
*Rosetta* **12.5**: 20-27.

http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Colloquium2012/heffernan_graffiti.pdf
Mortuary Graffiti as a ‘Lieux de Mémoire’ in Eighteenth Dynasty Egypt

Gabrielle Heffernan
PhD Candidate, 2nd Year
University of Birmingham, College of Arts and Law

‘Graffiti are a rich source indeed for the study of the ancient world’. So ends the introduction to Baird and Taylor’s recent book on ‘Ancient Graffiti in Context’; but how can graffiti be used in studies of cultural and collective memory in Egyptian society? What can it really divulge about how the Egyptian people viewed the past and, more specifically, royal ancestors?

Graffiti are found on several royal mortuary monuments in the Memphite necropolis. Apart from the Pyramid Complex of Senwosret III, which dates to the Middle Kingdom, all of the monuments discussed date to the Old Kingdom, from which 43 graffiti have been studied although some are in fragmentary states. Five main categories of graffiti have been identified, some of which are based on those suggested by Navrátilová in her 2007 study of Memphite graffiti. The first identifies the monument, the second describes it, the third includes offerings or prayers to the royal ancestor, the fourth portrays negative emotions, while the final category focuses on the living king rather than the owner of the monument. Discussion will focus on the first category to demonstrate how the graffiti can give important information about on the way in which royal ancestors and their mortuary monuments fitted into society as well as how the graffiti itself may be seen as a site of memory.

---

3 They are found at the Sun Temple of Userkhaï and the Funerary Temple of Sahure at Abusir, the North and South Chapels of Djoser at Saqqara, the Mortuary Temple of Sneferu at Meidum and the Pyramid Complex of Senwosret III at Dahshur.
The nature of ancient graffiti

When discussing ancient graffiti it is important to remember that the term should not be construed in the same way in antiquity as it is in the modern world. Graffiti are often used as evidence of the less educated or even subversive element in ancient societies; however, studies of graffiti in several locations have suggested a very different understanding of these texts, and it would seem that the line between graffiti and other, more formal, forms of writing is often somewhat undefined. Of course, that is not to say that some graffiti wasn’t in some sense subversive or dissenting, but that the use of the term ‘graffiti’ must not be taken as implying this until the context is known.

Furthermore, in some situations graffiti may be seen not only as non-subversive, but as being created by the state – Baird discusses a selection of graffiti found all over the city of Dura-Europos which he argues was used by the military to ‘take possession of particular spaces’; he suggests that examples on gates and other military structures would have been inscribed by soldiers, who were the representatives of state authority, while they were on duty. Of course, Zadorojnyi disagrees, arguing that ‘graffiti represent a trajectory of dissent even it their overall message is not overly politicised; to sabotage the established ownership of a space is a political enterprise already’. Therefore, it is important to approach ancient graffiti with an open mind – the key to understanding it lies in its context as well as in its content.

---

5 Baird and Taylor 2011: 1.
7 For example some of the Roman graffiti discussed by Zadorojnyi 2011: 125.
9 Zadorojnyi 2011: 100.
Graffiti identifying the monument

Twelve of the 31 readable texts include the name of the owner of the monument, for example:

[There came the scribe...son of scribe...] to see the temple of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Sahure, justified.

These texts all state that the king who is named in them is the owner of the monument on which they were written. There are two possible reasons for this; the first is that the artist knew the owner of the monument in advance and perhaps visited a specific monument for that reason; the second is that the graffitist copied the name either from the monument itself or from earlier graffiti that he found on it. Baird and Taylor note that graffiti in many situations can be seen to respond to each other, perhaps emphasising the competitive nature of graffiti writing; Mairs also discusses a graffito from el-Kanais in the Egyptian desert which reads, 'I too came to you, Pan [from Thebes]: Poseidos, son of Athenon'. This use of the word ‘too’ shows a clear awareness of other graffiti and suggests that imitation by graffitists of other texts that they found at the site is quite possible. There is little explicit evidence of this at the Memphite necropolis but this does not mean that it did not happen. The positioning of the graffiti discussed is often uncertain as many pieces are no longer found in situ, but where the original positions of graffiti are known there appears to be some grouping of texts which suggests that scribes may have been encouraged to write their own texts by the presence of others, and possibly to copy them as well.

However, it cannot be assumed that all of the graffiti were simply copies of earlier texts and so other explanations must be sought. It is possible that the monuments

---

10 Eight of these are found at the complex of Djoser at Saqqara (two from the North Chapel of Djoser at Saqqara and six from the South Chapel of Djoser); two are from the Mortuary Temple of Sahure at Abusir; two are from the Mortuary Temple of Sneferu at Meidum.
11 This graffito is found on the Sun Temple of Userkhaf at Abusir and dates to the reign of Thutmose III, Navrátilová 2007: 49-50.
14 For example in the South Chapel of Djoser at Saqqara four of the five graffiti for which the original location is known occur on the same wall (wall C recorded by Gunn, see Navrátilová 2007: 85, 90, 100, 103).
were known at least to some, if not most, visitors before they arrived which would imply that the graffitist had deliberately chosen to visit, and to mark the monument of a specific royal ancestor. The knowledge from this may have come from several sources; cults of royal ancestors are known from later in the New Kingdom and it is likely that at least some were functioning in the Eighteenth Dynasty but it is unlikely that every scribe who marked the walls of these monuments held a position within one of these cults. Some papyri also include stories of royal ancestors but there is no reference to these stories in the graffiti and it is unlikely that every graffitist was motivated by references found in literature. So maybe one must not look to external sources for knowledge of royal ancestor but to the sites themselves, to the very monuments that were marked by the graffitists – perhaps they acted as sources of information, retaining the memory of past kings in the minds of the people.

The Memphite monuments as sites of memory

Navrátilová states that a ‘practical religious interest in the communication with the dead is present in the Egyptian tradition as a longue durée phenomenon’, which would suggest that the graffiti was a form of communication with the dead rather than simply being commemorative. How, then, should these monuments be seen? Simply as historical artefacts or impressive tourist attractions? Graffiti extolling splendour of the monuments suggest that they were visited simply to marvel at their ancient beauty. Or should they be thought of as ‘cultic’ sites of personal devotion?

---

15 The kinglist of Tjuneroy, which was found at Saqqara and dates to the Nineteenth Dynasty, and lists the Egyptian kings from the First Dynasty to Ramesses II with some exceptions, Martin 1991: 123. Tjuneroy has been identified as being a chief lector priest of deified rulers and includes offering formulae relating to his position in the kinglist, Redford 1986: 21-22.

16 The link between graffiti and royal cultic activity is supported by two graffiti at Memphis which include offering formulae on behalf of the royal ancestor, such as one dated to the reign of Thutmose III at the South Chapel of Djoser at Saqqara which reads, ‘...And so he said, let be caused that there come loaves of bread, bulls, fowl and all good and pure things for the ka of Djoser, justified. May the heaven send down myrrh, and provide incense for it!...’, Navrátilová 2007: 74-76. However, it is also important to note that such graffiti are uncommon in the Eighteenth Dynasty, but become more frequent in the Nineteenth Dynasty, which suggests that cultic motivations become more common in the later New Kingdom, Navrátilová 2007: 92-94.

17 Lichtheim, 1973: 215-222, for example, discusses Papyrus Westcar, which includes references to King Sneferu. The papyrus dates from the Middle Kingdom although this doesn’t preclude such tales being in circulation throughout the New Kingdom.

18 Navrátilová, 2006: 95; for more on communication with the dead see Baines 1987: 86-88.

19 A text from the South Chapel of Djoser at Saqqara dated to the Eighteenth Dynasty reads, ‘He found it as though heaven were within it, Re rising in it, heaven [raining] myrrh, incense dripping upon
Texts including offering formulae imply that this may have been the case. Or perhaps they should be viewed as lieux de mémoire, which kept alive the memory of the ‘great’ kings of the past, the ancestors of the pharaoh.

**Graffiti as ‘lieux de mémoire’**

Graffiti, however, should not be seen as simply marking a site of memory, but as an event of its own. Taylor suggests, furthermore, that clusters of graffiti could be understood as being ‘important for the formation, negotiation and contestation of ... group identities’. As such, one must view graffiti as an important site of memory in and of itself. Keegan goes on to suggest that graffiti are not the products of an isolated individual memory which have been constructed after the event but are, in fact, the ‘instruments used in acts of recall’; it is here, at the junction of the literal and conceptual that one encounters the ‘social frameworks of memory’ of Halbwachs.

Graffiti should not be seen, therefore, as static markings but as dynamic processes that interacted with all those who viewed them, thus linking the viewer with the graffitist. One may also see graffiti as ‘the result of a desire to ... add one’s own contribution and to join in the conversation’. Therefore, copying other graffiti or adding phrases to one’s own to ensure a degree of ‘one-upmanship’ cannot be discounted but it also does not take away from the importance of each graffito as a site of memory - it is likely that people were encouraged to leave graffiti at certain sites simply by the existence of other graffiti. Taylor suggests that making one’s mark ‘situates the individual within a place at a moment in time, but also situates them within a group of people or a community’. Furthermore, that several people make the marks over a period of time implies a ‘process of legitimation’ by the group.
such, the graffiti does not only represent the individual but the community as a whole.

The graffiti discussed here, therefore, served a double purpose; they acted as markers of the monumental sites of memory (i.e. the Memphite royal monuments), both preserving each individual’s response to the mortuary complexes and encouraging others to do likewise, and preserving the knowledge of these sites for future generations; but they also acted as sites of memory themselves, acting as markers of a ‘group identity’ which itself provided them with legitimation. They can be seen as important additions to the collective identity of the site.
Bibliography


