%B9%CE%B1>. [Accessed 28 May 2024].

52 PHI Database of Greek Inscriptions. <https://epigraphy.packhum.org/search? patt=%CE%B5%CF%85%CF%80%CE%BB%CE%BF%CE%B9%CE%B1>. [Accessed 28 May 2024].

53 F F. Hiller (ed.), *Inscriptiones Graecae XII,5 Inscriptiones Cycladum* (Berlin 1903–9) no. 712,25 (hereafter IG XII,5) εὐπλοια / τῷ φιλο-/σεράπι / τῷ(;) Ἰουλι-/ανῶ / Ἀρτεμισίου / Μειλησιῶ. See also IG XII, 5, 712, 22.

54 35 of 920 graffiti.

55 Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, no. 126. Κύ(ριε) σῶσον τὸ πλῆ[ο] / Γεωγίω<v> κέ Πέτρο ναυ/κλήρων μετὰ τίς σου/ πλύ(αζ) αὐτοῦ Μίλισίων | (καί) Πίλου<μ>(σ)ιανῶ(ν), ἀμήν. Similar invocations can be found in Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, nos. 129, 131, 132.

56 IG XII,5 712,31. Ἀσκλη/πιε μέγα / [σῶσον Εὐ]τόχη / ... ἀγν[ά]ς. ‘Great Asklepios, save the good fortune of...’.

but was also associated with physical needs. It may be that Christian authors had few qualms about adopting this to request physical salvation, especially as it aligned neatly with pre-existing Christian prayer formulae. The use of *σῶσον* to request physical salvation is mirrored at other sites in the eastern Mediterranean, where the author of a graffito would have been endangered whilst travelling. From the late antique Greek graffiti along pilgrimage routes to St Catherine's monastery in the Sinai desert, *σῶσον* appears seven times, including one prayer which specifically mentions travel, 'Lord, save your servant Theophilus and those who belong to him, and his travelling companions. Amen'.⁵⁷ A certain correlation exists, therefore, between graffiti written by those on dangerous journeys, and those who selected the 'save' formula for their informal prayers.

The prayer formulae found in graffiti at Syros were carefully chosen by the authors, who altered their traditional prayers to accommodate the dangers they experienced during travel by sea in the Cyclades. Prayers were augmented with references to ships, sailors, and cargo in order to ensure God's recognition of the dangers of sea. The term 'save' was a part of a culturally defined roster of divine requests chosen by the sailors at Syros to ensure the safe completion of their journeys. It is important to note that these authors were not divorced from the 'formulaic' graffiti of the day, and made use of prayers such as 'Lord, help' frequently, whilst even prayers such as 'save' were not exclusively associated with safe travel. Rather, when selecting from this roster of prayers, they often chose one which they believed was most appropriate to their current needs.

The cave chapel of Saint Stephen, Tinos: selecting prayer formulae in the middle Byzantine era

The final site I will examine is the Cave Chapel of St Stephen on Tinos. The cave is located on the southern tip of the island, close to the Hellenistic sanctuary of Poseidon and the modern village of Gastria.⁵⁸ Denis Feissel discovered forty-eight Christian graffiti at the cave, which he published in 1980, accompanied by two additional inscriptions originally recorded by Hubert Demoulin. In 2000, Kiourtzian re-edited three of the inscriptions published by Feissel and published an additional three fragmentary graffiti from the cave.⁵⁹ The graffiti within the cave can most likely be ascribed to the middle Byzantine period due to textual similarities with the graffiti in the Parthenon, which can be securely dated to the late seventh to thirteenth centuries.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, despite

57 Negev, *Wadi Haggag*, no. 100. + Κ(ύρι)ε σῶσον τὸν δοῦλόν σου / Θεόφιλον κ(αι) τοὺς διαφέροντας/ αὐτοῦ κ(αι) τ(ῆ)ν συνοδίαν αὐτοῦ. Ἀμήν.

58 D. Feissel, 'Inscriptions byzantines de Ténos', *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 104 (1980) 477–518 (477)

59 For the re-edited graffiti from Feissel, see Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, nos. 137, 138 and 139. Kiourtzian's editions of these texts are identical to those provided by Feissel, and therefore I have used Feissel's editions for ease of reference. For the new graffiti published, see Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, nos. 140a, 140b and 140c.

60 Middle Byzantine dating: Feissel and Nowakowski agree on a middle Byzantine date, assuming the texts must have been written the end of the Arab presence in the Cyclades, although both also identify several texts

the plethora of inscriptional material, the purpose of the cave remains relatively obscure to us. There is no extant evidence of a systematic decorative programme, which we would expect from a church or chapel.⁶¹ It is possible that, as with Syros, the cave did not have a devotional function and merely provided a dry and convenient space for sailors to shelter.⁶² At the same time, however, whilst the Christian graffiti at Syros do not consistently invoke the aid of any specific religious figure besides ‘Lord’ or ‘Christ’ (excluding one reference to St Phokas) twelve graffiti at Tinos acclaim Stephen Protomartyr, suggesting that unlike Syros, the cave at Tinos did bear some association with a Christian saint.⁶³

Additionally, a modern chapel dedicated to Saint Stephen is placed nearby, and may therefore represent a possible continuation of this tradition, although it may also be the result of coincidence or the modern rediscovery of the Byzantine texts.⁶⁴ Thus it is probable the cave did have a cultic function and local association with the saint, and its visitors should therefore be seen as pilgrims.⁶⁵ Three graffiti in the cave list women as the primary supplicant, further supporting this suggestion.⁶⁶ Pilgrims to the cave appear to represent both local and foreign supplicants. Two inscriptions explicitly identify the author as from Tinos.⁶⁷ Other inscriptions indicate a foreign origin, with the authors identified as originating at several locations from the Aegean and Asia Minor. For example, two graffiti name Timotheos, Bishop of Knidos.⁶⁸ The date of Timotheos’ visit to the cave is uncertain, with both Feissel and Kiourtzian favouring a pre-seventh century date, on the assumption that travel across the Aegean would have been impossible in later periods due to the Arab navy, and due to the apparent disappearance of the title Bishop of Knidos in the eighth century.⁶⁹ As has already

which they believe may have predated the seventh century. (Feissel, *Ténos*, 518; Nowakowski, *Pilgrims and Seafarers*, 112–13.) As with Syros, the Arab navy would not have prevented travel within the Cyclades, nor visitors from the island of Tinos itself. Similarities to the Parthenon graffiti are discussed on page 11.

61 Feissel, *Ténos*, 514–15.

62 Nowakowski, *Pilgrims and Seafarers*, 113.

63 For the Saint Phokas graffito, see Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, no. 71. Κ(ύρι)ε κα(ι) ἄγγε Φωκᾶ σοσον / τὸ πλοῖον Μαρία καὶ τοὺς πλεόντας ἐν αὐτῷ / [---]πηδάλιο Σ[---] | [---] ΣΗΣ[---] / [---] Η[---]. ‘Lord and Saint Phokas, save the ship Maria and the sailors on it ...’.

64 Feissel, *Ténos*, 477.

65 Nowakowski, *Pilgrims and Seafarers*, 113.

66 For graffiti written by women: Feissel, *Ténos*, nos. 6, 13 and 14.

67 Feissel, *Ténos*, no. 14. † Ἄγγε / Στέφανε / φοήθη (sic) τῆς / δούλη(ς) σου Θεωφύλακτου τοῦ Τηνηακοῦ. ‘Saint Stephen, shelter the servant of God Theophylakto (?) of Tinos.’; Feissel, *Ténos*, no. 4. Ἄγγε Στέφανε προτομάρου / βοήθη τοῦ / δούλου σου Κοσμά τοῦ Τηνηακοῦ. ‘Saint Stephen Protomartyr, help your servant Kosmas from Tinos.’ It should be noted that in both these graffiti, Feissel interprets *Τηνηακοῦ* as a patronym, ‘son of Tieniakos’. If *Τηνηακοῦ* is a personal name, rather than a toponym, it is most likely still connected to the individual’s origin on the island of Tinos.

68 Feissel, *Ténos*, no. 38. Ο Θε(εο)ς τῆς Θεωτόκου βοήθη / Τιμόθεο ἐπισκ(όπω) Κνίδου. ‘God of the Theotokos, help Timotheos the Bishop of Knidos’ and Feissel, *Ténos*, no. 39. Θεοτόκε βοήθη Τιμοθέω ἐπισκόπο Κνίδου / ..ου ...κλια / .. γ .. γα ‘Theotokos, help Timotheos, Bishop of Knidos...’

69 Feissel, *Ténos*, 500; Kiourtzian, *Cyclades*, 205.

been discussed, Arab presence is not a strong enough argument to suggest travel could not have occurred, additionally it appears that the title of Bishop of Knidos re-emerged in the tenth century.⁷⁰ Accordingly, a middle Byzantine date for this graffito is still possible. Another author travelling from Asia Minor was ‘Eustathios of Paphlagonia’.⁷¹ Another originated from the Greek mainland: ‘Ioannes of Athens’, perhaps a goldsmith.⁷² Even if these travellers did not journey to Tinos on pilgrimage, they chose to visit the chapel to partake in the cult of St Stephen whilst on the island.

As with Corinth and Syros, the graffiti at Tinos largely align with the epigraphic traditions we would expect to see in the Byzantine era. The most common prayer inscribed in the cave chapel is ‘Lord, help’, which appears in 72% of graffiti at the site.⁷³ There are also many local characteristics of the prayers at Tinos. Eleven inscriptions finish with the term ‘amen’, which is uncommon in Byzantine graffiti, but not unprecedented. More notable however, are the six inscriptions which also include the Greek translation of ‘amen’, *γένοιτο* or ‘so be it’. *Ἀμήν, γένοιτο* appears in the graffiti at three other known sites in the eastern Mediterranean, in one graffito at Panormon in Crete, one text from Ephesos in Asia Minor and in four texts at the Parthenon in Athens.⁷⁴ As we know from the inscription of Ioannes the Athenian that travel between Athens and the cave chapel of St Stephen occurred, the use of *ἀμήν γένοιτο* should probably be read as a regional variation in graffiti, specific to Athens and those places in frequent contact.⁷⁵ Regardless of this local variation however, the frequency of the ‘Lord, help’ formulae associate these graffiti firmly with the typical nature of epigraphic Byzantine prayer.

As with Syros, however, we see that a selection of graffiti includes reference to the dangers of the Cyclades. The cave is only meters from the shore, and those who

70 Nowakowski, *Pilgrims and Seafarers*, 121–2.

71 Feissel, *Ténos*, no. 44. † Εὐστάθ(ι)ος ? Πεφλαγών ... / / ‘Eustathios of Paphlagonia’.

72 Feissel, *Ténos*, no. 40. Κ(ύρι)ε βοήθ(η) Ἰωάννου Ἀθουέου τοῦ / χρ(υσο)χοῦ ? ΓΑΠΡΟΣ ? ‘Lord, help Ioannes of Athens the Goldsmith’

73 38 of 53 inscriptions in the Cave Chapel of Saint Stephen feature the ‘help’ invocation.

74 For Panormon, see: A. C. Bandy, *The Greek Christian Inscriptions of Crete*, vol. X part I (Athens 1970) no. 73. Κ(ύρι)ε, βοήθ(η) τοῦ / δ’ οὐ’ λ’ οὐ’ ? σο[υ] / Κοσ[μᾶ.] / Ἀμήν γέ/νοιτ[ο]. ‘Lord, help your servant Kosmas. Amen, so be it.’ For Ephesos, see: H. Engelmann, D. Knibbe and R. Merkelbach (eds), *Die Inschriften von Ephesos*. Vol. IV (Bonn 1980) no. 1279. κ(ύρι)ε Ἰησοῦ Χ[ριστὲ καὶ Ἰωάννη(ς)] / ὁ θεόλογος [ῥύσατε ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ - -] / ἀπὸ τε τοῦ [πονηροῦ(?) ἀμήν, γέ/γγ(η)το κ(ύρι)ε. ‘Lord Jesus Christ and John the Theologian, deliver me from evil. Amen, so be it. Lord.’ For the use of this phrase at Athens, see A. K. Orlandos and L. Vranoussis, *Τὰ χαράγματα τοῦ Παρθενῶνος ἥτοι ἐπιγραφὰὶ χαραχθεῖσαι ἐπὶ τῶν κίωνων τοῦ Παρθενῶνος κατὰ τοὺς παλαιοχριστιανικοὺς καὶ βυζαντινοὺς χρόνους* (Athens 1973) nos. 6, 7, 33, 167.

75 The outlier is the appearance of this term at Panormon. It is possible that this author originated in Athens or Tinos, and travelled to Crete by boat. It is also possible this appearance was a coincidence. Outside of graffiti, the phrase *ἀμήν, γένοιτο* appears only twice on the Packard Humanities Institute Database of Greek Inscriptions, once in Athens and once in Nubia: <<https://inscriptions.packhum.org/allregions>> [accessed 10 October 2023].

worshipped there were either visitors who travelled to the island by ship or locals who would have been regular witnesses to the threats storm surges and flooding could cause. One text explicitly references the dangers of the sea, the author requesting that God ‘save him, Lord, in the sea’.⁷⁶ Another pilgrim similarly referenced the dangers caused by storms in his prayer ‘Lord, help your servant Sedorros... release him from the surge of the sea.’⁷⁷

Interestingly, by contrast with Syros, we do get a selection of texts which reference theological concerns, a factor which contributes to our reading of the Tinos cave as a cult environment or consecrated shrine, rather than merely a dry space for sailors to shelter. One Papageorges requested that he be free ‘from his sins, and free him from the indistinguishable fire’.⁷⁸ Similarly, a supplicant named Anna asked to be released from her sins, whilst two pilgrims, Gabril and Eirene, asked for the ‘requests of their heart’.⁷⁹ One inscription, which does not name its author, does not feature any prayer but instead relates to scripture. The very unusual invocation refers to Matthew 27:51, and is paralleled not in informal inscriptions but in formal church epigraphy.⁸⁰ Within this context we should therefore pay especial note to those inscriptions which reference the sea. They reveal that within this cultic environment, the fear of physical harm led to individuals expressing their desire for salvation from the sea.

A different category of graffiti in the cave chapel of St Stephen also illuminates the relationship between dangerous travel and prayer in graffiti. Seven graffiti feature either all, or part, of the phrase σκέπε, φρούρει καὶ φύλαττε ‘shelter, protect, and guard’, e.g. ‘Saint Stephen, shelter, protect and guard your servant Basilios, the lowest

76 Feissel, *Ténos*, no. 17. *Ἀργυρος πρ(εσβύτερος) ἀμαρτολὸς / τοῦ Βουλομένου ’ (?) σοῦσον αὐτ(ὸν) / Κ(ύρι)ε ἐν τῇ θαλάσῃ.* ‘Argyros Boulomenou, Presbyter and Sinner, save him, Lord, in the Sea or Argyros of Boulomen, Presbyter and Sinner, save him, Lord, in the Sea.’

77 Feissel, *Ténos*, no. 21. *Κ(ύρι)ε βοήθη τοῦ δούλου σου Σηδόρρου / τῆς ΠΛΟΥΤΗΝΑ (?) · λήτρωσον αὐτὸ(ν) / ἀπὸ ΘΑΛΛΟΥ θαλάσσης.* The meaning of the terms ΠΛΟΥΤΗΝΑ and ΘΑΛΛΟΥ in this graffiti is obscure, and Feissel was not able to solve their meaning.

78 Feissel, *Ténos*, no. 19. *† Κ(ύρι)ε βοή(θει) τοῦ δούλου σου Παπαγληγόρη κέ δὸς / αὐτὸν ἄφεσην ἀμαρτηῶν κέ λήτρωσε αὐ/τὸν ἐκ τοῦ πυρὸς τοῦ ἀσβέστου.*

79 Feissel 1980: no. 13. *Ἄγχε Στέφανε / βοήθη τῆς δού/λι(ς) σου Ἄννας τοῦ / Στροβηληατῆ ἢ κέ δὸς αὐτὴν / ἄφεσην ἀμαρ/τηῶν.* ‘Saint Stephen, help your servant Anna daughter of Strobeleates and give her release from sins.’ Feissel, *Ténos*, no. 11. *† Ἄγχε Στέφανε προτομάρτυς / σκέπε φρούρη φύλατε τὸν δούλόν σου Γαβρήλην / κέ τὴν δούλην σου Ἐρήνην κέ δὸς / αὐτὺς τὰ ἐτήματα τῶν καρδιῶν αὐτῶν κέ μὴ ἐγκαταλήτη αὐτοῦς ὁ Θ(εὸς) / τὰ πλοῦσηα τοῦ ἐλέη · ἀμὴν γέντω. †.* ‘Saint Stephen protomartyr, shelter, protect and guard your servant Gabril and your servant Eirene and give to them the requests of their heart and do not forsake us God, rich in your mercy, Amen. So be it.’

80 Feissel, *Ténos*, no. 36. *(Η) γῆς κλονῆτε κέ πᾶσα κτήσης / τρέμη, μ(ή)τηρ δὲ <θε>θρηνη κέ μα/θητῆς δακ(ρ)ύον, Χ(ριστὸν ;) <ορ>όροντες ἐ(ν) ξήλ(ο) / τεταμένο(ν). Τῆμα τὸν τόπο (ν) .. ἰ ..* ‘The earth is shaken and all creation quakes, and the mother laments and the disciple weeps, seeing Christ lying on the tree. Honour this place... Lord...’. This graffiti is paralleled in an eleventh–thirteenth-century epigram from a church in Cappadocia: A. Rhoby, *Byzantinische Epigramme auf Fresken und Mosaiken* (Vienna 2009) 279–81.

Archon, and his wife and his children'.⁸¹ The use of this formula at Tinos can be explained in multiple ways. Variants of 'shelter, protect and guard' appear multiple times in the graffiti at the Athenian Parthenon, e.g. a graffito reading 'Lord, our God, shelter and protect your servant Grigorios, Archivist, Amen'.⁸² The terms 'shelter and guard' also appear in a formal inscription at the Parthenon, indicating the use of this phrase across multiple forms of inscription.⁸³ This prayer is also attested on another island of the Cyclades, in an inscription from Naxos.⁸⁴ As with ἀμὴν γένοιτο, it is possible that 'shelter, protect and guard' was a localized Athenian and Cycladic prayer dispersed through travel to Tinos. However, I would like to propose an alternative theory which may have contributed to its adoption and use at Tinos. Although the formula is not recognized in any other Byzantine graffiti outside of Athens, the phrase is common on middle Byzantine seals and eulogia.⁸⁵ A tenth-century seal, currently in the Dumbarton Oaks collection, reads 'Cross, shelter, protect and guard your servant Konstantinos the priest'.⁸⁶ Another example reads 'Theotokos, guard and protect the most venerable Soteirios'.⁸⁷

What then might have motivated pilgrims and other supplicants at the chapel to adopt a phrase from seals when carving their graffiti? The answer may lie in the similar actions taken by seals and *eulogia*, and the individual traveller at Tinos. *Eulogia* were carried from a pilgrimage site to the supplicant's home, regardless of distance. Additionally, seals were responsible for the safe deliverance of a letter or object. The desire a seal would ensure letters arrived at their destination unaltered is evidenced in the inscription of one seal, which uses the terms 'guard' and 'protect' to refer to the seals purpose 'I am the seal of Leo Kouboukleisios, which both guards and

81 Feissel, *Ténos*, no. 2. Ἄγχε Στέφανε σκέπε φρού[η] / φύλατε τὸν δοῦλον σου / Βασίλῃον ἄρχοντα ΗΚΕ ἐ/λαχίστου κὲ τ[η]ς σ[η]βήου αὐ[τ]οῦ κὲ τῶν τέκνων αὐ[τ]ῶν. This version of the prayer also appears in Feissel, *Ténos*, nos. 1, 11, 12. Nos. 5, 10, and 14 each partially utilize this phrase.

82 Orlandos and Vranoussis, *Τὰ χαράγματα*, no. 129. Κ(ύρι)ε ὁ Θ(εὸ)ς ἡμῶν, / σκέπε φύλατ<τ>ε / τ]ὸν σὸν δοῦλον / Γ]ρίγόριον χαρ/<του>λάριον· ἀμὴν. I have re-edited this graffito according to the Leiden conventions.

83 Orlandos and Vranoussis, *Τὰ χαράγματα*, no. 116.

84 A. Rhoby, *Byzantinische Epigramme auf Stein*, vol. II (Vienna 2014) no. GR95.

85 'Shelter, protect and guard' is unique to graffiti at Tinos and Athens, but singular words are found in graffiti from other areas of the Byzantine world. For example, 'guard' is found at several different sites, including a basilica at Sergiupolis-Resafa: C. Römer, 'Die Griechischen Graffiti' in T. Ulbert (ed.), *Die Basilika des Heiligen Kreuzes in Resafa-Sergiupolis* (Mainz 1986) 171–9 (no. 23), at a cave church in Cappadocia: G. D. Jerphanion, *Les églises rupestres de Cappadoce: une nouvelle Province de l'art byzantine*, vol.2. (Paris 1932) no. 46, and at the Cave of the Seven Sleepers in Ephesos: C. Praschniker, *Das Cömeterium der Sieben Schläfer* (Vienna 1937) no. II.a.40b.

86 Dumbarton Oaks Online Collections < <https://www.doaks.org/resources/seals> > (accessed 10 October 2023) (hereafter DO Online Collections) Accession Number: BZS.1947.2.1398. Σταυρὲ σκέπε, φρούρει, φύλαττε τῷ σῶ δοῦλῳ Κωνσταντίνῳ ἱερεῖ. A similar formula, Σκέπε, σώζε, φύλαττε 'shelter, save and protect' is found on an eleventh-twelfth century seal from Kyiv: A. Wassilou-Seibt, *Corpus der Byzantinischen Siegel mit Metrischen Legenden*, Vol.2. (Vienna 2015) no. 1954.

87 DO Online Collections. Accession Number: BZS.1955.1.4565. Θεοτόκε, σκέπε, φύλατε ἐδεσιμώτατον Σωτήριον.

protects my things'.⁸⁸ Another seal from the eleventh or twelfth century reads 'The seal (is) guarding the words of Theophylaktos'.⁸⁹ It is possible the 'shelter, protect and guard' formulae were associated not only with local means of expression, but specifically with travel and the safe transfer of an individual or object from their place of origin to their destination. Thus, the supplicants who either arrived at Tinos by sea, or were locals who engaged in activities involving the sea, chose this phrase in order to ensure their physical safety. Once again, we see how the environment of the inscription and context of the author led to the adoption of uncommon yet meaningful formulae.

Before concluding, it is necessary to make a few comments on the palaeography of these graffiti. Of the seven inscriptions which request some variation of 'shelter, protect and guard', four have notable similarities in the handwriting, particularly in the form of ἄγιε 'Saint'.⁹⁰ All four of these graffiti open with an uncial alpha, followed by a majuscule gamma with a small vertical strike attached to the horizontal bar (Figs 4–5). The similarities in these inscriptions would hint at the same author inscribing each one; and as all four name different individuals, perhaps one author was paid to write these texts. If this was the case, then this author may have been an individual named Agathon, whose name appears in one text which also references 'the writer of this'.⁹¹ In the event that a writer, such as Agathon, acted as an intermediary, this does not discredit the importance of the formulae for understanding personal experience. The individual who commissioned or requested the text may very likely have had a choice of which formulae would be written.

For example, it is worth noting that it is not only these four texts which are written in the same hand, but four additional texts feature the distinctive ἄγιε (Figs 5–6).⁹² However, these texts each feature the prayer 'help', rather than any variant of 'shelter, protect and guard'.⁹³ The use of a different phrase in these four inscriptions would suggest that perhaps, even if the texts were commissioned, the supplicant perhaps still had the opportunity to select the prayer they wished to be inscribed on their behalf,

88 Wassilou-Seibt, *Corpus der Byzantinischen Siegel*, no. 2527. Σφραγι(τις) Λέοντό(ς) [ε]ἴμι κουβουκλησ(του) / τάμου ἰσα φρουρ(εῖ) (καὶ) φυλάττει πένο(ς).

89 DO Online Collections. Accession Number: BZS.1947.2.1622. Σφραγίς λόγουσ φρουροῦσα Θεοφυλάκτου. This seal is also published in Wassilou-Seibt, *Corpus der Byzantinischen Siegel*, no. 2555,

90 Feissel, *Ténos*, nos 5, 11, 12, 14. It should be noted another graffito from the cave, no. 2, may have been written by the same author and features the same alpha, however the gamma lacks the additional strike.

91 Feissel, *Ténos*, no. 5. Ἄγιε Στέφανε προτομάρτηρε φύλατε τὸ γράμμα. / † Κ(ύρι)ε † Κ(ύρι)ε βοήθη τοῦ δούλου σου Ἀγάθονος / ὅπου ἂν ἔχω περηπατῆν · ἀμ(ή)ν γένοι(το). 'Saint Stephen protomartyr, guard the writer of this, Lord, Lord, lord help your servant Agathon, no matter where he goes. Amen, so be it.'

92 Feissel, *Ténos*, nos. 4, 13, 15, 27.

93 It should be noted there are slight inconsistencies in the spelling of βοήθει in these four inscriptions. Feissel, *Ténos*, nos. 4 and 13 both offer βοήθη, whilst nos. 15 and 27 both use βούθη. Eta and upsilon were homophones in this era, so the switch does not render the idea the graffiti were written by the same individual impossible, particularly if they were inscribed at different times, but it does complicate it, and we are possibly considering a case where several different authors with similar handwriting, but non-identical spelling preferences, wrote the texts.

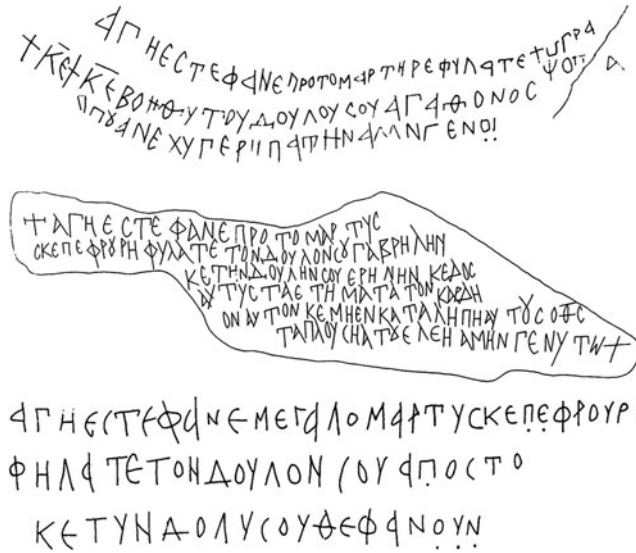


Fig. 4. ‘Shelter, protect and guard’ graffiti from Tinos. Source: Feissel, *Ténos*, nos. 5 (top), 11 (center), and 12 (bottom).

and selected the one they believed would grant them salvation from the sea. This is a suggestion supported by the appearance of two graffiti written in unique hands which were also found in the cave, which request protection for the author. One graffito written by, or on behalf of, an individual named Amanos, requests God ‘guard’ him.⁹⁴ This graffito was certainly written by a different author than Agathon, as is clear through the form of the alpha. In the graffito of Amanos, the alpha is majuscule, with a deep ‘V’ shape forming the cross-bar (Fig. 7). Similarly, another graffito (the personal name written here has been lost) utilizes the ‘shelter, protect and guard’ formula.⁹⁵ Although this graffito does share palaeographic similarities with the Agathon texts, such as the uncial alpha and the strike on the gamma, the graffito also makes use of the pi/rho ligature for *πρωτομάρτυρος*, which do not appear in the Agathon examples (Fig. 8). In all these inscriptions, regardless of whether they were inscribed by the supplicant or an intermediary, the use of the rare ‘shelter, protect and guard’ formula was a deliberate choice, motivated by the environment in which the texts were written.

As at Syros, inhabitants and visitors to Tinos were acutely aware of the dangers they faced in the island environment, and thus emphasized their desire for protection in their

94 Feissel, *Ténos*, no. 10. Κ(ύρι)ε ό Θε(ός) τῆς ἀγ(ί)α(ς) Θε(οτό)κου φύλαξον Ἄμανον / μετ(ά) τ(ῶν) ναυτῶν (αὐτοῦ) καί) πα(ν)τῶς τ(οῦ) ὄκου αὐτοῦ · ἀμήν γένητ(ο). ‘Lord, God of the holy Theotokos, guard Amanos with his sailors and all his household. Amen, so be it.’

95 Feissel, *Ténos*, no. 1. † Ο Θε(ός) διὰ τ(ῶν) πρεσβιῶν τοῦ ἀγ(ί)ου / πρ(ω)τ(ο)μ(ά)ρ(τυρ)ος Στεφάνου σκέπε [φρ]οῦρη φύλατε τὸν δοῦλον [σου] / Χρ ‘God, through the intercession of the Protomartyr Saint Stephen, shelter, protect, guard your servant ...’



Fig. 5. Graffiti from Tinos. Source: Feissel, Ténos, nos. 13 (top), 14 (center) and 15 (bottom).

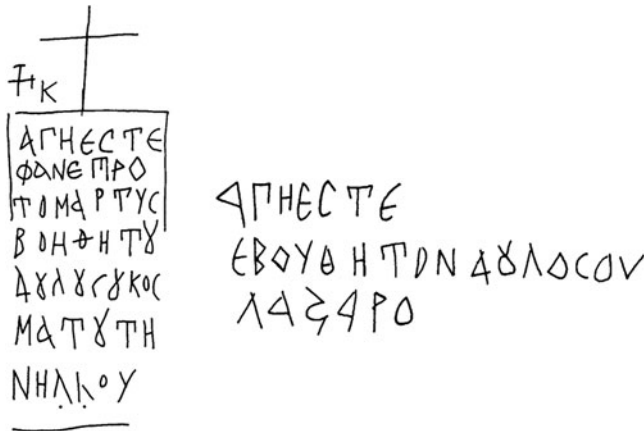


Fig. 6. Graffiti from Tinos with an uncial alpha and gamma with a short line. Source: Feissel, Ténos, nos. 4 (left) and 27 (right).

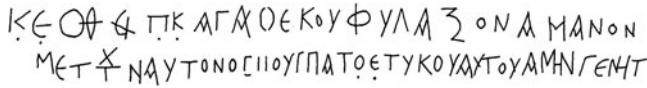


Fig. 7. Graffiti from Tinos requesting protection. Source: Feissel, Ténos, no. 10.

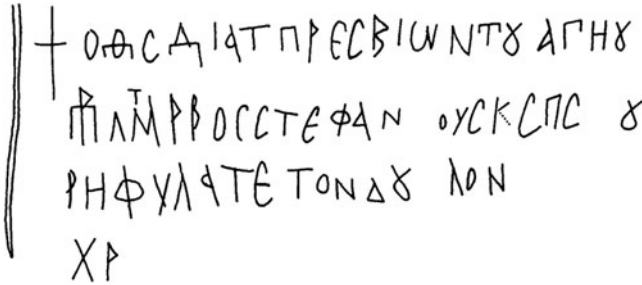


Fig. 8. Graffiti from Tinos requesting protection. Source: Feissel, Ténos, no. 1.

prayers. Supplicants carved requests for their protection from the sea, whilst also emphasising their position in relation to the sea, such as their occupation as sailors. In some cases, the authors used a local formula which was also associated with the safe delivery of letters to request their own safe delivery when travelling. The use of such a formula highlights the breadth of the Byzantine epigraphic tradition and Byzantine people’s understanding and familiarity with this breadth. When inscribing a text, they did not always blindly adopt common phrases but selected phrases which related to their current situation and needs.

Conclusions

Christian graffiti in late antiquity and Byzantium has traditionally been characterized as formulaic, not providing the insight into the personal experiences and emotions we expect to read in graffiti from earlier periods. This formulaic nature has invited greater attention in recent years, however the underlying belief that the repeating phrases associated with Christian inscriptions belie a detailed understanding of individual experiences prevails. Late antique graffiti certainly were a repetitive medium, with Christian inscriptions frequently featuring prayers, invocations and acclamations from a small selection of phrases. This article has not sought to disprove the formulaic nature of late antique graffiti, but rather to question the implication we cannot read the authors experiences in the text. When Byzantine peoples were placed in dangerous scenarios, they wrote prayers relevant to these scenarios.

At Corinth, prisoners expressed their desire for freedom, and vengeance on those who had incarcerated them. These prisoners both used unparalleled formulae related to their specific situation (including calls for justice and the destruction of their enemies) and drew formulae from a cultural catalogue of epigraphic expressions.

Through the appropriation and altering of phrases such as ‘Lord, have mercy’ (becoming ‘have no mercy’) and ‘may the fortune triumph’ individuals were able to express their immediate needs to God within an understood linguistic framework. Similarly, at Grammata Bay in Syros, sailors and other travellers continued a long tradition of carving informal prayers to their deity, in the hope they would receive salvation. Within these prayers they identified both the individuals and the ships which required salvation, as well as textually requesting their primary need: ‘good sailing’. Furthermore, the prevalence of the ‘Lord, save’ formulae appears to have been associated with the physical danger from which the author required salvation. At Tinos we see a middle Byzantine era continuation of these prayer traditions. Authors from the island landscape and travellers between islands expressed not only their fears of travel by water, but also specifically adopted formulae associated with the safe delivery of an item to its destination, the seal formula ‘shelter protect and guard’. We thus can recognize the connection between the intensity of a person’s emotions (e.g., fear for their safety) and the graffiti they carve.

What this article does not seek to argue is that Byzantine graffiti were not formulaic. In fact, as I have shown, Byzantine graffiti was overwhelmingly formulaic, with the vast majority of texts adhering to specific formulae, be they ‘help’, ‘have mercy’, ‘remember’, ‘save’, or ‘shelter, protect and guard’. However, these formulae were chosen with purpose. When an author felt an acute sense of danger, such as the threat of drowning at sea, or the consequences of an unjust incarceration, the author accounted for this by selecting formulae which were pertinent to the situations in which they found themselves. These conclusions appear across all aspects of the graffiti tradition, in both secular and cultic spaces, when the supplicant was the author, or when they may have acted through an intermediary. Communities selected the phrases most relevant to their own salvation, and employed these formulae accordingly. Going forward, the formulae chosen must be examined carefully in order that we may better reconstruct the emotions and experiences of individuals in a post-classical world.

Rachael Helen Banes is a postdoctoral researcher at the Austrian Academy of Sciences on the Epigraphies of Pious Travel project. Rachael completed her PhD at the University of Birmingham in 2023, on the subject of late antique graffiti in the eastern Mediterranean. She is currently researching Greek pilgrimage graffiti throughout the Byzantine period. Her research interests include the epigraphy, material culture, and urban environment of the late antique and Byzantine era.