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Introduction to Special Issue on New Research on Medieval and Later Graffiti

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*Introduction to Special Issue on New Research on
Medieval and Later Graffiti*

**By Matthew Champion, Independent archaeologist;
Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London**

In the early months of 2009 I was commissioned to oversee a project that involved the conservation and interpretation of a whole series of nationally significant medieval wall paintings at the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Lakenheath, in Suffolk. After centuries of neglect and leaking roofs, the paintings were in dire need of a little tender loving care. Perhaps more importantly, with the fragmented remains of at least five different paint schemes visible on the same wall, they were in need of some serious research and



interpretation. However, as the work continued through some of the coldest weeks of a bitter fenland winter, I soon came to realise that we were dealing with far more than just medieval paintings on the walls of Lakenheath's lovely ancient church. For there on the walls, etched in to the very stones themselves, were a large number of graffiti inscriptions -- many of which clearly dated to the pre-Reformation period.

So began a journey for me, to discover the early graffiti inscriptions that lie hidden in plain sight upon the walls of many thousands of English medieval churches. Church by church, county by county, we have begun to catalogue and record the tens of thousands of inscriptions that lay previously undiscovered. Something that was considered a rarity only seven or eight years ago, but something that we now know was actually commonplace -- the norm. And I also made other discoveries too. First, that I wasn't alone in this search. The advent of new technologies had meant that suddenly it was possible to undertake large scale surveys at almost negligible costs, and by the time I began my own surveys others were already busy reading the writings on the wall, several of whom appear in this very collection of essays. My second discovery was that graffiti doesn't actually mean graffiti. These informal inscriptions that we were recording were far more than the idle scratchings of bored choirboys. They had meaning to those who made them, and an intended function that went far, far beyond modern preconceptions of vandalism and mark making. They were, quite simply, medieval prayers made solid in stone. The hopes, dreams, and fears of a million long-dead souls -- etched into the very fabric of the building in which they worshipped. They were, in many cases, the only mark these dusty remnants of people had left on a world that had long forgotten them.

These are early days for the study of historical graffiti. Although we have been looking at early graffiti for over a century, the employment of new technology, particularly digital imagery, now means that masses of data has suddenly become available for study.

And will continue to do so for some decades yet to come. However, what is clear is that we are dealing with a whole new corpus of material -- much of which is clearly medieval in origin -- and all of which will require detailed analysis in the years to come. This small collection of essays is simply one exemplar of the work that is now beginning to be undertaken on a far larger scale, and something that will undoubtedly expand as the years pass.



This collection of essays makes no claim to reflect that growing area of academic study. Instead the aim was to bring together a diverse collection of writings that simply showcase the breadth and diversity of the research currently being undertaken. It begins with my own essay, examining the changing attitudes towards these informal inscriptions throughout history, and perhaps highlighting the need to set aside modern preconceptions when dealing with historical concepts of what may have been deemed acceptable. These themes are further expanded upon in Becky Williams study of the graffiti inscriptions present

in Leighton Buzzard Church; where questions of creation, function and intended audience are considered, and paving the way for a more-detailed examination of the manner in which this new corpus of material can be used to enhance and bolster a sometimes-scarce written record.

The concept of graffiti as an addition or enhancement to written sources is explored more fully in Claire Woodhead's examination of the inscriptions found in Winchester's Westgate. With the site reputed to have been an 18th-century debtor's prison, her analysis of the inscriptions has allowed a far deeper understanding of this story, and opened up new avenues of research that simply weren't available to scholars examining the written records alone. This in turn has enabled Woodhead to examine the inscriptions as far more than just another primary source, but as an embodiment of collective memory and identity. These themes of identity and memory are central to Alison Fearn's essay dealing with the markings recorded at the preserved medieval manor house of Donington Le Heath in Leicestershire. Her detailed examination of the structure, tied in with an analysis of the building's chronology, raises several key questions concerning the function and motivations of those who made such marks. Focusing particularly upon themes of ritual protection and "folk" beliefs and memory, she examines the ritual practices of a household and their evolution over time. Looking in detail at specific markings, in this case ritual taper burn marks, Fearn places them firmly within the wider lexicon of ritual protection activities and beliefs, in turn suggesting both a motivation behind their creation, and a suggested chronology of evolving beliefs.

Penultimately Nathalie Cohen, archaeologist for the National Trust in the South East of England, demonstrates the role that graffiti studies are now playing in re-shaping our understanding of some of England's finest historic properties. As the National Trust is at the forefront of utilizing historic graffiti as a means of developing new narratives and interpretations for many of their ancient sites, Nathalie's account demonstrates just how

studying this early graffiti can add a very real human element, both in the past and the present, to monuments of brick, stone, slate, and plaster. The last essay, but by no means the least, is perhaps the most unusual of the collection. The account of how Crystal Hollis came to discover medieval French graffiti inscriptions in the middle of the United States. Her detailed examination of one much-moved medieval chapel exemplifies the archaeological approach to recording these inscriptions, taking time to fully record every single exposed stone surface. Her resultant analysis also examines the wider context of the chapel graffiti, and certainly proves that wherever they may be, the writings on the walls always have a tale to tell.

Much of the work on early inscriptions has been the result of the county-based Medieval Graffiti Surveys, which now cover over half of England (and with one small beleaguered outpost in the United States), that have recorded many tens of thousands of early-graffiti inscriptions. Such work would never have been possible, across the country, without the hard work and dedication of many hundreds of volunteer surveyors, spending long cold hours in the country churches of England -- and it is to them that this collection is gratefully dedicated. Lastly, Becky Williams and I would like to take the opportunity to thank Sarah Blick and her team at Kenyon College for the opportunity of bringing together this short collection of edited essays. 🐼