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Conclusions Regarding the Study of Medieval Graffiti

By Becky Williams, Independent Scholar

The present volume has investigated a wide range of graffiti and other architectural markers found in a variety of locations and spanning a vast chronological scope. In doing so, it has brought to light an incredibly broad and diverse array of source material, and offered numerous analyses and insights into interpretation and function. The challenge of sorting, recording, categorizing, and understanding such a gigantic and varied source is enormous and ever-changing; fresh discoveries appear constantly to shed new light on old interpretations, or add yet another facet to an already multifarious source base. The massive variations in graffiti type, content, execution, and quality make it clear that there is no “one” purpose behind the creation of graffiti, just as in the modern world there is no singular cause for the use of pen and paper, rendering questions such as “what does graffiti mean?” or “why is it there?” – which were often asked when graffiti study was just beginning to pique the interest of researchers – are now completely impossible to answer holistically. Rather than looking at historical graffiti as a sole entity or specific source type, it becomes increasingly clear that the canvas of stone was used in a paper-short world by people at every level of society and for a huge variety of reasons, some of which at the present time can only be speculated upon, and others which are starting to become clear.

Our main source for the study of medieval graffiti is the church and cathedral; it must be acknowledged, however, that this is largely by virtue of these buildings having been built to last and having been maintained over centuries. While it is tempting to ascribe religious or devotional significance to at least some of these markings, the volume has also discussed graffiti found in domestic contexts and in prisons, which will have been possessive of their own function and purpose. Indeed, not all of those found in a religious building will themselves have religious meaning. Graffiti in caves and castles, which have also been cited briefly within this volume, are being discovered and recorded as graffiti study progresses. How frustrating it is that so many medieval and early modern structures have not survived the centuries.



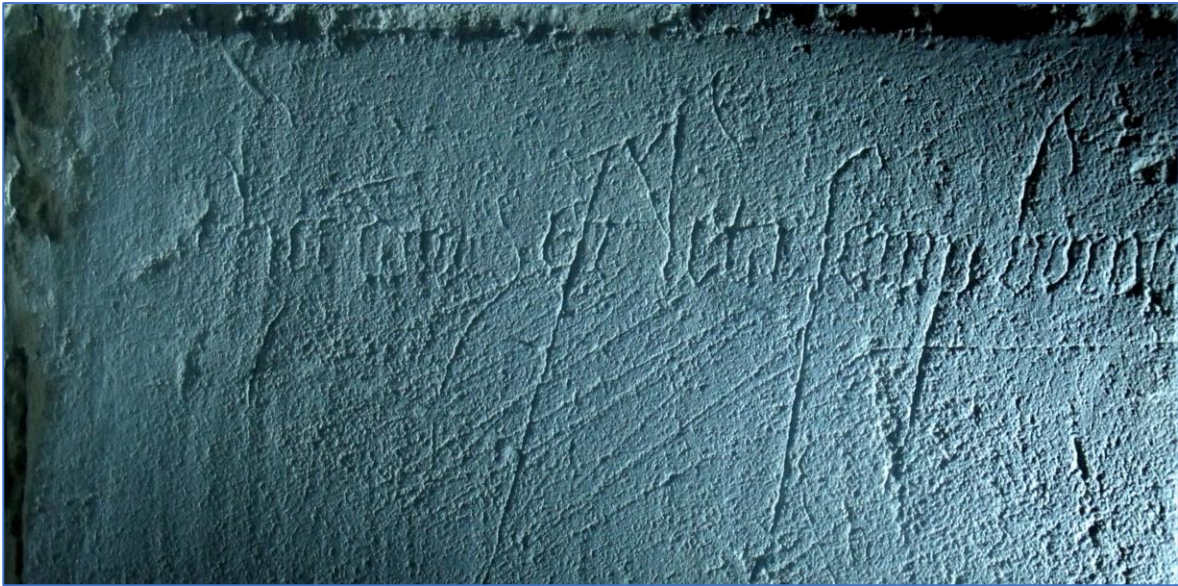
A selection of compass drawn designs, most probably architectural in nature, from Church of St. Peter, Belaugh, Norfolk.

Why medieval graffiti have been largely ignored by historians and researchers until the last half a decade now seems difficult to comprehend.

Certainly, their often crude style, lack of

clear authorship, and issues with dating must have contributed to this ostensible disregard. Pritchard's 1967 work, cited frequently throughout this volume, is certainly not without its methodological flaws and tenuous interpretations - but it did, at least in some places, attempt to ascribe significance to these markings as a valid historical source in their own right. As such, Pritchard began to see beyond the apparent perception of them as unskilled and therefore unworthy of study, challenging the notion of these informal inscriptions as no more than idle doodles created for no particular purpose other than to fill time. Her survey is geographically limited and does not by any means provide a thorough or complete catalogue of graffiti at any of the sites discussed, and yet the huge amount of graffiti and many different apparent categories within it are made clear. Since then, more recent, in-depth efforts have been made to undertake thorough and comprehensive site surveys, most notably, those led by Matthew Champion, revealing an enormous wealth of graffiti types and forms within single sites across England, evidencing patterns as well as anomalies in terms of content and distribution.

On the one hand, the scale of this evidence base is overwhelming, even daunting; and yet on the other, the potential that graffiti offers is simply astounding. Study of medieval history is severely limited by the relative paucity of surviving source material, particularly when it comes to seeking out the "common voice" of the Middle Ages. Professionally commissioned artwork, carefully illustrated manuscripts, charters and other textual



(Above) Heavily contracted and abbreviated late medieval Latin text from Church of St. Margaret, Swannington Norfolk,



(Left) Deeply incised compass drawn designs from King John's House, Romsey, Hampshire.

documents represent a small minority of medieval society – normally a privileged minority, with a set agenda. We know what people were supposed to believe, to think, to understand; but it has been almost impossible to infer how they responded - what they *truly* believed, thought and understood – from the majority of the surviving sources at our disposal. Graffiti has the potential to open up the doors for such investigation, and to greatly enrich our relatively narrow understanding of the Middle Ages in a way that might never have been believed possible.

How we can actually use graffiti to seek out this common voice is, at present, very much open to speculation and debate. Possibilities for interpretation and analysis are evident, and the examination of graffiti from iconographical and architectural perspectives shows

merit; nonetheless, graffiti study has changed and developed dramatically in the years since I first embarked upon research into the subject some seven years ago, and is yet still very much in its infancy. Much more evidence will need to be uncovered and recorded in order to draw firmer conclusions, establish stronger patterns, and begin to understand apparent anomalies, and this can only be done with continued and serious efforts to discover and catalogue this enormous source base, of which – to brazenly employ a fitting cliché – we have only just begun to scratch the surface. 🐢



Typically “busy” graffiti surface, including pre-Reformation text and compass drawn designs, Church of St. Mary, Troston, Suffolk.