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In small scratches forgotten

New perspectives on graffiti from ancient Dura-Europos

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Abstract

In small scratches forgotten: New perspectives on graffiti from ancient Dura-Europos

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 discusses some of the ways that the unofficial urban texts of antiquity can, when studied in their spatial context as material objects, reveal urban histories which rub against the grain of traditional studies. It explores the ways such seemingly ephemeral marks can be active agents within the urban environment in public, religious, and private contexts. I propose that graffiti can be defined by their immediacy and spatial contingency, and I contend that graffiti 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 in which the walls of the city could become active in people's lives.

Keywords: graffiti, Dura-Europos, Arsacid archaeology, Roman archaeology, urban archaeology, Syria

Graffiti are common within the contemporary urban landscape, so much so that we might think that they are a phenomenon of modern life. But markings of the type which we think of as graffiti are also found in many past societies. I write 'we think of as graffiti' since there is a problem in defining precisely what it is that we are 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's formulation) 'out-

of-place'.¹ In contemporary Western society it is usually considered inherently subversive to write on a wall, and in viewing graffiti we tend to assume that they are made without the building owners' permission: graffiti transgress modern notions

¹ On the problems of defining graffiti: J. A. Baird and Claire Taylor, 'Ancient Graffiti in Context: Introduction' in: J. A. Baird and Claire Taylor ed., *Ancient Graffiti in Context* (New York 2011) 1-19; J. A. Baird and Claire Taylor, 'Ancient Graffiti' in: Jeffery Ross ed., *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art* (London and New York 2016) 17-26.



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.

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of property and what is considered to be appropriate means of communication.²

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

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 2016). Of course, the phenomenon of street art means that the ground has shifted and street artists are commissioned or otherwise encouraged to paint on particular urban spaces (in London, e.g. Wood Street Walls; <https://www.woodstreetwalls.co.uk>); and a museum of street art, Urban Nation, has recently opened in Berlin. There continues to be a tension between street art which is valued as art and other forms of marks which are considered defacing/transgressive, as can be seen, for instance, in vandalism of Banksy's work.

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 marks made by people are often taken to be transgressive. Equating cave paintings with modern graffiti which might be removed by the authorities poses a question about what is valued by contemporary society 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 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 graffiti made at an ancient Greek temple, or indeed any of Banksy's own urban interventions, each of which is now highly regarded.⁴ By drawing attention to the analogy between modern graffiti and cave paintings, Banksy cleverly asks us to 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.

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 being considered obscene.⁵ 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 ex-

amples of graffiti from an archaeological site, Dura-Europos on the Syrian Euphrates, to address these issues. Dura was a Hellenistic foundation held by the Arsacids (Parthians) and then the Romans. Destroyed by the Sassanians in the mid third century AD, the site was never substantially reoccupied, so was relatively well preserved, and was excavated in the 1920s and 30s by Franz Cumont of the French Academy and then by a joint Yale-French Academy expedition.⁶

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 the late second century BC the city came under Arsacid control. This was a time of expansion for Dura, and as the population grew so did the town, filling up space within the city walls.⁷ During

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* 5.2 (2009) 210-237: 228.

4 R. L. N. Barber, *Athens*, Blue Guide 4th ed. (London / New York 1999) 234.

5 E.g. the comments of female prostitutes at Pompeii, see Sarah Levin-Richardson, 'Fututa Sum Hic: Female Subjectivity and Agency in Pompeian Sexual Graffiti', *Classical Journal* 108. 3 (2013) 319-345, or those of the clients, Sarah Levin-Richardson, 'Facilis Hic Futuit Graffiti and Masculinity in Pompeii's "Purpose-Built" Brothel', *Helios* 38.1 (2011) 59-78. On this topic see also A. Varone, *Erotica Pompeiana: Love Inscriptions on the Walls of Pompeii* (Rome 2002).

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 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 1926); and the series which began with P. V. C. Baur and M. I. Rostovtzeff, ed., *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 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*. For an overview of the site, see J. A. Baird, *Dura-Europos* (London 2018).

7 Pierre Leriche and Asad Al-Mahmoud, 'Doura-Europos. Bilan des recherches récentes', *Comptes Rendus. Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* 138.2 (1994) 395-420.

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.⁸ The period for which we have the most evidence, the third century AD, 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).⁹ It is to this period that most of Dura's preserved graffiti belong.

Third-century Dura is well known archaeologically because the city did not

survive: after a siege by the Sassanians, the city was taken from the Romans, and it was never substantially reoccupied.¹⁰ Dura, by the time of its demise 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 is its preservation and the extent of excavation. As is visible in figure 2, much of the city has been revealed by archaeology, and combined with the results of geophysics, most of the urban

8 Documents were found in secondary deposits, but the archive building in G₁, the Chreophylakeion, was excavated by Brown (other archives may have been kept elsewhere in the city). On the Chreophylakeion, see now Gaëlle Coqueugniot, 'Le Chreophylakeion et l'agora d'Europos-Doura: Bilan des Recherches, 2004-2008' in: Pierre Leriche, Gaëlle Coqueugniot and Ségolène du Pontbriand ed., *Europos-Doura Varia* 1 (2012) 93-110; Gaëlle Coqueugniot, 'The Hellenistic Public Square in Europos in Parapotamia (Dura-Europos, Syria) and Seleucia on the Tigris (Iraq) during Parthian and Roman Times, in: Sujatha Chandrasekaran and Anna Kouremenos ed., *Continuity and Destruction in the Greek East* (Oxford 2015) 71-81; Gaëlle Coqueugniot, 'Ancient Near-Eastern Traditions and Greco-Roman Culture in the Agora of Europos-Doura (Syria)' in: Rolf A. Stucky, Oskar Kaelin, and Hans-Peter Mathys ed., *Proceedings of the 9th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 2 (Wiesbaden 2016) 119-132. The inscriptions, parchments and papyri were published in Richard N. Frye et al., 'Inscriptions from Dura-Europos', *Yale Classical Studies* 14 (1955) 123-213; C. B. Welles, Robert O. Fink and J. Frank Gilliam, *The Excavations at Dura-Europos Conducted by Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters, Final Report V, Part I, The Parchments and Papyri*, ed. Ann Perkins (New Haven 1959). On the 'hereditary' elite of Dura: C. B. Welles, 'The Population of Roman Dura' in: P. R. Coleman-Norton ed., *Studies in Roman Economic and Social History in Honor of Allan Chester Johnson* (Freeport 1951) 251-273; a critique of Welles can be found in Nigel Pollard, 'Colonial and Cultural Identities in Parthian and Roman Dura-Europos' in: R. Alston and S. Lieu ed., *Aspects of the Roman East* (Turnhout 2007) 81-102.

On the Hellenistic colony, see especially Pierre Leriche, 'Pourquoi et comment Europos a été fondée à Doura?', *Escalavage, Guerre, Économie en Grèce Ancienne. Homages à Yvon Garlan* (Rennes 1997) 191-210; Pierre Leriche, 'Europos-Doura Hellénistique' in: *TOPOI Supplement 4, La Syrie Hellénistique* (Lyon 2003) 171-191; Paul J. Kosmin, 'The Foundation and Early Life of Dura-Europos' in: Gail Hoffman and Lisa Brody ed., *Dura-Europos: Crossroads of Antiquity* (Chesnut Hill 2011) 95-109.

9 On problems with the periodization of Dura: Peter M. Edwell, *Between Rome and Persia. The Middle Euphrates, Mesopotamia and Palmyra under Roman Control* (London 2008); Peter M. Edwell, 'The Euphrates as a Boundary between Rome and Parthia in the Late Republic and Early Empire', *Antichthon* 47 (2013) 191-206. On the Roman military base: Simon James, *The Excavations at Dura Europos. Final Report 7, Arms and Armour and Other Military Equipment* (London 2004); Simon James, 'New Light on the Roman Military Base at Dura-Europos: Interim Report on a Pilot Season of Fieldwork in 2005' in Ariel S. Lewin and Pietrina Pellegrini ed., *Proceedings of the Later Roman Army in the East Conference, Potenza, 2005* (Oxford 2007) 29-47; Simon James, *The Military Base of Dura-Europos* (Oxford, forthcoming).

10 Simon James, 'Dura-Europos and the Chronology of Syria in the 250s AD', *Chiron* 15 (1985) 111-124; J. A. Baird, 'Dura Deserta: The Death and Afterlife of Dura-Europos' in: Neil Christie and Andrea Augenti ed., *Urbes Extinctae: Archaeologies of Abandoned Classical Towns* (Aldershot 2012) 307-329.

plan is known.¹¹ 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.¹²

Dura was, in the Roman period, a curious city by the standards used by modern historians and archaeologists to discuss cultural affiliation: there is evidence for 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 of the civic life of the town, the Latin inscriptions and papyri of the Roman army, and a range of other languages. These include Palmyrene, Hebrew, Safaitic, Syriac, Hatrene, and Middle Persian. Dura does not fit neatly into typologies, but instead combines local, Archaic, Mesopotamian, Hellenic, and Ro-

man features, languages, and cults. Also staggering in its complexity was the religious life of the town.¹³ From Dura we have temples to local and regional deities, to gods like Aphlad and Azzanathkona, 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 were worshipped at the site. With the Roman military came also new shrines, including a Mithraeum, and the worship of Jupiter Dolichenus.¹⁴ Excavations at the site 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 building, each amongst the oldest known examples. So, we have

11 Simon James, J. A. Baird and Kristian Strutt, 'Magnetometry Survey of Dura's Roman Military Base and Vicinity' in: Pierre Leriche, Gaëlle Coqueugnot, and Ségolène du Pontbriand ed., *Europos-Doura Varia* 1 (2012) 111-116; Christophe Benech, 'The Study of Ancient City Planning by Geophysical Methods: The Case of Dura-Europos, Syria', *Archaeologia Polona* 40 (2003) 124-127; Christophe Benech, 'The Use of "Space Syntax" for the Study of City Planning and Household from Geophysical Maps: The Case of Dura-Europos (Syria)' in: *Städtisches Wohnen Im Östlichen Mittelmeerraum 4. Jh. v. Chr.–1. Jh. N. Chr., Actes du colloque "Urban Living in the Eastern Mediterranean 4 Th Century BC – 1 St Century AD"*, Vienne, 24-27 October 2007, vol. *Archäologische Forschungen* 18, 2010, 403-416,

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 Studies* 2.2 (2014) 128-151; Jesse Casana, 'Satellite Imagery-Based Analysis of Archaeological Looting in Syria', *Near Eastern Archaeology* 78.3 (2015) 142-152.

13 Ted Kaizer, 'Religion and Language in Dura-Europos' in: Hannah M. Cotton et al. ed., *From Hellenism to Islam. Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East* (Cambridge 2009) 235-253; Ted Kaizer, 'Local Religious Identities in the Roman Near East' in: Michele Renee Salzman ed., *The Cambridge History of Religions in the Ancient World* vol. 2 *From the Hellenistic Age to Late Antiquity* (Cambridge 2013) 54-86; Ted Kaizer, 'Patterns of Worship in Dura-Europos. A Case Study of Religious Life in the Classical Levant Outside the Main Cult Centres' in: Corinne Bonnet, Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge and Danny Praet ed., *Les Religions Orientales dans le Monde Grec et Romain: Cent ans après Cumont (1906-2006)* (Brussels, Rome 2009) 153-172.

14 For a recent assessment of the Dura Mithraeum in the context of Mithraism more widely: Lucinda Dirven and Matthew McCarty, 'Local Idioms and Global Meanings: Mithraism and Roman Provincial Art' in: Lisa Brody and Gail Hoffman ed., *Roman in the Provinces. Art on the Periphery of Empire* (Chesnut Hill 2014) 125-142. An overview of Dura's religious architecture can be found in Susan B. Downey, *Mesopotamian Religious Architecture. Alexander through the Parthians* (Princeton 1988).

a town with an immensely rich linguistic and religious profile.¹⁵ 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, appear in 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, attesting to a surprising density and diversity of literacy across the site, which can also be seen in material culture, e.g. by the many *styli* excavated there.¹⁶ While the parchments and papyri preserved at the site were carefully studied and published, the graffiti languished.¹⁷ This was in part due to the value judgments of the excavators: the graffiti were initially interpreted as signs of debase-

ment 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’.¹⁸ Graffiti were assumed to relate only to the period when houses and other buildings were no longer in use or cared for, rather than to be part of the use-life of the structure. However, when we actually read the texts we see they are not the scrawls of looters and vandals, but those of the house owners, welcome guests, and devoted temple-goers. We need to be careful not to retroject our understanding 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, like the textual graffiti, are often religious in tone, sometimes showing figures which seem to be priests, or acts of sacrifice, or deities.¹⁹ Frequent too are animals, including birds, bulls, camels, and deer, and occasionally even

15 The literature on the religious buildings of Dura is vast. On the synagogue and Christian building, the original publications remain key: Carl H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, ed. A. R. Bellinger et al. (New Haven 1956); Carl H. Kraeling, *The Christian Building* (New Haven 1967). On the diversity of the site, we might look to the evidence of ‘foreigners’ there, Lucinda Dirven, *The Palmyrenes of Dura-Europos. A Study of Religious Interaction in Roman Syria* (Leiden 1999); Lucinda Dirven, ‘Strangers and Sojourners: The Religious Behavior of Palmyrenes and Other Foreigners in Dura-Europos’ in: Gail Hoffman and Lisa Brody ed., *Dura-Europos: Crossroads of Antiquity* (Chesnut Hill 2011) 201-220.

16 J. A. Baird, ‘The Graffiti of Dura-Europos: A Contextual Approach’ in: J.A. Baird and Claire Taylor ed., *Ancient Graffiti in Context* (New York 2011) 49-68.

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

18 A reference to the numerous graffiti in House B8-H (the ‘House of Nebuchelus’): P. V. C. Baur, M. I. Rostovtzeff, and A. R. Bellinger ed., *The Excavations at Dura-Europos Conducted by Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters. Preliminary Report of Fourth Season of Work October 1930-March 1931* (New Haven 1933) 136; J. A. Baird, ‘Private Graffiti? Scratching the Walls of Houses at Dura-Europos’ in: Rebecca Benefiel and Peter Keegan ed., *Inscriptions in Private Places. Brill Studies in Greek and Roman Epigraphy* (Leiden 2016) 13-31.

19 The pictorial graffiti are collected in Bernard Goldman, ‘Pictorial Graffiti of Dura-Europos’, *Parthica* 1 (1999) 19-106. They are also included in: M. Langner, *Antike Graffitizeichnungen. Motive, Gestaltung und Bedeutung* (Wiesbaden 2001). Neither considers the relationship between textual and pictorial graffiti: at Dura they often occur together.

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 who would be at home anywhere in the empire.²⁰ Rather than seeing this graffiti as incidental or marginal, if we consider them as any other find, alongside pottery or sculpture, then they help to bring into focus the cultural affiliations and religious concerns of Dura's populace. So too perhaps does the degree of cosmopolitanism allowed by Dura's 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 acts of defacement or of rebellion, nor were they only the acts 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, 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 the question of how ancient graffiti and other examples might interrelate 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 Greek and Roman graffiti. When they were published (which did not always happen, sometimes because of the relative lack of value placed on them compared with 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 have, they tend to be transcribed into tidy printed texts, with mini-

20 The gladiator graffito is published in M. I. Rostovtzeff, ed., *The Excavations at Dura-Europos Conducted by Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters. Preliminary Report of Fifth Season of Work, October 1931-March 1932* (New Haven 1934) 38-40; Goldman, 'Pictorial Graffiti of Dura-Europos'. no. F.5. For comparanda of gladiatorial graffiti from Pompeii and elsewhere, Langner, *Antike Graffitizeichnungen. Motive, Gestaltung Und Bedeutung*, 45-58. Further on the C7 graffiti, J. A. Baird, 'The Houses of Dura-Europos: Archaeology, Archive, and Assemblage' in: Gail Hoffman and Lisa Brody ed., *Dura-Europos: Crossroads of Antiquity* (Chesnut Hill 2011) 240; J.A. Baird, *The Inner Lives of Ancient Houses: An Archaeology of Dura-Europos* (Oxford 2014) 145.

21 Bernard Goldman, 'Foreigners at Dura-Europos: Pictorial Graffiti and History', *Le Muséon* 103 (1990) 5-25.



Figure 3: Photograph of graffiti along the interior passage of the Palmyrene Gate, the main gate of Dura, taken in the late 1920s. Dura-Europos Archive, B108.

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mal contextual descriptions.²² These descriptions sometimes give the name of the building on which the graffiti was found, but do not say whether it was inside or outside, the part of the building in which it was found, how visible it was nor its 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 in its material form or its physical location: context was not important. But for graffiti their location in the city, on a building, and their 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 also 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 inscrib-

ing 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 that 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 customs officer, giving an idea of not only the people who would have been present but also the type of activities that would have occurred within that space.²³

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

²³ P. V. C. Baur and M. I. Rostovtzeff ed., *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* (New Haven 1931) 156.

But these are not 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 from that in many modern contexts: 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 name and title.²⁴ In 1928 and 1929, as the gate was excavated, at least 166 such Greek graffiti were counted, many being simply names of individuals.²⁵ 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 and official inscriptions, in their placement all over the inner walls of the gate passage, most at approximately standing height, they were 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 for their use of local practices and habits, in an unofficial tongue. 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.²⁶

A large group of texts found at Dura consists of a short formula, which roughly says 'May (a named individual) be remembered [to the gods]'. In these remembrance graffiti writing is not simply a way of making one's mark but also a way of making a religious declaration.²⁷ Indeed, the act of making the graffiti in this formula is part of its invocation, and its continued physical presence, its materiality, ensured remembrance, as did the possibi-

24 Graffiti in the Palmyrene gate were published in Baur and Rostovtzeff, *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*, 32ff; 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*, 114ff.

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.

26 As discussed of the Semitic remembrance graffiti from the Synagogue in Karen Stern, 'Tagging Sacred Space in the Dura-Europos Synagogue', *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 25 (2012) 171-194. On the ways graffiti accumulate in particular places over long periods of time, see e.g. Rachel Mairs, 'Egyptian "Inscriptions" and Greek "Graffiti" at El Kanais in the Egyptian Eastern Desert' in: J. A. Baird and Claire Taylor ed., *Ancient Graffiti in Context* (New York 2011) 153-164.

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.

lity that the text could be read out loud by those who passed.²⁸ The writing of the text and its continued physical presence were both facets of its usefulness: the bodily act of writing the text might have itself been a prayer or dedication, and the graffiti was a means by which a text could speak for itself long after the writer had gone.²⁹

If we think of the audience for such graffiti, even the illiterate person walking through the gates of the city would understand something of their message.³⁰ This gate was the main entrance to the city, which people would have moved through regularly, and a liminal point between the city, 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 read aloud, would have been part of daily lives. They are not only texts but also images of religiosity, often abbreviated in Greek 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 much variation in the deities, elements of religious practice were held in common, and graffiti were one of these shared aspects of religious practice, even for monotheistic cults (e.g. such graffiti appear in the synagogue).³¹ Among the graffiti of the passage of the city gate was one to the *Tyche*, or personified Fortune, of the city; small altars were also found along the passage. Together these graffiti and altars transformed 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.³² Graffiti allow a space that archaeologists would usually describe as a fortification to be revealed as having had a

28 Discussed in more detail in Baird, 'Private Graffiti? Scratching the Walls of Houses at Dura-Europos', 16-18.

29 On the graffiti themselves as dedication (rather than commemorating a dedication), see Stern, 'Tagging Sacred Space in the Dura-Europos Synagogue', 178-181.

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* 58.2 (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.

31 Stern, 'Tagging Sacred Space in the Dura-Europos Synagogue'; Karen Stern, 'Inscription as Competition in Third-Century Syria' in: Jordan Rosenblum, Lily C. Vuong and Nathaniel P. Des Rosiers ed., *Religious Competition in the Third Century CE: Jews, Christians, and the Greco-Roman World* (Göttingen 2014) 141-152.

32 For further discussion of graffiti on Dura's fortifications, Baird, 'The Graffiti of Dura-Europos: A Contextual Approach', 56-61.

religious aspect. So, graffiti can both respond to place and also 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.³³ The meanings of graffiti can only be understood in context, but graffiti can also help to create meaningful places.

Graffiti as object

Just as there is a lack of physical and urban context in the usual approach to ancient graffiti, there is 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 can consider the ways graffiti may have agency, and can be active in the world.³⁴

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 such 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, but instead a direct trace of a mark made by an individual who was in this particular place. It is these concepts of direct trace and immediacy, rather than subversiveness, which link together marks across time which we have instinctively called 'graffiti' but which are not otherwise unified by technique, style, or content. And while their writers were aware of formal texts – here the *tabula ansata* framing devices drawn around them deliberately link visually to these, as do the conventionalized palm leaves which sometimes fill in gaps – graffiti trace 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 the individual to have a more direct engagement with them than with 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 have 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 them-

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>

34 A more material and contextual approach to inscriptions and other forms of writing has also emerged in recent years. See, e.g., Rudolf Haensch ed. *Selbstdarstellung und Kommunikation: die Veröffentlichung staatlicher Urkunden auf Stein und Bronze in der römischen Welt: internationales Kolloquium an der Kommission für Alte Geschichte und Epigraphik in München (1. bis 3. Juli 2006)*. 1. Aufl. Vestigia, Bd. 61. (München 2009); Kathryn E. Piquette and Ruth D. Whitehouse, *Writing as Material Practice* (London 2013).

selves 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 be invisible, and to appreciate how they might be active in the urban environment.

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 of the colloquium *Fleeting testimonies of urban life* 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 together these chronologically and geographically diverse texts. 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 the case of the graffiti of Dura, of course, we are 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.³⁵ Other types of more ephemeral writing we know about only from other sources and do not survive archaeologically at all, such as writing made on tree trunks.³⁶

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. Those traces could be enduring: graffiti could hold time and 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 them a different temporal status, and they can remain active in a way other texts might not. In the case of our graffiti from the Palmyrene Gate at Dura, they have been so active that since their excavation they have invited further, modern graffiti, and painted Arabic graffiti have recently 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.³⁷ A graffito *in situ* is a mark that links a person (the mark-maker) to a place in a way that is individual and embodied, unlike, for instance, the words commissioned from a scribe or stone carver for other types of

35 E.g. on charcoal graffiti, Rebecca Benefiel, 'Dialogues of Graffiti in the House of the Four Styles at Pompeii (Casa Dei Quattro Stili, I.8.17, n1)' in: J.A. Baird and Claire Taylor ed., *Ancient Graffiti in Context* (New York 2010) 37.

36 Peter Kruschwitz, 'Writing on Trees: Restoring a Lost Facet of the Graeco-Roman Epigraphic Habit', *Zeitschrift Für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 173 (2010) 45-62.

37 Baird, 'Private Graffiti? Scratching the Walls of Houses at Dura-Europos', 16.

text. Graffiti are a trace of an embodied practice, with their context preserving not only the text, but also the height to which the person who made it could reach (preserving, in turn, evidence for children and others), and other details of the physical circumstances of its making: its place within a building or urban setting, a bright street or shadowy corner.³⁸ Graffiti record the physical locus of their making, because graffiti made on structures (as opposed to objects) had to be made in the place where they were 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 graffiti from the central passage of the Palmyrene Gate is from the second century BC – so the practice of writing one's name on these walls was carried out for almost as long as the city existed, for five centuries.³⁹ Graffiti could speak for their makers when they were

³⁸ Indeed, the ability of people to reach a certain height is a factor allowing the study of graffiti probably made by children: Katherine Huntley, 'Identifying Children's Graffiti in Roman Campania: A Developmental Psychological Approach' in: J. A. Baird and Claire Taylor ed., *Ancient Graffiti in Context* (New York 2011) 69-89. See also Renata S. Garraffoni and Ray Laurence, 'Writing in Public Space from Child to Adult: The Meaning of Graffiti' in: Ray Laurence, Gareth Sears and Peter Keegan ed., *Written Space in the Latin West, 200 BC to AD 300* (London 2013) 123-134; Eamonn Baldwin, Helen Moulden and Ray Laurence, 'Slaves and Children in a Roman Villa: Writing and Space in the Villa San Marco at Stabiae' in: Gareth Sears, Peter Keegan and Ray Laurence ed., *Written Space in the Latin West, 200 BC to AD 300* (London 2013) 153-166.

³⁹ 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* no. D12. Dated to 183/2 BC according to Johnson.

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 later ones. This persistence over time can also record types of human inactivity, for example in the way that graffiti accumulated in spaces where waiting seems to have occurred – we have 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.⁴⁰ 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 apparently made by visitors to the house ask for the remembrance of Lysias, the owner of 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 they 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 were used for record-keeping: there graffiti re-

⁴⁰ E.g. In the *House of Lysias* in block D1 and the *House of Nebuchelos* in B8. Discussed in further detail in Baird, 'Private Graffiti? Scratching the Walls of Houses at Dura-Europos'.



Figure 4: Detail of panel WC2 (the triumph of Mordecai) of the synagogue paintings showing Middle Persian *dipinto*, Kraeling inscription no. 45=Syr114=CII.iii.iii.iv, made carefully on the chest of Mordecai's horse.

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cord transactions.⁴¹ In this house, too, we see remembrance graffiti clustering in the entranceway, but once we move farther 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 commu-

nication, and the solidity of the walls and their survival over time is 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

⁴¹ It was also known as the 'House of the Clothes Merchant'. We might question the domestic status of this building, with multiple attached shops and several reception rooms, Baird, *The Inner Lives of Ancient Houses: An Archaeology of Dura-Europos*, 187. For an in depth treatment of the texts, Kai Ruffing, 'Die Geschäfte des Aurelios Nebuchelos', *Laverna* 11 (2000) 71-105.

scratched just centimetres away from the sculpted face of the deity, or in the Mithraeum, where they are found beside cult images.⁴² Writing graffiti within religious spaces was an accepted 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, they could exist in sacred spaces without being sacrilegious.⁴³ Rather, they are dedicatory, or small prayers, or votives: evidence of religious practice. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the careful Iranian *dipinti* made on the paintings of Dura's synagogue (figure 4), once taken for granted as post-occupation scrawls and now justly recognised as devotional additions, careful Persian texts joining the Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew of the synagogue.⁴⁴

42 Stern, 'Inscription as Competition in Third-Century Syria'.

43 Similarly, on graffiti in the 'temple of Bel', Maura K. Heyn, 'The Terentius Frieze in Context' in: Lisa Brody and Gail Hoffman ed., *Dura-Europos. Crossroads of Antiquity* (Chesnut Hill 2011) 221-233.

44 D. Noy and H. Bloedhorn ed., *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis. Vol.3: Syria and Cyprus* (Tübingen 2004) 177-209, on these. See also Richard N. Frye, *The Parthian and Middle Persian Inscriptions of Dura-Europos* (London 1968); C. J. Brunner, 'The Iranian Epigraphic Remains from Dura-Europos', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 92 (1972) 492-497; Frantz Grenet, 'Les Sassanides a Doura-Europos (253 Ap. J.-C.). Réexamen du Matériel Épigraphique Iranien du Site' in: Pierre-Louis Gatier, Bruno Helly, and Jean-Paul Rey-Coquais ed., *Géographie Historique au Proche-Orient (Syrie, Phénicie, Arabie, Grecques, Romaines, Byzantines)* (Paris 1988) 133-158.

Conclusion

Part of what I think we can do 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 more archaeologically: that is, to consider notions of context, materiality, and duration.⁴⁵ 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 also how these shape, encourage, or constrain human interaction.⁴⁶ A material and contextual approach emphasizes how the experiential qualities of writing and reading affect interpretation and how graffiti might be conditioned and constrained by our own cultural contexts. Viewing graffiti in this way has the potential not only to change perceptions of the scholarly utility of ancient graffiti, but also to help remove contemporary graffiti from the paradigms of illegality and subversiveness or the distinction between vandalism and fine art. Graffiti are cultural productions in their own right, as is well shown by the other contributions to this issue, which are situated in a variety of social, cultural, and temporal networks.

45 For such approaches to modern graffiti, Ursula K. Frederick, 'Shake Well Midden: An Archaeology of Contemporary Graffiti Production in Perth, Western Australia', *Australian Archaeology* 78 (2014) 93-99; Ursula K. Frederick and Anne Clarke, 'Signs of the Times: Archaeological Approaches to Historical and Contemporary Graffiti', *Australian Archaeology* 78 (2014) 54-57.

46 Christopher Tilley, 'Materiality in Materials', *Archaeological Dialogues* 14.1 (2007) 16-20.

At Dura the way in which graffiti are active in the world allows a new view of the site. It helps us to 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 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 stood 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 already this is a problem, as modern graffiti, being generally painted rather than scratched, are by archaeological parlance *dipinti*) or by 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 often understood as additions that were not part of the original programme of the building).⁴⁷ In the examples given above, it is 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 across time and space is their contextual sensitivity and their immediacy. Graffiti are directly preserved traces of individuals which tie together particular people and

particular places: entangling marks, mark-makers, and contexts, and allowing them to endure.

About the author

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⁴⁷ For the definition of graffiti as later additions: Angelos Chaniotis, 'Graffiti in Aphrodisias: Images – Texts – Contexts' in: Claire Taylor and J. A. Baird ed., *Ancient Graffiti in Context* (2010) 191-207.

