

INTRODUCTION TO VISITORS' GRAFFITI

The inscriptions called *graffiti* today are mostly an unofficial remembrance, or even self-presentation of most various kinds, more often connected with vandalism than with art or socially generally respected self-expression¹. Nevertheless, their history and context is rich, and reaches far back, even to rock paintings and prehistoric decorated caves. Egyptian *graffiti* is a common term used for short inscriptions, scratched or written with ink or other media, on the rocks and walls; in this they are little different from modern graffiti examples.

We find ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic, hieratic and demotic graffiti; in addition there are Coptic graffiti. Visitors of less ancient lineage left Greek, Latin, and Arabic graffiti, often next to those from Pharaonic times. To these layers of human presence we must add modern tourist graffiti, starting with the 16th century onwards, and reaching the peak of their use (in obvious connection with number of visitors) in 19th century. These are in a number of modern European languages, mainly English, German, Italian and French. The focus of the present work, however, is that of ancient Egyptian graffiti, although the modern travellers' graffiti have their own intrinsic interest².

The graffiti are a specific phenomenon, given their role of “informal” writings, and also their importance when we try to study the Egyptian mental world. The essential definition of *graffiti* is their being *informal* which does here mean that they are not composed inscriptions of official character.³ It is, however, necessary to clear a little the term “informal” within the typologies of written evidence. They are informal in so far, as they do not represent – or most of them do not represent – any inscription with more or less clearly defined form and function – stela, autobiography, order, tomb inscription or temple text. Their use is most varied too. On the other hand they are not informal in so far, as they cannot be straightaway supposed to show an “alternative” cultural view, as they were often made by members of the

¹ Compare Richard Lachmann, “Graffiti as Career and Ideology”, in: *The American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 94/No. 2 1988, 229–250. Although Lachmann presents a sample only, graffiti are generally viewed as a principally illegal social activity; however, the graffiti writers have an organisation and a subculture of their own, therefore their creations are not aimless and without a code of evaluation and audience; on the contrary, they have an evaluation system, and defined objectives and “audience”.

² Compare G. Goyon, *Les inscriptions et graffiti des voyageurs sur la grande pyramide*. Société Royale de Géographie, Le Caire 1944 or R. de Keersmaecker, *Travellers' Graffiti from Egypt and the Sudan*. I–III, see <http://www.egypt-sudan-graffiti.be/Travellers.htm>.

³ Desroches – Noblecourt, “La Quête des graffiti” in *Hommages Champollion II* p. 164; as *inscription rupestre* – rock inscription, she defines the pre-planned, composed texts subsequently noted on a rock surface, which is therefore different from a graffito, see further also Detlef Franke, “Graffiti”, in: D. B. Redford, *OEAE II*, 38–41.

scribal elite/sub-elite⁴ or at least by literate strata of the society, educated with the aim of representing sociocultural tradition⁵. They are “official” as long as they were created by the elite/sub-elite for a certain purpose; their spontaneity is a question of its own – inviting a research with very sparse sources. However, the sociocultural terms like formal and informal or even collective and individual have still an unsatisfactory sound in ancient Egyptian setting.⁶ Still, what speaks in favour of considering them a separate and special sort of Egyptian written evidence, a sort, which stands apart from other testimonies, is the following:

⁴ The “sub-elite” of scribes, when compared to “elite” of the power-holders, and especially royalty and royalty-related persons, if we prefer Baines’s term, see further J. Baines – Ch. Eyre, “Four notes on literacy”, *GM* 61, 1983, 65–96, and J. Baines, “Literacy and Ancient Egyptian Society”, *Man*, New Series, Vol. 18, No. 3, 193, 572–599. The portion of literates in ancient Egyptian society is another question, and substantially influences the context and perception of any written material from ancient Egypt, including therefore graffiti. J. Baines is, methodologically speaking, innovative and keeping a straight historical view, which tries to follow the sociocultural perception inside the society, in ancient *Weltanschauung*, not outside, in historians’ *Weltanschauung*. However, while doing that, his text is sometimes problematic due to missing evidence, and must rely on conjectures, esp. in Baines & Eyre, “Four notes on literacy”, *GM* 61, 1983, esp. 65–69, on the Old Kingdom percentage of literacy. Situation is much better for the New Kingdom – Baines & Eyre, “Four notes on literacy”, *GM* 61, 1983, 88–89, especially for Deir el-Medina. This special milieu of royal tomb-builders is unique, however, and in this point the analysis of literacy again touches the analysis of graffiti, es. *Besucherinschriften*, see further below – the literate groups of tomb-builders and chiefly tomb-decorators can be expected in the other great necropoleis too, and their supposed presence might have corresponded to the graffiti groups presence.

⁵ It is a different question to decide which was the real influence of taught tradition upon the people, and even which degree of literacy the graffiti authors really attained (note the possible differences in mastering different scripts, see J. Baines, “Schreiben”, in *LÄ* V, 693–698). There were schools for scribes, where the children were taught by scribes, probably from Middle Kingdom onwards. In the New Kingdom the curriculum included the book of *Kemit*, *Weisheitslehren*, and various miscellanies. The character of texts indicates also that the youngsters were not only taught to write and read but also they were taught the basis of Egyptian cultural code and ideal of behaviour. See H. Brunner, “Schule”, *LÄ* V, 741–743. On the schooling and its various aspects H. Brunner, *Altägyptische Erziehung*. Wiesbaden 1957; however some of his conclusions must be taken with caution. His overview of New Kingdom (i.e. to the graffiti herein related) material is factual. There were scribal groups – schools, and later youngsters trained as apprentices to their father or an elder scribe, a special tutor was appointed to royal children etc. (pp. 17–26); in general there are solid reasons to suppose a sort of organised education in Egypt, although the teachers drew heavily from their own experience and not from some completely universal academic standard. See also J. Baines, “Schreiben”, in *LÄ* V, 693–698.

⁶ See Assmann, bifurcating culture of ancient Egypt in his *Stein und Zeit, Mensch und Gesellschaft im alten Ägypten*. München 1997, further compare Baines, “Restricted Knowledge, Hierarchy, and Decorum: Modern Perceptions and Ancient Institutions”, *JARCE*, vol. XXVII, 1990, 1–25. Loprieno, A., “Defining Egyptian Literature: Ancient Texts and Modern Theories”, in A. Loprieno, ed., *Ancient Egyptian Literature. History and Forms*. Leiden 1996, 39–58; esp. on pp. 46–47, “... In Egypt, punctual ‘innovation’ rarely became generalized ‘inauguration’, and the rules of decorum allowed for individual leeway only within the frame of a formal adherence to sociopolitical context ...”; questions of literacy and reception of various cultural traditions and by various social strata and various social units – compare Richard B. Parkinson, “Individual and Society in Middle Kingdom Literature” in A. Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian Literature. History and Forms*. Leiden 1996, 137–155; esp. 137; Baines – Eyre, “Four notes on literacy”, *GM* 61, 1983. These Egyptological analyses point at the problem of following different social strata and different variants any culture has, such as regional, social or individual, etc.; I have made this rather far-fetched overview of opinions and works with the aim of indicating that Egyptology registers fully the fact that Egyptian society cannot be treated as a seamless homogenous compact unit with cast attitudes and totally unified perceptions of their given *Weltanschauung*. However, distinguishing in sources these nuances is a long-termed process.

We can find graffiti in a certain sense literally everywhere⁷ – it can be said even, that their presence is a mark to follow, when we would like to put over the physical map of Egypt a map of human presence in the landscape. Quarries, mines, desert roads and their stops, temples and necropoleis, every one of these places carries a trace of human presence left in the form of graffiti. There are military (given the supposed social stratum of their authors, not some strategic information) graffiti in the Nubian fortresses' neighbourhood, graffiti left by members of mining and quarrying expeditions, we can follow by graffiti the outline of desert tracks.⁸ The content is most varied – some are lengthy inscriptions noting an expedition, and thus they border on an official inscription.⁹ Others are just a short scratching noting a name and a date. They surely were not always planned and composed beforehand; their spontaneity is another important characteristic.

They are a personal testimony, mainly that part of them, which is not mentioning a mining expedition or a military activity. In this area, there is a conspicuous group – visitors' graffiti, *Besucherinschriften*. These can be viewed as something belonging to the sphere of personal impression, or personal piety, as we shall see later. Their connection with official duties, and activities can be only presumed¹⁰, in some cases it is more or less likely, e.g. on a model like: a scribe visited a necropolis on behalf of an official duty, and left in addition a visitors' graffiti on a building neighbouring to the place of his work.

The *graffiti*¹¹ have been known to Egyptologists since the very beginnings of Egyptology, although at first under no specific name. It seems that Champollion during his voyage noted a number of graffiti, and noted that they cover most probably the activities of

⁷ Peden, A. J., *Graffiti of Pharaonic Egypt*. Brill, Leiden 2001 tries to draw from this a conclusion on literacy (*Graffiti*, "Conclusions", 293), and in addition remarked "... *But why should we study graffiti in the first instance? Because it is in practice the study of human beings using a form of written communication that is invariably free of social restraints ... Besides the very pervasiveness of graffiti inscriptions throughout the Nile Valley surely entitles them to as much scrutiny as any other record of man's activities in this part of the world.*", Peden, *Graffiti*, xxi. The New Kingdom literacy, however, is a special question. The wide presence of graffiti could have indicated the level of literacy, see further.

⁸ Cf. Darnell and Darnell, *Oriental Institute Annual Reports* from 1994 to 1996, now Darnell, J. C., *The Theban Desert Road Survey in the Egyptian Western Desert* I. Chicago 2002, Oriental Institute.

⁹ Cf. Quarries and mines, like Wadi Hammamat, *LÄ* VI, 1100 – 1113, Peden, *Graffiti*, passim.

¹⁰ It makes a difference in respect of e.g. graffiti in the temple of Khonsu, where the priests were on duty, compare Jacquet-Gordon, H., *The Graffiti on the Khonsu Temple roof at Karnak. A manifestation of personal piety*. OIP 123, *Temple of Khonsu* vol. 3 Chicago 2003.

¹¹ See Peden, A. J., *Graffiti of Pharaonic Egypt*, "Introduction" and also Franke, D., "Graffiti" in Redford, D. B., *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, vol. 2., Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001, 38–41.

visitors, Egyptians, Greeks and even Coptic visitors.¹² Champollion did not use the term graffiti, though, but described them aptly:¹³

“... *Je dois cependant ajouter que plusieurs de ces tombes royales portent sur leurs parois le témoignage écrit qu’elles étaient, il y a bien de siècles, abandonnées et seulement visitées, comme de nos jours, par beaucoup de curieux désœuvrés, lesquels, comme ceux de nos jours encore, croyaient s’illustrer à jamais en griffonnant leurs noms sur les peintures et les bas-reliefs, qu’il ont ainsi défigurés. Les sots de tous les siècles y eurent de nombreux représentants ... Egyptiens ... qui se sont inscrits, les plus anciens en hiéroglyphes, les plus modernes en démotique; ... des Grecs de très ancienne date ...; de vieux Romains de la République; ... une foule d’inconnus du Bas Empire ...; des noms de Coptes ... enfin, des noms de voyageurs européens ...*”

He was also the first to make a still valid division – graffiti by Egyptians, in hieratic and demotic, Coptic graffiti, and later Greek, Latin and modern European languages graffiti.

The graffiti as such were noted by visitors and researchers, and eventually were named by Auguste Mariette in 1850s, in particular. Mariette lived in a period, when visitors’ graffiti – but made by modern tourists – were immensely in vogue and he made some himself, on a special occasion.¹⁴

The history of beginnings and development of graffiti research and their mapping has been done by Christiane Desroches-Noblecourt¹⁵, who dedicated a lot of her research within the research to the Upper Egyptian and Nubian border sites – understandably, since the state of research in Lower Egypt had lagged behind in those years. The main studied groups of graffiti and rock inscriptions (these terms were not at first clearly defined¹⁶) – studied till II World War – were to be found in Middle and Upper Egypt and in Nubia and on Sinai. Later, graffiti in the oases were added and the research in wadis of the Eastern desert, especially when connected with mines and quarries, continued, as well as the survey of desert roads both in Eastern and Western desert. Special attention was turned to Nubia in the 1900s and again in the 1960s, as the Aswan dams were built and rescue archaeological operations were undertaken.

Lower Egypt was represented chiefly by visitors’ graffiti in pyramid complexes of ancient rulers in the Memphite area, whose evidence was rich but their exploration, as can be

¹² Desroches – Noblecourt, “La Quête des graffiti” in *Hommages Champollion II*, 152.

¹³ Desroches – Noblecourt, *op. cit.*, 151–152, quoting *Lettres écrites d’Égypte et de Nubie en 1828–29*.

¹⁴ Desroches-Noblecourt, *op. cit.*, 154 –footnote 2.

¹⁵ Desroches–Noblecourt, *op. cit.*, 151–183.

¹⁶ See Desroches–Noblecourt, *op. cit.*, 163–164.

seen further, left some unanswered questions. There are graffiti registered in a number of other publications regarding singular sites or monuments, more recently, the registered graffiti have been often the quarry marks and masons' inscriptions, which help in establishing the building history of a monument, and often add to our knowledge about its owner.¹⁷

The main attempt in research on the affluent Theban zone of graffiti is the Spiegelberg, Sadek and Černý work, which resulted in the monumental opus of *Graffiti de la Montagne thébaine*.¹⁸ History of study of the Theban region graffiti shows the range of uses for the other graffiti material too. There are numerous New Kingdom graffiti to be found, in accordance with the history of the site. Their character varies from short notes left by the workers from Deir el Medina, to the inscriptions left by curious or pious visitors in tombs and temples. The Deir el Medina workers are often portrayed with the help of these graffiti to a very lively degree.¹⁹

The current overview of the graffiti exploration has been made by A. J. Peden²⁰, which is a survey of graffiti in general, without highlighting any period, site or text type.

The tomb visitors' graffiti – a special category – Theban or Memphite or otherwise, are often published in books dealing with respective tombs. Some of more recent publications in this respect comply with high standards of graffiti publications.²¹ These texts are to be grouped under an already mentioned German term, *Besucherinschriften*, and their testimony is most intriguing.²²

Why should we actually pay more attention to visitors' graffiti? Visitors' graffiti are an important historical source, dated mainly to the New Kingdom. Their geographical distribution covers, although not exclusively²³, important necropoleis, such as the Theban and the Memphite ones. We shall systemise our knowledge of them, as they are interwoven with

¹⁷ Cf. the use of masons' marks in studying some monuments on the Abusir royal necropolis – in Verner, M., *Abusir II – Baugraffiti der Ptahschepses Mastaba*. Prague 1992.

¹⁸ See also J. Černý, *Graffiti hiéroglyphiques et hiératiques de la nécropole thébaine. Nos 1060 a 1405*. DFIFAO Le Caire 1956 and of course Jaroslav Černý, A. A. Sadek, and others, *Graffiti de la montagne thebaine*, Le Caire 1969-1974.

¹⁹ See Černý, *Community of Workmen*, or Valbelle, *Les ouvriers de la Tombe, passim*.

²⁰ Peden, A. J., *Graffiti of Pharaonic Egypt. The scope and roles of informal writing*. Leiden 2001.

²¹ E. Hornung, *Zwei Ramessidische Königsgräber: Ramses IV. Und Ramses VI*. Theben XI. Mainz 1990, 132–133. See further also de Garis Davies and Gardiner, *Tomb of Antefoker*, TT 60, or Dziobek, E., et al., *Das Grab des User-amun*, Mainz 1994, with contribution by E. Hornung on p. 100f.. For Theban necropolis see also F. Kampp, *Die Thebanische Nekropole I-II*, Mainz 1996.

²² Cf. Helck, "Besucherinschriften" in *ZDMG* (1952), 41f., and Wildung, "Besucherinschriften", *LÄ* I.

²³ Compare material from Beni Hasan, which presents parallels to known Memphite examples. Cf. Griffith, „Inscriptions“ in Petrie, *Medum*, 40–41; Peden, *Graffiti*, 102, following Champollion, *Notices descriptives II*, 430, and Lloyd, in A. B. Lloyd, ed., *Studies in Pharaonic Religion and Society in Honour of J. Gwyn Griffiths*, London 1992, 32 – note 13.

the history of important archaeological sites.²⁴ Other examples of known graffiti of similar character²⁵, recently published, yielded interesting results – new information about their authors, and their cultural and historical milieu. In addition, the visitors’ graffiti are rousing constant interest in Egyptology – were they results of antiquarian or religious interest, or just leftovers of scribal presence at the necropolis, whose primary reasons were completely different and mostly practical?²⁶ Their current interpretation is ambiguous²⁷. They can be seen as a source for confirming the religious sense of Egyptians, of their pious visits and pilgrimages, or they can be judged as testifying the historical consciousness of New Kingdom Egyptians face to face with ancient monuments. The present work shall focus on the comparison of these two moments in graffiti interpretation on the basis of the Memphite corpus of New Kingdom graffiti. These graffiti can be considered as one of the key groups of sources for the study of Egyptian uses of the past, and the historical tradition of kings²⁸. However, to verify this hypothesis, we should work with a feasible corpus of visitors’ graffiti, and evaluate their occurrence, contents and context.

MAP 1a: Map of Egypt with indicated presence of the New Kingdom graffiti

²⁴ See Málek, Jaromír, “A meeting of the old and new. Saqqara during the New Kingdom”, in Lloyd, A. B., (ed.), *Studies in Pharaonic Religion and Society in honour of J. G. Griffiths*, (London 1992), 57-76.

²⁵ In this case a temple’s visitors’ graffiti, by H. Jacquet-Gordon, *The Graffiti on the Khonsu Temple roof at Karnak. A manifestation of personal piety*. OIP 123, *Temple of Khonsu* vol. 3 (Chicago 2003), and further see section *Interpretations*.

²⁶ Compare F. Detlef, “Graffiti”, in Redford, Donald B., 2001, *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, vol. 2 (Oxford 2001); Málek, Jaromír, “A meeting of the old and new. Saqqara during the New Kingdom”, in A. B. Lloyd (ed.), *Studies in Pharaonic Religion and Society in honour of J. G. Griffiths*, 57-76; H. Fischer-Elfert, “Representations of the Past in New Kingdom Literature”. in J. Tait, *Never Had the like occurred*, London 2003, p. 131–133.

²⁷ Compare Wildung, “Besucherinschriften”, *LÄ*, I, Helck, “Besucherinschriften” in *ZDMG* (1952), 41f., H. Fischer-Elfert, “Representations of the Past in New Kingdom Literature”, in J. Tait, *Never Had the Like Occurred* (London 2003).

²⁸ Compare H. Fischer-Elfert, “Representations of the Past in New Kingdom Literature”, in J. Tait, *Never Had the Like Occurred* (London 2003), p. 131–133, and D. Wildung, *Die Rolle ägyptischer Könige im Bewußtsein ihrer Nachwelt*, MÄS 17, (München 1969).



Generally speaking, although there are handy and reasonable works on graffiti, both in general (recently by A. J. Peden²⁹) and in site related corpora (classical *Graffiti de la montagne thébaine*), and, in addition, the visitors' graffiti are quoted in many contexts, there hasn't been yet taken a complex attitude in respect of the visitors' graffiti. Nonetheless, these graffiti present a special sort of written evidence, and have to be studied in period and site relations, and eventually compared to other sorts of informal and formal written material. They belong in general to a prolific sort of written material, but they deserve to be treated separately from other graffiti.

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²⁹ A. J. Peden, *Graffiti of Pharaonic Egypt* (Leiden 2001). Graffiti have been dealt with since J.-F. Champollion visited Egypt, an overview of their study has been presented by Ch. Desroches-Noblecourt, "La quête des graffiti", *Textes et langages. Hommage à Jean-Francois Champollion*, vol. II (Cairo 1972), 151-183, and on visitors' graffiti see W. Helck, "Besucherinschriften" in *ZDMG* (1952), 41f.