Abstract

We need to rethink graffiti: they are not just words and images but places and things. Using the graffiti of Dura-Europos on the Syrian Euphrates, this paper will demonstrate some of the ways that the ‘unofficial’ urban texts of antiquity can, when studied in their spatial context as material objects, elucidate urban histories which rub against the grain of traditional studies. It will explore the ways such seemingly ephemeral marks can be active agents within the urban environment in public, religious, and private contexts. Graffiti, I contend, have the potential to give new perspectives on the ancient world: they are unmediated traces, stories of daily life, and through them it is possible to explore the ways the walls of the city could become active in people’s lives. At Dura, the small scratched messages of an otherwise historically voiceless people made on a plaster wall can be read almost two millennia later.

Keywords
Graffiti, Dura-Europos, Arsacid archaeology, Roman archaeology, Syria

Introduction

Graffiti are common within the contemporary urban landscape, so much so that we might think that they are a phenomenon of modern life. But things we might think of as graffiti are also found in many historical societies. I say “we might think of as graffiti” as there is a problem in defining precisely what it is that we’re talking about. In modern examples, we tend to think of graffiti as writing that is intrusive, or marks that are unofficial or (to borrow Mary Douglas’ formulation) “out-of-place”. In contemporary society, it is considered inherently subversive to write on a wall, and in viewing graffiti we tend to assume they are made without the building

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owners’ permission: graffiti transgresses modern notions of property and what is considered to be “appropriate” means of communication.²

<Insert Figure 1. Banksy, mural of worker cleaning Paleolithic wall art using a pressure washer. Made as part of the Cans festival in Leake Street (‘Banksy tunnel’), London, 2008. Used by kind permission of the artist/Pest Control Office.>

The tension between what we define as graffiti and other marks made on walls which are accepted or positively valued has been commented on by no less an authority than Banksy himself, in the now-painted over image of a worker using a pressure washer to clean away cave paintings (Figure 1). Part of how we attribute value to such wall markings is, of course, age, which is why the Banksy work is apt: ‘cave paintings’ are valued as some of the earliest marks made on walls by human hands, but in the contemporary urban environment such marks are often taken to be transgressive. Equating cave paintings with modern graffiti which might be removed by the authorities poses a question about what art valued and what is considered vandalism. This is doubly meaningful, of course, precisely because Banksy’s works have themselves become valuable (and in the context of a continuing tension between ‘graffiti’ and ‘street art’) but also because the work itself was also removed.³ In addition to age, the value (or lack of value) that is given to marks made on walls is a function of context: markings which might be considered vandalism in some contexts might be tourist attractions in others, such as Lord Byron’s graffito made at an ancient Greek temple, or indeed any of Banky’s urban interventions, both of which are now highly valued.⁴ By drawing attention to the analogy between modern graffiti and cave paintings, Banksy cleverly asks that we question where we place value, and of course humbly connects his own art to the earliest and perhaps most famous wall markings made by humans.

² For an example of the range of approaches to contemporary graffiti, from that made on trains to those in latrines, see e.g. the contributions in Jeffrey Ian Ross, ed., Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).
³ As noted by Frederick, modern graffiti makers are aware of, and play with, their lineage of past visual traditions. Ursula K. Frederick, “Revolution Is the New Black: Graffiti/Art and Mark-Making Practices,” Archaeologies 5, no. 2 (2009): 228.
We do, of course, possess graffiti from the ancient world that fit comfortably within modern understandings, transgressive texts including those with sexual subjects, some long ignored by scholarship on account of their ‘obscene’ character. But were such ‘subversive’ texts the norm in the ancient world, or simply one variation of a much broader habit of writing on walls? This is a question worth asking, not only in order to understand the material itself, but to reveal false analogies sometimes made between ancient and modern graffiti. This article uses examples of graffiti from an archaeological site, Dura-Europos on the Syrian Euphrates. Dura was a Hellenistic foundation held by the Arsacids (Parthians) and then the Romans. Destroyed by the Sasanians in the mid-third century AD, the site was never substantially recaptured, so was relatively well preserved, and was excavated in the 1920s and 30s by Franz Cumont of the French Academy and then a joint Yale-French Academy expedition.

Dura’s history as an urban environment began as a Hellenistic military colony, in the late fourth century BC. The town seems to have taken shape initially around its citadel, and an orthogonal grid of streets was probably laid out later in the Hellenistic period, in the second century BC. In early second century BCE the city came under Arshacid control. This was a time of

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6 The first discoveries of paintings from Dura were published in James H. Breasted, Oriental Forerunners of Byzantine Painting. First-Century Wall Paintings from the Fortress of Dura on the Middle Euphrates, Oriental Institute Publications 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1924). Subsequent excavations were made by Cumont, and then ten seasons under the joint auspices of Yale and the French Academy of Arts and Letters, Franz Cumont, Fouilles de Doura-Europos (1922-1923) (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1926); and the series which began with P. V. C. Baur and M. I. Rostovtzeff, eds., The Excavations at Dura-Europos Conducted by Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters. Preliminary Report of First Season of Work, Spring 1928 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929). In the 1980s a joint Franco-Syrian expedition was restarted at the site, with publications chiefly in the series Doura-Europos Études, and now Europos-Doura Varia.
expansion for Dura, and as the population grew so did the town, filling up space within the city walls.

During this time many Hellenic civic institutions apparently continued, and an urban elite maintained itself, as Greek documents from the remains of the city’s archives attest, although most of these are later in date.

The period for which we have the most evidence, the third century, is that in which a Roman military garrison had been installed within the city walls, taking up much of the north side of the town (figure 2). It is to this period that most of Dura’s graffiti belong.

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Third century Dura is well known archaeologically because the site did not survive: after a siege by the Sasanian Persians, the city was taken from the Romans, and it was never substantially reoccupied.  

10 Dura, by the time of its demise at the hands of the Sasanians in the mid-third century, was a large Roman frontier town, but not a terribly important one, and it went almost unmentioned in the ancient sources. What is exceptional about Dura was its preservation and the extent of excavation. As is visible in figure 2, much of the city was revealed, and combined with the results of geophysics, most of the urban plan is known.  

Unfortunately, this rich archaeological record also made the site a target for looters during the current conflict in Syria, and the site has been heavily damaged in the search for objects which can be sold on the antiquities market.  

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12 For satellite images of Dura and an assessment of some of the damage to the archaeological site, Jesse Casana and Misha Panahipour, “Satellite-Based Monitoring of Looting and Damage to Archaeological Sites in Syria,” Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage
Dura was, in the Roman period, a curious site by the standards used by modern historians and archaeologists to discuss cultural affiliation: there is evidence of a range of written languages, but the overwhelming majority of documents was in Greek. Aramaic was probably the common spoken tongue, and in the site we have, in addition to Greek parchments and inscriptions, and the Latin inscriptions and papyri of the army, a range of other languages. These including Palmyrene, Hebrew, Safaitic, Syriac, Hatrane, and Middle Persian. Dura does not fit neatly into typologies, instead combining local, Arsacid, Mesopotamian, and Hellenic and Roman features, languages, and cults. Also staggering in its complexity was the religious life of the town. From Dura, we have temples to local and regional deities, to gods like Aphlad and Azzanthkona, to the gods of Palmyra, to Baal and Zeus Megistos, to deities with Classical names like Adonis, and Artemis, and Syrian ones like Atargatis, all of whom had their own sanctuary at the site. With the Roman military came also new shrines including a Mithraeum, and the worship of Jupiter Dolichenus. Excavations at the site also uncovered a third century Jewish Synagogue, for which the site is perhaps best known, and on the same road along the western wall of the city, a Christian house church, each amongst the oldest known examples. So, we have a town with an


immensely rich linguistic and religious profile. Graffiti are one way we can access this rich picture of cultural complexity and diversity.

For what was probably a fairly ordinary town in the Roman Near East, we might be surprised by the density and extent of writing culture at Dura. Graffiti, both textual and pictorial, permeate every part of the town, in public and private contexts, in temples, shops, houses, and fortifications; even with the unsystematic recording of the early excavations, we have over 1300 separate recorded graffiti. The textual graffiti are largely in Greek, but also Latin, Palmyrene, Hatrene, Safaitic, and Aramaic. While the parchments and papyri preserved at the site were carefully studied and published, the graffiti languished. This was in part due to the value judgements of the excavators: the graffiti were initially interpreted as signs of debasement and decline, as “...scrawls, scratches, and drawings ... so common in Dura wherever owners ceased to feel a pride in their buildings or neglected to guard them.” Graffiti were assumed to only relate to the period when houses and other buildings were no longer in use or cared for. However, when we actually read the texts we see they are not the scrawls of looters and


17 The inscriptions of Dura (within which we might include the graffiti) were never published or included in standard corpora.

vandals, but those of the house owners, welcome guests, and temple-goers. We need to be careful not to retroject our understandings of mark-making on walls in modern cities (as did some of the initial excavators, as evident in the quote above), and to keep in mind the relative scarcity and expense of other writing surfaces in the ancient world.

In addition to textual graffiti, pictorial graffiti also reveal concerns of the people of Dura, and these too are often religious in tone, sometimes showing figures which seem to be priests, or acts of sacrifice, of shrines and on altars, or deities. Frequent too are animals, including birds, bulls, camels and deer, and occasionally even detailed scenes, including those depicting the city walls. Mounted archers and lancers are repeated, as are hunting scenes. The content and style of these images all place Dura within a regional Syrian and Mesopotamian tradition more than a Greco-Roman one, although in a house taken over by Roman soldiers, we do find images of Gladiators which would be at home anywhere in the empire. Rather than seeing this graffiti as incidental or marginal, if we consider them as any other find, alongside pottery or sculpture, then they help the cultural affiliations and religious concerns of Dura’s populace come into focus. So too does perhaps a degree cosmopolitanism allowed by Dura’s (albeit probably


minor) place in the trading network, as we find images of ‘Iranian nobles’ and ‘Kushan’ lancers, distinguished by facial hair and clothing.21

What is interesting then, in terms of the general character of the Dura graffiti and how we define modern graffiti is this: it was not subversive or transgressive. In Arsacid and Roman Dura, it was completely normal to write on house walls, or on the walls of the city, or even within a temple precinct. People often included their names in the graffiti (indeed, some graffiti at Dura are only names), and graffiti were often made by those in positions of authority, including the Roman army. People frequently scratched simple acclamations to their gods all over the city. These were not considered an act of defacement or of rebellion, nor only the act of the marginalised in the ancient world (although those people are visible, too). What, then, is the use of comparing graffiti and other fleeting testimonies across time, and across a wide geographical area? The use is that despite these differences, the fact that there are a number of commonalities which we can use to interrogate our material, and to think of them in different ways, ways that might tell us new stories. This article will approach this in terms of three broad themes: Graffiti as place, graffiti as object, and the relationship between graffiti and time.

**Graffiti as place**

Scholarly conventions have been one hurdle in the understanding of ancient graffiti. When they were published (which did not always happen, sometimes because of the relative lack of value placed on them compared to, say, formal stone inscriptions), they were presented in corpora which decontextualised them. Most of the Dura graffiti did not even make it that far, and have not been included in the scholarly corpora, but when they are, they tend to be transcribed into tidy printed texts, with minimal contextual descriptions.22 These descriptions sometimes give the name of the building on which the graffito was found, but do not say whether it was inside

22 See, e.g., selected Dura graffiti published in *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum VII*. 

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or outside, what part of the building in which it was found, how visible it was nor what size, or any other characteristics of its physical location. The value of these graffiti within the standard corpora, when it was recognized at all, was thought to be in the text itself, rather than its material form or its physical location: context was not important. But, for graffiti, the location in the city, on a building, and its relationship to other graffiti are all important components of its meaning. Taking such things into consideration not only informs our understanding of the texts, it can reveal the way that spaces in the city worked and the way that places were created.

For example, at Dura, we find the Roman military taking control and inscribing themselves all over the city, on its gates, along the city walls, in houses and in temples, demonstrating a particular relationship with their urban environment. Graffiti can, therefore, be used to examine the density and duration of military presence, for example, in particular parts of the fortifications: it is no surprise to find many soldiers scratched or painted their names into the stone of the main city gate, the Palmyrene gate and its towers, where they would have been posted on guard (figure 3). They would have been stationed there for hours on end, and would have doubtless been bored a lot of that time. Among the graffiti are those which record the gatekeepers and custom’s officer, giving an idea of not only the people who would have been present but the type of activities that would have occurred within the space.  

But these aren’t just the marks of bored soldiers. These careful, deliberate, and publicly visible texts show just how varied writing on walls was in the ancient world, and how different it is to that in modern societies: these were not subversive texts, as the people making them often were the authorities, in this case Roman military personnel, and they identify themselves by 

In 1928 and 1929, as the gate was excavated, at least 166 such Greek graffiti were counted, many being simply names of individuals. The time and care necessary to carve and paint these graffiti is not indicative of hasty and clandestine acts. And while these texts might be contrasted with large, monumental, official inscriptions, in their placement all over the inner walls of the gate passage, most at approximately standing height, they were similarly highly visible and in an area of high traffic. They are mostly in Greek, not the official Latin of the army, and use a formula which was also used by civilians throughout the town, in both private and religious contexts. So, while these graffiti might be read as evidence of the soldiers enacting their control over a key part of the town, they are also evidence of their use of local practices and habits. Indeed, people had been carving their names into this gate for centuries. So, the relationship between these graffiti and place is not only the way in which they reveal the occupation and use of this space, but also the way that certain graffiti-making practices were a local phenomenon that cut across different sectors of the population over time: such graffiti were an aspect of the *habitus* of the place.

A large group of texts found at Dura are a short formula, which basically say “May so-and-so be remembered [to the gods]”. In these remembrance graffiti, writing is not simply a way of


25 This task was carried out for the most part by Jotham Johnson: he did see value in the texts and paid careful attention to them, and their spatial context, giving each text a number, which he marked in chalk on the monument; the marks are visible in some of the photographs. He used these numbers to produce sketch-plans of the passageway which marked the approximate position of each text and which showed the relationship of the texts to each other.

making one’s mark but a way of making a religious declaration. Indeed, the act of making the graffito of this formula is part of its invocation, and its continued physical presence, its materiality, ensured remembrance, as did the possibility that the text could be read out loud, by those who could read it and passed by. The writing of the text, and the continued physical presence of the text were both facets of its usefulness: the bodily act of writing the text might have itself been a prayer or dedication, and the graffito was a means by which a text could speak for itself long after the writer has gone.

If we think of the audience for such graffiti, even the non-literate person walking through the gates of the city would understand something of their message. This gate was the main entrance to the city, which people would have moved through regularly, and a liminal point between the city and the surrounding territory, and the steppe beyond. The exhortation to remember certain individuals, written prominently along the central passage of the gate, and perhaps even being read aloud, would have been part of daily lives. They are not only texts but also images of religiosity, often abbreviated to the letters MN. This formula is one that did not name a particular god, and was used in many of the sanctuaries of the site. So, while we have

27 On the Palmyrene gate, Johnson counted 35 mnesthe graffiti, of which 25 were Roman in date, among the 143 Greek graffiti he recorded Baur and Rostovtzeff, The Excavations at Dura-Europos Conducted by Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters. Preliminary Report of Second Season on Work, October 1928-April 1929, 154. He dated these as Roman by their use of titles such as beneficiarius (known to be titles in the Roman army), but this dating is perhaps debatable.


29 On the graffiti themselves as dedication (rather than commemorating a dedication), see Stern, “Tagging Sacred Space in the Dura-Europos Synagogue,” 178–81.

30 The degree to which people were literate in the ancient world is of course a contentious issue. In any case, much meaning could have been understood even by those who were not fully literate, conveyed by the form, size, material (etc) of texts (for a recent discussion of some of these issues, see Greg Woolf, “Ancient Illiteracy?,” Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies 58, no. 2 (2015): 31–42. At Dura, there is evidence of illiterate people in the papyri, who have others act on their behalf, but overall the density of writing across the site, evidenced in large part by graffiti, gives an impression of more widespread literacy in this urban environment than is usually assumed to be the case.
much variation in the deities, elements of religious practice were held in common, and graffiti was one of these, even for supposedly monotheistic cults. Among the graffiti of the passage of the city gate was one to the Tyche, or fortune, of the city; small altars were also found along the passage. Together, these graffiti and altars transform the city gate into a religious place, perhaps even allowing it to function in a formal way as a sanctuary to the Fortune of the city.

The towers of the city walls, too, can be read as religious spaces and not only as fortifications when we consider graffiti. Throughout the city’s towers, we find graffiti that are not scratched but hammered into the stone, recessed to give silhouettes, which are now only visible when caught in the raking light of the evening. These images include human figures, apparently dancing, often holding their hands above their heads, and holding wreaths. These are positions we would usually associate with religious activities. So, graffiti can help us understand the multiplicity of uses places within the ancient urban environment might have had, uses we would not be able to identify from architecture alone. Graffiti were part of how a space archaeologists would usually describe as a fortification can be shown to have a religious aspect. So, graffiti both responds to place and could make place: one of the ramifications of this is that it becomes evident that we need to reflect on how we record graffiti, both ancient and modern, in a way that is spatially and contextually contingent.

**Graffiti as object**

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33 Spatially aware ways of exploring the graffiti at Pompeii and Herculaneum are being developed, e.g., by Rebecca Benefiel and her colleagues on the Ancient Graffiti Project: http://ancientgraffiti.org
Just as there is a lack of physical and urban context in the usual approach to ancient graffiti, there’s generally a lack of consideration for its material form. By paying more careful attention to the material characteristics of graffiti, thinking of them as things rather than as disembodied texts or images, we have an opportunity to consider the ways graffiti may have agency, and can be active in the world.

The careful scratching of letters into limestone, as we see in the graffiti of the Palmyrene gate, reveals something of the circumstances in which they were made. These are slow and careful, usually scratched and cut with something sharp into the relatively soft and friable limestone, and then painted in red or black. These characteristics also reveal that while these graffiti have the intentionality of formal inscriptions, in their deliberate production, they have another quality that more formal texts lack: immediacy. Unlike formal stone inscriptions, these are not commissioned words, they are not the script of an artisan or scribe, they are a direct trace of a mark made by an individual. It is these concepts of trace and immediacy, rather than subversiveness, which link together texts which are not otherwise unified by technique, style, or content. And while their writers were aware of formal texts—here, the *tabula anasata* framing devices drawn around them deliberately link them visually to these, as do the conventionalized palm leaves which sometimes fill in gaps—graffiti are a trace of a direct connection between a writer and their own words. This immediacy also holds true for the readers. The graffiti were made at about standing height, and are at a human scale, both for their writing and for their reading, allowing a more direct engagement for the individual than a formal stone inscription, placed high on a podium or, as outside the gate at Dura, on a monumental arch.

The size and form of the texts of the Palmyrene gate often has a direct relationship to the individual limestone blocks which make up the gate: the texts are of a size to fill up most of a block, and the block forms a natural frame around the text. The urban fabric itself thus becomes a frame, an affordance for the remembrance of people via texts they themselves made. Reciprocally, the texts give voice to the urban fabric, for instance by intensifying the monumentality and scale of the Palmyrene gate. The graffiti also have a relationship to each other, and accumulate in clusters over time, their physical proximity to each other creating
intensified zones of prayer or remembrance. Treating graffiti as objects, that is, for example, paying careful attention not only to their textual content but to their material form, allows us to appreciate aspects of their meaning which would otherwise disappear.

**Graffiti and time**

Considering the relationship between graffiti and the temporal is a way of bringing together perspectives of place and materiality. Indeed, the title this issue mentions time and the temporal: the fleeting testimony of these texts and the momentary nature of graffiti are a key part of what is presumed to bring these chronologically and geographically diverse texts together. I take the point, because we are trying to find some commonality, something to bring together a diverse phenomenon. But a devil’s advocate might ask: *are* these fleeting texts? In my case, of course, we’re still able to read them almost two millennia after they were made.

Graffiti can be fleeting in a number of ways. In the case of ancient graffiti, we are sometimes in the strange position of having ‘temporary’ marks which have accidentally survived for millennia, and we have, at Pompeii for example, charcoal writings preserved on walls, disappearing only after early archaeologists left them exposed to the elements.34 Other types of more ephemeral writing we know only about from other sources and do not survive archaeologically at all, such as writing made on tree trunks in antiquity.35

The fleeting *act* that is preserved, of course, is the act of writing and making a graffito. The act of writing itself could be performative, and preserved graffiti are physical traces of that act. Graffiti also, however, have duration. Unlike a document filed away in an archive to be consulted in the future, or a prayer made aloud, the continued existence of graffiti in the world gives it a

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different temporal status, and they could remain active. In the case of our graffiti from the Palmyrene gate at Dura, they could indeed remain so active that they invite further, modern graffiti, and painted Arabic graffiti have now joined the ancient Greek, Latin, Palmyrene and Safaitic texts.

Scratching graffiti into a surface ties text to context in a way not possible with other types of documents.\(^\text{36}\) The scratches of graffiti hold time in a number of ways. Graffiti are a trace of an embodied practice, with their context preserving not only the text, but in their context the height to which the person who made it could reach (preserving, in turn, evidence for children and others).\(^\text{37}\) Graffiti also record the physical locus of their making, because, for graffiti made on structures (as opposed to objects), they had to be made in the place where they are found: they are thus ripe for phenomenological examination.

Next, the continued existence of graffiti over time raises the question of the long-term memorial aspect of writing. The earliest dated graffito from the central passage of the Palmyrene gate is second century BC—so the practice of writing one’s name on these walls was one that was carried out for almost as long as the city was existing, for five centuries.\(^\text{38}\) Graffiti could speak for their makers when they were not there, and even interact on their writer’s behalf with later readers, as we see when early graffiti are overwritten or added to by

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later ones. This duration in writing could also record human duration, for example in the way that graffiti accumulated in spaces where waiting seems to have occurred—we’ve already noted the marks of bored soldiers on the city gates.

The duration of people waiting can also be seen inside houses. In a number of private houses, graffiti cluster in the entranceways, above benches where guests were likely to have sat, awaiting admittance to the house. In the largest house at the site, the ‘House of Lysias’ (which takes its name from graffiti found within it), a number of these texts ask for the remembrance of Lysias, the owner of the house, apparently made by visitors to the house. Again, when considered in their context, within the entranceway of a private house, it is clear that these texts are anything but subversive. No one would have made such marks on the walls of the house of their powerful patron as they waited to see him, if they thought it might be considered offensive. In another house at the site, B8-H (also known as ‘the House of the Archive’ or ‘the House of Nebuchelos’) the walls of the house are used for record-keeping: there, graffiti record transactions. In this house, too, we see remembrance graffiti clustering in the entranceway, but once further inside the house they are used to record business transactions, giving us hints as to where such activities happened, but also one of the means by which those transactions could be recorded and displayed. Here, as in the Palmyrene gate, the fabric of the house became a means of communication, and the solidity of the walls and their endurance over time was part of the message communicated by the graffiti scratched into them.

We see a similar phenomenon in the religious buildings of the site. For example, in the shrine of Aphlad, where graffiti are scratched just centimetres away from the sculpted face of the deity, or

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in the Mithraeum, where they are found beside images of the tauroctony. Writing graffiti within religious spaces was an acceptable practice, with almost forty percent of recorded graffiti at Dura coming from sanctuary contexts (and many more are religious in nature, even in non-sanctuary locations, as discussed already). Just as graffiti could appear inside houses without being subversive, it could be in sacred spaces without being sacrilegious. Rather, they are dedicatory, or small prayers, or votives: evidence of religious practice. This is perhaps nowhere more evidence than the careful Iranian dipinto made on the paintings of Dura’s Synagogue (figure 4), once taken for granted as post-occupation scrawl and now justly recognised as devotional additions, careful Persian texts joining the Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew of the Synagogue.

Conclusion

Part of what I think we can be doing to enhance our approaches to graffiti and other similar texts is to treat them less like historical documents, less like texts or images, and treat them

41 Stern, “Inscription as Competition in Third-Century Syria.”


more archaeologically: that is, to consider notions of context, materiality, and duration. Graffiti continue this presence in their duration which, at Dura-Europos, often continued long after they were made. Graffiti and other ‘fleeting’ texts transcend text’s usual ontological status, and cross from the status of text to that of thing.

Considering both graffiti and graffiti-making practices in this way poses questions not only about the techniques of production and the surfaces on which graffiti are found, but how these shape, encourage or constrain human interaction. They emphasize how the experiential qualities of writing and reading affect interpretation and how they might be conditioned and constrained by our own cultural contexts. Viewing graffiti in this way has the potential not only of shifting the perceptions of the utility of ancient graffiti, but to help recast of contemporary graffiti outside of the paradigms of illegality and subversiveness or trapped between vandalism and fine art. Graffiti is cultural production in its own right, as is well shown by the other contributions to this issue, which is situated in a variety of social, cultural and temporal networks.

At Dura, the way in which graffiti are active in the world allows a new view of the site. It helps us consider the way the city was experienced by those walking on the street, or into a house or temple. It lets us consider everyday life, and inhabitation and use of spaces, whether imagining a client nervously awaiting admittance to an elite house, a businessman recording on a reception room wall how much a visiting trader owed him, or a bored soldier ensuring his name was alongside those of his military brethren stationed in the city gates.


These texts allow us to reconsider what it is that brings together ‘graffiti’ across time and space. Usually, graffiti are defined by technique (but modern graffiti, being painted rather than scratched, are by archaeological parlance *dipinti*) or whether they are subversive (many ancient examples simply are not), or as defined by their chronological relationship to the surface on which they are made (that is, graffiti are additions that were not part of an original programme of the building). In the examples given above, it’s evident that the graffiti at Dura were not an act of defacement nor even necessarily a change of use. That they are not original to a building does not make them any less deliberate or meaningful. Rather, we might consider whether what unites graffiti is their contextual sensitivity and their immediacy. Graffiti are direct preserved traces of individuals, which tie together those people and those places: entangling marks, contexts, and mark-makers.

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