The Priest, the Prostitute, and the Slander on the Walls: Shifting Perceptions Towards Historic Graffiti

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

On the 2nd of September 1486, an accusation was made in front of a vicar on the Maltese island of Gozo against the cleric, Andreas de Bisconis, by the husband and the father of local woman Jacobi Saliba. The cleric, they claimed, had sexually harassed Jacoba Saliba whilst she was at prayer in the church of St James. Waiting until she was alone, it was stated that Bisconis had approached and declared his love for her, claiming also that he had propositioned her to have sex with him.

In the court case that followed Bisconis said that it was a case of mistaken identity, and that, in the darkness of the church, he had believed he was actually addressing a local prostitute with which he was acquainted. However, further evidence was presented against him by the family. It was also claimed that Bisconis had inscribed a slanderous statement about Jacoba Saliba into the walls of a local church some months earlier. Although the witnesses differed as to what the statement actually said, it was claimed that the defamatory words were written clearly in Bisconis' handwriting. Despite a vigorous defence, and the calling of many character witnesses, Bisconis was found guilty of both the charges of sexual harassment and the slander -- being sentenced to a year in prison confined in irons.¹

Whilst the case itself is of interest, particularly in the legal defence of female reputation, and that the cleric's defence was that he thought he was speaking to a prostitute of his acquaintance -- which he obviously deemed to be totally acceptable -- the use of church

¹ G. Wettinger, Aspects of daily life in late medieval Malta and Gozo (Malta University Press, Msida, 2015).
graffiti as evidence is one of the very few documentary references we have to the act taking place. As with the cleric's association with the prostitute, that he created the graffiti on the church wall was not the subject of approbation, just the content of the message itself. It is also clear from the evidence presented during the court case that Bisconis had not just written one piece of graffiti, but was believed to have created multiple inscriptions on the walls of several different churches. Yet the act of creating the inscriptions appears to have been accepted, with only the content being under review.

What makes the Bisconis case of such interest is the sharp contrast in attitudes towards the creation of graffiti inscriptions in a place of worship displayed by the witnesses appearing for the prosecution and those generally held today, where virtually all graffiti, with some noted exceptions, is regarded as anti-social, destructive and lacking legitimacy. Writing in the New York Times as recently as 2014, Heather MacDonald, the Thomas W. Smith Fellow at the Manhattan Institute, stated that “all graffiti is vandalism” and that “all graffiti was a crime.”2 Whilst it is unsurprising that her article received widespread support from amongst those living in New York at the time, it is a reflection of the more nuanced approach to informal art and inscriptions in general in that the article also received widespread criticism for its outdated and dogmatic approach. This more embracing approach and attitude towards graffiti is still in its infancy, and has grown from the recognition amongst academics in a number of fields that graffiti is, like manuscripts, artifacts and archaeology, simply another evidence source, whether to past events or modern social attitudes. Still, even amongst many of the scholars who have used the study of graffiti to carve out their own academic niche, there still generally persists an over-riding belief that even historic graffiti sits apart from most other evidence bases.

The growth in the academic study of early graffiti inscriptions in recent decades has been marked, with a growing number of articles and conference presentations looking at various aspects of the subject. Nonetheless, the majority of these works tend to use as their starting point the widespread understanding that graffiti inscriptions are “wild signs” -- essentially inscriptions that lack legitimacy -- lack “licence” -- and are by their very creation anti-social and, in the public sphere at least, regarded as negative and destructive. They are “illicit.” It is from this base point that many of the recent works have attempted to re-write the narrative surrounding graffiti inscriptions. That so many of the newer studies have come to the conclusion that the narrative can be re-written would rather suggest that the original starting points, the perception of what graffiti “is,” were too confined and confining to begin with. Put simply, they were starting in the wrong place. Tim Neil and Jeff Oliver's collection of edited essays published in 2010, *Wild Signs: Graffiti in Archaeology and History*, is perhaps one of the most telling recent exemplars.3

The volume consists of nine essays looking at many aspects of graffiti from an archaeological perspective, including studies of tree graffiti from the USA, the graffiti of modern-day Bristol, 19th and 20th -century graffiti in the Yorkshire Wolds, post-World War II pornographic inscriptions from a military installation, and the medieval graffiti of Tewksbury Abbey. Almost all of the essays outline the recent perception that graffiti is “counter-normative” and “deviant behavior,” and state the author's intention to look beyond this so that they can record, interpret and assess the “scrawl” that may become the “next generations written testimony of unheard voices.”4 Yet this overtly constructive approach is countered throughout the essays by the underlying impression that the “art,” the “inscriptions,” the graffiti that is the subject of the research is an illegitimate voice; a voice that sits in the

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margins. More recently still, Dr. Richard Clay, writing about his 2015 BBC documentary “A Brief History of Graffiti,” confirmed that he too, even when writing about the history of graffiti, regarded such marks as essentially destructive. "It makes me uncomfortable to write it," he stated, "but I think that it is. I might not like all illicit marks, but they at least involve somebody having thought creatively about how to avoid getting caught."5

This paper will examine the question of contemporary attitudes towards informal inscriptions; essentially judging whether modern interpretations of “graffiti” can be applied to early, and particularly pre-Reformation, inscriptions -- and whether any such perceptions can even be regarded as a relevant starting point towards any such study? Is there a direct relationship between the modern perceptions of graffiti, and is there any value in attempting to examine early inscriptions in the light of modern theory? To do this I will examine the wider contemporary evidence from literary and artistic sources for the presence and creation of early inscriptions, in an attempt to determine the contemporary attitudes towards them. In addition, I will also examine the emergence of graffiti research as an academic study, and chart the changing attitudes towards graffiti in the last two centuries, with particular emphasis upon the growing divide between single-strand theory-based approaches and the more thematic and contextual archaeological approaches to research. Finally, I will argue that, with all early graffiti inscriptions, a more nuanced approach to their interpretation is both essential and required; an approach that views them as more than a single corpus of material to be catalogued and classified.

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Amongst the very earliest reference to the informal inscribing of a church of place of worship in England can be found in the 12th century text of the life of Christina of Markyate. Christina, an anchoress and religious mystic, was born in the very last years of the 11th

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5 BBC History Extra (http://www.historyextra.com/article/prehistoric/brief-history-graffiti-and-creativity)
century to affluent Anglo-Saxon parents. Her life was recorded by an intimate friend, some of which may have actually been dictated by Christina herself. Most probably commissioned by Abbot Robert de Gorham of St. Albans Abbey, the work was entitled Of Saint Theodora, Virgin, who is also called Christina. The account relates that, as a young teenager, Christina was taken to visit the powerful Abbey at St. Albans, where she was so inspired and impressed by the devotion of the monastic brothers that she there and then made the decision to devote her own life to the service of God. As a physical symbol of the private vow of devotion and chastity that she made the document records that she inscribed a votive cross into the doorway of the cathedral church “with her own fingernail.”

Unfortunately, such written references are rare, and it isn't until the 15th century that a number of accounts appear that directly relate to wider examples of church graffiti. The first is an altogether-ambiguous reference that appears in the border of a manuscript copy of a historical chronicle also from the Abbey at St. Albans. Beneath an entry relating to events for the year 1403, an unknown individual has written “Christe, Dei Splendor, tibi supplico, destrue Gleendor / iste versus fuit scriptus in fine chori Monachorum Sancti Albani” (Christ, Splendor of God, I beseech you, destroy Glyndwr/this verse was written in the choir of the monks of St. Albans). Whilst obviously referring to the events that took place during the early 15th-century Welsh revolt under the leadership of Owain Glyndwr, it is believed that the marginal note was created as a direct interaction with, and in reaction to, the text contained in the chronicle rather than any direct threat to the abbey itself. Although the first line of text is unambiguous, wishing the destruction of Glyndwr, the second line of the inscription can be read in a number of different ways. Alicia Marchant has suggested that the second line may be recording that the note itself was written in the choir at St. Albans. She also notes that the

two lines, being written in the same hand, are of a very different construction, and suggests that the first line may indeed be a record of an inscription that the author viewed within the abbey itself. It is possible that such an inscription could have been part of a formal painted scheme, Marchant speculates that it may well be a record of a graffiti inscription once located in the choir. The remains of the abbey at St Albans have been examined for graffiti inscriptions on several occasions, with notable success, unfortunately this particular inscription has not so far been located.

In the closing decades of the 15th century, the Dominican theologian Felix Fabri wrote a colorful account of the pilgrimage he undertook to the Holy Land in 1483. The book, taking the form of a guide to the sites and customs of the Holy Land, gives a detailed account

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8 Ibid.
9 A selection of the graffiti at St Albans has been published by the Friends of St Albans Abbey. M. Rose, G. Thomas, & J. Wells, A Short Graffiti Tour of St Albans Abbey (St Albans, 2014, revised edition). The more detailed notes and database of findings are held in the Abbey library.
of his own visit to the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and surrounding sites of religious interest. Fabri explains that, upon first entering the Holy Land, their leader and guide read out in both Latin and German the twenty-seven rules that they should all observe to ensure that they did not offend the Muslim community, and to ensure their own safety. The sixth rule, as related by Fabri, stated that “pilgrims of noble birth must not deface walls by drawing their coats of arms thereon, or by writing their names, or by fixing upon the walls papers on which their arms are painted, or by scratching columns or marble slabs, or boring holes in them with iron tools, to make marks of their having visited them; for such conduct gives great offence to the Saracens, and they think those who do so to be fools.” (fig. 1) The very fact that it was felt necessary to state this within the rules of the visit does rather strongly suggest that the act was not unknown, and many such examples can still be seen at the furthest point of Fabri’s pilgrimage; the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai. It is also interesting to note that Fabri recounts only the condemnation of such acts amongst “the Saracens” rather than by himself or his companions.

Taken as a whole, what little documentary evidence there is for the creation of church graffiti, all points towards it being, if not unquestionably acceptable, then at least not something that was subject to approbation. In the case of Fabri and the Maltese court case, it is clear that the creation of the inscriptions was not regarded as unusual, or something to be condemned; only the content and context of the subject matter were subject to criticism. Other texts, such as the case of Christina of Markyate clearly indicate a devotional aspect to the creation of inscriptions; aspects that also appear to be accepted for what they are: an act of faith rather than of vandalism.

But what of the inscriptions themselves? Is there evidence actually on the walls that gives any indication of how such inscriptions were viewed by those who created them? In general terms, it must be acknowledged that there isn't. Collections of deeply scored imagery
in specific locations, created over a considerable period of time, do suggest, at the very least, a toleration of such practices - and perhaps more - but direct evidence is limited. At sites such as Ashwell in Hertfordshire, and Acle in Norfolk, long inscriptions on the walls chronicle significant community events, in both cases the arrival and consequences of a plague or pestilence.¹¹ (fig. 2) Veronique Plesch's work on inscriptions incised into Italian medieval wall paintings has highlighted similar collections of graffiti that, over a period of centuries, record the major events taking place within a small rural community.¹² Floods, wars, plagues and famines -- the events that both shaped and shook the lives of numerous generations.

These are inscriptions created by multiple individuals, over a long period of time, formalizing and ensuring the preservation of a shared folk memory. As such, as Plesch highlights, they must, at the very least, have been tolerated. Yet do the inscriptions themselves offer any direct indication of contemporary attitudes beyond a tacit toleration?

![Figure 2 Plague Graffiti, Church of St. Mary’s, Ashwell, Hertfordshire. Photo: author.](http://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal/vol6/iss1/20)

**Figure 2** Plague Graffiti, Church of St. Mary’s, Ashwell, Hertfordshire. Photo: author.

Lidgate Church in Suffolk contains one of the highest concentrations of early graffiti inscriptions for a building of its size anywhere in England. Although first brought to public

¹¹ D. Sherlock, *Ashwell Church, Medieval Drawings and Writings* (Ashwell Parish Church, 1978); M. Champion, “Late Medieval Painted Decoration at St Edmunds Church, Acle,” *Norfolk Archaeology*, 47 (2013), pp. 462–466

attention by inclusion in Violet Pritchard's 1967 book, *English Medieval Graffiti*, it was only in very recent years that a full survey of the inscriptions was undertaken.\(^\text{13}\) Exactly why this relatively humble structure should have attracted such a vast amount of graffiti is open to question. Nonetheless, what is particularly marked about the collection of early inscriptions present at Lidgate is the high percentage of pre-Reformation text inscriptions found on the walls.

![Figure 3](image-url)  
**Figure 3** Text inscribed by John Lydgate (?), Church of St. Mary, Lidgate, Suffolk. Photo: author.

The text on the walls at Lidgate includes many names from the 15\(^{\text{th}}\) and 16\(^{\text{th}}\) centuries, as well as a whole series of, as yet, unidentifiable Roman numerals, and a number of Latin phrases and mottos. Perhaps the most intriguing of all the text inscriptions is also one of the most discrete. In a neat and precise late-medieval hand, in letters each less than ten millimetres tall, is a short Latin sentence inscribed amongst a mass of other text inscriptions on a pier of the south arcade. The inscription translates as “John Lidgate did/made this, with licence, on the feast of saints Simon and Jude” (fig. 3) Leaving aside the question of whether the inscription was created by the medieval poet John Lydgate, who was a native of the parish and spent much of his adult life in nearby Bury St. Edmunds, it is the phrase “with licence” that strongly suggests an overt and perhaps even formal legitimacy to the creation of

the inscription. However, what isn't clear is from whom licence was sought, and for what exactly?

And whilst medieval poets “may” have left behind graffiti inscriptions of an intriguing nature, they are by no means the most elevated of individuals to do so. According to tradition, even those at the very highest levels of society saw nothing to be condemned in leaving their mark upon the fabric of the buildings they inhabited. The 16th-century martyrologist John Foxe stated that the Princess Elizabeth, upon her release from the manor of Woodstock where she had been confined by her sister Mary, took a diamond ring and engraved into the window glass “Much suspected by me / nothing proved can be. Quoth Elizabeth, prisoner.” As Juliet Fleming clearly details, moving further into the 16th and early 17th centuries, the attitudes towards graffiti, most particularly in its written form, remain one of ambivalence. Examining the literary evidence for inscribing text into glass, and writing upon the walls, Fleming lists numerous examples from early modern plays, poems, and broadsides. Amongst the most notable are “a character in John Grange’s *Golden Aphroditis* (1577) who relieves his feelings at having been denied access to his mistress by writing “Veni, vidi... upon the gallerie door,” while another entertains his fellow guests by writing “with redde oker stone upon the screne of the hall” a long riddling poem.” In 1585 Samuel Daniel writes in more general terms that “men all naturally take delight in pictures, and even little children as soon as they can use their hands at libertie, goe with a Cole to the wall, indeavouring to drawe the forme of this thing or that.” As Fleming notes, “there is extensive literary and non-literary evidence that the early modern English did not hesitate to

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14 John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, published in 1563, was more commonly referred to as Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*.
16 Ibid, p. 57.
write on walls as well as windows." It would appear to be the case that the same was true of their late-medieval counterparts.

This seeming acceptability to leave what we now term as graffiti upon the walls may well just be one result of the differing attitudes towards internal decoration in the medieval and early modern periods. Fleming highlighted numerous early-modern examples that suggest that internal decoration was seen as something fluid and informal; where bill and broadsheets could be pasted, and inspirational texts (and occasionally downright slanderous ones) could be created with impunity. The internal surfaces may have included formal decorative schemes, particularly within late-medieval churches, but this did not preclude direct physical interaction with those areas. At a number of English sites, including the Prior's Chapel at Durham Cathedral and Swannington Church in Norfolk, graffiti inscriptions have been recorded that are not only inscribed into surfaces that contain medieval wall paintings but, in several cases, the inscriptions appear directly related to, and an interaction with, the images contained in the paintings themselves. Further afield, Veronique Plesch's work on graffiti carved into wall paintings show exactly the same patterns as seen in England, but with far more numerous examples to document. It would appear that, whilst the decorative scheme may have been regarded as formal, it was wholly acceptable to physically interact with it. Indeed, in a number of specific cases, direct interaction between the viewer and formal decorative schemes appears to have been both encouraged and expected.

The first signs that graffiti may not have been wholly accepted by all within a church environment begin to surface in the 17th century. Writing in 1609, the satirist Thomas Dekker extolled the virtues of a visit to old St Pauls cathedral in the City of London. There he suggested that visitors should ensure they made a visit the roof, paying “tribute to the top of

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17 Ibid, p. 57.
19 V. Plesch, pp. 139-141
Paul’s steeple with a single penny... ... ... Before you come downe againe, I would desire you to draw your knife, and grave your name (or, for want of a name, the marke, which you clap on your sheep) in great Characters upon the leads, by a number of your brethren (both Citizens and country Gentlemen) and so you shall be sure to have your name lye in a coffin of lead, when yourselfe shall be wrapt in a winding-shee: and indeed the top of Powles conteins more names than Stowes Chronicle. “20 Although Dekker doesn't overtly criticize the act of adding graffiti to the obviously already well-marked lead, and most certainly highlights the commemorative aspects of the action, his comments are drawn from a satire that pokes comic fun at visitors to the city, suggesting that such actions are those of the illiterate and uncouth. Dekker's attitude, that graffiti may not be wholly acceptable within a church environment, are echoed by a series of monumental brasses found in Horsell Church in Surrey. The brasses commemorate several members of the Suttone family, who all appear to have perished in 1603, and each contains the addendum beneath which reads “Gentle reader, deface not this stone.” 21 It is clear that this emergence of a more critical attitude towards graffiti inscriptions within churches in the early 17th century is apparently confined only to churches. Graffiti in a vernacular setting, and most particularly on historic monuments, appears to remain as something that is largely acceptable. The most obvious location to demonstrate this continued acceptance of early graffiti inscriptions, and the most studied, must be regarded as the historic archaeological sites and monuments of ancient Egypt. 22 Even today any visitor to the majority of tourist sites in the country will be surprised at the sheer quantity of inscriptions found there, many of which very clearly date back into the 18th and 19th centuries. (fig. 4)
Figure 4 A typical graffiti surface, built up over centuries. Bodiam Castle. Photo: author.

In some cases, academic study of this graffiti has already taken place, linking the inscriptions to individuals and particular events. Many of those who left their mark on the monuments were largely drawn from the privileged classes, essentially those who could afford to undertake such a journey, and many of the 19th-century inscriptions appear to have been made by members of the nobility or upper classes undertaking their “Grand Tour” following the end of their formal education. In terms of the contemporary attitudes towards the creation of such inscriptions, it should be noted that many of the early Egyptologists and scholars were amongst those who had no hesitation inscribing the ancient structures they studied with a record of their visit. At Ramasseum, the Temple of Ramses the Great, can be found, amongst other inscriptions, the marking of Giovanni Belzoni (1816), the pioneering Italian archaeologist sometimes known
as “The Great Belzoni.”\textsuperscript{23} Nearby, and on the same monument, is an inscription attributed to Henry Salt, a gentleman who gained fame as an acquirer and collector of ancient Egyptian antiquities.\textsuperscript{24} In the early decades of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, with Europe plunged into years of warfare, Egypt saw its fair share of military visitors of rank, many of whom also left their mark upon the ancient sites they visited. Very prominently amongst these was the Scottish soldier, and later Member of Parliament, John Gordon, who inscribed his name into numerous monuments during his tour of 1804. Only three years earlier, whilst serving as a senior officer in the army of Napoleon, Auguste Colbert left his own inscription on one of the pyramids at Dahshur.\textsuperscript{25}

However, by the middle of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, and perhaps linked to the increasing accessibility of Egypt’s most ancient sites and the subsequent rise in the level of inscriptions, opinion was beginning to shift. Simple memorial inscriptions that had passed without comment at the beginning of the century were beginning to be seen as both destructive and unwelcome. Writing to his uncle from the island of Rhodes in 1850, the thirty-year old French novelist Gustav Flaubert expressed his annoyance at the large number of “imbecile names” that were inscribed into every ancient monument he visited. “In Alexandria,” he continued, “a certain Thompson from Sunderland, wrote his name in letters six feet high on Pompeii’s column. It can be read a quarter of a mile off. There is no way of seeing the column without seeing the name of Thompson. This imbecile has become part of the monument and is perpetuated with it.”\textsuperscript{26} Flaubert was expressing a growing sense of concern and frustration at the proliferation of such inscriptions at ancient sites. At the very same time that serious academic study was being directed at earlier inscriptions, most notably at ancient Roman sites such as Pompeii, the increasing number of modern inscriptions was, in Flaubert’s eyes,

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid. p.164.
\textsuperscript{24} http://www.alanfildes.com/gallery.php?level=picture&id=49
\textsuperscript{25} http://www.alanfildes.com/gallery.php?level=picture&id=15
damaging and defacing the monument themselves. Still, Flaubert was merely articulating the concern of “his” age, and as Richard Caminos has eloquently pointed out “Let a thousand years pass by, and scholars will be in raptures over ghafir Abdul Rahman’s signed arabesques incised on blocks of the Kumma temple.”

The great irony perhaps being that if Flaubert had left his own mark, like the ostentatious “Thompson of Sunderland,” it would indeed be exciting the interest of scholars.

The beginnings of the study of early-church graffiti as a historical source in the United Kingdom, and as a subject of antiquarian interest, appears to emerge in the late 19th century. Although initially largely confined to the study of mass dials or scratch dials, and a number of what might be considered semi-formal inscriptions, this early interest most certainly raised awareness of inscriptions in general. Yet even at the peak of activity for archaeological publications relating to mass dial research, in the 1920s and 1930s, the wider attitude towards church graffiti was mixed and, in many cases, entirely contradictory. (fig. 5)

Figure 5 Typical examples of scratch dials recorded on the fabric of Norfolk churches. Photo: author.

“The King's England” was a series of forty-one volumes, promoted as the “New Domesday,” that dealt, parish by parish, with the villages of England and their key points of historic interest. Although all edited originally by Arthur Mee of the Daily Mail, they were compiled from submissions made for each county by a number of separate contributors, and as such each volume forms a microcosm of the attitudes towards church graffiti inscriptions prevalent at the time. The volume for the county of Surrey, first published in 1938, claimed that “no other book has done for any county what this book does for Surrey,” and wonderfully highlights in one place the contradictory attitudes towards graffiti embraced by the contributors.\(^{28}\)

The contributors to the Surrey volume are quick to condemn a number of examples of graffiti in the churches they are examining. At Horley it is stated that “the doorway is finely moulded, but has had too much attention from scribblers in the last three hundred years,” whilst at Bisley they complain that “one would think a porch five hundred years old would be lovingly cared for in a village which has almost lost its touch with the old world, but we found these fine old timbers disfigured and cut with the names of scribblers of two centuries.” Likewise, at Chobham, the writer talks of an old sundial “pitiably disfigured by the louts who go about the country scribbling and cutting their initials everywhere.” The repeated use of the term “scribblers” does rather suggest that this outright condemnation and criticism was the view of only one of Mee's contributors, and elsewhere in the same volume an utterly contradictory view to early graffiti is demonstrated. Writing about the parish church at Compton another contributor states that “on the face of the arch... is the figure of a Norman knight cut into the chalk, an almost comical figure such as a schoolboy might draw, all straight lines yet with a vivid suggestion of movement... and at his side an eight-armed cross. The knight is standing akimbo, and is an engaging little figure. Close by is what we can only

\(^{28}\) Mee, p.1
interpret as the signature of the mason who put him there, a mason's mark with five linked circles drawn with compasses. The carving on both the chancel arches is a great enrichment to this small place...” Whilst these comments obviously only highlight the personal bias of the individual writers, that the first contributor is happy to utterly condemn all “scribbling,” even that dating back to the 17th century, suggests that graffiti as a historic resource was largely an alien concept to them.

The visual evidence

From a period of centuries that has left us a rich visual culture it would be highly unlikely that a phenomena as common as graffiti inscriptions would escape the notice of the artists of the period. Still, leaving aside the handful of images that appear to show a variety of apotropaic markings, or ritual protection marks, applied to structures, the depictions are relatively few in number.

Given the sheer volume of informal pre-Reformation inscriptions currently being recorded in parish churches across Europe the one place you might reasonably expect them to be depicted are in the numerous manuscript illustrations of the interiors of places of worship, but, at the present time, not a single medieval example is known. This may be regarded as evidence of an illegitimacy associated with the inscriptions, with the artists disinclined to record what might be considered a defacement of the structure, though the reasons may be more complex. It is notable that those same manuscript illustrations also fail in almost every instance to record the medieval wall paintings that the buildings archaeology tells us were almost universally present, concentrating instead upon the architectural details of the structure. Perhaps then the manuscripts themselves are simply a reflection of the medieval attitude to these surfaces, echoing what was described by Fleming as happening several centuries later? The manuscripts suggest that they are liminal spaces that sit upon the interdict
between the formal and informal, set apart from the architecture of the building, and yet applied to its structure. They are temporary surfaces, that reflect only a moment in time, and the thoughts and images of those times. However, in the 16th and 17th centuries there are a whole series of paintings of church interiors that show just that, and suggest a great deal more.

The Dutch school of painting in the middle decades of the 17th century is rightly famed for its use of light and perspective to produce some of the finest architectural paintings of the century. One of the most capable of the early artists was Pieter Saenredam, who created a series of paintings of the interior of churches in Delft and Utrecht, in which he clearly depicted church graffiti on the walls. In his work entitled “The Nave and choir of Mariakerk in Utrecht,” painted in 1641, Saenredam actually signed the painting in amongst the graffiti on a pillar at the right of the painting, giving the impression that it was simply another piece of church graffiti.29 It was a ploy he used upon several occasions, including in his works showing the interior of Buurkerke in Utrecht dating from the 1630s and 1640s.

Saenredam wasn't alone in adopting this unusual method of signing paintings. The popular subject of the tomb of William the Silent in the Nieuwe Kerk in Delft was painted by Houekgeest in 1651 and De Witte in 1653, both of whom followed Saenredam's lead by hiding their signatures amongst the graffiti on the church pillars, with Hendrick Cornelisz van Vliet hiding his own signature in a similar manner in a different view of the same church in 1661.30

Whether it was actually Saenredam who locally began this fashion, which the others later emulated, remains open to question. Saenredam certainly wasn't the first artist to use the informal inscription as a method of signing their work. As early as 1432 the Flemish artist

29 Currently held by the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
30 Currently held by the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. In 1434 Van Ecyk made similar use of a graffiti style inscription to sign his own portrait of the Arnolfini wedding upon the back wall of the room in which the couple were portrayed.
Jan van Eyck included such an inscription in his so-called Tymotheus portrait.\(^{31}\) The portrait of a somber-looking young man was probably created as a memorial painting, although the identity of the sitter is open to question. Across the bottom of the image van Eyck has included a realistic stone parapet which shows a number of inscriptions cut into or painted onto the crumbling surface. The largest of the inscriptions is in French, has the appearance of being the professionally cut work of a stonemason, and reads “LEAL SOUVENIR” (loyal memory), giving credence to the idea that the image was intended to have a memorial function. The other two inscriptions however, appear far more informal. Both are far smaller than the French inscription, and give the appearance of having been painted onto the stone parapet. The upper inscription is in Greek and reads “Tymotheos,” from which the painting derives its name, whilst the lower inscription is in Latin and records the artist’s own details and the date the work was undertaken.

There are also a number of manuscript illustrations that, though ultimately ambiguous, might be intended to portray forms of building graffiti, albeit all in vernacular settings. A 15\(^{th}\)-century codex created in Breslau of Valerio Massimo's “Facta et Dicta memorabilia” contains a miniature showing mixed bathing in a medieval bath house. Behind the risqué behaviour of the bathers appears a pale slogan that can be interpreted as a chalked or painted motto on the rear timber partition wall. However, the level of detail is such that it can also be seen as an addition to the miniature that wasn’t intended to be seen as being directly associated with the bathing scene.\(^ {32}\) Similarly, the work of the manuscript illustrator known as the “Master of the White Inscriptions,” who was active in the closing decades of the 15\(^{th}\) century, also contain a number of inscriptions in the background of the scenes he illustrated, all apparently painted or chalked onto stone surfaces.\(^ {33}\) While several of these

\(^{31}\) Now held by The National Gallery, London.
\(^{32}\) Now held by the Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.
white inscriptions contain dates and, like the Jan van Eyck portrait, commemorate their creation, unlike the inscription that appears at the rear of the bath house miniature, these inscriptions are depicted as being far larger, and may be intended to represent a more formal motto or decorative scheme.

One of the most overt and extensive depictions of graffiti in a work of art is in the painting of a tavern or brothel scene entitled “Merry Company” by the Flemish realist artist Jan Sanders van Hemessen.\(^34\) Dated to the 1540 the paintings shows a crowded tavern of individuals. The back wall of the tavern, and the chimney breast, are clearly shown as being covered in numerous applied examples of graffiti. Although most of the inscriptions are clearly textual, there also appear a number of images, including what are apparently merchant's marks and the crude depiction of a bird. Similar depictions in European paintings occur throughout the middle decades of the 16\(^{th}\) century, most notably by the unidentified “Brunswick Monogramist.”\(^35\)

It is clear therefore that Saenredam was merely extending an already known artistic ploy. Yet because Saenredam chose to hide his signature amidst the graffiti can be seen perhaps as enlightening as to the manner in which he and his contemporaries viewed the presence of graffiti in churches. In the first instance the very depiction of the graffiti suggests that it was regarded as commonplace within the church environment; otherwise its presence would be seen by the viewer as highly incongruous in paintings otherwise notable for their elegant depictions of reality. Then, the act of hiding the artists signature amongst the graffiti suggests that it was there to be seen by the discerning; those who examined the details of the image before them, again suggesting that the presence of church graffiti was accepted to the degree that a casual viewer would simply look past the routine and monotonous.

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\(^34\) Oil on oak panel, 29 x 45 cm, now held in the Staatliche Museen, Berlin.

\(^35\) Although sometimes identified as Jan van Amstel (d. 1543), his identity remains a matter of conjecture. [https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/the-brunswick-monogrammist](https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/the-brunswick-monogrammist)
Discussion

The evidence from both the walls and the literary sources therefore suggest that the changing attitudes towards the application of graffiti to a building took place gradually and in a number of distinct phases; phases that can be traced in outline at least through the literature and the writing on the wall. In the late medieval and through to the beginning of the early modern period there is no evidence of condemnation of graffiti as a physical act, with the only criticism being at the content of individual inscriptions, or the context in which they are created. As Fleming notes, “Early modern English contains no term to denote graffiti writing -- a fact suggesting not so much that the vice was unknown, but that the activity was not distinguished from other writing practices, and not yet considered a vice.”\(^{36}\) However, as the Surrey brasses from Horsell hint at, and Thomas Decker satirically vocalizes, by the early 17\(^{th}\) century the creation of graffiti in an ecclesiastical setting is something that has begun to attract criticism, if not yet downright condemnation. Still, it is also clear that the creation of graffiti inscriptions outside the ecclesiastical setting, and most particularly on historic monuments, largely fails to attract any critical literature until well into the 19\(^{th}\) century. It is only at that point that the condemnation of graffiti, as an entire genre, becomes what may be considered universal.

The visual evidence clearly indicates that graffiti was commonplace, in tavern, brothel, and church. Whilst Plesch may suggest that the presence of graffiti showing on the walls of the brothel in the Jan Sanders van Hemessen painting marks out this as a space for the lower orders, and perhaps also in Valerio Massimo's bawdy scene of the bath-house, this may be too simplistic an interpretation.\(^{37}\) What then of the exact same type of graffiti?

\(^{37}\) V. Plesch, p. 142.
inscriptions being depicted in religious spaces? Surely the images of graffiti depicted in both churches and the most secular of secular buildings is simply reinforcing the idea that it is a universal. That it is regarded as commonplace. Whilst its content may be informed and influenced by the fabric that it sits upon, its true context is far wider. Indeed, in the middle of arguing against graffiti having been regarded as an “illicit” activity, Plesch demonstrates how even her own objective view of the evidence is colored by the modern preconceptions, and an on-going obsession by scholars with defining the accepted and the illicit. Can the graffiti in Jan Sanders van Hemessen's painting not simply reinforce Borettaz's assertion that “…in the late Middle Ages, there was probably no castle, no church, no guesthouse, no tavern, or other public space that did not reveal on its walls traces of the passage of guests, pilgrims, wayfarers or customers... ... ... involving both the more cultivated and humbler classes?”

It is also worthy of comment that the term “graffiti” also first enters usage in the middle of the 19th century, at almost exactly the same moment that Gustav Flaubert is expressing his disgust at the Egyptian inscriptions, primarily to describe the early inscriptions then being discovered and recorded at ancient sites such as Pompeii, and seemingly derived from the Italian “graffito” -- meaning to “scratch.” Although the negative connotations of the word appear shortly after its introduction, the lack of an actual word to describe the informal inscriptions recorded on the walls prior to this point suggest that there was no perceived need for its existence. The term is an artificial one, created to add form to a newly developed concept; and not one, as Fleming highlights, that would be regarded as even remotely relevant only two centuries earlier.

39 Derived ultimately from the Greek “graphein” – “to write.”
40 The term is first recorded in 1851 as specifically being related to the inscriptions at Pompeii, and generally introduced into English by the publication of Raphael Garucci’s “Graffiti of Pompeii” in 1856. By 1877 the term had been expanded to cover more recently made crude drawings in public spaces.
It may appear too simplistic a question, but can the deed exist without there being a word to describe it? Most certainly the archaeology and buildings recording proves that inscriptions were being created, but once the word exists, with all the connotations either negative or positive associated with that word, then those connotations are retrospectively and universally applied to the act. The creation of the word leads directly to a retrospective revisionism of the act itself. Writing and imagery on the fabric of buildings most certainly occurred prior to 1851 and yet the lack of a single term of reference ensured that it was not regarded as a single type of act, or even a single corpus of material, where individual instances, when they were even the subject of any attention at all, were examined in relative isolation. The idea that the creation of a single term to describe and reference such a wide variety of material has caused fundamental problems with the perceived nature of the material is nothing new. Chris Daniell has strongly argued that the negative connotations associated with the term graffiti are hampering research, and that a new term, “Calliglyphs,” might usefully be applied to the area of academic study, thereby removing immediately any preconceived notions of negativity. Nonetheless, the danger of simply replacing one overarching term with another to describe such a wide variety of material is in itself limiting, and is worth examining in some detail.

Daniell's term “calliglyph” is designed to allow the differentiation between that which he terms “graffiti” and the historic material that he studies, and it is the very definition that he applies to the former that largely invalidates the usefulness of the latter. The matter, he states, hinges upon whether the creation of the inscription was “permissible” and was “just as acceptable as anything else.”42 In Daniell's view modern graffiti inscriptions clearly are not permissible, and drawing upon the current legal definitions are described as both illegal and

42 Ibid. p. 464.
anti-authoritarian. This then leaves the definition of the calliglyph wholly dependent upon the ability to determine whether an inscription was authorized or unauthorized; the “with licence” statement found upon the walls of Lidgate church. Whilst Daniell claims that the adoption of the new term would allow “for the possibility of a much more contextualized explanation,” in practice any single new over-arching term is just as likely to add layers of needless complexity to the interpretation of material that can already be adequately described with the legally and politically neutral term “inscriptions.”

A later informal analysis of the inscriptions located on two alabaster tombs in Wells Cathedral by Daniell himself enmeshes itself in an analysis of whether the numerous inscriptions on the effigies were authorised or unauthorized, and therefore whether they could be characterised as either graffiti or calliglyphs. In the context of these two particular tombs, where most of the inscriptions date from the second half of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries, such a discussion is an irrelevancy. With the inscriptions being created at a period in history when informal inscriptions on historic monuments were apparently acceptable and unquestioned, as seen previously with regard to the monuments of ancient Egypt, the question of whether they were “authorized or unauthorized” is simply another example of modern scholars retrospectively trying to apply a single over-arching terminology to something that defies a single and simple classification. In a more-recent book contribution Daniell's stated objective when analyzing two sets of military inscriptions was again to determine whether they could be classed as graffiti or calliglyphs; thereby creating a whole new level of argument where none previously existed. Whilst acknowledging that the term graffiti is by no means ideal due to its wholly modern negative connotations, the creation of new terms also clearly comes with potential pitfalls. This isn't to say that the term calliglyphs

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43 http://calliglyphs.blogspot.co.uk/2015/03/the-marble-tomb-in-wells-cathedral-1.html
is any more of less suited to this field of study than any other term, including the word “graffiti,” just that any such term is unlikely to satisfactorily account for many of the individual types of inscription encountered. Indeed, are we actually searching for a term to describe something that actually does not exist? Are we looking for a catch-all phrase for a group of material that the evidence suggests is not in fact a group at all?

Fleming convincingly argues that the writing on the wall in the early modern period was in no way differentiated from the writing on any other surface or medium, and it is not difficult to argue that this too was the case in the pre-Reformation period; an assertion that is supported by the manner in which those involved with the Maltese court case react to the graffiti accusations written on the walls of the church. The writing on the wall is simply that - - writing -- and the medium appears entirely irrelevant. Similarly, Dekker satirically encourages individuals to “grave” (engrave) their name or “the marke, which you clap on your sheep,” again eliciting parallels with the written word and traditional forms of record keeping. (fig. 6) Whilst the lack of differentiation may well be the case with the written word, what then of the vast majority of informal inscriptions, that the evidence tells us most certainly weren't textual in nature? Extending Flemings concept further than she ever intended, were the pictures on the wall simply seen as art in the same way that a painted canvas was perceived? Were the votive ships etched into the stones of a church regarded in exactly the same manner as the elaborate and expensive models that hung above the church altars? In no manner diminishing the essence of Fleming's conclusions concerning the perceptions of the written word, the evidence rather suggests that such an approach is far too simplistic in regard to non-textual inscriptions.

Fabri is clear in his repetition of the orders given to the pilgrims in the Holy Land, and although he does use the term “deface,” his emphasis is upon those who “scratch” into the walls. Whilst Fabri's account does not associate the inscriptions with more formal art or
The decoration, being as they are largely directed at heraldic graffiti, it does emphasize the links between inscriptions and the individuals who create them. These are personal interactions with the structure, undertaken by an individual, “to make marks of their having visited them,” which clearly suggests a commemorative function for the inscriptions. Taken at face value, such a statement suggests that the heraldic inscriptions made by the knights have much in common with the memorial graffiti of the post-Reformation and modern periods. They are simply a physical commemoration of a visit. However, in the case of the pilgrims it is perhaps the intended audience for the inscriptions, essentially the wider context, that suggest a more complex process behind their creation, which in turn informs the contemporary attitude towards them.

Amongst the intended possible audience for the inscriptions were later western pilgrims who would visit the site, perhaps even subsequent generations of the same family, and a commemorative “I was here” function is clear and unambiguous. Nonetheless it is also
possible that the creation of these personal and individual inscriptions at the very spiritual center of the Christian Church was a deliberate attempt to insert themselves, both physically and permanently, into that Christian narrative. They had achieved more than simply walking in the footsteps of the saints, and had left a permanent record on the actual stones the saints had known. It is also clear that the one audience that would undoubtedly view the inscriptions were the local Muslim population: a population that retained overall physical control of the most holy sites within the Christian faith. It was to these “infidels” that the Christian pilgrims were indebted for even gaining access to the sites of Christ's birth and subsequent death; a fact that must have been hard to bear for knights and nobles from the west more used to being in near total and immediate control of their own destinies. Therefore, the creation of their own coat of arms on these most holy sites was a small, but significant act in appropriating these places for themselves and for the wider Christian church, quite literally marking it out as both their own and the churches territory. As Plesch has stated in relation to graffiti on medieval wall paintings, “they are the product of a process of claiming ownership and of the prolonging a cultural and geographic attachment to a site which can become a locus of memory.”

This is perhaps reflected in the choice of inscriptions that the pilgrims created. Had they simply wished to leave their mark upon the site, in simple commemoration, it would have been just as possible to leave their names. That they chose to leave their own coats of arms, which both denoted an individual and the noble and martial prowess of their family, suggests that the choice was deliberate. It was their rank and authority that they were inscribing onto the walls, and therefore obvious that those who created these inscriptions perceived them as having a power beyond the merely commemorative. Detlev Kraak, specifically discussing heraldic inscriptions created by medieval pilgrims, describes their

45 V. Plesch, p. 137.
Given that all these interpretations can be applied to one single type of graffiti inscription, created at a single place in both time and space, it becomes clear that no simplistic single-stranded interpretation is likely -- either now or when they were first created. It therefore also appears evident that, as both Fleming and Plesch signposted, contemporary attitudes towards early informal inscriptions were dependent upon many factors included, but not limited to, the type, medium, location, content, and historical context of individual inscriptions.

Similarly, the name Johed (John) Abthorpe, inscribed into the tower arch of St Mary's church in Troston, Suffolk, is just a single mark amongst many within the building, and can be subject to multiple layers of interpretation that can inform us as to the contemporary attitude towards its creation.\(^\text{47}\) (fig. 7) As an elegantly inscribed text inscription it was created by an educated and literate individual much used to the writing arts. The size of the inscription, and


its relatively visible location within the structure indicates that it was made to be seen by an audience, and that the author did not expect to be punished or admonished for its creation; an assumption reinforced because the inscription was not subsequently defaced, covered over, or removed by the church authorities. The depth of the inscription in the relatively hard stone also indicates that this was an act that took some time to create, suggesting a significant period of time in the church, or perhaps multiple visits. Analysis of the surviving written records for the parish indicate that the individual, John Abthorpe, belonged to the family that held the lordship of the principal manor from the early 15th century, until about 1490. A John Abthorpe is identified as witness to a number of local wills in the 1460s and 1470s, and analysis of the handwriting of the inscription indicates that it also corresponds to the same period. Such multiple layers of interpretation are self-evident, and yet they too are only indicating a number of “possible” interpretations that can be placed upon the evidence. Most obviously, it must be asked if the inscription was created by John Abthorpe himself, or simply refers to him by name? The possible change in perceived authorship of the inscription completely and fundamentally shifts our view of the interpretation, which in turn perhaps alters or nuances our view of the contemporary attitude towards its creation. How also might our perceived interpretation change when we come to understand that the same John Abthorpe was the last male of his line; the father of daughters who would be unable to carry his name into the future? Does this information and altered interpretation also shift the manner in which we regard the contemporary attitude towards its creation?

What is plain from this single example is that the evidence itself, when seen within the wider social, historical, and religious context, defies any single or simple interpretation. I would argue that any single change in interpretation can, and does, shift our view of how such inscriptions are perceived by their audience, both now and at the time of their creation. Like the heraldic graffiti of the medieval pilgrims, a simple act of supposed memorialization
and commemoration can also be legitimately interpreted as a political act of appropriation. It is the recognition of the complex message that such inscriptions may carry, and a recognition of the dangers that the creation of such inscriptions may cause his fellow pilgrims, that leads to Fabri’s condemnation. His warning against the creation of such marks is not informed by perceptions of legitimacy, but rather by an appreciation of how an external audience may subsequently view the western heraldic inscriptions within their own territories. It is only subsequently, after the introduction of a single over-arching term – “graffiti” -- to describe all of these varied inscriptions, that we have applied a single, and largely negative, interpretation to the whole corpus of material. In doing so we over simplify our own examination of the material evidence, in the past often reducing it to little more than an artificially constructed examination of the nature of legitimacy. Graffiti good? Graffiti bad?

After all, the general acceptance that even early graffiti is vandalism in the middle of the 19th century, and therefore to be unconditionally condemned or passed off as being of no import, was relatively short-lived. By the closing decades of that century the study of ancient graffiti as a historic resource had already begun to become established, most particularly the study of Roman inscriptions. Amongst the first academic papers written upon the subject of graffiti in England, and specifically medieval churches, appeared in the opening decades of the 20th century, with G. G. Coulton highlighting the material as a method of examining attitudes and ideas of the Middle Ages that were difficult to access elsewhere within medieval studies. 48 Although this shift towards the view that ancient graffiti was an important historical record received a mixed reception, as highlighted by the highly contradictory attitudes expresses by contributors to the Surrey volume of “The King's England,” it did herald the beginning of a more nuanced approach to graffiti studies. It would be fair to state, as Daniell

has pointed out, that the older the inscription was, the less likely it was to be viewed critically, it must be accepted that it opened up a number of possibilities for further study of informal inscriptions that would have been largely unthinkable a generation before. Although Pritchard's 1967 publication of *English Medieval Graffiti*, and numerous articles by the likes of Doris Jones-Baker and Reginald Hine, have paved the way for modern graffiti studies, it must be accepted that the wholesale late-19th century condemnation of graffiti as a destructive medium will not be quickly cast off.49 Even Reginald Hine, one of the most enlightened of the early recorders of church graffiti clearly placed a great emphasis upon textual graffiti from the Middle Ages only. Non-text graffiti, and those of a post-medieval date were “in their interest and number of much less account.” Hine's approach was influenced and informed by the general perceptions and attitudes prevalent at the time of his writing -- the early 1950s -- and for the wider community those perceptions have not changed quickly in the intervening six decades.

**Conclusion**

It is clear that our modern attitudes towards graffiti in general, relegating it to the realms of vandalism and anti-social behavior, have colored our view of early inscriptions. These modern preconceptions have led researchers to propose that the term graffiti itself is not a reasonable or fully descriptive term to use in relation to the markings now being studied. Such proposals have focused upon ideas of legitimacy within the corpus of early material, and have the potential for both adding further layers of self-imposed complexity to the field, and imposing our own views of legitimacy to inscriptions to which such concepts clearly do not apply. From the documentary and pictorial evidence it is evident that no such

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contemporary ideas of legitimacy existed. As Fleming highlights, the writing on the wall is just that -- writing -- and no different from any other contemporary text except in the medium onto which it is written. The very few documentary references we have to the creation of early inscriptions, text or otherwise, reinforce this conclusion. However, the use of single overarching term to describe all markings and motifs recorded on the walls is useful; and the original intention when the term “graffiti” was first coined in the mid-19th century.

What contemporary accounts of early inscriptions do tell us is that, whilst we may be able to group them all beneath a single neat heading, there is no similarly single and neat interpretation. As with the Abthorpe inscription from Troston, our interpretations of the meaning and function of the inscriptions can be multiple, and altered by a number of factors. Questions of authorship and intended audience simply sit highest on a long list of possible influencers, and all inscriptions must be seen within the wider social and architectural context. To view them in isolation is a largely futile exercise. We must therefore accept that even the single neat heading of “graffiti” is an artificial one. A definition that has meaning only to those who study such markings, and would have been meaningless to those who created them, for far more reasons than the fact the word did not exist. Even the term “licence” used in the inscription from Lidgate, whilst implying a formalized legitimacy to its creation, applies only to that one inscription, made in that place, by that person, and at that time.

That we can now begin to address such questions does evidence a continuing change in attitudes by academics, historians, and archaeologists towards the early inscriptions currently being recorded. However, whilst attitudes may be changing, there is still far to go. Just how far is perhaps perfectly exemplified when a modern scholar and art historian, Dr Richard Clay, writes “I have found myself thinking about the long history of graffiti that is somewhat less visually striking; about the ‘I woz ‘ere’ school, and about some of the lewd
scrawlings that still persist today. Perhaps one day such marks might prove interesting to historians."\textsuperscript{50}