
PTOLEMAIC AND ROMAN FIGURAL GRAFFITI FROM THE TEMPLE OF KARNAK AN OVERVIEW ON ITS DISTRIBUTION

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Abstract

An important source of ancient Egyptian history is the graffiti found in the temples of Thebes, as it provides a comprehensive historical account of the relationships between individuals and temples, the pilgrimage rituals that led to these visits, and what visitors to the temples sought from their gods. Embroidering a personal message or image on the temple wall was one way to present oneself. As opposed to stelae and statues, these inscriptions clarified the relationship between the author of the graffiti and the gods in a cheaper, more accessible, and immediate manner. It is evident from all the inscriptions and scenes in those temples that all of the characters in them play a secondary role in the service of the king and the deity. In temples, the high ranks could place their own statues and paintings. In the Middle Kingdom, the rules prohibiting ordinary individuals from portraying themselves inside temples were broken, so the high priests and the high officials began making graffiti mentioning their names and depicting themselves on the walls of temples, eventually including most members of temple society.

Despite the fact that the temples of Karnak were not designed to contain figural graffiti throughout, this paper discusses how graffiti are distributed throughout the temple. This study does not analyze or count these entries but rather addresses their spatial distribution.

Keywords: Karnak Temples, Figural Graffiti, Self-presentation, Ptolemaic and Roman periods.

مُلخَص البَحْث

الكتابات التذكارية التصويرية في معابد الكرنك أثناء فترتي حكم البطلمة والرومان: نظرة عامة على توزيعها

تعتبر الكتابات التذكارية في معابد طيبة مصدراً هاماً لكتابة التاريخ المصري القديم، حيث تُقدم موضوعاً تاريخياً شاملاً عن علاقات الفرد بالمعبد، وعن الزيارات وطقوس الحج التي أدت إليه، وماذا كان يطلبه زوار المعابد من معبوداتهم.

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كان عمل نص أو صورة شخصية على جدار المعبد وسيلة لتقديم الذات، وقد أوضحت هذه النقوش العلاقة بين مؤلف الكتابات التذكارية والمعبودات بطريقة أرخص وأكثر سهولة وفورية من العديد من الأشكال التقليدية للعرض التذكاري كاللوحات والتمائيل.

وكانت جميع النقوش والمناظر الموجودة في المعابد مرتبطة بشكل مباشر بشخصين هما الملك، والمعبود، وجميع الشخصيات التي تظهرها نقوش المعابد أشخاصاً يلعبون دوراً ثانوياً في خدمة الملك والمعبود. كان لدى الرتب العليا إمكانية وضع تماثيلهم أو لوحاتهم داخل المعابد. ومن عصر الدولة الوسطى، تم كسر القواعد التي تمنع الأفراد العاديين من تصوير أنفسهم داخل المعابد، فبدأ كبار الكهنة وكبار المسؤولين في عمل كتابات تذكارية يذكرون فيها أسمائهم ويصورون أنفسهم على جدران المعابد حتى شمل ذلك معظم فئات مجتمع المعبد.

تدور هذه الورقة حول توزيع الكتابات التذكارية التصويرية التي قام بها الأفراد في معابد الكرنك، حيث لم تكن هذه المعابد مصممة في الأصل لاحتوائها في كل مكان وليس الغرض منها تحليل أو إحصاء هذه التدوينات ولكن تناول التوزيع المكاني لها.

الكلمات الدالة: معابد الكرنك، الكتابات التذكارية التصويرية، تقديم الذات، العصر البطلمي والروماني.

Introduction

Graffiti practice was widely attested across ancient Egypt; temples were no exception. In some Theban temples, textual and figurative graffiti started to appear very early, at a time when these structures were definitely still in use. Early examples include the tribune platform at the temple of Al-Madamud, which may have received graffiti as early as the Middle Kingdom, and at least two monuments of Senwoseret I from Karnak. These include the well-known White Chapel, which bears a figurative graffiti that were added before the monument was dismantled under Amenhotep III to be reused in the core of the third pylon; this is suggested by their distinctive style that is different from all other figurative graffiti in the Karnak complex. The second example is on the chapel found dismantled in the core of the ninth pylon, the lower blocks of which bear a textual graffiti of a Nile level record and a royal figure all this indicate that graffiti in Karnak was acceptable since the Middle Kingdom.²

Definition

In Karnak, **two different, main categories of graffiti can be differentiated**: the first are those that belong to **individual** contexts, which were made by members of different strata of the temple society, the second are the graffiti of **divine images**.

^[2] Salvador, C. (2016), 117-118.



Individual graffiti

In Thebes, from the Middle Kingdom onwards, graffiti constituted one of the means of self-presentation in the temple. It explains a personal relationship to deities that was less expensive, progressively open, and more immediate than types of presentation which consider more conventional such as stelae, ostraca, and statues.

Although graffiti of this category function as a usual method of self-presentation, they do not match them. They can be interpreted as a more cost-effective method accessible to a broader range of Egyptian society.³ These kinds of graffiti are identified as 'individual', because they were made for the benefit of individuals.

Divine images graffiti

However, not all Karnak graffiti were individual acts. There were also some whose level of formality, visibility and investment suggest that they were 'institutional' and this is the second type, which is what we call the **divine images** graffiti.

In Thebes, from the New Kingdom onwards, a time when personal piety in temples had significantly developed, temple institutions seem to have introduced new cultic practices and iconography to carry out their service to the gods as well as to facilitate personal worship. Wall surfaces at Karnak and Luxor along processional ways and on the exterior of temples that had previously been left undecorated, became a medium for carving and/or painting graffiti of divine images.⁴

Figural Graffiti distribution at Karnak in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods.

This type of graffiti was widely observed in Karnak, and most of it contained images of animals, birds, boats, human figures, and figures of various deities. This paper places figural and textual graffiti in the same melting pot in terms of interpretation. Finding a balance between the current focus on figural graffiti while also focusing on textual graffiti through an integrated approach that combines both types may provide us with a clear picture of that type of graffiti. It may be suggested that certain types of figural graffiti may be considered a pictorial form of worship intended to give a clear indication of the permanent presence of its owner in the temple, like similar textual graffiti.⁵

The distribution of individual graffiti in Karnak varied and included almost all parts of the complex. The most important observation regarding this is that individual graffiti of this type tends to be found in external places, which are places available to all sects of workers in the temple.

³ Frood, E. (2103), 289-299.

⁴ Brand, P. (2004), 263-264.

⁵ Paul van Pelt, & Staring. (2019), 2-3.

The following is a review of some of the most important forms:

Animals and birds: There was an ancient Egyptian admiration for animals, and with the beginning of the dynasties, the depiction of deities in complete animal forms or in a form combined between human and animal forms became widespread.⁶ However, the custom of sanctifying animals and worshipping them as bA or a manifestation on earth of deities was only known from the beginning of the New Kingdom era until that custom spread in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, when these animals were sanctified throughout the temples of that period in the form of a real animal. Examples of this were found in the worship of the “living falcon” in Edfu was represented by the sacred animal of Horus, as bA of Ra, who represented the new king.⁷

After their death, the sacred animals were united with Osiris after they were mummified and buried, and then their worship continued in the animal cemetery. This matter contributed to the increase in graffiti that depicts the deities of the period that are the focus of the study.

On the outer eastern wall of the temple of Montu, a large group of graffiti depicted.⁸ What most draws attention is a group of graffiti of jackals (Fig. 1). Although there are no accompanying texts, we can assume, based on similar graffiti,⁹ that these images represent either Anubis or Webwawt (if the deity is a crouching, it represents Anubis, and if it is standing, it represents Webwawt). Each of the deities that took the form of dogs is closely linked to funerary worship, and there were many ritual actions that involved it, which reflects their presence among the graffiti in the temples. If it is difficult to determine the exact reasons for making them, perhaps it can be assumed that they are a means of communicating with the deities that are depicted with the aim of requesting divine protection for the author of the graffiti.¹⁰ If this is the case, then it was an expression of awe and piety and aimed to support the good aspects of the funerary deities to obtain safe behavior in those places. Anubis’s role as cemetery caretaker and cemetery master would certainly lend itself to such an interpretation.¹¹

⁶ Dunand, F and Zivie-Coche, C. (2002), 16- 21.

⁷ Dijkstra, J.H.F. (2012), 7-10.

⁸ Altaher, A. Forthcoming in Karnak 18.

⁹ Paul van Pelt, & Staring. (2019), 11-12.

¹⁰ Abdelhalim, A. (2023), 395-418.

¹¹ Christina, A. (2018), 47 ff, 112 ff.





Fig. 1: Graffiti depicting Jackals on the eastern outer wall of Montu temple, © Ahmed Altaher

The collections of private graffiti that were used as ritual work may have expanded to include certain groups of animals, including **baboons and lions**:

Baboons were associated with more than one deity, especially with Djehuti, because Khonsu took some of Djehuti's characteristics as a lunar deity, he was also depicted in the form of a Baboon, just like Djehuti. There is graffiti depicting Khonsu in the form of a baboon on the outer western wall of the Temple of Khonsu in Karnak, (Fig 2). This depiction faces another one depicting Khonsu in his human form.¹²

Perhaps some of the graffiti depicting baboons were intended to depict Djehuti, the patron god of scribes, which indicates the extent of Djehuti's mediation - and when they appear in the Temple of Khonsu, the matter relates to Khonsu - in the divine world. Perhaps those who carved these depictions witnessed this mediating role during implementing them on the walls of temples.¹³

It is also possible that this type of graffiti was associated with rebirth and renewal because of the sexual activity of the baboon.¹⁴

Some graffiti depicted lions, including what was depicted on the outer western wall of the Temple of Khonsu, (Fig. 3) the southeast corner wall of the Seventh Pylon, and the outer eastern wall of the Temple of Montu(Fig. 4). Graffiti depicting lions can also be interpreted as symbols associated with protection, death, and rebirth. They are powerful symbols of protection and rebirth, ensuring that whoever performs them will be protected and reborn in the afterlife.¹⁵



Fig. 2: A graffiti of the god Khonsu in his human form (right) and his animal form (left). On the outer western wall of the Temple of Khonsu in Karnak, © Ahmed Altaher.

^[12] Two statues of Khonsu in the form of a baboon can be observed in the hypostyle hall of the Temple of Khonsu at Karnak.

^[13] Stadler, M.A. (2009), 38.

^[14] Andrews, C. (1994), 67.

^[15] De Wit, C. (1951).

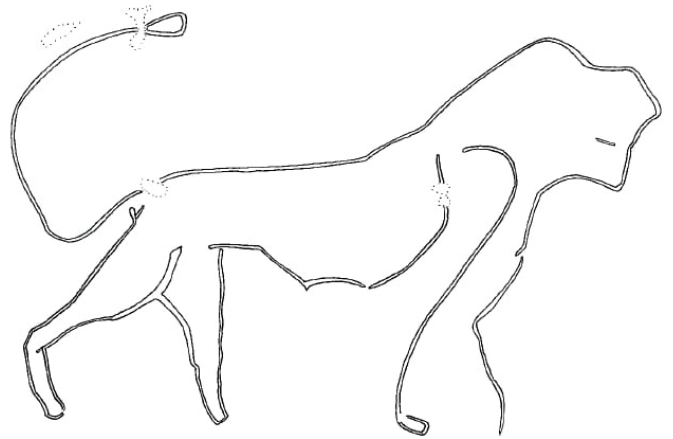


Fig. 3: One of the graffiti depicting a lion on the roof of the Temple of Khonsu in Karnak: Jacquet-Gordon, H. (2003), 281, pl. 108.



Fig. 4: A graffito depicting a lion on the eastern outer wall on Montu temple, © Ahmed Altaher.

Graffiti depicting geese may similarly be associated with renewal. In texts 336a/b and 1122a/b of the Pyramid Texts, the deceased king ascends to heaven in the form of a goose, and according to Spell 223 of the Coffin Texts, the world emerged from an egg. The funerary statues depicting geese discovered in the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings are considered a development of these ideas that indicate renewal.¹⁶ The graffiti depicting geese on the Temple of Khonsu in Karnak (Fig. 5) can be depicted as a symbol of Amun, as the Nile goose was associated with this god because of its attachment to the creation of the world from nothing.¹⁷

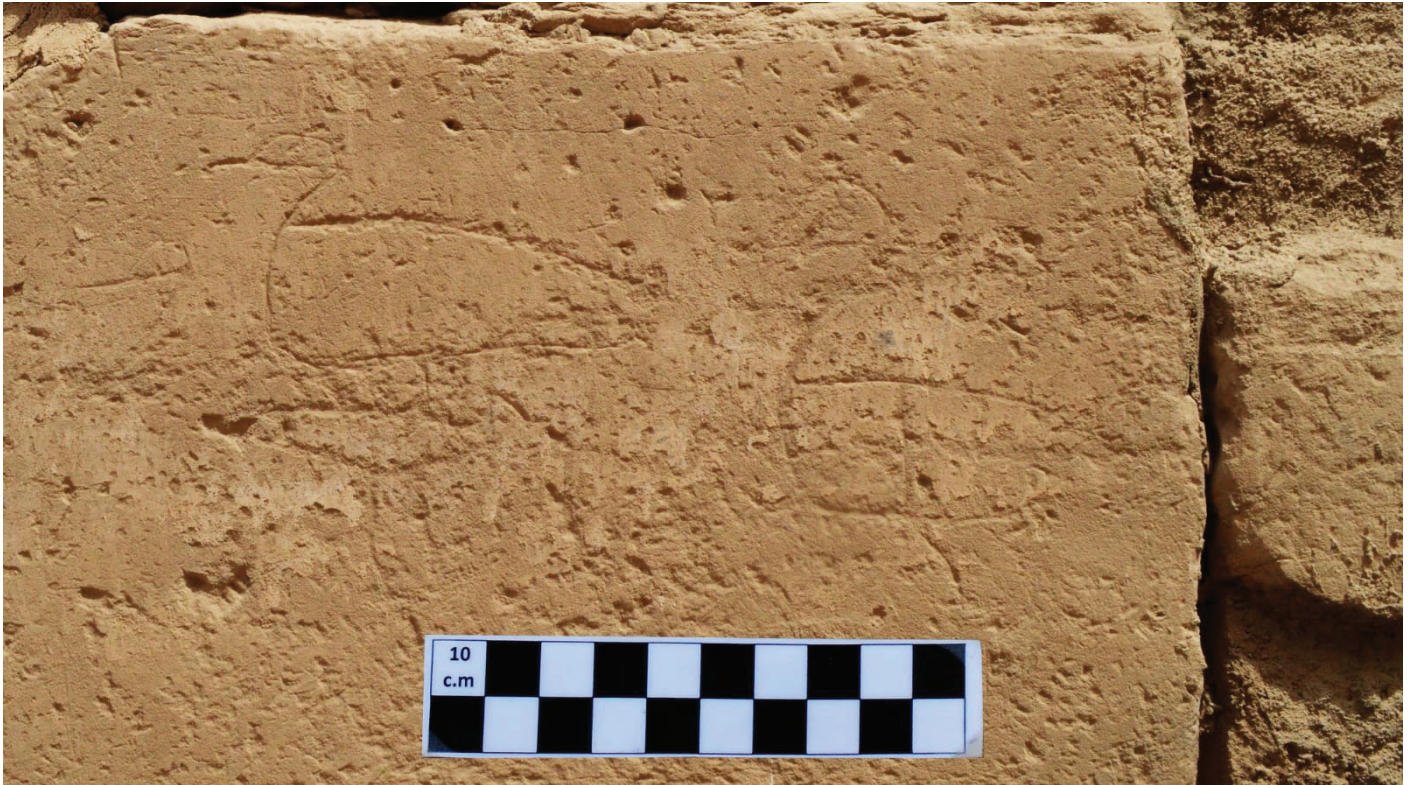


Fig. 5: A graffito depicting geese on the outer western wall of the Temple of Khonsu,
© Ahmed Altaher.

Boats: We cannot be surprised by the presence of boats in the graffiti on the walls of temples. The Nile played an important role in the daily life of the ancient Egyptians;¹⁸ they were usually simple river boats or boats with a tambourine for one man. This type of graffiti was often found on rocks in prehistoric times and continued after that in historical times.¹⁹

¹⁶ Abitz, F. (1979); Davies, de Garis. N. (1920), pl. 17; Davies, N. (1920), pl. 17.

¹⁷ Lacau, P. (1909–16), 200, pl. 61.

¹⁸ Vinson, S. (1994); id (1998).

¹⁹ Huyge, D. (2009), 4-5.

Several of graffiti on the temples of Thebes that depicted the sacred boats of the deities were found, especially those relating to the Theban Trinity, Hathor Maat, Osiris and Soker. They depicted mainly on the walls of the southern processional way, on the eastern outer wall of Montu temple and on the roof of the Temple of Khonsu in Karnak, where a bark of Khonsu was depicted (Fig 6),²⁰ Amun's bark was depicted next to one of Khonsu (Fig 7).²¹ Although it was depicted in a larger, it lacked the details found in one of Khonsu.

Also, on the roof of Khonsu temple there is a depiction of the sacred bark of Mut (Fig 8), resting on a palanquin, and the front and back of it are decorated with the head of the goddess, who is wearing a double crown and a wide collar around her neck. In the middle of the bark there is a compartment inside which is a veiled image with a miniature depiction of a king kneeling on both sides, and in the front of it are images of the god Tutu wearing a crown. At the front, and in the back, there is a depiction of a person.²²

Based on the above, it can be said that divine barks which were represented on in Karnak may have been carried during festivals. The depiction most likely depicts barks that the people in the temple had just seen during the festivals.



Fig. 6: Graffito of the bark of Khonsu from the roof of the Temple of Khonsu in Karnak, Jacquet-Gordon, H. (157 ,(2003, pl. 60.

²⁰ Jacquet-Gordon, H. (2003), 59, no. 157, Pl. 60.

²¹ Jacquet-Gordon, H. (2003), 59, no. 158, Pl. 61.

²² Jacquet-Gordon, H. (2003), 105, no. 306, Pl. 118.

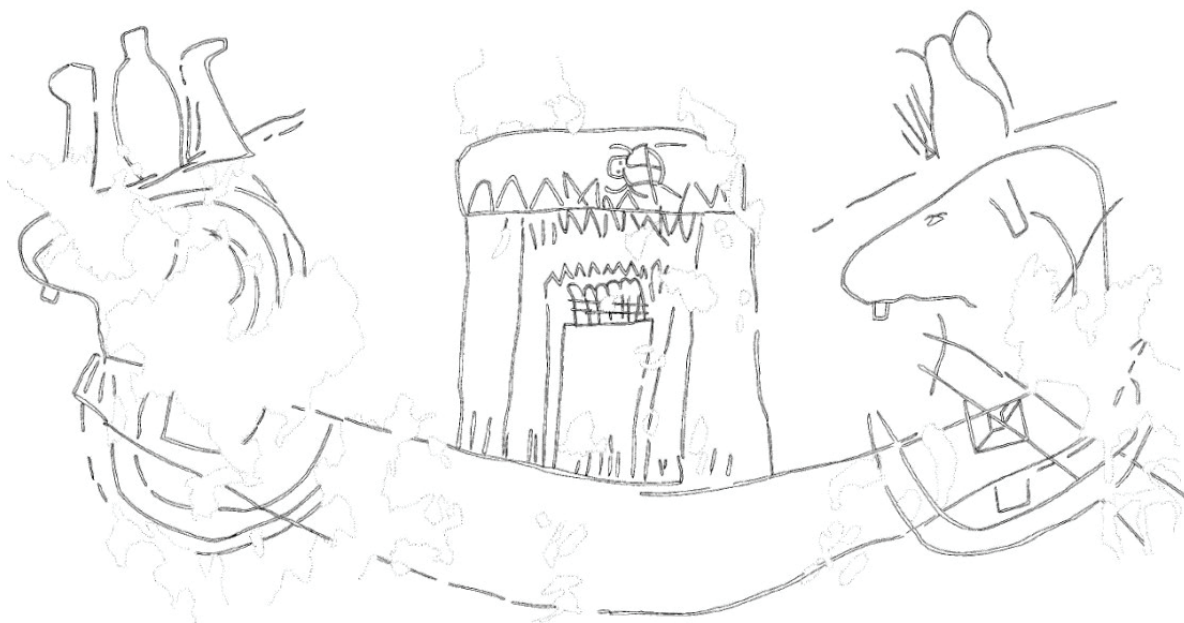


Fig. 7: Graffito of the bark of Amun from the roof of the Temple of Khonsu in Karnak, Jacquet-Gordon, H. (59 ,(2003, no. 158, Pl. 61.



Fig. 8: bark of Maat may you intend Mutas depicted on the outer eastern wall of the Temple of Montu, © Ahmed Altaher.

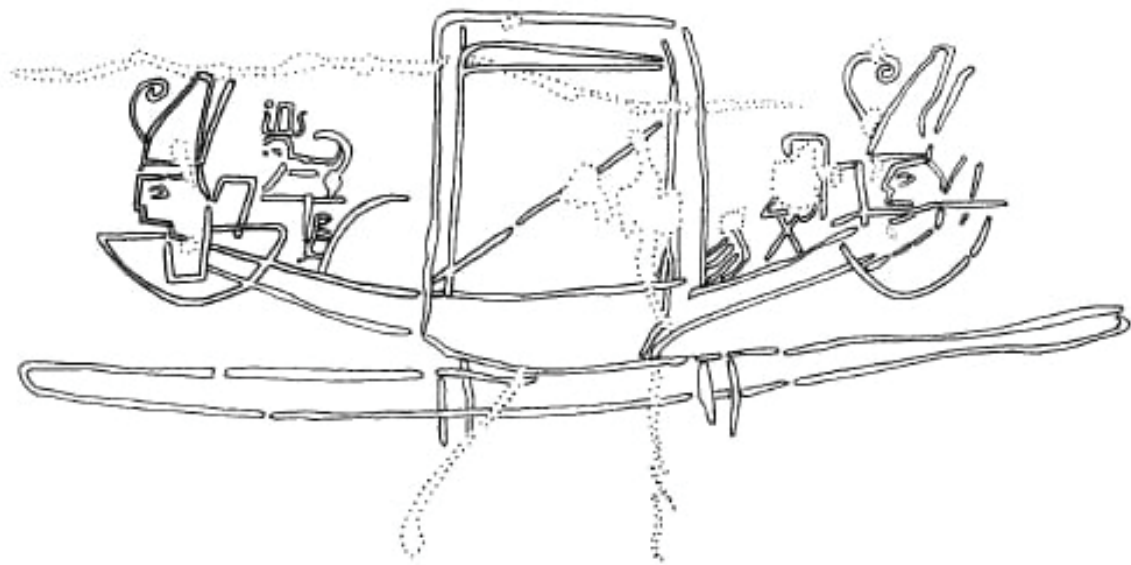
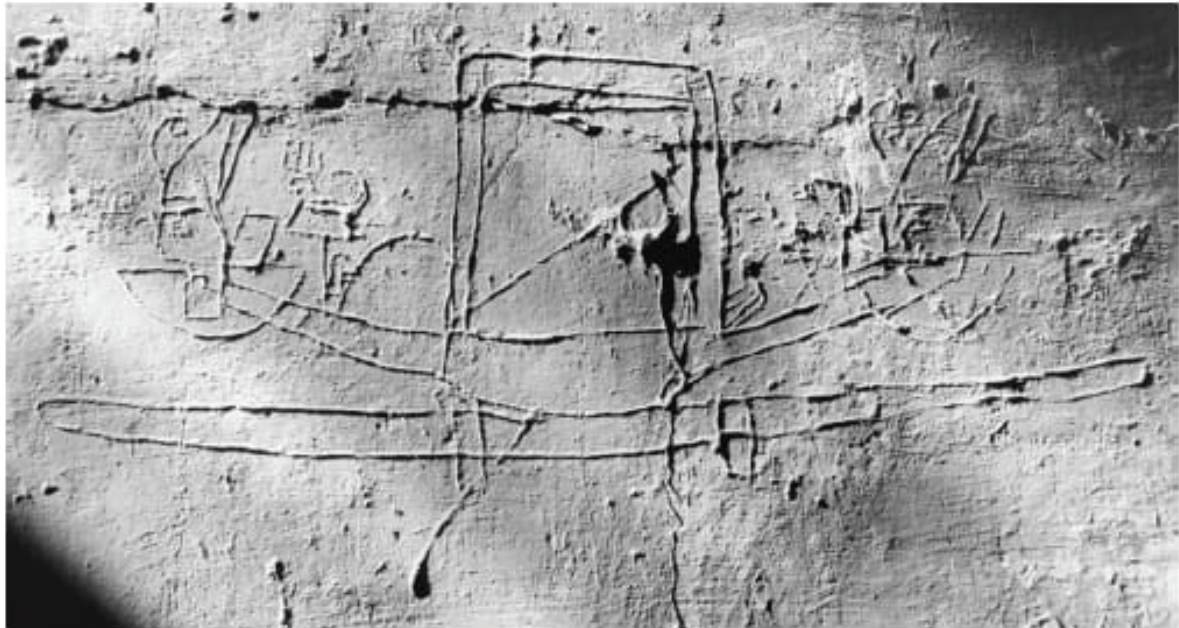


Fig. 9: Graffito of the bark of Mut from the roof of the Temple of Khonsu in Karnak, Jacquet-Gordon, H. (1923, no.311, pl. 118).

In addition to the depiction of divine barks, there were riverboats (Fig 10-11). The Nile has been a vital waterway for transporting people and goods since the earliest times in Egyptian history. Therefore, it would not be a coincidence if ideas were prompted to produce a number of graffiti depicting boats. The depiction of ships was a common element among the primary inscriptions of the temples and tombs in all periods, and it is likely that they were a source of inspiration for those who made these graffiti to create similar images.

The religious context of these graffiti, on the other hand, may indicate that they have a deeper meaning. Perhaps the intention of making them in the temples was to indicate a

safe journey to the temple in order to make a pilgrimage to its deities, in a way similar to the graffiti that depicted footprints.²³

In the Temple of Montu, riverboats were depicted, which may have been used for transportation, whether for passengers or goods. There are similar models found on the roof of the Temple of Khonsu,²⁴ on the northern outer wall of the shrine of Tuthmosis III, at the wall connecting the seventh and eighth pylons, and on the back wall of the shrines of Seti II at Karnak when it was have been overlooking the Nile since the Nineteenth Dynasty.²⁵

Therefore, it seems, at least in the temples of Thebes, that some of the graffiti that represented boats were an expression of the safe arrival of their owner to the holy place by boat that he recorded on the walls of the sacred place in the presence of the deity, and they may be an expression of their owner's pilgrimage to the temple.²⁶

Boats graffiti continued to be made on the walls of temples until the Byzantine era, when Christians at that time worked to visit or reuse those temples. Many examples representing boats from the Christian era were found on the roof of the Temple of Khonsu, as well as in the Ramesseum Temple,²⁷ Al- Deir el-Bahri,²⁸ the Osireon in Abydos,²⁹ and the Temple of Khonsu. Dandara and Al-Madamud.³⁰



Fig. 10: A boat sailing towards the north (right) as depicted on the outer eastern wall of the Temple of Montu at Karnak. A boat with oars sailing towards the south (left) from one of the columns of the southern row of columns of Shashenq I in the great courtyard, © Ahmed Altaher.

²³ Dijkstra, J.H.F. (2012), 73–75.

²⁴ Jacquet-Gordon, H. (2003), 18 (no. 19; Pl. 7), 60 (no. 161; Pl. 62), 89 (110.258; Pl. 98), 92 (no. 265; Pl. 102), 103-5 (nos 297-300, 304-5; Pls. 115-6), 106 (no. 309; Pl. 118), 109 (no. 324; Pl. 122).

²⁵ Boraik, M. et. al, (2010), 101-109.

²⁶ Wilson, P. (1996), 117; Castiglione, L. (1970), 126-7.

²⁷ Lecuyot, G. (2000), 1-14.

²⁸ Godlewski, (2003), 110. 50, Fig. 43.

²⁹ Piankoff, A, (1958/60), 137-44 (Figs 2-8).

³⁰ Cottevieille-Giraudet, (no. 102; Pl. XVII); Names written as the local people pronounce it.



Fig. 11: A boat with an oar as depicted on the outer eastern wall of the Temple of Montu,
© Ahmed Altaher.

Sacred Symbols: The wedjat eye may be one of the most famous symbols of Egyptian protection³¹ and was depicted as graffito on the northern statue of the Osiris statues of Thutmose III on the facade of the Eastern Temple at Karnak, and on the outer western wall of the Temple of Khonsu (Fig 12).

It represents the eye of Horus, which was uprooted by Seth and returned to him by Djehuti later, making it a symbol of perfection, good health, and generational renewal. It is associated also with the Eye of Ra, which was the violent force that defeated the enemies of the sun god. Thus, the Eye of wedjat may have been imbued with the healing power of the “healthy eye” of Horus and the protective power of the ferocious deities represented by the Eye of Ra.³²

With these characteristics, the wedjat represented a good symbol of ritual expressions associated with the protection of its owner when it was made as a graffito.

³¹ Paul van Pelt, & Staring. (2019), 13, fig. 13.

³² Pinch, G. (1994), 110.

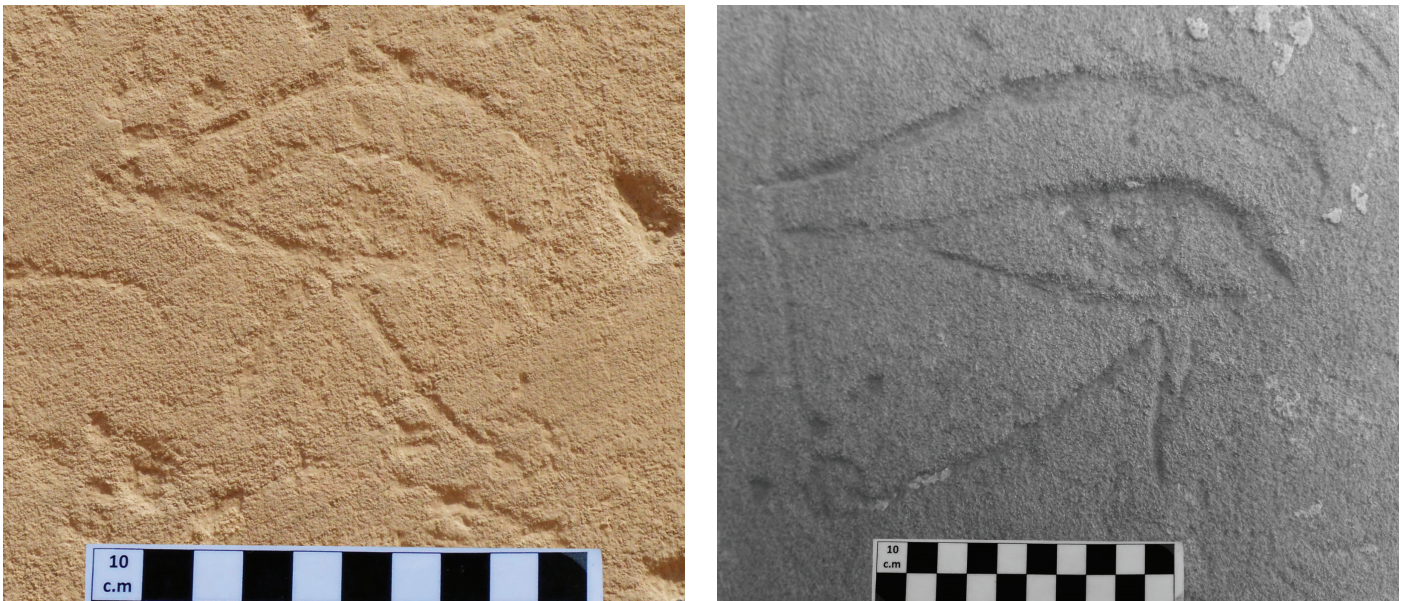


Fig. 12: Graffito depicting wedjat eye, on the western outer wall of the Temple of Khonsu (right), on the northern statue of the Osiris statues of Thutmose III on the facade of the eastern temple at Karnak (left), © Ahmed Altaher.

Human figures and figures of deities: As is the case with graffiti that represents animals and birds, there were graffiti that represented human figures. In Egypt, they carried a religious character, which differs from their representation in the Mediterranean region.³³ Graffiti that depicted humans in ritual scenes outside Egypt were rare. In Egypt, graffiti that represents human bodies were often found, and because of the religious thought of the ancient Egyptians, which emphasized public participation in rituals, graffiti were strongly present on the walls of temples, and some of them represented human beings. They were most likely a depiction of people who participated in the worship of temple's deity.³⁴

Graffiti representing humans' deities were found on stone blocks dating back to the Middle Kingdom in Al-Midamoud, where several inscriptions by men were found in which the entire body or only the upper part of it was depicted. Among these were at least two of royal figures and some inscriptions with a human body and the head of an animal, which are they represent deities. What is noteworthy is that the depiction of royal faces in temples continued in graffiti dating back to the Roman period (Fig. 13-17). Karnak temples contained a large number of many graffiti representing humans and deities. They appear everywhere in the temple but concentrated on the great court, the southern processional way, the temple of Ptah, the temple of Montu and the temple of Khonsu. The Khonsu Temple contained about 55 inscriptions of this type that depicted

³³ Langner, M. (2001), 34-64 (nos. 187 -1378).

³⁴ Dijkstra, J.H.F. (2012), 63.

deities in the human form and the form that combines humans and animals. In addition to a depiction of the heads of kings, including the head of a king who does not appear to be wearing anything on his head except a band surrounding it with the royal uraeus attached to its front, and a wide necklace around the neck. There are also depiction of ordinary people, some women, and children.

A noticeable well carved Human and deities graffiti is depicted on the walls of the griddle wall of the temple of Amun. The outer eastern wall of the Temple of Montu contains some inscriptions depicting the heads of kings. It does not seem unreasonable to assume that some participants in the cult left figures of kings, particularly royal heads, as part of ritual actions. These graffiti may have served as votive offerings to thank the king. It is important to note that the graffiti depicting royal heads are not limited to the Theban region alone. They can be observed in Abydos, Assiut and Saqqara, although they are smaller in number. However, in places such as Abydos and Karnak there were many royal figures in the temple decoration, which could have inspiration to create similar images.



Fig. 13: Graffiti depicting humans and deities on the outer eastern wall of the Temple of Montu,
© Ahmed Altaher.

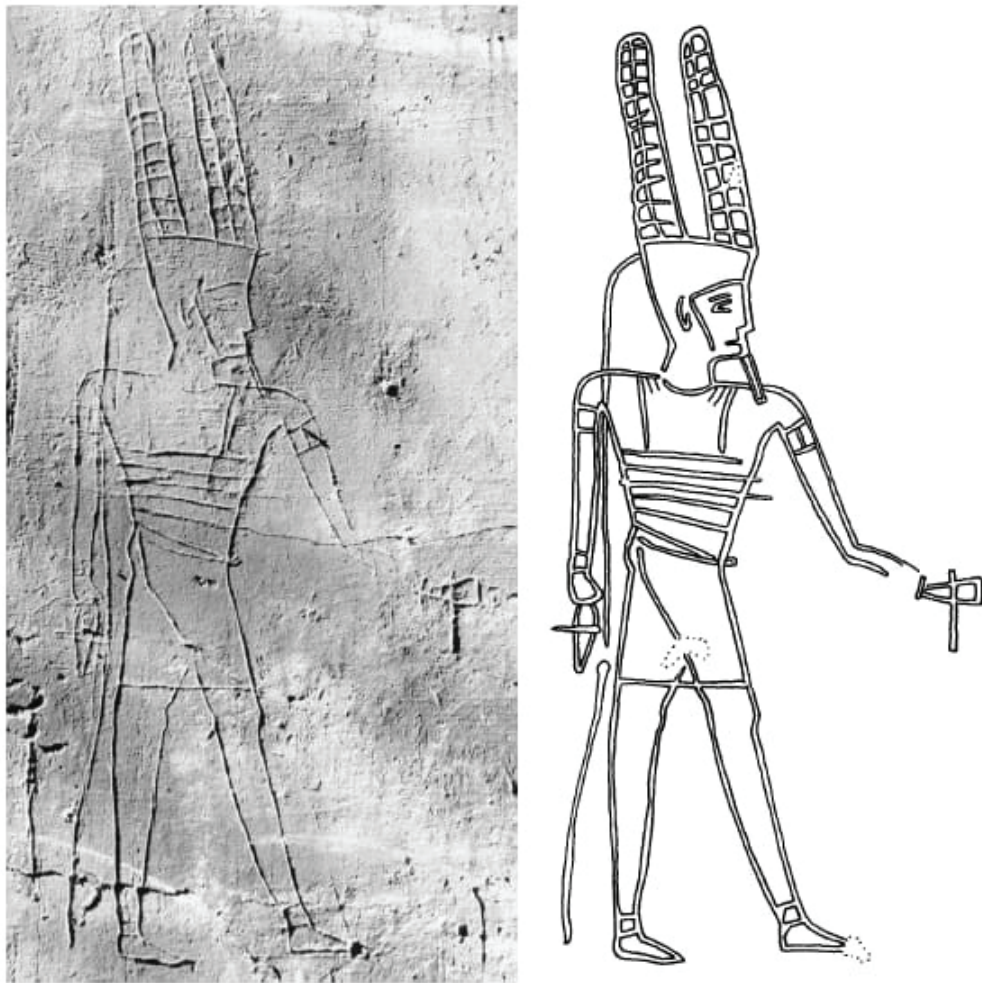


Fig. 14: Graffito depicts deities on the roof of the Temple of Khonsu, Jacquet-Gordon, H. (2003), no. 310, pl. 119.

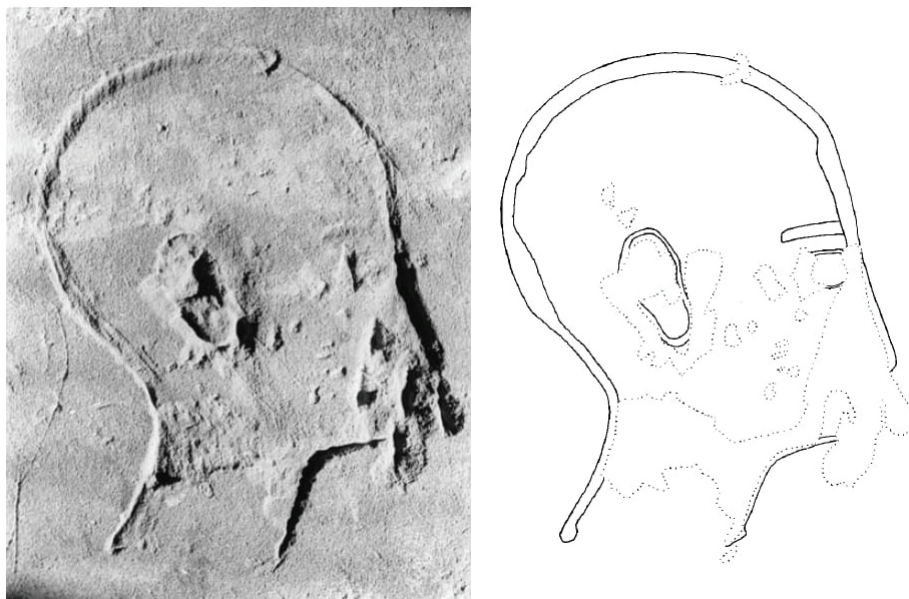


Fig. 15: Graffiti depicting the head of a priest from the roof of the Temple of Khonsu, Jacquet-Gordon, H. (2003), no. 313, pl. 121.



Fig. 16: Graffiti depicting the kings (right) from the outer eastern wall of the Temple of Montu, from one of the columns in the southern row of the columns of Shashenq I in the great open courtyard (left), © Ahmed Altaher.



Fig. 17: A graffito depicts king's head on the roof of the Temple of Khonsu, Jacquet-Gordon, H. (2003), no. 212, pl. 80.

Conclusion

The presence of graffiti can be observed in all the temples of Thebes, but it seems that those who left these notes and figures were of different categories. It seems that practicing graffiti in Karnak was only available to temple employees. In temples such as the Temple of Thutmose III in Deir el-Bahari, more than 500 graffiti were written in ink.³⁵ It was left by different groups from different places inside and outside Thebes and was often done during a visit to the temple as part of their participation in the beautiful feast of the valley. During the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, hundreds of graffiti were left in the temples of Medinet Habu, most of which were also written in ink, but in Demotic script, and were done on the occasion of the owner's visit to the Medinet Habu region, which had special importance in that period.

The fact that Karnak and Luxor graffiti is not available to the public and is limited only to temple employees is mainly due to the nature of these two temples. They were not available to the public. Although some believe that Karnak and the palace were available to the public on certain occasions, at least even the open courtyard,³⁶ the author agrees with the assumption that they were not available to the public at any time.³⁷

It is not clear whether the identity of the dedicator and the graffitist (always) corresponded, as is commonly assumed. It is equally possible that members of the temple staff left graffiti on behalf of people who could not otherwise access these areas. One cannot exclude the possibility that some staff acted as proxies and received gratuities to pass on the pleas and prayers of others as they scratched or painted a graffito, through a system that was probably similar to the votive offerings that could be presented to priests, at least in certain temples.

Graffiti location always relates to priestly movement in and out of inner temple areas and the processional ways. These images are usually understood as focal points for popular religion.

In the Temple of Khonsu, graffiti is concentrated on the outer western wall and on the roof. We can suggest that those who left their graffiti on the roof left it while watching the various celebrations on the southern axis. Here it can be suggested that the scarcity of individual graffiti on the western wall and the presence of graffiti of deities is due to the fact that the institution that governs the work of graffiti in the temple chose the roof as the place for the individual's graffiti and the western wall to have graffiti depicting divine images of deities. This institution also decided not to make graffiti on the outer eastern wall. In this regard, it should be noted that some of the external walls, such as

³⁵ Published by Marciniak, M. (1974), and translated by Sadek, A. (1983), 67–91; Sadek, A. (1984), 65–86.

³⁶ Dils, P. (1995); Cabrol, A. (2001), 720–31; Brand, P. (2004), 263–64; Brand, P. (2007) 59–65.

³⁷ Frood, E. (2013), 289–290.

the southern external wall of the Temple of Ptah, contained divine images of deities, and around them were found several individual graffiti. Here the role played by the institution that governs the work of graffiti can also become clear.

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