

# EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN GRAFFITI

## A HIDDEN HERITAGE TO BE DISCOVERED AND PRESERVED

The Andreas Pittas Art Characterization Laboratories (APAC Labs) and STARC have recognized the potential and relevance of historic graffiti as a written source able to provide valuable insights into little known aspects of the life of past societies, such as the thoughts, feelings and emotions of everyday individuals. Overall, graffiti provide evidence of the visual culture and the everyday practices of people in the past.

During the past few years, APAC Labs/ STARC researchers have been involved in an array of research projects aiming to foster the study and promote the preservation of historic graffiti in Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean region. A structured methodology for the documentation, analysis, and study of this material is still missing. This gap threatens the development of this field of studies and limits our knowledge concerning this long-lasting phenomenon, too often mistakenly associated with vandalism and destructive activities. Responding to these needs, the use of advanced digital technologies applied to Cultural Heritage is helping the development of a specific pipeline for the documentation, analysis, and study of historical graffiti in different contexts.

The main aim of APAC Labs/ STARC research activities is to enhance the study of historical graffiti through the application of innovative and ad-hoc technologies. The output is to enrich our knowledge concerning past societies' with new and untapped information through the 'voices' of common people.

Moreover, recovering past people's voices creates a virtual connection with the past, lively visible in the scratched, incised and painted graffiti on the surfaces of buildings and monuments that we still experience in our daily life.

Graffiti represents the deep human need to communicate and to relate to the surrounding space by leaving signs that mark their presence and passage. In Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean, graffiti can be found on numerous buildings from Antiquity until today.

Who wrote?

Everyone. Graffiti are a free and spontaneous form of expression, allowing any individual to leave their mark in space. Graffiti has nothing to do with literacy, when, for example, in the Middle Ages writing was effectively the privilege of the literate, upper classes of society. Making graffiti, instead, was possible for anyone due to the availability of support surfaces (from walls to wood furniture, from natural rocks to frescoes) as well as easy access to makeshift writing tools.

What did they write?

Almost everything. First of all, the act of writing must be considered in its broader definition, not merely connected with literacy. Graffiti are forms of everyday writing, preserving alphabetical texts, drawings, symbols and geometrical/ abstract compositions. Their diversified forms reflect past people's use of different writing systems to communicate, precisely as they are used today, combining texts with images (i.e. emoticon in social media).

Where did they write?

Potentially everywhere. Graffiti do not require specific support since every surface can be appropriately used. Medieval and post Medieval graffiti in Cyprus and Eastern Mediterranean are almost exclusively preserved in religious, public and private buildings, thus showing that graffiti writing was a frequent and generally permitted practice in the past.

Why did they make graffiti?

People made, and still make graffiti, to interact with their surrounding space by expressing their thoughts and feelings. Writing and drawing represent, first of all, a marked sign of self-affirmation within the space and the community. Graffiti, in this sense, represent the most natural and spontaneous form of communication.

What graffiti can tell us about?

- people's thoughts and feelings
- people's visual culture and literacy
- people's mobility
- people's interaction with their surrounding urban and natural environments

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