

GRAFFITI AT KHONSU

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Editor's Note: Helen Jaquet-Gordon, an ARCE Fellow 1986-87, is an Egyptologist with the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire. Her writing first appeared in *NARCE* in June, 1986 (#22) with a "First Glimpse of Egypt." Her reports and letters have graced many issues in the intervening years.

The research project which I am reporting on here started many years ago when I first came to Egypt in the 1950's. Other occupations had caused me to put it aside, and it was only in October, 1986 that a generous grant from the American Research Center in Egypt enabled me to take up the problem anew and to work seriously towards its publication.

The object of my work is the recording of a series of graffiti situated on the roof of the Khonsu temple at Karnak. These graffiti, of which there are approximately 300, are incised on the upper surfaces of the sandstone blocks which form the roof of the temple. They cover the whole period from the XXIInd dynasty until the Ptolemaic era and include likewise a few Christian graffiti made at the time when part of the temple was used as a church.

The graffiti can be divided into two large groups differentiated by their subject matter. The first group is composed of inscriptions including the names and titles of the persons who wrote them and usually accompanied by the outlines of a pair of feet. The second group consists of drawings of miscellaneous objects such as boats, figures of gods, heads, animals and architectural elements. Their size varies considerably from a few centimeters to over a meter in length and their workmanship is very unequal in quality, some being hardly more than careless scratches on the stone while others are very carefully incised.

The inscriptions are mainly in the hieratic script with a certain number, particularly those dating from the XXVth dynasty, in hieroglyphs, and only three short texts in Demotic. Two texts are in a foreign script which has not yet been identified. It does not, however, seem to be Carian, the first language which comes to mind since many other Carian inscriptions have been found at Karnak.

Earlier Egyptologists, referring to these inscriptions accompanied by the outlines of feet, have surmised that such graffiti were the work of ancient "tourists," people who came to visit the temple and wanted to leave there a proof of their passage. This appears at first sight a logical explanation, but closer examination of the texts and of the titles of the people who wrote them shows that it is probably a false one. These graffiti were written at a time when the temple was in full activity and when outsiders would never have been permitted to penetrate very far into its sacred precincts. The titles of the people whose graffiti have been incised on the roof show that almost without exception they were priests of the temple of Khonsu itself

or of the neighboring temple of Amon.

The reasons for which these graffiti were made and for which we find them situated here on the Khonsu temple roof, as well as the occasions on which they were written are questions to which we hope to be able to give at least tentative answers when the study of these texts has been completed.

The second group of graffiti is perhaps easier to interpret. Many of the drawings are obviously copies of things which were visible to the "artist" from his observation post on the roof of the temple. Thus the columns of the courtyard are sketched on one of the cornice blocks just opposite the colonnade. Sacred barks are several times depicted and could have been drawn during or just after one of the festivals when these barks were carried in procession from their sanctuaries to visit other temples. Figures of the god Khonsu himself in various guises show him as a mummy, as a baboon, a crocodile, or a fetish with falcon head surmounted by the moon disk and crescent. Numerous drawings of heads, many of which are royal heads judging by their headdresses adorned with uraei, are perhaps half-hearted attempts at portraiture. In Christian times several small crosses were deeply engraved on the roof.

One or two inscriptions seem to antedate the building of the temple. This is not as impossible as it might seem. In fact, there are numerous indications which prove that the roof slabs covering the colonnade of the court are reused blocks taken from some earlier building. They were originally longer but have been cut down to suit their new positions. The inscriptions mentioned above must have already been present on the slabs when they were placed here on the roof.



A graffiti showing a boat.

Technique Used for Recording the Graffiti

The first requisite for the study of the graffiti was to have a plan of the roof in order to localize the graffiti on the various roof blocks. Such a plan had been made many years ago when I first started the study but it was not complete. It was necessary to enter on the general plan the position of each graffiti with its exact dimensions and its orientation. This data will, we hope, eventually aid in assigning relative dates to the large majority of graffiti which are not otherwise datable.

The next step in the study was to assure a complete photographic coverage of all the graffiti. Here also, I already possessed a partial file of photos, but it was essential during this season to check the whole roof in detail and add to the file the missing items. This was accomplished. With the kind permission of the Franco-Egyptian Center at Karnak, I was able to work in their photographic laboratory in order to produce enlargements of all the photos in the file to be used as a basis for facsimile drawings of the graffiti.

These drawings are made in pencil on transparent film placed over the photo. The photo is then checked against the original on the roof. This is an essential step as many of the graffiti are very lightly incised in the stone or have been worn by people walking over them. Some of them likewise show traces of having been erased in order to make room for a later graffiti. Such traces are not always easy to interpret if only photographs are available for examination.

The final step in reproducing the graffiti after they have been thoroughly checked is the production of inked copies of the pencil drawings showing, besides the inscription itself, indications of changes in the text, usurpations, breakage, wear, etc. These inked drawings will appear in the publication.

The Publications of the Graffiti

Because the epigraphic survey of the Khonsu temple is in the concession of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, the graffiti from the roof of the temple will be published under the auspices of that institution.

Besides the facsimile drawings of the graffiti already mentioned above and the key-plan of the roof on which each graffiti will be situated and identified by number, the publication will include a transcription and translation of each inscription (or in the case of uninscribed objects, a description) together with a short notice in which the names and titles of the people mentioned in the texts and any other relevant material will be discussed. Chapters treating in a more general context the significance of graffiti of this kind and the reasons for their appearance on the Khonsu temple roof in particular, as well as the dating of the individual graffiti, will also be included.

Access to the Roof of the Temple

The roof of the rear part of the temple is easily accessible by the stairway whose entrance lies in the corri-

dor surrounding the bark shrine. In ancient times there must have been stairways from the back roof leading up to the higher roof of the hypostyle hall and again from there onto the part covering the colonnade of the court. Part of one of these latter stairways is still to be seen on the east side. However, at present, the only access to this part of the roof is by climbing along the outer wall. As this was somewhat too risky a business to be undertaken every day, I was able, with the kind help of Dr. Sayed Hegazy and Dr. Jean-Claude Golvin of the Franco-Egyptian Center at Karnak, to rig up a long ladder from the ground to the roof of the hypostyle hall and another shorter one in order to reach the higher level. This arrangement much facilitated my work and I thank them heartily for their cooperation.



One of the name graffiti, accompanied by the outline of a pair of feet.



Mme. Jacques-Gordon working on the roof of the Khonsu temple.