Part I

History, types, and writers/artists of graffiti and street art

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Introduction

It is probably safe to say that graffiti has been around since the time that humans chose to live together in communities, and discovered the ability to translate their thoughts and ideas on to the surfaces of the spaces where they lived, worked, and travelled. Some experts consider the markings of cave dwellers the earliest form of graffiti (Brassai, 2002).

Others believe that the origins of contemporary graffiti can be traced back to gang graffiti. Readers must keep in mind that gang graffiti is only a small portion of all the graffiti that exists. Not only have the individuals, surfaces, and subject matter of graffiti changed since the time it was first used by street gangs, but gang experts/specialists have discovered that gang graffiti has decreased overall, and that it has been predominantly supplanted by art-related graffiti and street art.

It goes without saying that numerous types of graffiti and street art exist. In order to provide meaning to this body of work, this section of the Handbook provides in-depth descriptions and discussions of the prominent kinds of graffiti and street art that have emerged over time and in recent years. In addition, this section looks at the work and biographies of specific graffiti writers/artists.

Overview of chapters

This section consists of ten chapters. J.A. Baird and Claire Taylor offer the first contribution in the book. In their chapter “Ancient graffiti,” they present the range and variety of the graffiti that existed in the ancient Mediterranean world (c. 700 BCE–500 CE). This chapter explores some of the disciplinary challenges in accessing, defining, and interpreting ancient graffiti, while also tracing the similarities and differences between ancient and modern graffiti trends. Baird and Taylor argue that contemporary paradigms which view graffiti as subversive or subcultural are misleading when applied to past societies. Ancient works of graffiti are important historical sources, contributing to a wide range of scholarly debates about the past, and they also prompt
reflection on the interpretative paradigms used within studies of contemporary graffiti. Baird and Taylor reveal that graffiti, like most kinds of mark-making, are bound by convention, context, and performance, and as such, they are a form of cultural production in their own right. Viewing graffiti in this way ultimately raises questions about cultural value: Why are some graffiti preserved and studied, but others erased and vilified?

In Chapter 2, “Trains, railroad workers, and illegal riders: the subcultural world of hobo graffiti,” John F. Lennon explains how hobo graffiti has a rich, mostly hidden, subcultural tradition. This particular graffiti form is rooted in the history of rail workers who chalked railroad cars for utilitarian purposes, writing instructions to other trainmen about which cars needed to be sided or rebuilt. While doing so, some trainmen also began placing their monikers on the cars, sending their messages and symbols throughout the country. Hobos, who physically shared the same geographic spaces as the rail workers (and were sometimes former railroad workers themselves), created a similar set of discursive emblems that were both practical and artistic. This graffiti expanded to all of the spaces in which the hobos congregated. Only those within the subculture could read – or even thought to look at – this graffiti. The means to decipher the graffiti was something taught from one hobo to another, as new riders became acquainted with more seasoned riders. In this way, graffiti was a way to link individuals, even though these people had no prior knowledge of each other and may not have ever met. Reflecting the individuality of the person, hobo markings and monikers were part of the shared language that helped bind together the geographically dispersed hobo subculture.

Next comes Robert Donald Weide’s chapter, “The history of freight train graffiti in North America.” This text examines the development of the freight train graffiti subcultural niche within the wider North American graffiti subculture, from its inception in the 1970s to the present day. The freight train graffiti subculture has yet to be examined systematically by scholars of the graffiti subculture. As a starting point for further scholarly research on this long-neglected topic, this chapter seeks to begin filling this void in the literature by offering a historical narrative of the emergence and proliferation of freight train graffiti in North America.

“Deconstructing gang graffiti,” by Susan A. Phillips, reviews this variety of graffiti as a particular form of written and visual communication, utilizing three case studies from within the urban United States. The first case derives from Chicano gangs based in Los Angeles and California; the second case is provided by the Bloods and the Crips, African American gangs also located in Los Angeles; and the third case is offered by People and Folk, a loosely configured gang system based originally in Chicago. In each of these cases, gang members utilize complex semiotic systems to represent affiliation, enmity, and alliance. The written systems are situated both in place and out of place, moving between contexts of prison and the street. Gangs use graffiti to communicate at a distance, as placeholders that define neighborhood space. Phillips provides detailed examples from these three case studies in order to theorize about gang graffiti as a specific communicative genre.

In Chapter 5, “Prison inmate graffiti,” Jacqueline Z. Wilson examines inmate-created graffiti in Australian, U.S. and U.K. prisons. Despite its unique nature, few studies of prison graffiti have been conducted. The scant existing literature in the area is reviewed to provide analytical context and highlight important differences between the varieties of “conventional” and inmate graffiti. A selection of examples accompanies the text, illustrating the styles, locales, and underlying motives discussed. A visual-ethnographic approach is employed to interpret the images’ meanings and infer something of their creators’ experiences. Inmates create graffiti for various reasons, not all congruent with those behind non-prison graffiti. While street graffiti, “paint-ups,” “tagging,” and so on are invariably rendered for public viewing, much prison graffiti is intended to remain hidden from anyone other than the graffitist. Inmate-graffitists’ motives tend
to reflect concerns arising from total, often dangerous, confinement. Thus their graffiti echoes prison-specific issues: Personal power relationships; sexual frustration and sexual aggression as self-assertion; resistance narratives against perceived oppression; or reactions to boredom. Some prison graffiti function as a form of personal diary.

Artistic creativity drives both clandestine and openly rendered graffiti. A variant form familiar to prison-museum tourists is the officially sanctioned “mural,” often adorning major outdoor surfaces. These must be viewed as a category separate from the routinely prohibited “private” type commonly found inside cells. Wilson argues that the stylistic and motivational differences between inmate graffiti in private spaces and that found outside underscore the need for further research on prison graffiti, and scholarly acknowledgement of this subcategory’s standing as a unique category of graffiti.

In “Ways of being seen: gender and the writing on the wall,” Jessica N. Pabón explicates how female graffiti and street artists are marginalized by the gendered politics of visibility. She illustrates how the writing on the wall is assumed to be the work of a male who is a member of an urban, economically disenfranchised, ethnic minority – an assumption which makes women and girls invisible as participants. Pabón then offers an international sampling of contemporary female artists who arecombating their social status through their art-making practices in Afghanistan, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Egypt, Japan, Mexico, South Africa, the U.A.E., and the U.S. This chapter is organized into six discussion points: “Gender Anonymity” allows graffiti writers and street artists to communicate and exercise their artistry without the stigma associated with their gender; “Gender Signification” directly combats the erasure of women in the subculture; “Hyperfeminine and Overtly Sexualized” graffiti and street art reclaims the imagery of girls’ and women’s bodies in public spaces; “Political and Cultural” artworks extend beyond the individual and the subcultural to provide a means to comment on political, social, and cultural environments; painting, graffiti, and street art “Collectively” invite girls and women into the culture and initiate a shift in women’s minority status; and lastly, “Digital” frameworks enable artist/writers to identify themselves and one another, to build networks, and to make history. Overall, Pabón’s analysis contributes to the literature on graffiti and street art by including girls and women, who challenge the conventional field of vision by demanding to be seen.

This chapter is followed by Adam Trahan’s analysis of latrinalia (i.e. graffiti found in public bathrooms), “Research and theory on latrinalia.” This contribution provides an overview of the major theoretical and empirical scholarship on latrinalia, which depicts latrinalia as a unique cultural form that, although similar in some fundamental ways to other types of graffiti and expression, is set apart by the nature of the space in which it is written and read. Public bathrooms are simultaneously “public” and “private” spaces that afford graffitists anonymity and segregate patrons by gender. These conditions give rise to graffiti that address a wide range of topics in a singularly direct and candid discourse. Latrinalia often prompts impassioned debates among multiple graffitists about identity, ideology, and the reproduction of the same.

Minna Haveri’s chapter, “Yarn bombing – the softer side of street art,” reviews the history and growth of this relatively new phenomenon. Already becoming an impressive part of the street art genre, knitting and crocheting, with a traditionally feminine material and techniques, are presented as an antithesis to traditionally masculine street art, especially graffiti art. Knitted street art has been called by many names, but the terms yarn storming in the U.K. and yarn bombing in the U.S. seem to have established themselves as the standard terms for visual expressions in the urban space that involve textile. Besides many names, yarn bombing also takes on many forms, but it generally involves wrapping hand-knitted or crocheted items around everyday objects, such as signs, poles, and streetlights, in city spaces. Creative and daring and getting in touch with environmental experiences, yarn bombing is related to social action.
For hobbyist knitters bored with only making socks and sweaters, it seems to be an alternative reason to use handicraft skills. It is appealing to knitters because it allows them to use their skills to do something beyond the functional. Despite its subversive nature, knitted graffiti is considered to make the environment feel inviting and cozy. This might explain the increasing interest of art institutions and different communities to organize yarn-bombing happenings.

Ronald Kramer’s chapter, “Straight from the underground: New York City’s legal graffiti writing culture,” draws extensively from observations of and interviews with twenty New York City graffiti writers. Kramer rethinks the contemporary graffiti writing culture in two important respects. On the one hand, previous scholars have tended to explore graffiti writing as an illegal and/or criminalized (sub)culture. On the other, these same scholars have found it to be a practice that embodies a “critical” stance towards society. This chapter shows that, since 1990, a subset of graffiti writers who paint with permission has emerged. Furthermore, Kramer finds that those who produce legal graffiti tend to lead lives and espouse values that most would not hesitate to recognize as “conventional.” The author concludes by suggesting that graffiti writing needs to be acknowledged as a multifaceted and historically fluid culture.

In “American Indian graffiti” (Chapter 10), Favian Martín uses the review of the current status of graffiti on American Indian reservations as an opportunity to engage in a public discourse on contemporary Indigenous social problems. He argues that American Indian graffiti exists as a form of resistance to the historical legacy of colonialism. In addition to this discussion, the chapter also investigates the criminal element of graffiti, which is associated with gang activities occurring in Indian Country. Lastly, the chapter surveys community-level initiatives to reduce the prevalence of graffiti within tribal communities.

Omissions

Despite the breadth of the work contained in this section, there are several notable omissions. One of these includes an analysis of hate graffiti (e.g. Sinnreich, 2004). This type of activity, clearly identifiable by its verbal and/or graphic content, appears all over the world. It is aimed at demeaning people based on their racial, ethnic, sexual, and national backgrounds. Like other types of hate crime, hate graffiti can take the form of racism, sexism, homophobia, or the targeting of specific groups based on their perceived deviation from the prevailing societal or moral norms. Hate crime is recognized by evocative graphic content, such as “general-purpose” symbols (e.g. swastikas) intended to convey hatred toward a range of targeted groups.

Also missing from this section is an in-depth analysis of subway graffiti, which exists throughout the world in cities that support a mass transportation system (e.g. Castleman, 1982; Cooper and Chalfant, 1988; Miller, 2002). The history of modern graffiti is intimately associated with “bombing” major subway systems (e.g. New York City, Paris, and London). Much of this literature approaches the artists and their work in a romanticized fashion, and little of it addresses the global aspect of this graffiti phenomenon.

Although the issue of gender has been examined in this section, as has Latino graffiti/murals and American Indian graffiti, a substantive analysis of the role of race/ethnicity has not been explored here in connection with graffiti/street art. This is a marked hole that future scholarship should attempt to fill.

Alternatively, although most contributors to this section and throughout this book note the political motivations and ramifications of graffiti/street art, a separate chapter focusing explicitly on political graffiti/street art is lacking. Such an analysis would go beyond reviewing the typical go-to personages of Banksy and Fairey, in order to incorporate lesser known purveyors of graffiti/street art.
Finally, *wartime graffiti and street art* is an especially important kind of work. As both Peteet and Palmer (this volume) suggest, graffiti/street art during political conflicts serve political propaganda purposes of all sorts, while simultaneously providing fertile communication channels for change, resistance, and protest. Wartime graffiti works are provocative and necessary parts of all political struggles, and Northern Ireland, Central America, and South America provide rich examples of this.

Despite these shortcomings, this section should assist the reader in understanding the distinct types of graffiti and street art that exist today. It is to be hoped that this will serve as a springboard for further studies of the differences and the commonalities between the various subtypes.

**Note**

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**References**


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Ancient graffiti

J.A. Baird and Claire Taylor

Introduction

Graffiti are commonplace within the urban cityscape, so much so that we easily think that this is a phenomenon of modern life. But graffiti are also found in many historical societies, both literate and pre-literate, from ancient Egypt to pre-Islamic Arabia to medieval Italy and beyond (Plesch, 2002; Macdonald, 2009; Bucking, 2012). Even though there is a wealth of information about – and interest in – graffiti from the past among different scholarly communities (i.e. historians, archaeologists and art historians), different disciplinary traditions have varying ways of understanding what ‘graffiti’ are and often use subject-specific terminology and definitions to understand the practice of making, preserving or ‘reading’ this material. Recently, however, work across historical studies (broadly defined) has made significant steps forward in broadening our understanding of different types of graffiti practices. Instrumental here is recognising the importance of the contexts in which graffiti are found and reflecting on the categories and assumptions that scholars use to interpret them (Baird and Taylor, 2011).

This chapter explores some important issues in the interpretation of historical graffiti by focusing on the cultures of the Graeco-Roman world in antiquity (c. 700 BCE–500 CE). Although graffiti also appears in other pre-modern historical societies, the use of the term ‘ancient graffiti’ in this chapter refers to material within this geographical and cultural context. The ancient Mediterranean world provides a good case study for a number of reasons. First, there is a lot of surviving evidence which provides a wide range of examples of graffiti from different chronological, geographical and typological contexts allowing historians to compare and contrast across time, space, production methods and material. Second, literacy in the past was widespread enough for large numbers of ordinary people to have access to the resources of writing whether they, or the marks they made, were literate or not. Third, the Graeco-Roman cultures of the Mediterranean world have been intensely studied for a number of generations which gives us good contextual material for interpreting different kinds of graffiti.

What are ‘ancient graffiti’?

Graffiti are ubiquitous across the ancient Mediterranean. These markings are found from the beginning of the invention of writing, until the end of Antiquity. They appear in cities, in the
countryside, at religious sites, both inside and outside houses, in public space and private. They are found on walls, columns, and other architectural forms, as well as in streets, market-places, on and in public and religious buildings and on moveable objects such as pottery. They include the written word (in multiple languages), pictures, pictograms and symbols. Some of the finest examples of graffiti survive in urban sites which are well preserved, for example Pompeii and Herculaneum in Italy (destroyed by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE), Dura-Europos (a Roman fortress town in Syria), Aphrodisias, Smyrna and Ephesos (Graeco-Roman cities in modern Turkey), but they are also found in more remote regions and non-urban contexts too. It is reasonable to expect that a great deal has not survived, because they are most commonly found at sites with exceptional preservation contexts (e.g. those with standing walls and extant wall plaster).

In addition to appearing in a range of places in the ancient world, graffiti appear in a variety of media. They are incised in plaster, painted, scratched, charcoaled or inked on structures, as well as inscribed in stone, with survival often depending on local factors of production as well as preservation. Walls and floors generally were constructed out of stone or plaster which are relatively easy to mark, and graffiti also appear on objects such as pottery. In terms of the practice of making graffiti, we might distinguish between those which remove material (by scratching with something sharp, hammering, chiselling or other means), and those which add it (with charcoal, ink or paint). The longevity of the mark is often related to the materials from which it was made, where it was made, as well as whether there was a desire to preserve it (or lack of desire to remove it). Additionally, there are the specific circumstances of archaeological preservation in which special archaeological environments preserve very ephemeral markings, for example dusty charcoal recording (perhaps) visitors to a house at Pompeii (Benefiel, 2011) or ink marks made in a collapsed basement at Smyrna (Bagnall, 2011: 6–26). Some forms of graffiti, such as those made on tree trunks, do not survive, but are known from ancient texts which mention them (Kruschwitz, 2010a). Graffiti could also be surprisingly tenacious, existing for years or even decades, and hence some graffiti could have a large audience over time.

Conventionally, the term graffiti is also applied by ancient historians to writing on objects such as pottery, incised or marked onto the vessel after firing. These include those which marked a particular owner of the object, or which provided information (such as price) related to the use of the vessel (Evans, 1987; Volioti, 2011). The distinction between these marks as ‘graffiti’ and others, including trademarks and tituli picti or dipinti (painted labels denoting content, volume, ownership or functioning as decoration), is a modern one. It is a distinction that relates to a temporal quality which scholars often implicitly use to define graffiti: They are marks made, which are not a part of the ‘original’ scheme of design, decoration or marking, whether on a wall or a pot (Chaniotis, 2011). One of the problems in the study of ancient graffiti is that such definitions and distinctions are not systematic and are complicated by different scholarly specialities, traditions and terminology that have evolved over time. For instance, short, ephemeral inscriptions made on fragments of broken pottery are conventionally known as their own class of material (ostraca) and not as graffiti, whereas some items which are sometimes labelled graffiti would probably surprise the general reader. This includes Roman election notices (programmata) painted onto the walls of buildings in Pompeii for example, but these are more akin to political campaign or advertising posters than might be initially assumed (Mouritsen, 1988). Deciding what is, or is not, ‘graffiti’ is often a necessary first step to interpreting this material.

In addition, specialists in different ancient disciplines have developed specific terminology to talk about graffiti, which can be confusing in itself, but also reveals some important – and problematic – ways in which this material has been conceptualised and categorised. Frequently this views graffiti as a sub-category of inscription, referring either to the place where they are
found (parietal inscriptions, rupestral inscriptions), the manner in which they were written (Franklin, 1991; Mairs, 2011), or the type of mark (e.g. figural graffiti have often been collected separately from textual examples: Langner, 2001). This implicitly distinguishes graffiti from other forms of writing practice and often fails to acknowledge the temporal, spatial and cultural contexts in which they are found.

Partly because much of this material has traditionally fallen under the purview of those who study inscriptions (epigraphers), who are often more interested in the written word than in visual meaning or archaeological context, written texts have tended to have been recorded more frequently (and valued more highly) than drawings or other non-verbal or non-literate texts (i.e. those which communicate words and ideas with ideograms or symbols, often now undecipherable); indeed, entirely different groups of scholars have tended to work on this material. Thus graffiti have often been published either as examples of written texts within epigraphic corpora (i.e. with limited contextual or visual information) or as art-historical images (i.e. analysed only from a visual perspective) and have come off worse in both. The assumption that graffiti are subversive, unofficial or informal implicitly permeates contemporary definitions of graffiti with the effect that they have frequently been separated from what has been perceived as more ‘formal’ types of writing (on stone, papyri or parchment – the most common form of extant writing from antiquity) or more ‘complex’ styles of image production and (negatively) contrasted with them. On a conceptual level, this means that graffiti have (in some contexts) been constructed almost as an intrusive form and not held up to the same scholarly scrutiny as other evidence, and in a practical sense, examples of ‘graffiti’ are collected in a wide variety of publications using different terminology and classified according to typological, rather than historical, concerns. Only recently has work begun to bring together textual, pictorial and contextual information at specific sites which will be of huge benefit for researchers in the future (Benefiel and Sprenkle, 2014).

If the term ‘graffiti’ is sometimes problematic for describing the ancient material because of the breadth of the evidence to which it has been applied, ‘street art’ is even more so: Although there are some exceptions, much ancient graffiti do not appear in streets, they were only in some cases produced by or connected to any subculture (this cannot be assumed), and they were never associated with ‘art’ in the way that scholars of contemporary graffiti are often drawn into debates about (Deitch et al., 2011). Similarly, defining ancient graffiti in terms of its relationship with the law (or other types of authority) or in terms of property ownership (Ross and Wright, 2014) can be misleading. What historians might identify as vandalism, illicit writing or defacement is often shown on closer inspection to be anything but. Much ancient graffiti appear inside houses and other buildings, often produced by, or with the tacit understanding of, the property owner (Benefiel, 2010, 2011; Baird, forthcoming). Graffiti are commonly found in sacred spaces too, but do not appear to be sacrilegious (Mairs, 2011; Stern, 2012, 2013). Assumptions about what graffiti are and what they do often need to be unthought and critically examined as part of the interpretation of this material.

**Graffiti: ancient and modern**

As can be seen from the brief overview so far, there are some important differences between ancient graffiti and modern graffiti. These are significant, but there are, of course, also some similarities. Like modern graffiti, there is a great variety of ancient graffiti. They appear on a range of surfaces in a variety of contexts and speak of a variety of topics. Some are mundane and even banal, such as simple names or quick calculations whereas others made literary allusions (Milnor, 2014), have a sacred or magical meaning (Baird, 2011), or have a pointed and resonant
political message (Zadorojnyi, 2011). Some are deliberately humorous; others have serious points to make. There are clever word-plays (Bagnall, 2011; Benefiel, 2013) and crude sexual imagery (Levin-Richardson, 2011), pictures of people, animals and objects (Langner, 2001). They provide evidence for the presence of particular people and their use of spaces (Taylor, 2011), everyday life and colloquial language (Kruschwitz, 2010b), the ancient economy (Lawall, 2000) and belief systems (Chaniotis, 2002) not to mention the spread, as well as the uses, of reading, writing and non-literate communication (Franklin, 1991; Webster, 2008).

Graffiti in the ancient world frequently cluster together in particular locations, sometimes over a long period of time. Graffiti frequently appear to attract graffiti, so one useful interpretative tool is to consider the ways in which graffiti are in dialogue with one another as well as with their audience(s). In the well-preserved house of Maius Castricius, a wealthy Roman living in Pompeii, graffiti appear in the places of the house which had the most visitors. These include poetic exchanges between different writers engaging in literary one-upmanship as well as drawings of boats and people (Benefiel, 2010). Viewing the dialogues and conversations between graffiti has allowed historians to consider questions of temporality and spatiality, not only in terms of production or content, but in terms of audience and performance. Graffiti frequently ‘talk’ to one another, commenting on the message already present, sometimes responding in kind (some examples from Pompeii: ‘Very many and continual greetings [from] Secondus to Onesimus, his brother’, ‘Onesimus to Secondus, his brother [greetings]’, ‘lots of greetings to Secondus, lovingly’), sometimes satirising them (‘May he who reads this never have to read another thing in the future’, ‘May he who writes above never be well’). Some graffiti are knowing, asking to be read aloud (‘I am amazed, O wall, that you have not fallen in ruins, you who support the tediousness of so many writers’), others memorialise the presence of the writer, or the text itself. Graffiti can map particular landscapes within the ancient city: Roman military graffiti in Dura-Europos shows not only where soldiers spent their time, but also delineates their relationships to each other and to the civilian community (Baird, 2011).

Graffiti have also been used to explore links between writing and identity more broadly, accessed via the analysis of language or the use of written space (Adams et al., 2002; Adams, 2003; Mullen and James, 2012). The study of graffiti has been crucial to a range of historical debates, for example those about ancient literacy, education or bilingualism. They have helped historians to refine understanding of literate (and non-literate) cultures and provided a wealth of data on the practices of reading and writing throughout diverse populations. They have helped to elucidate knowledge of the education systems of the ancient world, of bilingual people and the presence of multilingual communities within different regions of the Mediterranean (Baird, 2011; Bucking, 2012).

When described like this, ancient graffiti seem familiar; they appear to be similar to those of the contemporary world. They define space, negotiate identity or demonstrate belonging, insult or admire people and deploy humour. However, the differences between ancient and modern graffiti are significant and there are dangers in interpreting the ancient material according to modern paradigms. Here we outline a few problems. As might be expected from the graffiti we see around us today, ancient graffiti are often found in public spaces – the public squares and market places of towns and cities, for example, are often good sites for writers (Langner, 2001; Hoff, 2006) – but we have to be cautious about making direct analogies when we are looking for the motivations behind this material. Ancient graffiti often have different functions from, and were received differently to, graffiti in modern urban or suburban contexts.

Frequently, modern graffiti are interpreted as a subcultural response to dominating power structures (see Ross, Campos in this volume). Political authorities frequently have criminalised graffiti-writing (to the extent of declaring war on graffiti) and taken ‘zero-tolerance’ approaches
to those producing them, while the same work is valued by others for social messages or as art (Austin, 2002; Iveson, 2010). Others have viewed graffiti as a form of self-expression or a critique of authority (Abaza, 2013). It is seductive to take these paradigms and apply them to the ancient world, and certainly some examples of graffiti might well be best explained in these ways. However, a great deal of it cannot.

Take, for example, the graffiti which appears in late antique Aphrodisias (Chaniotis, 2011). This includes sporting slogans ('the fortune of the Greens [a chariot team] wins!'), acclamations of good governance of the local politicians ('you have earned fame') and acceptance of the authority of the Roman Emperor ('many years for the emperor!'). These appear in prominent public spaces, but they are not the voices of dissent. Quite the opposite: The political authorities certainly did not disapprove of such writing; they actively encouraged them. Many other examples across the ancient world show the same thing; graffiti are often produced by and for elites. It appears frequently inside their houses (Benefiel and Keegan, forthcoming).

We might also think of graffiti as a predominantly urban phenomenon, appearing in less-than-salubrious parts of town or as a way of marking territory. Graffiti do appear in ancient cities, and patterns of preservation ensure that these are common places in which they are found, but they are also found in non-urban contexts too. From remote mountainsides to deserts, graffiti attest to the use of writing, sometimes non-literate writing, as a means of communication. Made by travellers, pilgrims and nomads, this was a way to memorialise presence, to practice and demonstrate newly acquired skills, or to engage with others coming through a territory. The Safaitic graffiti in the Syro-Arabian desert, in particular, shows that graffiti in the ancient world are found in a very wide range of places. These are found almost exclusively in remote sites rather than settled villages, in places were nomads tended their pastures, and are often written in Greek as well as Safaitic, the authors’ mother tongue (Macdonald, 2005). Similarly remote graffiti are also found elsewhere in the Mediterranean world (Langdon and van de Moortel, 2000; Mairs, 2011).

An important way to understand and explain these differences is to view graffiti simply as one aspect of the ubiquitous writing culture that appeared across the ancient Mediterranean. Walls, floors and potsherds were just another surface to write on and were often more available than papyri, wax or wooden tablets which might be expensive, inaccessible and not necessarily easy to use or familiar. In many places, the writing of graffiti did not require special tools: Scratched or incised graffiti requires only a sharp point such as a knife or a stylus. Inscribed graffiti in the marble at the theatre at Aphrodisias or in the Athenian town of Thorikos is surely related to the proximity of stone quarries to these places and the availability of stone carving tools to the general population there. Ancient graffiti are just one, of many, different forms of writing, which sometimes operated decoratively, and sometimes symbolically.

**Historical approaches to graffiti**

Interpreting graffiti, therefore, requires consideration of a number of issues. Most historians and archaeologists are interested in graffiti for what they reveal about life in the past, but some of their critical responses have resonance for the interpretation of contemporary graffiti. Ancient graffiti are not merely a pleasantly diverting curiosity, but instead they provide a means to think through some important issues of interpretation which apply to non-ancient contexts too.

Although we have outlined above some of the difficulties of ancient graffiti research, notably the question of definition and the lack of systematic approaches to recording, this downplays somewhat a vibrant, encapsulating and self-reflexive field which has much to offer those outside the discipline. Much exciting work has been done in the recent past and frequently this has
deliberately engaged with other fields as well as with the general public. Researchers of the ancient world are well-placed to be at the centre of debates about graffiti since their work frequently lies at an intersection between different historical disciplines and they are well-trained in the close reading of both texts and images.

One of the most significant conclusions of the recent interest in ancient graffiti is that the context in which a graffito is found is crucial to our ability to interpret it; context(s) affect not only how the material is analysed, but how it is defined in the first place (Baird and Taylor, 2011). This means not only paying attention to the physical location of the text or image or its means of production, but also to its historical, social and cultural contexts, and the relationship to other graffiti and features in the landscape. One ramification of this is that the category of ‘graffiti’ itself should be seen as an umbrella term which encapsulates a wide variety of different practices, locations and social meanings.

Second, this research has shown that it is necessary to look past the stereotypes (popular and scholarly) about graffiti, whether these are assumptions that graffiti have an immediacy or truthfulness lacking in other texts, and so are ‘unfiltered’, or ideas that this form of writing has an immediacy which other forms lack. Both of these interpretations are fantasies that reflect unsophisticated assessments of the material. Graffiti, like most kinds of mark-making, are bound by convention, context and performance and as such are rarely as immediate or subversive as it might first be assumed. There is no unbroken link between a graffito on a wall in, say, Pompeii and the contemporary world, despite what we might like sometimes to think.

However, a third important conclusion, related to both of these, is that graffiti can be used to access otherwise ‘invisible’ historical groups. Although it should not be assumed that graffiti represent the unfiltered markings of the ‘lower classes’, as frequent interpretations have suggested, and we have stressed above that many graffiti reflect the thoughts and concerns of elites, in some contexts we can identify the writings and drawings of precisely this group of people. Drawing particularly on comparative approaches, close analysis of placement and content of graffiti has allowed the identification of marks likely made by children (Huntley, 2011; Garraffoni and Laurence, 2013), those made by slaves (Webster, 2008) or women’s contestation of their normative sexual roles (Levin-Richardson, 2013). This has important ramifications for social history particularly in a field in which evidence for these groups (particularly the type of evidence which is produced by them) is extremely scarce. Comparative approaches like these open up many potential avenues of enquiry which have yet to be explored, and this promises to be a fruitful line of future research.2

Similarly, archaeological approaches, such as those which focus on materiality, have much to contribute to other graffiti studies (Frederick, 2014; Frederick and Clarke, 2014). Considering both graffiti and graffiti-making practices in this way poses questions not only about the techniques of production and the surfaces on which graffiti are found, but how these encourage or constrain human interaction (Tilley, 2007). They emphasise how the experiential qualities of writing and reading affect interpretation and how they are conditioned by our own cultural contexts. Viewing graffiti in this way has the potential not only of shifting our perceptions about the production, consumption and preservation of ancient material, but also encourages the recasting of contemporary graffiti outside of the illegitimate/illegal or vandalism/art paradigms. Instead it considers graffiti as cultural production in its own right which is situated in a variety of social, cultural and temporal networks. We all need to challenge the methodological assumptions which are rooted in our individual disciplines.

Perhaps most importantly, ancient graffiti raise questions of cultural value. As we have seen, the perception of (ancient) graffiti as something subversive, or as ‘matter out of place’ (in Mary J.A. Baird and Claire Taylor 22
Douglas’ famed formulation for ‘dirt’),³ has frequently led to their marginalisation as a historical source, but ironically such material is perceived as having greater cultural value than many contemporary graffiti. Generally, surviving ancient graffiti raise questions of preservation and vandalism, both in the ancient world and in the contemporary one; the former posing a historical problem and the latter an ethical one. The outcry in 2013 over a Chinese tourist writing his name on an Egyptian temple at Luxor reveals starkly divergent attitudes to graffiti – ancient and modern. The mark-making of ancient Greek, Roman or Coptic tourists visiting Egyptian sites is preserved, valued and studied (Adams, 2007; Bucking, 2012), that of a contemporary Chinese visitor considered as vandalism and removed. Press reports and social media were outraged by the actions of the teenager involved in this incident and considered them a form of defacement which ‘ruined’ the monument. He was hounded online and publically shamed. Much of the coverage of the incident employed negative ethnic stereotypes focusing on the writer’s nationality (as opposed to his age) and depicting the Chinese abroad as ‘uncivilised’ and ‘lack[ing] quality and breeding’ (Pumin, 2013) as if Western tourists never engaged in such behaviour (that this is not exclusively the ‘problem’ of one group of people, see English Heritage, 1999). In contrast, the nineteenth-century graffito written by Lord Byron on the Classical Greek temple of Poseidon at Sounion, south of Athens, is considered a tourist attraction in its own right (Barber, 1999: 234). The intersection of race, class and cultural heritage are thrown into sharp relief through the production of graffiti. This highlights a temporal dimension to our analyses which plays into assessments of cultural value: Why are ancient graffiti preserved and studied but their modern equivalents at ancient sites erased and vilified (Frederick, 2009; Merrill, 2011)?

Conclusion

Historical approaches to graffiti are, therefore, not only useful for those interested in past societies, but also can provide interpretative paradigms for contemporary scholars in non-historical disciplines. Reading contemporary graffiti as historical data has distinct advantages; it prompts not only critical reading of the content of the graffiti but also shows how important various contexts might be. Since a contextual approach resists a one-size-fits-all interpretation, it encourages researchers to note the variety of material and develop a diversity of responses to it. Viewing contemporary graffiti in the longue durée of historical vision enables reflection and critique of culturally embedded patterns of interpretation rather than assuming a similarity. Instead of erroneously focusing of the perceived immediacy of the past, we can both expand and contract the distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’ as appropriate, and nuance our understanding of different types of writing and reading cultures in the past and in the present. Ancient graffiti resist monolithic interpretation. They are not a legal problem to be resolved, nor (necessarily) the marks of a subculture resisting authority, nor are they to be considered through the paradigms of defining what is, or what is not, a work of ‘art’. Rather, ancient graffiti are examples of everyday writing that speak of a multitude of different and often competing concerns, contribute to numerous historical debates and reveal a tension between what is culturally valued and what is – and what will be – destroyed.

Notes

1  For discussion of the relationship between writing surfaces and texts, see, for example, Johnston (2013).
2  For instance, ancient and modern graffiti in places of confinement: Casella (2009).
3  See Douglas (1966).
References


