

***Cultic Graffiti in the Late Antique Mediterranean and Beyond.***Edited by **Antonio E. Felle** and **Bryan Ward-Perkins.**

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Cultic graffiti—implying individual devotional acts at some place culturally regarded as appropriate for or even receptive to such marks—provide *prima facie* evidence for how a place can be “sacred.” They reflect how spaces invite visitors to place their marks, how spaces gather people to perform similar acts like marking, and how those practices coalesce into what Karen Stern, in her recent book on late antique Jewish graffiti, has called “gestural systems” of spatial devotion, from postures (orans, prostration) to singing to depositing ex-votos (*Writing on the Wall: Graffiti and the Forgotten Jews of Antiquity*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018, 78). The volume under review offers a wide geographical range of studies in the placement, formulation, and language of cultic graffiti, from Anglo-Saxon visitors to Rome to grateful sailors in the Cyclades to early Muslim Arabs in the Near East. The individual essays tend toward the philological and archaeological rather than the synthetic, but the Introduction and Afterword by Felle and Ward-Perkins are models of historical and cultural comparison. And both Marlene Whiting (“Contextualizing Christian Pilgrim Graffiti in the Late Antique Holy Land”) and Jacques van der Vliet (“Inscribing Space in Christian Egypt”) offer important thematic observations about the relationship of sacred spaces to writing gestures.

Although we assume that cultic graffiti respond to “sacred” places, perhaps the greatest diversity among the chapters lies in the types of spaces that attracted it. In Pompeii, as Rebecca Benefiel describes (“Graffiti in Religious Spaces in First-Century Pompeii”), people inscribed such graffiti everywhere: throughout homes and streets as well as around *lararia*. In the two Cycladic islands examined by Pawel Nowakowski (“Pilgrims and Seafarers”), graffiti congregate near a port and in a cave shrine. Those along a rock escarpment in a monastic area east of the Nile, as Alain Delattre reveals (“Graffiti from Christian Egypt and the Cult of the Saints”), point to specific shrines to deceased (and now forgotten) holy men. Whiting finds evidence of “contact zones” within various Holy Land shrines, represented by large clusters of graffiti and suggesting spaces of collective devotional significance. And Van der Vliet perceptively notes how such clusters of graffiti can actually transform liturgical spaces into memory-sites and tombs into devotional spaces for the living. Notably, Adam Łajtar defines “cultic graffiti” as acts performed anywhere rather than as a response to a recognized sacred space: as he describes for medieval Nubia, cultic graffiti should be defined by their devotional, even festive purpose—irrespective of the place (“Cultic Graffiti in Christian Nubia”).

Stern’s 2018 book showed that, in the practice of Jewish cultic graffiti, there was little regard for issues of religious orthodoxy, and the chapters in this volume seem to bear out this observation: a Jewish inscription in the Cyclades, identifiable for its menorah but indistinguishable in formula from Christian inscriptions (Nowakowski, 128); crosses adorning Arabic inscriptions that suggest a more fluid religious/scrabal environment around the earliest Muslims (Imbert, 151). On the other hand, Di Segni (“Jewish Devotional Graffiti and *Dipinti* in the Holy Land”) takes a more positivist view of

Jewish and Christian distinctiveness in this period. Orthopraxy itself—a sense of what one ought to do in the practice of devotion—seems to have been quite local: Guizzi notes, for example, that in a sixth- to tenth-century Phrygian church to St. Philip, people put their marks near, but never on, the tomb of Philip (“‘Servant of the Apostle Philip’: Byzantine Graffiti from Hierapolis of Phrygia,” 55).

Along with a great range of local and apostolic saints invoked, graffiti offer evidence of social groups in action: sailors (Nowakowski), Anglo-Saxons (Carletti), earliest Muslims (Imbert), and even urban guilds (Rizos, “Associational Religion in Late Antiquity?”). These appearances of collective travel to someplace are the best data we have for pilgrimage over distances—as a transregional phenomenon—for which one might imagine (after Victor Turner) that the longer liminal period of approach could bring about distinctive religious experiences. Most evidence for visitors’ origins suggests regional or local travel (less than a day)—or at least little acknowledgment of geographical origin (such as to imply pride in distance), as Mark Handley found in his comprehensive study of western inscriptions (“Scratching as Devotion: Graffiti, Pilgrimage and Liturgy in the Late Antique and Early Medieval West,” in *The Epigraphic Cultures of Late Antiquity*, eds. Katharina Bolle, Carlos Machado, and Christian Witschel, Stuttgart, Germany: Steiner Verlag, 2017, 55–79). Delattre’s and Van der Vliet’s chapters on Egypt suggest more of this type of local/regional travel to holy sites, while Carletti’s essay about Anglo-Saxons in Rome points to other kinds of travel as well, for example, ethnic collectivities in protracted transit together.

For the historian, the corpus of graffiti can be frustrating, since it is rarely datable, and a single wall can bear graffiti from many centuries’ visitors. While the early Muslim inscriptions can be dated to within a century or so by their Kufic writing and occasional dates (Imbert), the Nubian and Phrygian graffiti extend from the sixth century to later Byzantine times and the Cycladic graffiti from Hellenistic times up to the twenty-first century. Thus it can be difficult to gauge historical or religious developments, the beginning or end of cults, or correspondences to historical events.

Felle and Ward-Perkins in their concluding essays offer a host of important questions and directions for the further study of cultic graffiti. What kinds of spaces actually motivated graffiti—sacred places or places for waiting before one entered sacred places? Who did the writing? How do graffiti construct a self in space? How did graffiti fit into other “epigraphic habits” or other devotional gestures? Did graffiti follow, or even inspire, *vocalization* of names and prayers, or did people feel it sufficient to leave a name or prayer for its own perpetual vocalization through the written word itself? These questions require attention to the kinds of close studies that this volume offers, although few of the authors broach them directly. Overall, the volume repays reading most of the essays if one is interested in pilgrimage generally, with Whiting, Imbert, and Van der Vliet the most useful for the comparative or historical value of their observations. This is an essential book for any research library.

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