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## ***Medieval Milwaukee: Unlikely Graffiti at the St. Joan of Arc Chapel***

**By Crystal Hollis, Independent Scholar**

Medieval graffiti inscriptions are commonly recorded occurrence in buildings throughout Europe and the United Kingdom. Regularly found in homes, barns, and churches, these inscriptions served both practical and spiritual purposes in the medieval era. The practice of carving or writing on stone or wood continued well after the medieval period in both the United Kingdom and Europe. Eventually, graffiti carried over to the Americas where examples from various occupations and wars can be found -- though mostly on the Eastern coast or islands. There is no logical reason to expect any medieval graffiti of importance to be present in the United States. However, after a recent survey in a French chapel that was relocated to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, several surviving examples of medieval graffiti were found at Marquette University's St. Joan of Arc Chapel. **(fig. 1)** To understand and further appreciate this find it must be placed both in the context of surviving American historical graffiti, as well as the existing body of research conducted on graffiti in Europe.

### **The Chapel**

The modern-day pilgrimage site of the Chapel of St. Joan of Arc in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is a completely reconstructed medieval chapel that was painstakingly moved to the United States. The chapel was originally constructed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and was attached to a chateau in the Chasse region of France. Originally called the "Chapelle de Saint Martin de Sayssuel," it fell into a state of decay



**Figure 1** St. Joan of Arc Chapel, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA. Photo: Wikimedia

during the French Revolution, which is also when many of the records for places of worship were destroyed – likely including those of this chapel.<sup>1</sup> The saint the chapel was originally dedicated to seems to have been lost in history; the only information found indicates that he was a local saint. The chapel itself, however, despite being attached to the chateau of a wealthy family, was used by the community for devotions and burial ceremonies for influential people.<sup>2</sup> This is important to bear in mind when examining the graffiti found there, as there is often a misconception that a family-owned chapel limited its access to a private group of family members, when in reality – despite it not being a

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<sup>1</sup> John Pick, *Chapel Dedicated to St. Joan of Arc: Reconstructed by Marquette University* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1966), pp. 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

completely public space such as a parish church – it still had a strong connection to the local community.

That any graffiti in this building survived at all is almost puzzling. In the 1920's an architect and restoration specialist named Jacques Couëlle discovered the ruins of the chapel, and measured and numbered the stones while in Chasse to begin reconstruction.<sup>3</sup> Prior to any actual work being done on the chapel apart from surveys and drawings, Gertrude Hill Gavin (the daughter of a wealthy businessman) contacted Couëlle, and in 1926 negotiated the purchase of the chapel for her estate in Long Island, New York as an addition to a previously reconstructed French chateau.<sup>4</sup> Had she waited a year, the chapel would have not made it to America, as in late 1927 a ban was placed on the exporting of historic buildings and monuments from France.<sup>5</sup> The 1927 reconstruction of the chapel saw additions and minor changes to the fabric of the building, two of which can be seen in the blueprints made by John Russell Pope who planned the overall project. The main changes to the building were the addition of an altar and the addition of a stone connected to Saint Joan of Arc in the niche (both still present in the chapel today), as well as a set of stained glass windows which were specially commissioned for the reconstruction.<sup>6</sup> The niche containing what is commonly referred to as “The Saint Joan of Arc Stone” is on the left side of the sanctuary, and the stone itself was endorsed as authentic by the *Monuments Historiques de France* to be the stone Saint Joan stood on and later kissed while praying to Our Lady for success in the siege at Orléans.<sup>7</sup> While at Long Island, the chapel was attached to the chateau owned by Mrs. Gavin, and the sacristy was moved out of its original position on the right side of the sanctuary to the left side.<sup>8</sup>

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3 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

4 Curtis Carter, “Marquette's Joan of Arc Chapel: Her Spirit in Stone” in *Joan of Arc at the University*, ed. Mary Elizabeth Tallon (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997), p. 135.

5 *Ibid.*, 136.

6 Pick, *Chapel Dedicated to St. Joan of Arc*,” p. 6.

7 Carter “Marquette's Joan of Arc Chapel,” p. 136.

8 Pick, *Chapel Dedicated to St. Joan of Arc*,” p. 7.

In 1962 the property was sold to the Rojzman family, but the chateau burned down before they were able to move in. The chapel itself was not damaged in the fire and the Rojzmans offered the building to Marquette University in Wisconsin, which gladly accepted it.<sup>9</sup> Once again the building was dismantled, and each stone coded in three places for accurate rebuilding – green marks on top, red on the bottom, and the inside face of the stone carrying a number to help placement.<sup>10</sup> During the 1965 reconstruction in Milwaukee more changes were made to the fabric, including adding a nave to the structure to accommodate students, heated pipes under the floor, and a decorative scheme that is in a contemporary style, but not original to the chapel.<sup>11</sup> The sacristy was moved back to its original location on the right side of the sanctuary, and most obviously, the chapel was re-dedicated to Saint Joan of Arc. The university placed the chapel in the center of campus to serve as a place of religious worship, which it remains as to this day.<sup>12</sup> Despite the multiple reconstructions, and resultant damage and additions to the chapel fabric, early apotropaic graffiti can still be observed on the building.

### **Graffiti in the Americas**

To better understand how we know the graffiti is likely apotropaic, medieval, and not American, we must first consider the wider context of historic graffiti in the Americas. The use of graffiti and apotropaic images came across the Atlantic with European Colonists from the 16th century onwards. One site that helps to establish the early role of graffiti in the Americas is the Spanish fortification in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Though the original structure was built in the 1500s, the majority of the walls date to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with some surviving 17<sup>th</sup> -century elements.<sup>13</sup> Though this graffiti certainly is not medieval, it demonstrates the practice of graffiti coming from Europe to the Americas during

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9 Carter "Marquette's Joan of Arc Chapel," p. 136.

10 Pick, *Chapel Dedicated to St. Joan of Arc*, p. 7.

11 Carter "Marquette's Joan of Arc Chapel," p. 137.

12 *Ibid.*, 136.

13 Isabel C. Rivera-Collazo, "Historical Ship Graffiti on the Walls of San Juan's Spanish Defence System: An Interim Report, *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 35.1 (2006), p. 41.

settlement and colonization. Though the graffiti clearly does not serve the same purpose as those found in churches in England, there are similar images present: specifically horses, ships, soldiers, birds, and signatures.<sup>14</sup> Apotropaic imagery also crossed the Atlantic with European settlers. Similar to examples observed in Europe, various symbols were inscribed on walls for the purpose of protection from unseen evil influences.<sup>15</sup> In particular, the use of angels and cherubs as physical representations of the heavenly host (an English tradition) became a prevalent way for New Englanders to feel protected from invisible hostile forces.<sup>16</sup> This is an obvious practice brought across the Atlantic from England which demonstrates the connection between Europe's traditions and their evolution in the Americas, as angels continue to adorn church interiors and exteriors well after the 18th century. Other tangible practices that followed English colonists to the Americas include the use of witch bottles, ritual concealments, and the carving of hexafoils, also known as “daisy wheels,” on beams in various buildings for protection.<sup>17</sup> While it seems obvious that many rituals and superstitions would carry over to America, it should be noted that many of these apotropaic rituals quickly evolved after America gained independence. Regional ways of coping with the supernatural (such as painting specific designs on barns) began to appear and take on their own meaning and power. It is also notable that their use continued in the Americas long after they had generally ceased to be used in the colonists' original home countries, suggesting a fossilization of folk beliefs amongst the émigré population.

Graffiti in America continued to evolve independently, as demonstrated by various examples recorded from the Civil War. Similar to the graffiti found at San Juan, most inscriptions found from this period were done with charcoal, pencil, or soft pieces of brick, and the buildings they were found in had been used as barracks, hospitals, jails, and stables during the conflict.<sup>18</sup> **(fig. 2)** Graffiti from this

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14 Rivera-Collazo, “Historical Ship Graffiti,” p. 42.

15 Louis P. Nelson, *The Beauty of Holiness: Anglicanism and Architecture in Colonial South Carolina* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), p. 159.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 159-160.

18 Katherine Reed, “‘Charcoal scribblings of the most rascally character’: conflict, identity, and testimony in American





**Figure 2** American Civil-War graffiti (1863), The Graffiti House, Brandy Station, Virginia.  
Photo: Wikimedia

period shares the ease of access between social classes that is observed in medieval graffiti, as during the Civil War charcoal was consistently readily available from used fires, which eliminated the necessity of wealth from this form of expression.<sup>19</sup> Though the inscriptions share similar characteristics with medieval graffiti, their execution is more evolved. Instead of a basic memorial inscription, like the simple pictorial ones seen throughout English churches and cathedrals, there are complete wills of dying soldiers recorded on walls in places such as the Ben Leomond farm house. Oddly, there is a distinct lack of religious or apotropaic graffiti in samples currently recorded from the Civil War thus far, in contrast to an overwhelming number of apotropaic marks found in medieval buildings all over Europe.<sup>20</sup> Despite the vast differences between medieval graffiti and Civil War graffiti, these inscriptions give insight to un-sanitized experiences, unlike letters and diaries which were written to be

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Civil War graffiti,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 16.2 (2015), p. 111.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 116-118.

shared amongst a domestic audience. While written accounts are useful, as they give personal and day-to-day accounts of life during the war, statistically the middle class is over-represented while lower classes are under-represented.<sup>21</sup> Graffiti balances out the representation of voices from various classes in American history, to include more of the lower-class experience, as well as adding to and enriching our understanding of the middle-class experience.

## Medieval Graffiti

To better understand the results of the survey at the Chapel of St. Joan of Arc and their place in the study of graffiti, they need to be placed in their original context of medieval, not American, graffiti. While the chapel itself is in America and contains modern inscriptions that are certainly from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the main area of focus is on the surviving medieval inscriptions. Graffiti in churches and chapels are well-recorded throughout Europe. Several studies have been conducted in Italy and France, and a relatively new interest in the subject has led to multiple surveys in the United Kingdom. The scope of current research and the quantity of studies confirms the inscriptions in the chapel are indeed important and meaningful.

Hundreds of examples of medieval graffiti exist throughout churches in Europe, and experts have called for further research regarding their meanings in relation to customs and beliefs. As churches were meant for social and religious interaction, interpreting graffiti can give greater depth to our understanding of how the space was used.<sup>22</sup> One building that demonstrates an excellent blend of images and text for ritual and protection is the Oratorio di San Sabatiano in Arborio, Italy. This small church is known for its frescoes and the large amount of graffiti scratched into them over the years. While many would deem the damage to the frescoes vandalism, the study of the chapel indicates “That

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>22</sup> Bob Meeson, “Ritual Marks and Graffiti: Curiosities or Meaningful Symbols?” *Vernacular Architecture* 36 (2005), p. 41.



this practice was a meaningful and accepted one is made clear by the sheer number of graffiti at Arborio: some 150 entries can be deciphered.”<sup>23</sup> The inscriptions in this chapel are mostly textual, recording important events such as conflict, plague, storms, comets, and earthquakes. The earliest inscription dates to 1531 and the most recent to 1889, and all share a similar structure of notation throughout the inscriptions.<sup>24</sup> There is evidence that pictorial graffiti is also present beneath some areas of the frescoes, and that these are likely to be more inscribed images. At this time, little more can be determined about the use of carved images in this instance.<sup>25</sup> The placement of the inscriptions in relation to the images depicted in the frescoes is potentially of more significance. As it might be expected, the main images in the chapel are of saints and the narrative Passion story. However, the inscriptions are not on or near the Passion story, but rather on or near the bodies of the saints; the two with the most inscriptions being Saint Anthony and Saint Sebastian, both of whom were commonly invoked against the plague. The inscribing of words and events on the bodies of saints in this case is accepted as a form of devotion; a way to invoke the saints, rather than desecration.<sup>26</sup> The carvings are attempts to physically connect with the spiritual world that influenced daily life in a direct and tangible way.

While the Oratorio di San Sebastiano is a little more unique in terms of textual graffiti, many other churches and chapels throughout Europe contain common and well-recorded pictorial graffiti that served the same function. The use of such images is argued by some to be evidence that visual culture was growing around ecclesiastical purposes that allowed for anyone to participate as an artist.<sup>27</sup> However, an ever-growing body of data suggests that the function of these images is less about

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23 Véronique Plesch, “Body of Evidence: Devotional Graffiti in a Piedmontese Chapel” in *On Verbal/ Visual Representation: Word & Image Interactions 4*, ed. Martin Heusser *et al.* (New York: Rodopi BV, 2005), p. 181.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 181-183.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 182.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 184-185.

27 Marcia Kupfer, “The Cult of Images in Light of Pictorial Graffiti at Doué-la-Fontaine,” *Early Medieval Europe* 19 (2011), p. 146.



**Figure 3** Medieval graffiti from the chancel arch surround, including a pentangle, ladder, and seven-pointed star, St. Joan of Arc Chapel, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Photo: author.

individual artistic expression and more concerned with protection and communication. By examining the designs themselves, the evidence suggests that these marks are more for ritual than art – daisy wheels, intersecting V's, crosses, and ladders are all known Christian symbols regularly associated with protection – not created solely for the sake of artistic expression.<sup>28</sup> Certain aspects of how these marks were formed set them apart from other images present in medieval places of worship. Examples of graffiti are often simple designs, have

<sup>28</sup> Meeson, "Ritual Marks and Graffiti," p. 46.

little aesthetic merit in terms of the building they are located in, and are not part of the décor.<sup>29</sup>

Apotropaic graffiti are one of the most commonly found types of medieval graffiti in Europe, and in the Chapel of St. Joan of Arc, it accounts for the overwhelming majority of graffiti present.

With the obvious amount of damage and reconstruction the original stones in the Chapel of St. Joan of Arc have been subjected to, it would not be unreasonable to assume that there would be only the remotest possibility of the presence of medieval graffiti. Despite the chapel's various moves and alterations, a survey conducted by the author in September 2016 recorded several distinct apotropaic marks in the chapel. Around twenty inscriptions were found in total, despite heavy tooling marks and damage from reconstruction. Although the quality of many of the graffiti are poor – four medieval inscriptions, in particular, stand out in terms of content and quality, and three of them are located in one spot. Hidden on a flat piece of stone that forms part of the chancel arch surround, a pentangle, a ladder, and a seven-pointed star are all present and in good condition. **(fig. 3)**. While there are other markings, namely crosses and what appear to be stray lines, the pentangle is the largest item and has a double line at the bottom which demonstrates the design was gone over several times to make the cuts deep. It features prominently on the remaining section of stone, which is abruptly broken off before continuing onto new plastered over walls. The fourth important image, a ladder inscription, is located on the arch itself, but first the two star images should be discussed.

Where apotropaic graffiti is concerned, many images use an endless line that knots over itself in multiple places in the hopes of trapping or confusing an unwelcome spiritual entity.<sup>30</sup> Star shapes and compass-drawn designs make up the majority of these endless-line graffiti. There is no evidence anywhere on the medieval stones in the chapel that compass drawn designs were ever inscribed – though it is possible any present were damaged during reconstruction or on portions of stone that

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>30</sup> Matthew Champion, “Magic on the Walls: Ritual Protection Marks in the Medieval Church.” in *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain*, ed. Ronald Hutton (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), p. 18.





**Figure 4** Medieval graffiti from the chancel arch surround, five-pointed star, St. Joan of Arc Chapel, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Photo: author.

suffered too great a state of decay to be moved. Returning to the stone in the chancel arch surround, what makes the panel special is the location of two stars. A five-pointed star (**fig. 4**) and a seven-pointed star (**fig. 5**) are in close proximity to each other, and these designs are considered scarce within the greater body of work on medieval graffiti. Pentangles (five-pointed stars)

have been described as “one of the less prolific ritual protection marks found in medieval churches.”<sup>31</sup> It is almost ironic that a building that has undergone so much change would house two relatively rare graffiti on one slab of stone. These protection marks often raise concerns of whether or not the intent was a Christian one, however, in the medieval era these symbols were clearly Christian and associated with both Christ and King Solomon. The five points were associated with the five wounds of Christ and the five joys of Mary, and they were further associated with King Solomon in the form of Solomon's Knot. The “knot” or “seal of Solomon” gave him the power over demons, although texts appear confused as to its exact form – which suggests we can now place the seven-pointed star in this

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

**Figure 5** Medieval graffiti from the chancel arch surround, seven-pointed star, St. Joan of Arc Chapel, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Photo: author.



confused category, since the number of points seems to be less important than the function of the unending line.<sup>32</sup>

The other two medieval inscriptions that are of importance are the two very clearly inscribed ladders. One is on the same slab as the star designs (**fig. 6**), and the other is located on the chancel arch itself (**fig. 7**). Once again, a less prolific design appears twice (with a possible third inscription now in too poor of condition to be positively identified), in this chapel. The ladder marks themselves are comprised of a vertical line, neatly intersected by several horizontal lines. The number of horizontal lines differs from graffito to graffito and therefore does not likely have a purpose. The apotropaic function of this design is widely believed to be associated with Jacob's ladder and climbing towards the heavens out of evil.<sup>33</sup> Apart from their importance in terms of relative scarcity and the quality of their carvings, not much else can be reasonably inferred from these two graffiti, as it is likely many more inscriptions were lost over time, and the nature of the designs in general is not fully understood.

The modern graffiti found in the doorway of the sacristy also warrants a brief note here. In the doorway, there are several sets of letters. Most notably two sets of what appear to be the initials ER (**fig. 8**). We can infer from the patterns in the ER initials that these were made with modern tools –

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>33</sup> Matthew Champion, *Medieval Graffiti: The Lost Voices of England's Churches* (Ebury Press, 2015), p. 58.





**Figure 6** Ladder graffiti from the chancel arch surround, St. Joan of Arc Chapel, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA. Photo: author.





**Figure 7** Ladder graffiti from the chancel arch, St. Joan of Arc Chapel, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA. Photo: author.

though from which reconstruction, the 1927 or 1965 – there is no way to tell. There are other textual graffiti, small letters not words or phrases, in the sacristy doorway which are also likely to be modern. These inscriptions, while interesting, are likely to have been made by Americans working on the reconstruction of the building.

### **Conclusions**

After reviewing the body of evidence regarding historical American graffiti, where an undeniable shift in purpose occurs in the 19<sup>th</sup> century towards using inscriptions for record keeping, and that 1500s American graffiti is currently restricted to the study of old fortifications, we can conclude that the graffiti in the chapel are indeed not of American origin, but are far more likely to be medieval and original to the building. The direct parallels with graffiti that serve an apotropaic or ritual purpose throughout European churches also supports the conclusion that the inscriptions discussed here are indeed medieval in origin. Not only are similar images found throughout medieval places of worship, but the records of the reconstruction of the building can verify that the stones the inscriptions are found on are firstly, in their correct place and in context of the original building, and secondly, as well preserved as they possibly can be. This also offers an interesting insight to the use of a private chapel as a public space for the devout to leave their respective marks in stone. We know that the chapel was used for religious events for the entire

**Figure 8** Medieval graffiti from the chancel arch surround, initials ER, St. Joan of Arc Chapel, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Photo: author.

community, and it is possible the inscriptions are from any and every social class. It is likely many more designs were originally present and were prominent on the stones connecting the chancel arch to the walls. It is highly likely that many featured on the arches themselves, but were lost either through exposure to the elements when the structure fell into disrepair, or through the evident modern



re-tooling of the stone. We are left with a very small, but poignant sample of graffiti, all designed to avoid evil or ask for protection. While assumptions regarding the circumstances that led to the use of these inscriptions can't be made, it can be firmly stated the people of Chasse were, at the very least, devout in their faith. The few preserved samples that are presently in the chapel are a unique find – medieval graffiti that exist in their original context in America. 🙏