Viewing Inscriptions in the Late Antique and Medieval World

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CHAPTER TWO

PRAYERS ON SITE: THE MATERIALITY OF DEVOTIONAL GRAFFITI AND THE PRODUCTION OF EARLY CHRISTIAN SACRED SPACE

Ann Marie Yasin

When the celebration of the Jubilee Holy Year of 2000 ended, the massive set of sculpted bronze doors that Pope John Paul II commissioned for the east porch of the church of St. John Lateran in Rome were ceremonially sealed.[1] Pilgrims and tourists cannot now pass through the closed entranceway, yet when they visit the church many also come to see the doors, and especially to touch them (Fig. 7). When doing so, visitors take part in a pattern of mimetic action by repeating the gestures modelled by those before them: they touch the sculpted foot of the infant Christ and then kiss their contact-hand or make the sign of the cross with it (indeed, an informal queue frequently forms as individuals watch others approach the doors while waiting a turn for their own personal encounter). Although it has been only a little more than a decade since they were cast, the hands of thousands of visitors have irrevocably altered the appearance of the bronze doors. With each touch, visitors contribute to the polishing of the infant's sculpted bronze limb. In the personal, bodily contact of pilgrims' flesh to holy image, the once uniformly textured, compositionally coherent and officially commissioned door panel is transformed into a site of perceptible and inviting popular piety.

A small fraction of the visitors to the Lateran leave a more individualized mark on the site by contributing to the scores of finely scratched graffiti that cover the jambs and surrounding mouldings of the Holy Doors. Some are anonymous

I am extremely grateful to Antony Eastmond, David Frankfurter, and the two anonymous readers for their insights and feedback on the text and to fellow workshop participants at the Courtauld Institute of Art and audiences at the University of Southern California and at the University of California, Riverside where subsequent of versions of this chapter were presented.

7. Jubilee Doors, St. John Lateran, Rome. (Photo: Ann Marie Yasin)

crosses and others now illegible marks, but many preserve names and, occasionally, dates of earlier visitors to the site. These scribbles, like the shiny bronze foot of the baby Jesus on the door, are physical manifestations of personal, ephemeral encounters with the site. They are material traces of the presence and religiously inspired gestures of previous visitors to the place; they signal past actions and individuals, but are made present each time the gesture is renewed. They are humble yet evocative, and we might imagine that a great deal of their affective

power, their power to inspire others to copy and repeat the action with their own bodies, comes from the perception of the traces as acts of *popular* piety: ecclesiastical authorities neither prescribe nor regulate the gestures, but nevertheless permit and tacitly approve them (the graffiti are not covered over or buffed out; groups of pilgrims touching the Holy Doors do not attract the attention of guards or clerics).

These kinds of pious gestures and the material marks they leave on holy places have a long history. This chapter examines the earliest surviving traces of graffiti at Christian holy sites as both evidence of and impetus for personal, physical interaction with a holy place. Like the modern rubbings and scratches in the Lateran porch, the traces are modest. Yet, then as now, graffiti provide rare and direct physical evidence of individual users' interaction with buildings and urban spaces. In contrast to idealized or prescriptive textual descriptions of ritual, graffiti offer hard evidence of actual devotional gestures carried out at holy sites. The contents of the handwritten messages are telling in their patterns and simplicity. The meaning and impact of the texts, however, are inherently linked to their materiality. I suggest that it is through their status as site-specific artefacts that the inscribed names of holy figures and their devotees evoke the presence of both. Moreover, the cumulative nature of graffiti invites active participation and renews and amplifies this message of divine and devotee presence over time. Equally significant is what the physical characteristics and placement of the texts reveal about the graffiti writers' and viewers' perception of and interaction with sacred space. Graffiti declare the efficacious sanctity of a place by attesting to multitudes of previous devotions enacted there. Their irregular, handmade traces evoke the very bodily experiences of their diverse writers and likewise engage viewers on a similarly personal and somatic level.

GRAFFITI IN CULTURAL AND SPATIAL CONTEXT

Before proceeding further, some clarification of terms will be useful. In contemporary usage, the word 'graffiti' is applied to a wide range of writing in both modern and ancient contexts. In today's world, the term usually conjures up associations with defacement, anti-establishment expression, or, increasingly since the 1970s and 1980s, with pop culture and edgy contemporary art that critique and play off of mainstream characterizations of the genre.[2] It is important to note, however, that the overtones of vandalism or illicit behaviour that accompany graffiti in the modern world do not appear to have been universal or even central to opinions about informal wall writing in the Greco-Roman sphere.[3] This is not to say that graffiti were always and everywhere deemed desirable or acceptable – scattered ancient literary sources allow us to sniff out traces of elite condescension towards the medium – but it is clear that we are dealing with a culture of unofficial public writing very different from our own.[4] Ancient graffiti

communicated a wide range of verbal content, from scatological jokes and love letters, to political commentary, literary riffs, accounting notations and prayers. It was also apparently tolerated, indeed sometimes even written, by authorities and/or property owners in a wide range of contexts and situations, including not only in latrines and bars but also in public squares, on and in houses, by military personnel, and on statues, tombs and shrines.[5]

It is this last type – graffiti scrawled on the surfaces of sites considered holy – that primarily concerns us here. As sources of evidence, these graffiti present numerous challenges. Some ancient Christian graffiti were carved into durable stone supports, but many were scratched into or drawn on the thin layers of plaster that coated walls and other surfaces. They are therefore inherently fragile, subject to destruction when buildings are damaged or renovated, and rarely survive in anything close to complete and fully legible form.[6] The sites on which this chapter focuses have been selected because they house graffiti both well enough preserved at the time of their discovery to have been recorded in at least some degree of detail and dateable to the late antique period (third–seventh century).[7] Within this time span, although the inclusion of absolute dates in the texts themselves is exceptionally rare, some graffiti can be more firmly dated than others because of their archaeological contexts.[8] At Rome's Memoria Apostolorum and the memorial of St. Peter on the Vatican Hill, for example, the older architectural features on which graffiti were written were replaced by grander buildings in the first decades of the fourth century, burying and thus preserving the earlier graffiti-covered surfaces until their discovery in the twentieth century.[9] At the early Christian church under the Liebfrauenkirche at Trier, graffiti cut into the plaster-coated choir screen were found amid the excavated debris of the church that had been destroyed in the fifth century.[10] In situ sections of plaster walls at both the Church of the Holy Cross at Resafa (ancient Sergiopolis) in Syria and the shrine of St. Felix at Cimitile-Nola preserve graffiti left by late antique writers thanks to subsequent installations that sealed off the inscribed surfaces until they were once again revealed by modern excavations.[11] Elsewhere, however, the exposed surfaces of long-lived holy sites, such as the Roman catacombs, the Church of the Theotokos in the Parthenon in Athens, the Church of St. Stephen at Philae, and the Monastery of Apa Apollo in Bawit, Egypt, preserve writing that can span generations, even centuries.[12] It is important to bear in mind, therefore, that the archaeology of each site presents its own window onto graffiti activity, either in a relatively concentrated time frame or over a longer *durée*.

Most analyses of early Christian graffiti have used them as a source of historical evidence about the development of cult – the graffiti attest to visitation to a particular holy place, the veneration of a particular martyr or pilgrimage to a particular shrine. Indeed, from the earliest chapter of Christian archaeology, graffiti have been central to the project of charting an early Christian sacred topography. For example, in his monumental nineteenth-century *Roma*

sotterranea cristiana, Giovanni Battista de Rossi's careful attention to epigraphy allowed him and subsequent scholars to map out entire catacomb systems by using graffiti to distinguish sacred 'hotspots' where especially venerated individuals were buried.[13] As the authors of one later handbook of Christian archaeology wrote, 'Almost always, in the Roman catacombs, they [= graffiti] indicated the proximity of a historical crypt; at times they enable us to follow, step by step, the same way as the ancient visitors used when they went from the upper basilicas to the subterranean chapels which contained the most venerated tombs'.[14] Like centuries-old breadcrumbs, in other words, catacomb graffiti allow modern investigators to trace their way back through the labyrinthine subterranean corridors to the historically venerated places.

Although indebted to this valuable work, this chapter focuses less on plotting a map of historical cult sites than on examining what Christian graffiti can tell us about the *lived experience* of sacred spaces.[15] In doing so, I examine early Christian graffiti from two related angles. On the one hand I consider graffiti as material manifestations of devotional practice. Graffiti present one type of response to a religious site and contribute to our understanding of late antique behaviour and ritual at and around holy sites more broadly, along with pilgrimage, prayers, offerings, and other devotional actions such as kneeling, kissing and lighting candles. On the other hand, I consider how graffiti, through their form and placement, communicated to viewers, conditioned subsequent visitors' interaction with the site, and transformed sacred landscapes over time. As Colin Adams has written, 'graffiti are dynamic in the sense that they form a body of evidence at particular locations that grows over time, and thus create and develop the history of a location – they are deeply linked to place'.[16] Essentially these two aspects constitute opposing faces of the same coin, one focusing on the producers of the inscribed texts and their actions at a sacred place, and the other on the inscriptions' reception, their effects on subsequent visitors to the site.

Given the fragile nature of the evidence, its relatively serendipitous rate of survival and the inconsistent conventions of publication, our picture is necessarily tenuous and incomplete. Nevertheless, I argue that examination of the diverse body of evidence from across the Mediterranean allows us to identify three key spatial and material aspects of early Christian graffiti. First, graffiti do not merely indicate the contours of a preexisting sacred topography, but are rather an active means through which to *interact with and shape* a natural or manmade landscape. Not planned by the patrons or builders of a site, but incorporated into architectural fabrics, the inscribed names, prayers and acclamations speak very directly to the physical action of writing as a popular devotional response to particular places. Second, the graffiti attracted other graffiti. The greatest proof of this is the fact that the handwritten messages regularly occur in groups – not as isolated texts, but in clusters that comprise a larger graffiti-laden field. Carving or drawing graffiti was a means of both joining and perpetuating a devotional community, for the writing often mimics earlier writers' gestures at a site while

simultaneously inspiring and inviting the production of future graffiti. Such texts adhered to collective conventions while also remaining vehicles for individual expression. Finally, the graffiti worked collectively to transform the supports on which they were inscribed and thereby constructed new meanings for the space bound by those physical structures. They palpably signalled to viewers that the place was an active and effective venue for Christian prayer. In this sense, graffiti both established a kind of space for communal action and provided a means of inserting oneself into that community.

MATERIALIZING PRESENCE AND PRAYERS

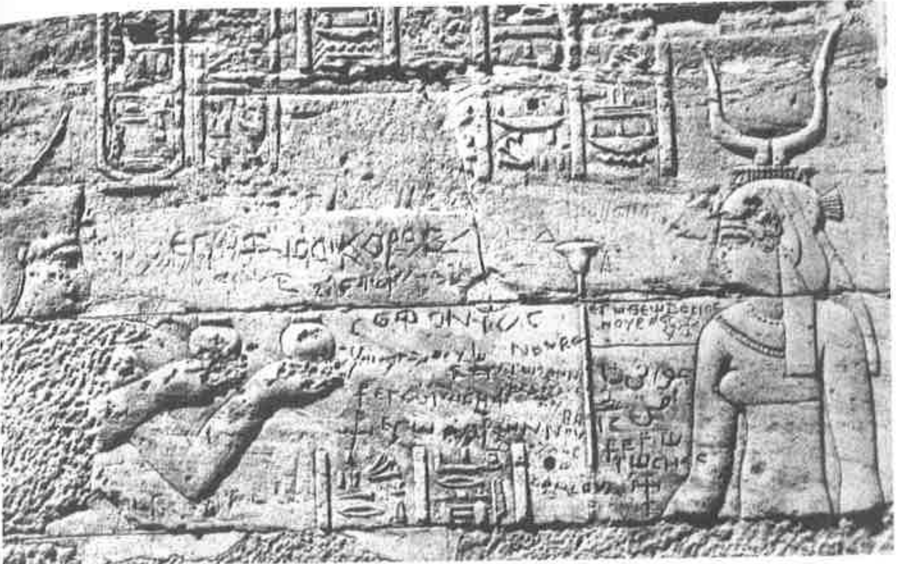
Even if graffiti are relatively uncommon at major Greco-Roman temples,[17] substantial corpora of hand-written inscriptions have been recovered from a number of cult sites, such as the shrine of Hercules Curinus outside Sulmona in Italy, the mithraeum at Dura Europos, the Gallo-Roman sanctuary at Châteauneuf, and Egyptian shrines at Abydos and Philae.[18] These places give us a glimpse at a site-specific, interactive and user-generated facet of the material culture of sacred space. The content of the texts conveys the writer's religious intent while the writing's form and placement transform the site itself. At Châteauneuf, for example, fragments of painted plaster reveal that the exterior walls of the cella were covered with scratched messages – records of donations made to the shrine and acclamations of the gods. Some call out to divinities broadly (e.g. no. 3: 'Gods! Goddesses!'), but many of the plaster fragments preserve the names of specific gods: Mercury, Maia, the local god Limetus, Roma, and the divine Roman emperor each appear multiple times.[19] The divinities' names literally covered the walls of the *fanum*. The προσκύνημα ('act of worship') type inscriptions common to Greek graffiti found at Egyptian shrines from the end of the second century BCE 'speak' their writers' messages with even more syntactical directness.[20] More than one hundred examples of these prayers of adoration adorn the walls of Isis's sanctuary at Philae, for example, and are written in the first person by named devotees who direct their acts of worship to the goddess, who is also directly named.[21] The formulae used in graffiti at the mithraeum at Dura Europos are different, but many seek to achieve similar results: memorializing the acclamation of the named god by a particular named devotee.[22]

These records of donations to the gods and of vows made in their names heaped up evidence of the divinities' power upon the very fabric of their sacred houses. The role of naming is thus key to many of the surviving graffiti from Greco-Roman shrines. The handwritten inscriptions provide a tangible proof at the site of the shrine of the presence of the gods named – Hercules Curinus/Quirinus in his shrine outside Sulmona, Mithras in his Durene sanctuary, Serapis and Bes at the Memnonion at Abydos, and so on.[23] Although much of the ancient graffiti carved or painted elsewhere on an ancient city's surfaces

8. In situ section of graffiti at the Memoria Apostolorum *triclia*. (After: Styger, Römische Martyrergrüfte, vol. 2, pl. 18)

were uncredited (anonymity being a central component of their function, for example, as political commentary or social expression), this is clearly not the case for shrines.[24] Graffiti found at cult sites regularly declare, one after another, the names of the individuals responsible for the scrawl. Thus, much like votive offerings, the graffiti attest both to the relationship between specific devotee and deity and to the special status of the sanctuary space. They are also, like votives, both performative and commemorative, materializing a gesture of communication while at the same time remaining on site after the fact as a record of the exchange. The graffiti ensure that, even after the visitor leaves the shrine bodily, his or her name persists, physically inscribed on the holy site.

Graffiti at early Christian sacred places too consisted largely of names and slightly more expanded texts that regularly adopted standard expressions for communication with the non-earthly realm. The walls of the so-called *triclia* area at the Memoria Apostolorum, a kind of above-ground trapezoidal portico with masonry benches on the Via Appia outside of Rome, were awash with scratched and scribbled marks of visitors (Fig. 8): the recovered plaster fragments attest to more than 400 individuals whose names were inscribed in the time between the area's installation in the mid-third century and its burial as part of the construction of the Basilica Apostolorum (today's San Sebastiano) in the early fourth century.[25] Inscribing one's name is the most direct and individualized way of recording one's personal presence at the site. Some graffiti emphasize the immediacy of



9. Philae, Temple of Isis/Church of St. Stephen, south wall of hypostyle hall, west side of entrance, with insc. nos. 205–14. (After: Bernand, *Inscriptions grecques et latins*, vol. 2, pl. 46)

the encounter with the place even more emphatically. '*I*, Dioskoros' and '*I*, Josaias,' for example, are but two of the Greek Christian graffiti gouged into the south wall of the hypostyle hall of the temple of Isis at Philae, Egypt, after it was converted to a church of St. Stephen in the sixth century, that heighten the sense of personal presence by preceding the visitor's name with a resounding first-person 'ἐγώ' (Fig. 9).[26] Others on the same stretch of wall declare the subject's humility in relation to the divine through the addition of the common epithet 'servant of God' or 'servant of Jesus'.[27]

At the same time, graffiti also offered a way to materialize prayers for those not able to be there in person. Indeed, a rare late antique literary reference to graffiti writing at an early Christian holy place attests to the practice of inscribing not one's own name but those of others. In an account by a pilgrim to the Holy Land from Piacenza in the late sixth century, the author writes of visiting Cana and of reclining on the very wedding couch where Christ did. There, he says, 'I, although unworthy, wrote the names of my parents'.[28] Archaeological evidence bears out this practice. It is not infrequent, for example, for a single graffito to list many individuals. At Resafa, for instance, one Sergios left a graffito asking God to remember him as well as a number of other relatives, including his father, daughter and sister.[29] In graffiti like this, although it is possible that all of those listed were present at the time of writing, it is probably more likely that some of the names included were written by the family member(s) who had ventured to the holy place and prayed there on behalf of them all. This is undoubtedly the case for graffiti such as that a certain Leo wrote to St. Felix at Cimitile-Nola for himself and 'all his', using the blanket phrase 'cum suis omnibus', which covered

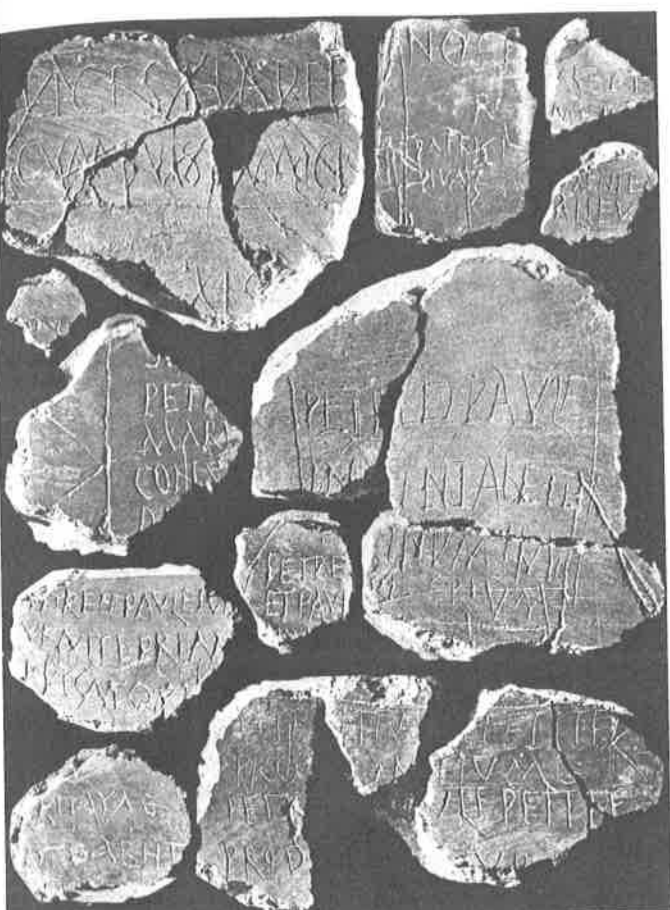
household members broadly, as well as for some handwritten inscriptions at the Memoria Apostolorum that record prayers for those no longer living.[30] Through the material inscription of their names and the prayers made in their honour, therefore, graffiti could make it possible even for those not present bodily to have a physically inscribed presence at the holy site.

Many of the texts spell out material prayers very explicitly. Early Christian graffiti writers regularly drew on a common storehouse of formulae such as the Latin 'pete pro X' ('pray for X') or the Greek 'Βοήθε X' ('help X') to articulate their message.[31] The addressee was sometimes God, but also often a saint or saints, as was particularly common in the graffiti scratched into the tufa or plaster coating of Roman catacomb walls.[32] The repetition and conventionality of the texts are striking. Some take the form of a benediction on behalf of the named individual. At least twenty-four of the graffiti gouged into the plaster face of the choir screen of the fourth-century church under the present Liebfrauenkirche at Trier, for example, include variations on the common acclamation 'May you live in God' (e.g. *vivas in deo, vivas in XP, vivas in Domino, vivas in deo XP semper*, etc.).[33] On the *triclia* walls of the Memoria Apostolorum, approximately half of the 189 more or less complete graffiti name Peter and Paul directly (see Figs. 8 & 10).[34] Here the most common prayer appealed to the apostles to 'remember so-and-so' ('in mente habete'), written at least sixty different times at the site.[35] These texts adopt the grammatical form of a direct address to the holy figures (with imperatives and vocatives). The result is an extremely densely packed field of handwritten inscriptions, as if the walls themselves speak on behalf of or in the voice of the texts' authors to call out to the apostles by name.

At the most fundamental level, the graffiti are a mode of communication between their writers on earth and God, or saintly intercessors, in the divine realm. The communication may have once been conveyed orally (through uttered prayers) in a passing moment during one's visit to a shrine, but the graffito presents a lasting material vestige of the exchange at the site. For the hundreds of individuals whose names were accompanied by these formulae, the written text was a physical trace that concretized their presence, a sign of having been to the site or having been remembered by others there, and the act of writing the graffito was also an overt, if humble, gesture of devotion, an active appeal to the heavenly realm.

AUDIENCE AND ACTION

As material acts of devotion, the graffiti thus both communicated to the heavens and commemorated that exchange. As we have seen, they attested to the piety of the writers and the power of heavenly figures, and for both groups they ensured a form of physical presence through the lasting material trace of their proper names on the fabric of the site. Graffiti also, however, would have been encountered by



10. Graffiti-covered plaster fragments from the Memoria Apostolorum *triclia*. (After: Styger, *Römische Martyrergrüfte*, vol. 2, pl. 21)

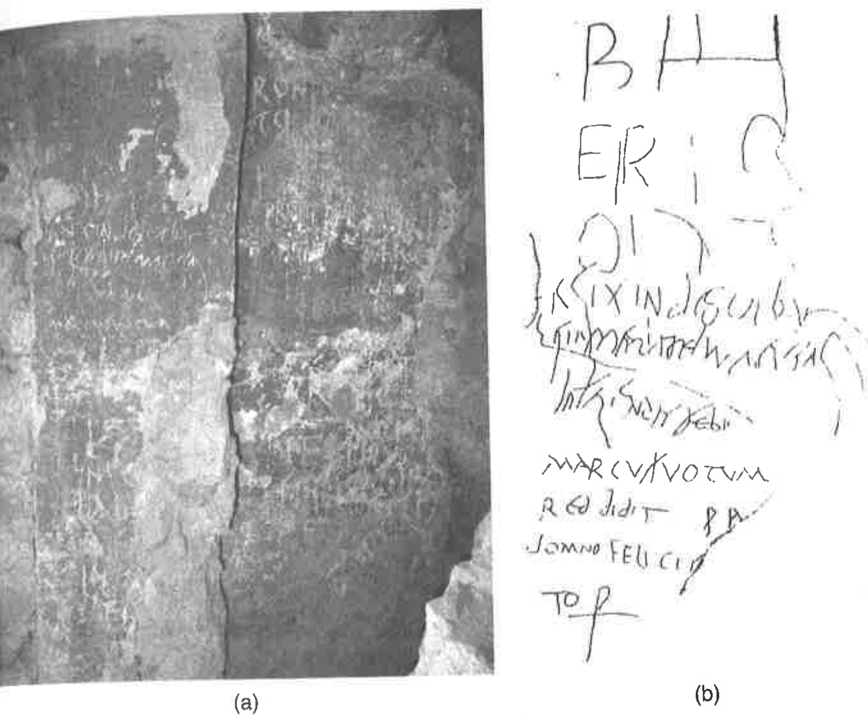
other visitors to the place, and the fact that the inscriptions cluster on specific sections of walls illustrates that graffiti invited action – specifically, the response of mirroring the gesture of earlier writers by adding one's own mark to the site.[36] The result is not the kind of 'dialogue' between writers prompted by many earlier Roman graffiti such as the texts scratched on Pompeian walls (or modern bathroom stalls!) that frequently find scrawled rejoinders, whether playful, clever, satirical or derogatory.[37] Rather, graffiti at sacred places encouraged viewers to copy the gesture of prayer writing, of adding their own names, of joining the ranks of those who had gone before in seeking divine assistance at that place.

In some cases the form of previously written graffiti seems directly to influence others produced in the same place. For instance, graffiti often adopt formulae that are common at that particular site, but are found less frequently in other regions of the early Christian world. The 'Ἐγώ + name' inscriptions from Philae discussed in the previous section (Fig. 9), for example, are not found amongst

the roughly contemporary Greek graffiti from Resafa.[38] It seems reasonable to suggest that, for a would-be graffiti writer at Philae, the choice to word one's own inscription in this way could very well have been influenced by the form of other devotional inscriptions at the site. At the Memoria Apostolorum, as we have seen, a good half of the preserved graffiti write out the names of the two apostles with the result that the words 'Petre et Paule' are repeated at least 100 times on the same wall (see Figs. 8 & 10).[39] Yet in the dense palimpsest of graffiti on the so-called wall g of the memorial under St. Peter's, the apostle's full name is conspicuously absent, and the patch of plaster is instead replete with scratched chi-rho monograms, symbols that are not common in the graffiti at the Memoria Apostolorum *triclia* across town.[40] At Trier, approximately two-thirds of the more or less complete graffiti open or close with a chi-rho monogram, creating a striking type of visual conformity not found at contemporary sites.[41] At the so-called Grotto of St. Paul on the outskirts of Ephesos, nearly all of the graffiti drawn or scratched into the fourth- to sixth-century plaster layers adopt a variation of 'Paul [or Christ, or Lord], help your servant' (βοήθη/βοήθι τοῦ δούλου σοῦ).[42] We find therefore, a certain, limited degree of internal cohesion among graffiti texts from some sites, and where this is the case, the graffiti themselves would have served as an important means of communicating and transmitting those local preferences and conventions. Indeed, Rachel Mair's observation about Hellenistic and Roman graffiti to Pan at El Karnais in the Egyptian desert is apposite for us as well: 'writing dedicatory graffiti... was a repetitive self-reproducing practice, reinforced by constant performance'.[43]

Adding one's own scrawl, whether simply one's name or a longer text, to the cluster of graffiti at a sacred site was then both a means to communicate with the divine and to join the ranks of others who have done so at the same place before. Yet through the words they wrote, certain individuals proclaimed an even more specific place within the community of Christian devotees to the shrine. For example, some graffiti testify to foreign names and foreign languages or explicitly indicate the writer's distant homeland.[44] In the panel we have examined from the Hypostyle Hall at Philae, for example, four Christian inscriptions identify their writers as Nubians (Fig. 9).[45] In addition to what they indicate about the history of pilgrimage, such inscriptions also reveal the importance of the holy sites as epigraphic spaces. The graffito could serve as a key medium for the representation, performance and registration of one's status as a pious Christian from near or far. When indications of ecclesiastical titles are present, as they are increasingly from the seventh to eighth centuries in the graffiti from Italy, they also indicate a growing distinction between spaces accessed, venerated – and graffitied – by lay people and those apparently reserved for clergy.[46]

Registering your devotion through the physical act of inscribing your name amidst the others written on the walls of a holy site was therefore not only a devotional but also a social gesture. Mary Beard's important discussion of the role of names inscribed at Roman sanctuaries as a means of what she calls



11. a. Graffiti wall at the shrine of St. Felix, Cimitile-Nola. (Photo: Ann Marie Yasin). b. Drawing of graffiti on left portion of graffiti wall at the shrine of St. Felix, Cimitile-Nola. (After: Ferrua, 'Graffiti di pellegrini', 19, fig. 2)

'signing up for paganism' is relevant for us here.[47] She sees inscribed votive texts as playing a 'central role in defining the place of the individual within traditional paganism', solidifying and making permanent the relationship between devotee and god that is otherwise expressed through the occasional, fleeting ritual of sacrifice.[48] I would argue that the Christian graffiti we have been examining also fulfil these important roles. The inscription of one's name at a shrine constitutes a physical trace of the appeal to God or a saint. It registers one's affiliation with Christianity and even to a specific saint's cult – a record of 'membership' in the religious community, in the Beardian sense.

I would press further, however, the importance of the location and form of the inscriptions. Writing one's name can be seen as a declaration of joining, an assertion of membership in the group, but it can also be used as a means to stand out. Through their appearance and scale many graffiti adhere closely to norms, as we have seen. Others, however, clearly strive to distinguish themselves from the surrounding texts. On the red wall at St. Felix's shrine at Cimitile, for example, the 4- to 5-cm high letters of the fragmentary text at the top ('BI' on one line followed by 'ERIO' on a second line) dwarf the rest of the texts below them (Fig. 11).[49] We find the same disparity of scale in other clusters of graffiti, for example in the case of the large 'κύριε βοέ[θησον]' ('Lord, help!') text engraved

into the Resafa wall (Fig. 12)[50] and the deeply gauged, 3.5- to 4-cm high letters of a certain Victor's prayer to Paul and Peter at the Memoria Apostolorum (Fig. 8).[51] Frames and other graphic arrangements can similarly distinguish individual texts. Slightly below the large, attention-grabbing prayer to the Lord on the Resafa wall, the roughly rectangular *tabula ansata* frame around the text of one Symeon's plea employs an archaizing epigraphic technique to segregate and elevate that writer's message (Fig. 12).[52] Other writers instead chose to capitalize on a wall's original painted decoration. Certain graffiti at the Memoria Apostolum, such as Victor's pronounced inscription, for example, are aligned with the painted borders of the preexisting garden scene, thus taking advantage of the polychrome effects and attracting visual attention by the way they are inserted within the larger compositional programme (Fig. 8).[53] Likewise, at the Monastery of Apa Apollo at Bawit, Egypt, the painted plaster walls of the chapels of the sixth or seventh to eighth centuries include many that explicitly appropriate the elaborate geometrical patterning of the painted decoration in their design and orientation.[54]

The surviving evidence of graffiti-encrusted walls thus reveals that the scribbled texts were not only passively witnessed: from some viewers they also elicited a parallel gestural response. Making one's own mark at a holy place was a means of materializing one's wishes and prayers to the divine *along with* the others who had patently done so before. The wall created a virtual community of devotees that transcended a given time, and adding one's own graffito provided a means of joining and literally carving out one's place in the group.

PERCEPTION AND CREATION OF SACRED SPACE

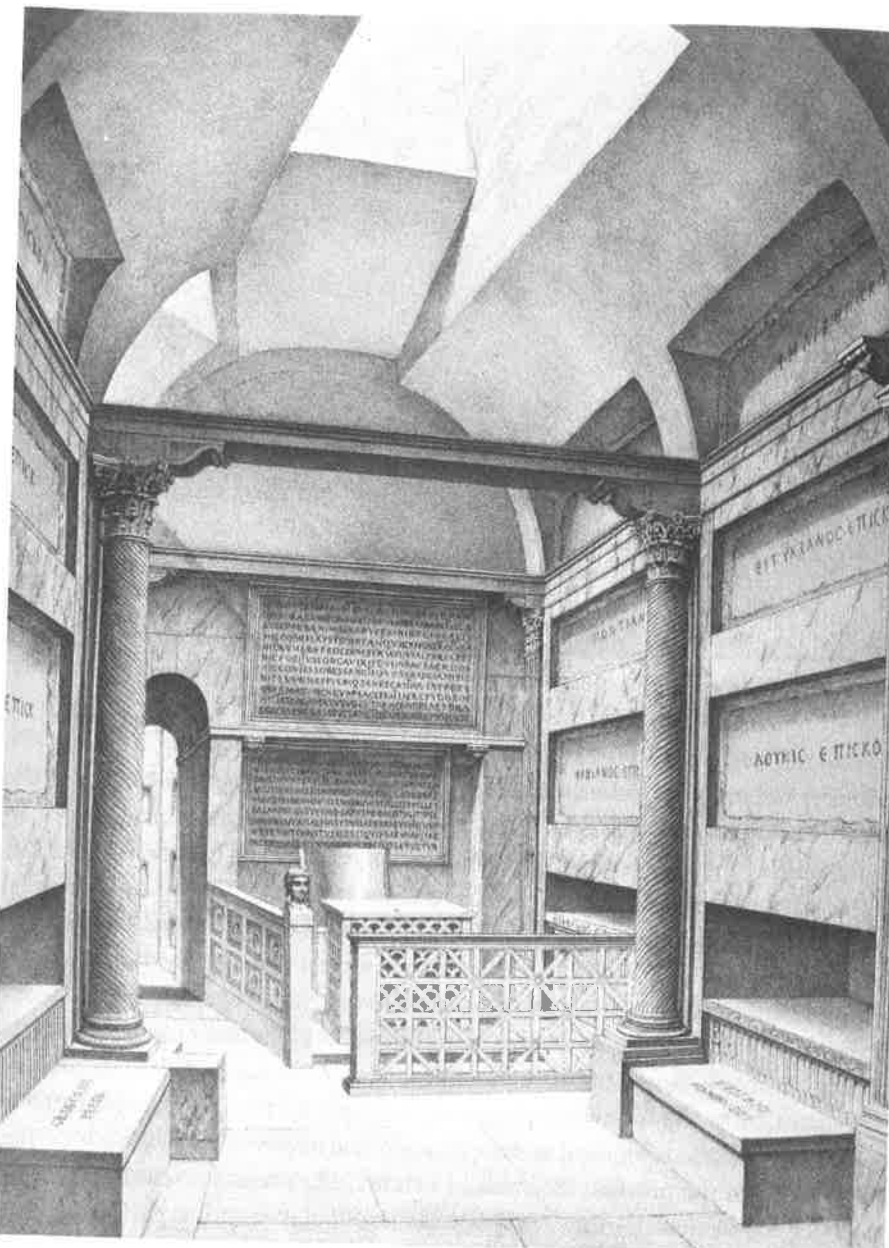
Graffiti could affect ancient viewers on other registers as well. When a visitor encountered an inscribed graffito, its status as a text that was written by a fellow devotee rather than a professional stone cutter was clear. A lettered visitor might decipher the words of a specific graffito and find a connection to its message, but even the illiterate would find themselves occupying the very same physical position of the text's writer and thereby understand that they were not alone in the experiences and motivations that brought them to the place. Collectively, one of the messages a mass of graffiti would have conveyed to visitors most forcefully was about the nature of the place itself – the popular recognition of its special sanctity and accessibility.

The material properties of graffiti speak to the physicality of the devotional act of writing the text, of cutting or drawing letters on the wall. Unlike the clean products of professionally tooled lettering with which formal inscriptions deny the impression of the craftsmen's physical labour, such as funerary epitaphs or the finely wrought lettering produced by the calligrapher Filocalus for Damasus, Bishop of Rome, in the second half of the fourth century

12. Resafa, Basilica of the Holy Cross, detail of graffiti wall fragment B in situ. (Photo after: Resafaarchiv DAI Berlin, courtesy T. Ulbert)

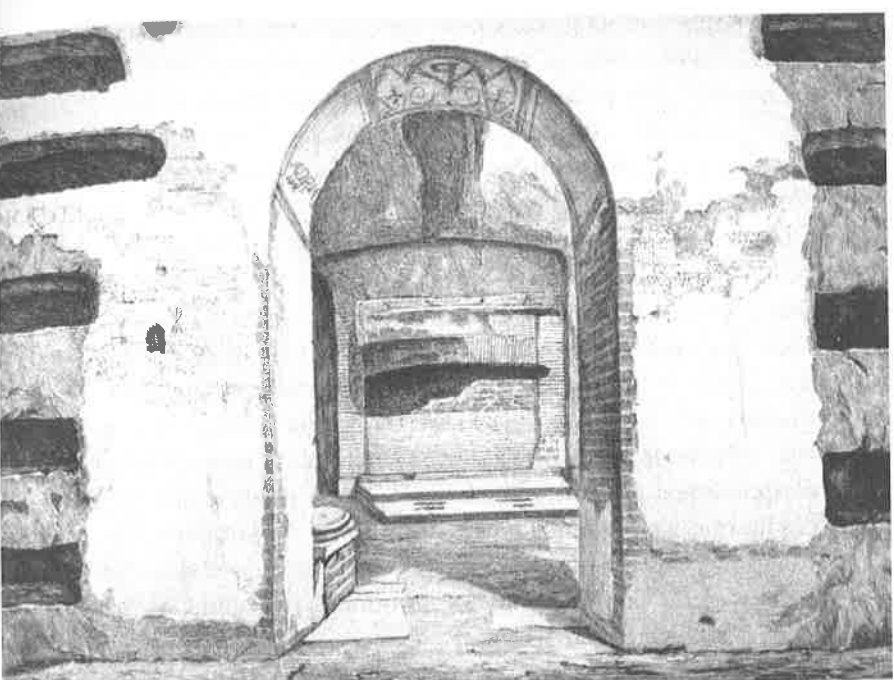
(Fig. 13), the graffiti's uneven scratches and chips fervently reveal the hands of the different writers who scraped pointed instruments, or even fingernails, through the surface of the plaster (Fig. 14).[55] The visual mash-up or juxtaposition of different hands, scales and scripts thus reveals far more than is said by its textual content; its materiality renders it a discernible record of multitudes of individual physical gestures of piety.[56] In contrast to a formal inscription that resonates with a steadfast voice of institutional authority (conveyed by such aspects as the placement, material, alignment and letterforms), the clusters of graffiti seem to murmur a steady hum of separate and unorchestrated yet harmonious prayers. The disparity in the formal properties of the writing found on a single patch of wall drives home the personal and unpremeditated nature of the texts. More than the content of the prayers, their varied handwriting presents viewers with hard evidence for a particular form of spontaneous popular devotion performed over and over again at the site.[57]

In addition, the appearance and location of the graffiti allow viewers to relate to the texts bodily, regardless of their degree of literacy and ability to access the textual content.[58] Philae's graffiti-covered monumental walls notwithstanding, most of the graffiti at Christian holy sites are very intimate affairs both in terms of the personal nature of their content and their scale.[59] They differ markedly from formal, professionally carved inscriptions not only in their diverse and irregular scripts, as we have seen, but also in their challenging legibility. In contrast to formal inscriptions that use visibility-enhancing graphic conventions, such as



13. Reconstruction drawing of the interior of the Crypt of the Popes in the catacomb of Callixtus, Rome. (De Rossi, *Roma sotterranea*, vol. 2, pl. 1A)

regular lines and text blocks, the form and spacing of letters, the scale and depth of carving, and the possible addition of pigment, most devotional graffiti with their irregular scripts, shallow carving and letter heights, often no more than 1–2 cm, are quite difficult to see from a distance. At the same time, the relative illegibility of graffiti in comparison to official and professionally produced inscriptions ensures that, when it *is* noticed, it has the potential to engender a profoundly different reception and reaction in its viewers. In general, to see a



14. Reconstruction drawing of the entrance of the Crypt of the Popes in the catacomb of Callixtus, Rome. (After: De Rossi, *Roma sotterranea*, vol. 2, pl. 29.1)

particular graffito, one needs to stand close to the inscribed surface. Notice, for example, the distribution of graffiti at the entrance to the Crypt of the Popes (Fig. 14), which in real life are more difficult to see than they appear in de Rossi's drawing because they are simply scratched into the white plaster. The texts do not span the entire surface of the wall, but congregate at roughly eye level at the threshold of the burial chamber. This puts the viewer in approximately the same position as the writer had been at the time he or she inscribed the text. These graffiti, in other words, work on a personal, somatic level. The human scale of the texts encourages a sense of personal identification with writers, not necessarily as specific individuals, but as fellow devout visitors who engaged in similar rituals and experiences at the same exact spot.

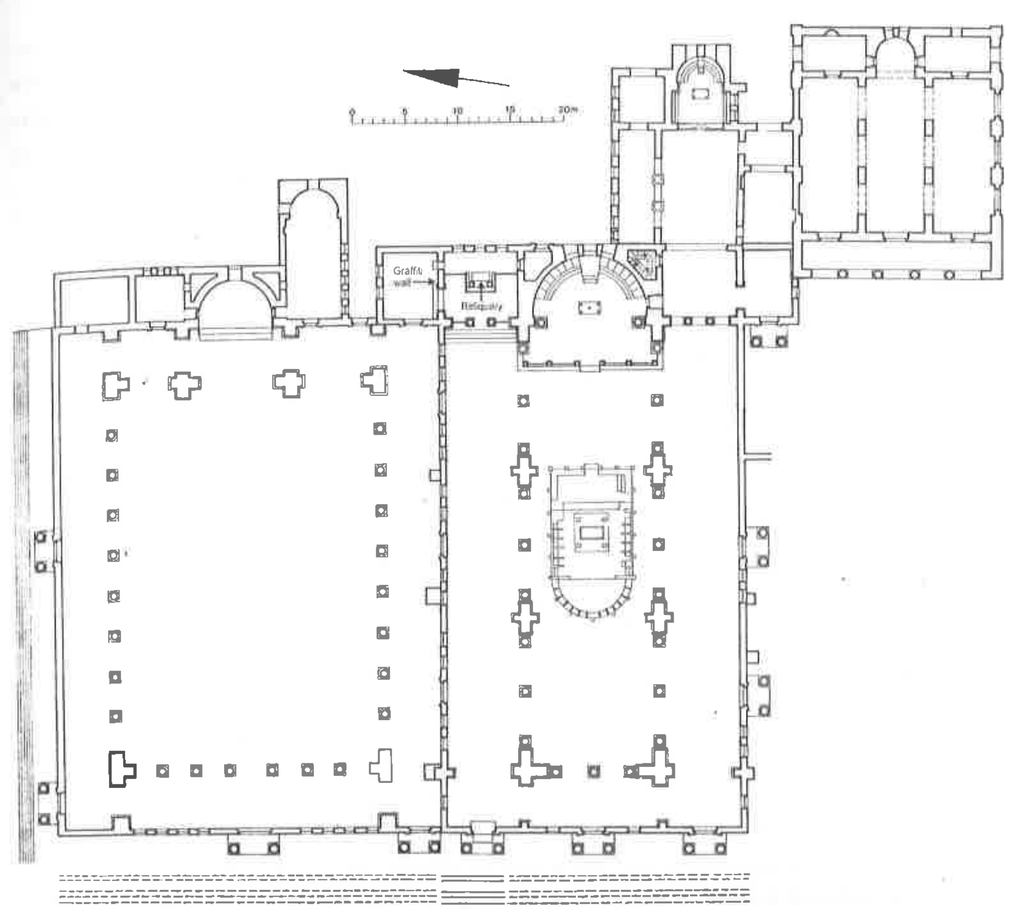
Considered from the perspective of an ancient Christian visitor to the site, therefore, devotional graffiti offered traces of others who had previously, in that very place, made verbal and physical gestures of communication with the divine. In this way, graffiti turned the place into a particular type of epigraphic environment, one that spoke of the masses of devotional gestures carried out there.[60] Borrowing a phrase from Véronique Plesch's work on later medieval church graffiti, a gallery of graffiti prayers turn the place into a perceptible 'contact zone' between earthly and heavenly realms.[61] The texts render the site a recognizable space of prayer and communication.

By creating such a contact zone the introduction of graffiti could transform a site both physically and symbolically. For example, the petitions and invocations

engraved on either side of the entrance to the Crypt of the Popes in the Catacomb of Callixtus or at the shrine of St. Felix in the cemetery zone of Cimitile north of Nola conveyed that these burial grounds were no longer merely places for interring and remembering the dead (Figs. 11 and 14). They had instead become spaces for communicating with heavenly martyrs and seeking divine assistance. In these cases, a cemetery zone has become a more affective sacred place – it attracts a broader audience who come not only to honour and commemorate the deceased but also to seek help from the 'special dead' for themselves or for their loved ones.

At other sites, graffiti participate in an even more dramatic type of transformation. Historically pagan shrines that were made into churches in the late antique period, such as the Parthenon in Athens or the sanctuary of Isis at Philae, underwent certain alterations, such as the addition of apses, Christian dedication inscriptions and monumental crosses.[62] These architectural changes mark an official liturgical and administrative conversion of the structure, but inscribed Christian graffiti enact the transformation at a palpable level of individual religious experience for they testify to the devotions of specific Christians and to the effectiveness of Christian prayers at the once pagan site. The columns of the Parthenon in Athens, for example, support more than 230 Christian inscriptions, prayers and epitaphs spanning the late sixth or seventh to the fifteenth century.[63] At Philae, more than thirty Christian devotional inscriptions, written after the temple's conversion to a Christian church in the sixth century, upstage the earlier Greco-Roman graffiti directed to Isis.[64] Furthermore, at both Athens and Philae, the Christian identity of the graffiti prayers is graphically underscored by the frequent inclusion of engraved crosses or chi-rho symbols. At these sites, the Christian graffiti are therefore an important element in both enacting and perceiving the ritual and cultural conversion of traditional pagan religious landscapes and structures.

The specific location of such graffiti-formed 'contact zones' within the larger sacred topography of each site is also noteworthy. As discussed earlier, graffiti often come down to us only by chance, and rarely do we have surfaces from an entire sacred complex with which to map relative densities of texts. Yet it is striking that evidence from numerous sites indicates that entrances or thresholds were often key locations for inscribing devotions. In addition to what this might indicate about social conventions or authorities' control over access to other, more holy areas, it also reveals a claim to the liminal space as a site of popular devotion.[65] The passageway walls in the Catacomb of Callixtus at the entrance to the Crypt of the Popes, for example are crowded with inscribed names and individual devotional prayers: the writing fields directly line both sides of the entrance to the chamber (Fig. 14). The cluster of graffiti we have examined from Philae was located on the wall of the hypostyle wall, directly adjacent to the entranceway (Fig. 9).[66] Interestingly too, at the Parthenon church the Christian inscriptions are not evenly distributed around the building. Most columns on



15. Resafa, Basilica of the Holy Cross, plan with location of graffiti wall and martyrium indicated. (After: Resafaarchiv DAI Berlin, courtesy T. Ulbert)

the long flanks have no or at most one or two inscribed texts, but at the entrance end the number explodes: 188 graffiti have been documented on the fourteen columns that form the inner and outer colonnades at the church's western face.[67] Moreover, within the general pattern of preference for the entrance side, certain columns flanking heavily used steps and doorways were clearly more popular than others, with some columns having attracted more than twenty or thirty graffiti each.[68]

The situation was perhaps somewhat analogous at the Church of the Holy Cross, built in 559 at Resafa in the eastern Syrian desert. Here, in a subsidiary chamber the chance survival of a section of wall plaster preserved under a later interior dividing wall revealed an exceptionally dense field of eighty-seven Greek inscribed graffiti (Figs. 12 and 15).[69] The architectural location of the room is critical. This thickly graffitied chamber connected the courtyard on the north side of the basilica to the martyrium room where the relics (likely of the True Cross) were displayed in a monumental reliquary, as indicated by the steps,

columns and pavement patterns.[70] Which other plastered surfaces of the complex supported inscribed prayers we do not know, but it is striking that this heavily written wall would have been encountered by visitors as they entered from the courtyard *before* they reached the shrine proper. Indeed, like the texts flanking the doorway to the Crypt of the Popes in Rome and those carved on the columns at the west end of the Parthenon church, the Resafa graffiti spatially anticipated the primary focal point of devotion. They materially defined the threshold as a place of prayer and conditioned the visitors' movement into increasingly sacred space.

For the pious visitor, carving a graffito was one of a range of devotional gestures that could have accompanied a visit to a holy place. But unlike bowing in supplication, intoning a prayer, lighting a candle or partaking of the Eucharist, inscribing a graffito offered a tangible interaction with the very substance of the site. Through it one's presence at the shrine and one's appeal to higher powers there found fixed form and a modicum of endurance. What is more, although some scholars have argued that Christian graffiti were not meant for a human audience, that the inscribed prayers were rather fully about communicating with the divine,[71] the form and placement of the inscriptions suggest otherwise. Even when words are not easily discernible, the graffiti communicate to and elicit responses from their human viewers through their location and material properties: their position on architectural supports; their juxtaposition to other features (including earlier inscribed texts); their use of conventional or unique formulae, symbols or framing devices; and the shallowness, scale and regularity of their strokes. To subsequent viewers, graffiti present lasting, visible testimony of past devotional actions performed at the site. They operate on personal and physical levels, inviting viewers to occupy the bodily position of the writers, and demonstrating a means for performing and displaying participation within the social group of devotees. The inscriptions sanction, even encourage, those moved to mirror the gesture and scratch their own mark on the shrine's surface. Graffiti also operate collectively and spatially. Galleries of graffiti conjure religious communities that extend beyond those worshippers present at any given moment. The traces, neither officially designed nor preordained, testify to parallel actions carried out in the same area by multitudes of individuals over time. Graffiti thus transform larger sacred topographies by signalling the use of a preexisting space now explicitly for communicating and memorializing individual petitions to the divine. It is clear then that, for us, graffiti's value as material artefacts of devotional and social behaviour far exceeds that of their textual content alone.

NOTES

1. Each of Rome's four main basilicas has a set of 'Holy Doors' that are opened ritually by the pope or his representative at the beginning of the Jubilee year and then walled up at its conclusion (for a summary, see Herbert Thurston, s.v. 'Holy Year of Jubilee'. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1910): www.newadvent.org/cathen/08531c.htm

(15 Aug. 2011). For the Vatican's description of the ritual and significance of the opening of the Holy doors for the Jubilee year of 2000, see www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/documents/ns_lit_doc_14121999_porta-santa_en.html.
2. Graffiti as art is more popular than ever: the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles reports that more than 200,000 people visited its recent exhibit of graffiti art, *The Art in the Streets*, during its less than four-month run in 2011, the highest attended exhibition in the museum's history to date ('MOCA Announces Record-Breaking Exhibition Attendance', Museum of Contemporary Art, Press Release, August 10, 2011: www.moca.org/pressroom/index.php). On the history of modern graffiti and the art world, see Susan Stewart, 'Ceci Tuera Cela: Graffiti as Crime and Art', in *Life after Postmodernism: Essays on Value and Culture*, ed. J. Fekete (New York, 1987), 161–80; and Jeffery Deitch, Roger Gastman, and Aaron Rose, eds. *Art in the Streets* (New York, 2011).
3. See J. A. Baird and Claire Taylor, 'Ancient Graffiti in Context: Introduction', in *Ancient Graffiti in Context*, eds. J. A. Baird and Claire Taylor (New York, 2011), 3–4; though cf. Roger S. Bagnall, *Everyday Writing in the Graeco-Roman East* (Berkeley, 2011), 24.
4. Alexei V. Zadorojnyi, 'Transcripts of Dissent? Political Graffiti and Elite Ideology under the Principate', in *Ancient Graffiti in Context*. eds. J. A. Baird and Claire Taylor (New York, 2011), 110–33.
5. See the essays and bibliography in Baird and Taylor, *Ancient Graffiti in Context*. Cf. Juliet Fleming, *Graffiti and the Writing Arts of Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, 2001), 29–72.
6. Werner Eck, 'Graffiti an Pilgerorten im spätrömischen Reich', in *Akten des XII. internationalen Kongresses für christliche Archäologie. Bonn 22–28. September 1991*, Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum Ergänzungsband 20,1 (Munster, 1995), 208–10.
7. Most work on early Christian graffiti is limited to study of a particular site. For an important synthetic account, see Eck, 'Graffiti an Pilgerorten'. Also still useful is Henri Leclercq, s.v. 'Graffites', in *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, ed. F. Cabrol (Paris, 1925), VI.2: cols. 1453–1542. Andrea Binsfeld's recent study of the early Christian graffiti from Trier also includes a valuable summary of comparanda from other sites: *Vivas in Deo. Die Graffiti der frühchristlichen Kirchenanlage in Trier* (Trier, 2006), 43–146.
8. On dating graffiti, see Eck, 'Graffiti an Pilgerorten', 211–12.
9. Memoria Apostolorum: *Inscriptiones christianae urbis Romae septimo saeculo antiquiores*, nova series. 10 vols, eds. Angelo Silvagni, Antonio Ferrua, D. Mazzoleni and C. Carletti (Rome and Vatican City, 1922–1992) [hereafter *ICUR*], V.12907–13096; Antonio Ferrua, *La basilica e la catacomba di S. Sebastiano*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City, 1990); Antonio Ferrua, 'Rileggendo i graffiti di S. Sebastiano', *La civiltà cattolica* 116 (1965), 428–37; Antonio Ferrua, 'Memorie dei SS. Pietro e Paolo nel epigrafia', in *Saecularia Petri et Pauli*, eds. B. M. Apollonj Getti, et al. (Vatican City, 1969), 131–48; F. Grossi-Gondi, 'Il "refrigerium" celebrato in onore dei SS. Apostoli Pietro e Paolo', *Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte* 29 (1995), 222–49; St Peter's: Margherita Guarducci, *I graffiti sotto la Confessione di San Pietro in Vaticano*, 3 vols. (Vatican City, 1958).
10. The graffiti fragments were found in 1949–50 in the area of the presbyterium of the south basilica of the cathedral complex: Nancy Gauthier's catalogue of the Trier graffiti (*Recueil des inscriptions chrétiennes de la Gaul antérieures à la Renaissance carolingienne*. Vol. 1: *Première Belgique* [Paris, 1975], 544–54) has been updated by Binsfeld, *Vivas in Deo*, 172–90. See also Andrea Binsfeld, 'Die Graffiti der frühchristlichen Kirchenanlage in Trier', in *Neue Forschungen zu den Anfängen des Christentums im Rheinland*, ed. S. Ristow (Munster, 2004), 235–52; Mark A. Handley, *Death, Society and Culture: Inscriptions and Epitaphs in Gaul and Spain, AD 300–750*, BAR International Series 1135 (Oxford, 2003), 163–64; Mark A. Handley, 'Beyond Hagiography: Epigraphic Commemoration and the Cult of Saints in Late Antique Trier', in *Society and Culture in Late Antique Gaul: Revisiting the Sources*, eds. R. W. Mathisen and D. Shanzer (London, 2001), 187–200. For a summary of the building phases, see Sebastian Ristow, *Frühes Christentum im Rheinland. Die Zeugnisse der archäologischen und historischen Quellen an Rhein, Maas und Mosel* (Köln, 2007), 193–203. See also n. 33.
11. Resafa: Thilo Ulbert, *Resafa II: Die Basilica des Heiligen Kreuzes in Resafa-Sergiupolis* (Mainz am Rhein, 1986). Within the same volume, the Greek graffiti are catalogued by Cornelia Römer ('Die griechischen Graffiti', 171–7) and the Arabic by Raif Georges

Khoury ('Die arabischen Inschriften', 179–80); Binsfeld, *Vivas in Deo*, 106–13. Cimitile-Nola: Antonio Ferrua, 'Graffiti di pellegrini alla tomba di San Felice', *Palladio* n.s. 13 (1963), 17–19; Binsfeld, *Vivas in Deo*, 85–93.

12. In addition to the sources listed in nn. 6–7, key recent publications addressing graffiti in Roman catacombs include: Carlo Carletti, '*Viatores ad martyres*: Testimonianze scritte altomedievali nelle catacombe romane', in *Epigrafia medieval greca e latina: ideologia e funzione. Atti del Seminario di Erice, 12–18 settembre 1991* (Spoleto, 1995), 197–225; ibid., '"Scrivere i santi": epigrafia del pellegrinaggio a Roma nei secoli VII-IX', in *Roma fra Oriente e Occidente, 19–24 aprile 2001* (Spoleto, 2002), 323–60; and the overview with select examples in Binsfeld, *Vivas in Deo*, 70–85. On the Parthenon church graffiti, see A. K. Orlandos and L. Vranousis, *Τα χαράγματα τοῦ Παρθενῶνος. Les graffiti du Parthénon. Inscriptions gravées sur les colonnes du Parthénon à l'époque paléochrétienne et byzantine* (Athens, 1973); and Anthony Kaldellis, *The Christian Parthenon: Classicism and Pilgrimage in Byzantine Athens* (Cambridge, 2009), 74–80. For Philae see: André Bernand, *Les inscriptions grecques de Philae*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1969); P. Nautin, 'La conversion du temple de Philae en église chrétienne', *Cahiers archéologiques* 17 (1967), 1–43; and Jitse H. F. Dijkstra, *Philae and the End of Ancient Egyptian Religion: A Regional Study of Religious Transformation (298–642 CE)*, (Leuven, 2008). On Bawit: Jean Maspero, *Fouilles exécutées à Baouît*, Mémoires publiés par les membres de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire 59 (Cairo, 1931). For a recent overview of the history and evidence from the monastery, see Alain Delattre, *Papyrus coptes et grecs du monastère d'apa Apollô de Baouît conserveés aux Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire de Bruxelles* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 2004), 29–109, and the brief summary in Roger S. Bagnall and Dominic W. Rathbone, *Egypt from Alexander to the Copts: An Archaeological and Historical Guide* (London, 2004), 175–8.

13. Giovanni Battista De Rossi, *La Roma sotterranea cristiana*. 3 vols. (Rome, 1864–77). See also the important recent study by Vincenzo Fiocchi Nicolai: 'Itinera ad sanctos. Testimonianze monumentali del passaggio dei pellegrini nei santuari del suburbia romano', in *Akten des XII. Internationalen Kongresses für christliche Archäologie* (Münster, 1995) 2: 763–75.

14. Orazio Marucchi and Hubert Vecchierello, *Manual of Christian Archaeology*, 4th ed. (Paterson, New Jersey, 1935), 265.

15. For a historiographical overview of late antique spatial studies and a call to focus on 'lived space', see Luke Lavan, 'Late Antique Urban Topography: From Architecture to Human Space', in *Theory and Practice in Late Antique Archaeology* (Leiden, 2003), 171–95.

16. Colin Adams, 'Travel and the Perception of Space in the Eastern Desert', in *Wahrnehmung und Erfassung geographischer Räume in der Antike*, ed. M. Rathmann (Mainz am Rhein, 2007), 215.

17. Martin Langner, *Antike Graffitizeichnungen. Motive, Gestaltung und Bedeutung*, Pallia 11 (Wiesbaden, 2001), 21.

18. Sulmona: Margherita Guarducci, 'Graffiti parietali nel santuario di Ercole Curino presso Sulmona', in *Scritti sul mondo antico in memoria di Fulvio Grosso*, ed. L. Gasparini (Rome, 1981), 225–40. Dura Europos: F. Cumont and M. I. Rostovtzeff, 'Dipinti and Graffiti', in *The Excavations at Dura-Europos conducted by Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters. Preliminary Report of the Seventh and Eighth Seasons of Work 1933–1934 and 1934–1935*. eds. M. I. Rostovtzeff, F. E. Brown, and C. B. Welles (New Haven, 1939), 116–28; E. D. Francis, 'Mithraic graffiti from Dura-Europos', in *Mithraic Studies: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies*, ed. John R. Hinnells (Manchester, 1971), 2: 424–45; Franz Cumont, 'The Dura Mithraeum,' in *Mithraic Studies: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies*, ed. John R. Hinnells (Manchester, 1971), 1:150–214, esp. 194–205. Châteauneuf: Christian Mermet, 'Le sanctuaire gallo-romain de Châteauneuf (Savoie)', *Gallia* 50 (1993), 95–138. Abydos: Ian Rutherford, 'Pilgrimage in Greco-Roman Egypt: New Perspectives on Graffiti from the Memnonion at Abydos', in *Ancient Perspectives on Egypt*, eds. R. Matthews and C. Roemer (London, 2003), 171–90. Philae: Bernand, *Inscriptions grecques de Philae*; Ian Rutherford, 'Island of the Extremity: Space, Language and Power in the Pilgrimage Traditions of Philae', in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, ed. David Frankfurter (Leiden, 1998), 229–56; Nautin, 'Conversion du temple', and Dijkstra, *Philae and the End of Ancient Egyptian Religion*.

19. Mermet, 'Sanctuaire gallo-romain'. See also Alix Barbet and Michel Fuchs, *Les murs murmurent. Graffiti gallo-romains. Catalogue de l'exposition créée au Musée romain de Lausanne-Vidy, 2008* (Gollion, 2008), 152–63 with color reproductions of Châteauneuf examples from the mid first century and a plaster fragment from the exterior of the courtyard wall of the temple at Jublains, dated after the mid second century, with proper names of gods and temple visitors.

20. Giovanni Geraci, 'Ricerche sul Proskynema', *Aegyptus* 51 (1971), 3–211; Rutherford, 'Island of the Extremity', 237; and Rutherford, 'Pilgrimage in Greco-Roman Egypt', 179.

21. Bernand, *Inscriptions grecques de Philae*; Geraci, 'Ricerche sul Proskynema', 115–36.

22. Most of the sixty-some catalogued graffiti and dipinti from the Dura Europos mithraeum date to the second phase of the structure, from ca. 210–40 CE, and more than half of the Dura mithraeum graffiti use the 'nama' formula, a kind of cultic acclamation or greeting appropriated from Old Persian (Francis, 'Mithraic graffiti', 438; Cumont, 'Dura Mithraeum', 195–6; Cumont and Rostovtzeff, 'Dipinti and Graffiti', 117–22). E.g.: 'Υπὲρ Νίκης τοῦ Κυρί/ου ἡμῶν Αὐτοκράτορος. / Νάμα θεῷ Μίθρᾳ, / νάμα πατράσι Λιβει/ανῷ καὶ Θεοδώρῳ, / νάμα καὶ Μαρείνῳ πε/τίτορι, νάμα πᾶσι τοῖς / συνδεξίοις παρὰ τῷ θε[ῷ]. (Francis, 'Mithraic graffiti', 438).

23. See sources in n. 18.

24. E.g. see Zadorojnyi, 'Transcripts of Dissent?' and cf. the religious graffiti discussed by J. A. Baird, 'The Graffiti of Dura-Europos: A Contextual Approach', in *Ancient Graffiti in Context*, eds. J. A. Baird and Claire Taylor (New York, 2011), 56. Monica Smith offers important insights on the role of anonymity in modern graffiti: 'Walls Have Ears: A Contextual Approach to Graffiti', *International Folklore Review* 4 (1986), 100–5.

25. *ICUR* V.12907–13096; Carlo Carletti, 'Nascita e sviluppo del formulario epigrafico cristiano: prassi e ideologia', in *Les iscrizioni dei cristiani in Vaticano. Materiali e contribute scientifici per una mostra epigrafica*, Inscriptiones sanctae sedis 2. ed. Ivan Di Stefano Manzella (Vatican City, 1997), 148. On the Memoria Apostolorum more broadly, with a description of the *triclia*, see: F. Tolotti, *Memorie degli Apostoli in Catacumbas* (Vatican City, 1953); R. Krautheimer, and S. Corbett, 'S. Sebastiano', in *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae. The Early Christian Basilicas of Rome (IV-IX Cent.)* (Vatican City, 1970), 4: 99–147, esp. 114–18; and Paul Styger, *Römische Martyrergrüfte*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1935), 1:15–36.

26. Bernand, *Inscriptions grecques et latins*, 2:268–77, insc. 205–15; Nautin, 'Conversion du temple', 29–31; Dijkstra, *Philae*, 335.

27. E.g. "Ἐγὼ Ἰωάνν|ης δοῦλος| [Θεο]ῦ' and "Ἐγὼ Ἀάρων Νουβὰ δοῦλος [Ἰ](ησοῦ)ς' (Nautin, 'Conversion du temple', 31; on the self-identification of the subject of the second inscription as Nubian, see the section, 'Audience and Action').

28. Full passage of *Antonini Placentini Itinerarium* 4, in *Itinera hierosolymita saeculi IIII-VIII*, (*CSEL* 39) ed. P. Geyer (Vienna, 1898), 161: 'Deinde milia tria venimus in Cana, ubi ad nuptias fuit Dominus, et accumsimus in ipso accubitu, ubi ego indignus nomina parentum meorum scripsi'. An English translation of the full text is available in John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades* (Warminster, England, 1977), 79–89. See also Eck, 'Graffiti an Pilgerorten', 206, and Gary Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C., 2010), 71.

29. Römer, 'Griechischen Graffiti', 173, insc. 14.

30. Ferrua, 'Graffiti di pellegrini', 18; Ferrua, 'Rileggendo i graffiti', 432–3.

31. Carletti, 'Nascita e sviluppo', 149 on prayer formulae at the Memoria Apostolorum. See also Eck, 'Graffiti an Pilgerorten', 217, and H. Leclercq, s.v. 'Boetheia', in *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, ed. F. Cabrol (Paris, 1910) 2.1: cols. 962–6.

32. Carletti, 'Nascita e sviluppo'.

33. Binsfeld, *Vivas in Deo*, 24–6 and 35–7, and id., 'Graffiti der frühchristlichen Kirchenanlage', 241–3. Recent review of the evidence has determined that the graffiti-covered plaster fragments come from two (previously thought to be three) phases of the choir screen, the first apparently from some time between the 330s and the middle, or just after the middle, of the century, and the second from the reign of Valentinian I (364–75) until the church's destruction in the fifth century (Binsfeld, *Vivas in Deo*, 15–22).

34. Ferrua, 'Rileggendo i graffiti', 431.

35. Ibid., 431–2.

36. Cf. Jean Guyon, *Le cimetière aux deux lauriers. Recherches sur les catacombs romaines* (Rome, 1987), 471.

37. Rebecca Benefiel, 'Dialogues of Ancient Graffiti in the House of Maius Castricius in Pompeii', *American Journal of Archaeology* 114:1 (2010), 67–9; id. 'Dialogues of Graffiti in the House of the Four Styles at Pompeii (*Casa Dei Quattro Stili*, I.8.17,11)', in *Ancient Graffiti in Context*, eds. J. A. Baird and Claire

Taylor (New York, 2011), 20–48; Peter Keegan, 'Blogging Rome: Graffiti as Speech-Act and Cultural Discourse', in *Ancient Graffiti in Context*, eds. J. A. Baird and Claire Taylor (New York, 2011), 165–90; Smith, 'Walls Have Ears'.

38. See Römer, 'Griechischen Graffiti'.
39. Sometimes in Greek and in reverse order (e.g. *ICUR* V.13052: 'Παῦλε καὶ Πέτρε'). See n. 31.
40. Carletti, 'Nascita e sviluppo', 149. Guarducci's study suggested that Peter was nevertheless indicated crypographically in the 'wall g' graffiti by abbreviations and monograms (*Graffiti sotto la confessione*, v. 2). In addition, she sees the fragmentary 'ΠΕΤ' graffito from the nearby 'red wall' as clear indication of Peter's name, although many others have been more circumspect, e.g. Ferrua, 'Memorie dei SS. Pietro e Paolo', 133–4.
41. On the christograms, see Binsfeld, *Vivas in Deo*, 39–41. Mark Handley suggests that text and script similarities among the Trier graffiti might mean that they were carved by designated cathedral personnel or that they 'reflect a desire to have one's graffito conform to a perceived norm' ('Beyond Hagiography: Epigraphic Commemoration and the Cult of Saints in Late Antique Trier', in *Society and Culture in Late Antique Gaul: Revisiting the Sources*, eds. Ralph W. Mathisen and Danuta Shanzer [Ashgate, 2001], 194, n. 37; reprised in Mark A. Handley, *Death, Society and Culture: Inscriptions and Epitaphs in Gaul and Spain, AD 300–750* [Oxford, 2003], 171).
42. Renate Pillinger, 'Neue Entdeckungen in der sogenannten Paulusgrotte von Ephesos', *Mitteilungen zur christliche Archäologie* 6 (2000), 16–29; Binsfeld, *Vivas in Deo*, 93–5.
43. Rachel Mairs, 'Egyptian "Inscriptions" and Greek "Graffiti" at El Kanais in the Egyptian Eastern Desert', in *Ancient Graffiti in Context*, eds. J. A. Baird and Claire Taylor (New York, 2011), 158.
44. Such evidence has been examined for what it can tell us of patterns of long-distance travel, e.g. Eck, 'Graffiti an Pilgerorten, 213–18; Carletti, 'Scrivere i santi',' 351–5.
45. From the south wall of the Hypostyle hall near the entrance, no. 205: 'Εγὼ Θεωδόσιος Νουβα; no. 208 (directly below inscription of Dioscoros above offering vessels held by king): 'Εγὼ Ε... Ν[ου]βα; no. 210 (immediately below graffiti of Sophronios = no. 209): Νουβα; 213 (before hands of king carrying offerings):+ 'Εγὼ Ἀάρων Νου/βα / δοῦλος / ['Ι](ησοῦ)ς (Bernand, *Inscriptions grecques*, 2:268–77). See Rutherford, 'Island of the Extremity'.
46. Carlo Carletti, 'Testimonianze scritte del pellegrinaggio altomedievale in occidente Roma e l'Italia', in *Los muros tienen la palabra: materiales para una historia de los graffiti*, eds. M. Gimeno Blay and María Luz Mandingorra Llavata (Valencia, 1997), 81–4; Carletti, 'Viatores ad martyres', 212–17.
47. Mary Beard, 'Writing and Religion: *Ancient Literacy* and the Function of the Written Word in Roman Religion, Question: What Was the Rôle of Writing in Graeco-Roman Paganism', in *Literacy in the Roman World*, JRA Supplement 3, eds. Mary Beard, A. K. Bowman, M. Corbier, et al. (Ann Arbor, 1991), 35–58.
48. Ibid., 47–8.
49. Ferrua, 'Graffiti di pellegrini', 18.
50. Römer, 'Griechischen Graffiti', 172, insc. 3 on wall fragment B with βοέ[θησον] for βοήθησον.
51. *ICUR* V.12989.
52. Römer, 'Griechischen Graffiti', 173, insc. 18: Συμεώ / Μάρας. On the *tabula ansata* frame used for divine invocations both on the Memoria Apostolorum *triclia* wall and in the nearly contemporary graffiti recording votives from the station of the VII Cohort of the Vigili, see Anna Holst Blennow, 'The Graffiti in the Cryptoporticus of the Horti Sallustiani in the Area of the Embassy of the United States of America in Rome', in *Unexpected Voices: The Graffiti in the Cryptoporticus of the Horti Sallustiani and Papers from a Conference on Graffiti at the Swedish Institute in Rome, 7 March 2003*, ed. Olof Brandt, Skrifter utgivna av Svenska Istitutet I Rom, 4°, 59 (Stockholm, 2008), 59. On *tabulae ansatae* in general, see Langner, *Antike Graffitizeichnungen*, 27.
53. Cf. Blennow, 'Graffiti in the cryptoporticus', 60.
54. Most of the site does not survive post-excavation. These panels, from the walls of hall 6, are preserved in the Coptic Museum in Cairo (reproduced in Gawdat Gabra and Mariane Eaton-Krauss, *The Treasures of Coptic Art in the Coptic Museum and Churches of Old Cairo* [Cairo, 2006], 88–9); others from the same room are in the collection of the Louvre. The room is described with excavation photos of the paintings in situ in Maspero, *Fouilles executeés à Baouît*, 20–3, pls. 15–25. It was a long (ca. 6 m × 30 m) rectangular chamber with a bench built along the south, west and east walls; Delattre and Walters suggest that the dimensions indicate that it could have been a refectory or other kind of reception place for pilgrims (Delattre, *Papyrus coptes et grecs du monastère*, 50; C. C. Walters, *Monastic Archaeology in Egypt* [Warminster, 1974], 109). The tomb of the monastic founders, Apollo and his companion Phib, was presumably the goal of the pilgrimage (Delattre, *Papyrus coptes et grecs du monastère*, 53); 337 graffiti from the room, mostly in Coptic, have been published (Maspero, *Fouilles executeés à Baouît*, 63–120). A plan of the complex can be found in Jean Clédat, *Le monastère et la nécropole de Baouit*, Mémoires publiés par les membres de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire, 111 (Cairo, 1999), plans I–IV.
55. On Damasus's epigraphy, see *Epigrammata damasiana*, ed. A. Ferrua (Vatican City, 1942); N. Gray, 'The Filocalian Letter', *Papers of the British School at Rome* 24 (1965), 5–13; Dennis Trout, 'Damasus and the Invention of Early Christian Rome', *Journal of Medieval and Early Christian Studies* 33:3 (2003), 517–36.
56. Cf. Véronique Plesch, 'Memory on the Wall: Graffiti on Religious Wall Paintings', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 32:1 (2002), 182.
57. In the interesting case of the tomb of a priest named Eulalios in the Domatilla catacomb at Rome, devotional graffiti provide evidence of popular recognition of a saint not officially recognized by the church: Philippe Pergola, 'Le "saint" prêtre Eulalios: un cas singulier de veneration à la fin du IVe siècle', in *Quaeritur inventus colitur: miscellanea in onore di padre Umberto Maria Fasola* (Vatican City, 1989), 2: 543–60.
58. Following William Harris's fundamental text (*Ancient Literacy* [Cambridge, Mass., 1989]), much important work has sought to refine our understanding of literacy in terms of a broader spectrum (e.g. the essays collected in *Literacy in the Roman World*, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* Supplement 3, eds. Mary Beard et al. (Ann Arbor, 1991); Rosalind Thomas, 'Writing, Reading, Public and Private "Literacies": Functional Literacy and Democratic Literacy in Greece', in *Ancient Literacies: The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome*, eds. W. A. Johnson and H. N. Parker (Oxford, 2009), 13–45; M. C. A. Macdonald, 'Literacy in an Oral Environment', in *Writing and Near Eastern Society. Papers in Honour of Alan R. Millard*, eds. P. Bienkowski, C. B. Mee, and E. A. Slater (New York, 2005), 49–118. For more on the relationship between graffiti and literacy, see also Bagnall, *Everyday Writing*, 25–6; Baird and Taylor, 'Ancient Graffiti in Context', 9–11; Mairs, 'Egyptian "Inscriptions"', 162; Keegan, 'Blogging Rome'; Handley, *Death, Society and Culture*, 170–1.
59. On the question of whether the proskynema inscriptions at Philae were carved by cult personnel or the pilgrims themselves, see Étienne Bernard, 'Réflexions sur les proscynèmes', in *Mélanges François Kerlouégan*, eds. D. Conso, N. Fick, and B. Poulle (Paris, 1994), 51–3. I am grateful to David Frankfurter for this reference.
60. On the concept of epigraphic environments, see Greg Woolf, 'Monumental Writing and the Expansion of Roman Society in the Early Empire', *Journal of Roman Studies* 86 (1996), 22–39, and Ann Marie Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces in the Late Antique Mediterranean: Architecture, Cult, and Community* (Cambridge, 2009), esp. 101–2.
61. Plesch, 'Memory on the Wall', 168.
62. On the conversion of the Parthenon, the dating of which is disputed (at least by the end of the sixth century based on archaeological evidence but with literary sources possibly pointing to a date as early as the end of the fifth century), see Bryan Ward-Perkins, 'Re-Using the Architectural Legacy of the Past, *entre idéologie et pragmatisme*', in *The Idea and the Ideal of the Town between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, eds. G. P. Brogiolo and Bryan Ward-Perkins (Leiden, 1999), 225–44.
63. Orlandos and Vranousis, *Graffiti du Parthénon*; Kaldellis, *Christian Parthenon*, 74–80. Sixty-five of the catalogued inscriptions include date formulae (Orlandos and Vranousis, *Graffiti du Parthénon*, esp. 28–30). Kaldellis calculates that 104 of the inscriptions are prayers, generally addressed to God of the Theotokos, and sixty-four are epitaphs. There are also at least eighty incompletely published Christian graffiti from the walls of the Propylaia (*Christian Parthenon*, 75–7).
64. Bernand, *Inscriptions grecques de Philae*, 2: 268–77, 305–14. The conversion of the sanctuary of Philae to the Church of St. Stephen, dated between 535–7 based on Procopius (*Bel. Pers.* I.19.37), is commemorated in a heavily damaged foundation inscription engraved on the south face of the North Pylon directly east of the central door leading to the hypostyle hall (insc. no. 200, Bernand, *Inscriptions grecques de Philae*, 2: 251–6; see also Nautin, 'Conversion

du temple', and Dijkstra, *Philae and the End of Ancient Egyptian Religion*.

65. Cf. Eck, 'Graffiti an Pilgerorten', 221–2.
66. Bernand, *Inscriptions greques*, 2: 268–74, plus the diagram at pl. 110.
67. Orlandos and Vranousis, *Graffiti du Parthénon*, esp. 15, with plan indicating graffiti placement. Recall that the 'back' of the ancient temple on the west side turned into the church's 'front' when the addition of the church's eastern apse reversed the building's orientation. It is also important to note the wide chronological range of the graffiti and that the Parthenon church presents a somewhat special case of official scribes: although 32 inscriptions provide only names and were most likely carved by pilgrims or other visitors, and more than 100 of them are prayers (see n. 63), as Kaldellis notes, 'the plurality of the inscriptions were carved by – or on behalf of – the temple staff' (*Christian Parthenon*, 78).
68. Orlandos and Vranousis, *Graffiti du Parthénon*, 15.
69. For a description of the chamber, see Ulbert, *Resafa II*, 62–8 and the useful overview of the site in Pauline Donceel-Voûte, *Les pavements des églises byzantines de Syrie et du Liban. Décor, archéologie et liturgie*, Publications d'histoire de l'art et d'archéologie de l'Université catholique de Louvain 69 (Louvain-la-neuve, 1988), 1: 273–79. For the graffiti, see Römer 'Griechischen Graffiti'.
70. Ulbert, *Resafa II*, 43–60; Donceel-Voûte, *Pavements des églises*, 279.
71. E.g. Carletti's 'messaggi unidirezionali' ('Scrivere i santi', 333 and 'Testimonianze scritte', 73).

CHAPTER THREE

ERASURE AND MEMORY: AGHLABID AND FATIMID INSCRIPTIONS IN NORTH AFRICA

Jonathan M. Bloom

According to the thirteenth-century North African historian Ibn ʿIdhari, in 909 when the Fatimid imam publicly revealed himself as the caliph al-Mahdi at Kairouan (now in Tunisia), he ordered his name mentioned in the Friday sermon and inscribed on coins, the two standard vehicles for the expression of sovereignty in the Islamic lands. He also ordered that the names of all previous patrons be removed from 'mosques, cisterns, forts, and bridges' and replaced with his own.[1] His erasure and subsequent relabelling of monumental inscriptions recall the case of the Abbasid caliph al-Maʾmun (r. 813–33) who tampered with the foundation inscription of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, adroitly replacing the name of the original patron, the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 685–705), with his own.[2] It is difficult to imagine that either ruler believed that such a change would cause the public to forget the name of the founder.[3] Rather, as the Swiss Arabist Max van Berchem suggested many years ago, the act was a *prise de possession*, ensuring to the new claimant the symbolic advantages of citation, that is, the benefits from any blessing the building might possess. Nearly a century and a half after the Fatimid ruler al-Mahdi, the scene would be replayed on the same stage when the Fatimid client, the Zirid governor al-Muʿizz ibn Badis (r. 1016–62), returned to the Abbasid fold and anathematised his erstwhile overlords, removing *their* names from inscriptions on coins, flags, standards and buildings.[4]

Although no examples of the outright substitution of names on the model of al-Maʾmun's action at the Dome of the Rock have survived in Tunisia, a well-known example of simple erasure is a carved stone plaque set in the east façade of