

## **Scratched in Stone: The Isis Temple Graffiti Project (ITGP)**

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In November 2002, when I was recording some graffiti on the front wall of the temple of Isis at Aswan, a young Egyptian inspector of excavations came by. I showed him round in the temple and afterwards he asked me what I was currently working on. I told him that I was recording some Graeco-Roman graffiti and showed him the representations of animals scratched into the front wall. After he had seen these scratchings, the inspector laughed at me and said that they had been made by children living in the houses around the temple. To his mind, these crude representations of animals could simply not have been made by Ancient Egyptians. This example clearly illustrates how people have looked, and still look, down on the ancient graffiti found in the temples of Egypt, which does not do justice to this highly interesting material.

In Antiquity it was common practice for visitors to leave graffiti on the walls of Egyptian temples during festivals or on other occasions. Like modern graffiti, ancient graffiti consist of informal writings. But unlike today, they were usually left on the walls of Egyptian temples for religious reasons. Graffiti from temples are therefore a treasure trove for the study of the personal piety of the ordinary visitors of temples in Ancient Egypt as well as in later periods when temples were frequently reused as churches. Despite the importance of graffiti, however, Egyptologists have usually concentrated on the hieroglyphic reliefs or other elements of a temple; they only mention graffiti in passing or ignore them altogether. This neglect is regrettable since in recent decades there has been a tendency to study ancient religions in their local context and to concentrate on personal religious piety.

The proposed project is among the first to catalogue and interpret all the graffiti (about 300 in total, both figures and texts) from one temple, the temple of Isis at Aswan. The project has three objectives. Firstly, the project will publish the vast majority of the graffiti for the first time and will therefore make available to the scholarly community an important corpus of completely new material ranging from the third century BCE to the nineteenth century CE. Secondly, the project will document and analyse the personal experience of ancient religion and its cultic practice in the specific case of the temple of Isis at Aswan. As such it can be compared with other, well-documented temples from the region. And thirdly, on account of its comprehensive approach to graffiti within a given location, the project will serve as a model for the study of graffiti of temples elsewhere in Egypt. Hence, it will be an important contribution to the study of Ancient Egyptian religion and Early Egyptian Christianity.

The methodology used in this project is in some points unique. The basis for it was laid in fieldwork conducted in the temple itself, in collaboration with the Swiss Institute of Architectural and Archaeological Research Cairo, between 2001 and 2003. In these three campaigns the majority of the graffiti were drawn, described, and photographed, and their features were entered into a database. Then the drawings of the graffiti were placed digitally in cross-sections of the temple's walls, so that their placement can be seen in one view. In the proposed project, this database will be finished and the graffiti will be divided into specific categories which will be studied separately. In this way, for example, different types of crosses can be discerned and compared with other places where they are found in the Mediterranean world, such as the Christian catacombs of Rome.

This project will be of interest not only to scholars specialised in Egyptian temples and Ancient Egyptian religion, but also to a wider community of researchers of personal religious piety in

ancient religions, ancient graffiti in the Mediterranean and the changes and continuities in cultic practices from ancient religions to Christianity in Late Antiquity (fourth to sixth centuries CE). In addition, I suspect that it will attract the attention of a wide, non-scholarly public, not only because of the concreteness of the material, but also because there is always a wide-ranging interest in Ancient Egyptian religion. My study will show how ordinary Egyptians experienced that religion – we can not get closer to them than that!

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