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## CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS: TIMELESS SPACES 2019*

# Between Mariners, Pirates and Priests: An Introduction to The World of Ship Graffiti In Medieval Mediterranean

Ioannis Nakas

**Abstract**: Ship graffiti are one of the most common illustrations or vandalisms found on the walls of medieval and post-medieval monuments in Mediterranean countries. A multitude of vessels of various types and sizes have been carved or drawn by the people of the Middle Ages on monuments, such as the Parthenon and the cathedral of Majorca, and humble buildings, such as cisterns and baths.

Who made these graffiti? And why? Their occurrence in places of worship (churches, mosques) indicates that they were tokens of suppliance and votives, but equally common is their appearance in secular buildings, often related with water (baths, fountains, etc.). Moreover, their quality ranges from simplistic 'banana boats' to highly accurate representations of ship hulls and their rigging.

This paper will examine certain case studies of medieval Mediterranean graffiti and propose different scenarios for the nature of their engravers or painters and the circumstances which led to their creation. Its aim is to explore the complicated relationship between the creation of ship graffiti and the contemporary world.

**Keywords:** Mediterranean; Medieval; Ships; Graffiti

## Introduction

One of the most interesting types of pictorial graffiti in archaeological and historical contexts is ship graffiti. Graffiti appear practically on every type of monument, material, artefact, and in locations including churches, fountains, fortifications, houses, or even in natural spaces like caves. These constitute a direct documentation

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of the complex relationship of humans with the sea world and are particularly common in the Mediterranean world. The Mediterranean is a geographical region where the sea is never too far away, even from inland human settlements. It played a crucial role in the development of trade and cultural exchange networks

An impressive number of medieval ship graffiti survive on a variety of monuments and spaces in the area. These medieval graffiti have been the target of various studies in the last 50 years. Scholarship has been particularly enriched and improved, especially during the last three decades, with specialised studies surveys and the use of new advanced technology (Bucherie 1992; Christensen 1995; Demesticha et al. 2017; Le Bon 1995; Westerdahl 2013). The following paper will approach these graffiti considering the spaces where these were created and the people who created them, highlighting issues such as graffiti quality, purpose and role in their contemporary society. This study cannot be an inclusive one, due to the great number of graffiti known and already studied, but gives a general overview of medieval ship graffiti and operates as an introduction to the complex subject of ship graffiti agency within the wider world.

## Spaces

Ship graffiti of the medieval period in the Mediterranean appear in a variety of spaces, means, and artefacts. Such variability most likely reflected different uses and functions of these depictions. Although a certain predominance of religious buildings is evident, ship graffiti are dispersed in quite a variety of spaces, something reflecting their multi-levelled function in contemporary societies.

### *Religious buildings*

The majority of ship graffiti studied here come from Christian religious buildings (Meinardus 1972). Few Islamic monuments preserve ship graffiti, probably due to the religious prohibition of pictorial art; many are, however, converted churches and do preserve earlier ship graffiti (e.g. the Prophet Elias of Salonica; Babuin & Nakas 2011). Scholars have often seen this as evidence of the religious role of ship graffiti as votives of mariners, travellers, pilgrims, or merchants and their families for the fortunate conclusion of their travels and ventures (Demesticha et al. 2017: 374). This practice, alongside the donation of similar votive objects like elaborate ship models, was not uncommon in the period, especially in other regions of Europe (Westerdahl

2013: 337-9). However, this rather straightforward interpretation, although not wrong in essence, can be misleading: one of the main reasons ship graffiti survives in religious establishments is the respect with which they were treated through the ages, even when their denomination changed (churches to mosques and vice versa), which lead to their structures and decoration being better preserved (Velthuis & Spennemann 2007: 43-4). To this we should also add the sturdiness of many of these buildings, especially of ancient monuments (e.g. the Parthenon where many medieval ship graffiti have been preserved on the solid marble walls and colonnades; Orlandos & Vranousis 1973) and the existence of large plastered surfaces (often belonging to elaborate wall paintings). The latter offer not only relatively soft surfaces which are ideal for the easy carving or drawing of graffiti, but also are often inside and not exposed to wear, weather conditions, or vandalism.

An important implication of ship graffiti in churches is their location, a feature concerning their function. Ship graffiti in churches are to be found everywhere: the chancel and central nave areas (e.g. Saint George of Angona and Saint George Teratsiotis in Cyprus, and the Dormition of the Mother of God, Amarynthos; Demesticha et al. 2017: Figs. 3 & 12; Nakas & Krapf 2017: 433), the narthex (e.g. Saint Sophia of Trebizond and Prophet Elias in Salonica; Babuin & Nakas 2011: 9-10; Bryer 1966: 5), and are not uncommon on the buildings' outer walls (e.g. Saint Marina at Frenaros, Cyprus and Prophet Elias in Salonica; Babuin & Nakas 2011: 10; Demesticha et al. 2017: Fig. 9). As noted above, however, the buildings' outer walls are areas most prone to wear and repair, especially when plastered.

*Secular buildings*

Ship graffiti also appear in a variety of secular buildings including fortifications (towers, gates), private houses, or warehouses, and mills. There are relatively few examples of ship graffiti in secular spaces because of the small degree of survival of medieval secular buildings especially in the Balkans and the Levant (Demesticha et al. 2017: 347). In the Western Mediterranean, especially on the islands of Malta, Gozo, and Majorca – places with a rich nautical tradition and many surviving medieval buildings– ship graffiti have been documented in houses, workshops (Gonzales Gozalo 2017; Muscat 2006: 160, 163), forts, towers (Gonzales Gozalo 2017: 439-40), and even prisons (Muscat 2006: 169). In the Eastern Mediterranean, but unfortunately in only a few cases, ship graffiti have been preserved on

fortifications and gates (e.g. in one of the gateways of the Hospitallers' Complex in Acre/Acco; Kahanov & Stern 2008). It is a reasonable hypothesis that had more secular buildings survived in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans, similar numbers of ship graffiti would have survived in similar spaces – especially in areas related with maritime activities.

*Buildings related to water*

Many ship graffiti are also preserved in buildings related to fresh water, namely cisterns, baths and fountains (e.g. the cistern at the Trigonion Tower in Salonica and the bathhouse of Paramythia; Babuin 2019; Koniordos & Pelekanidou 2001). This relationship with such buildings can be both functional as well as symbolic: bathhouses and fountains, much like the gateways and workshops mentioned above, are places that a variety of people tend to visit and who are most likely to spend time there. Thus it is natural that many of them carve or draw their ships on the walls as a pastime. Cisterns on the other hand are much less likely to be visited by any kind of people, since when functional they are supposed to be filled with water, but have a direct symbolic connection to water and subsequently the sea and ships. Empty cisterns were possibly used as temporary shelter for travellers, mariners, and soldiers, who would, thanks to the extended use of mortar on their walls, had plenty of space to draw various graffiti, including ships.

*Ship graffiti on artefacts or on ship hulls*

One last space where medieval ship graffiti are found is pottery or on the hulls of actual ships, although both types are rather rare. Many pottery vessels of the period, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean, are decorated with engraved ship images, but these are all done before firing and thus cannot be considered proper graffiti. However, the style of the engraving is very close to contemporary ship graffiti (Böhlendorf-Arslan 2017: Abb.5, 7-10). Post-firing graffiti on pottery are limited to only one known example: a sherd from Amarynthos, Euboea (Nakas & Krapf 2017). Another unique case is the depiction of a trireme galley on one of the frames of the Boccalama galley discovered in the lagoon of Venice and is considered to have depicted the original ship (D' Agostino & Medas 2002: 32). In both cases the graffiti are simple but quite accurate, and must have been done by people with knowledge of these vessels, probably mariners, although their function was probably just decorative.

## Quality and realism

Although graffiti in general have a temporary character, considerable effort has often been invested in the creation of the ship graffiti studied here. One can only speculate whether some of the most elaborate ones were executed by commissioned artists and whether the simplest ones were done by people with little talent in draughtsmanship. The sumptuousness of several graffiti should not, however, be related with their realism.

Medieval ship graffiti of the Mediterranean belong to a great variety of qualities and styles. A large part are the so-called 'banana boats,' extremely simplified and abstract images of ships. These are usually small in size, and executed swiftly with little care in depicting any specific vessel with realism. They thus include the basic elements of a ship (mast, hull, oars), often exaggerated in proportions, as these were perceived by common people (e.g. the graffiti at the castle of Pope Julius II in ancient Ostia; Boetto 2002: Figs. 8-9). Another category includes equally simple images, which, however, preserve a certain degree of realism, corresponding to specific ship types. These thoroughly convey, albeit highly abbreviated, the ships' main characteristics, equipment and rigging (e.g. several graffiti from the church of Prophet Elias in Salonica and from Saint Marc in Venice; Babuin & Nakas 2011: Fig. 10; Ray Martin 2001: Figs. 122-4). A third group is the graffiti that are highly accurate and include well-drawn details on the rigging, equipment, and even crew of the ships. This group reproduces the actual ship's hull, occasionally with great precision, resembling blueprints of the ships depicted (e.g. several graffiti from various sites of Majorca; Gonzales Gozalo 2017: Figs. 10-2). These features can be related not only with the creators' talent and craftsmanship, but also with their knowledge of the ships they depicted. This is evidenced not so much through the detail of the graffiti but through the accuracy of each image as a whole. This can be verified through the comparison with contemporary iconography, shipwrecks, and shipbuilding texts that allow the recreation of the ships' original form (e.g. the 15$^{th}$-century Venetian shipbuilding texts). Finally a fourth group includes what can be called 'hybrid ships.' These are elaborate graffiti, filled with details from flags and sails to crewmen/passengers and shading lines–but cannot be attributed to specific ship types or often appear to have combined elements of various ships in a purely imaginative way (e.g. graffiti on the outer walls of Prophet Elias in Salonica or at the Panagia Asprovouniotissa in Cyprus; Babuin & Nakas 2011: Fig. 3; Demesticha et al. 2017: Fig. 18). Such ships images are

more of decorative creations of people with enough time at their disposal to carve elaborate and often quite large images of imaginary ships that had little relationship with reality. What these images document however is the importance of portraying ships even when these are not realistic, and even when the creators of these images are totally irrelevant to their reality.

**The creators**

One of the most interesting and complicated aspects of the study of ship graffiti is to connect them with the actual people who created them. This task is difficult since not only these are never signed by their creators, but they have also often been created in public spaces frequented by a multitude of people of various professions, sexes, and ages. But some points can be made.

The common occurrence of ship graffiti in religious buildings points towards a connection with priests and monks, especially in churches and monastic spaces (Meinardus 1972: 31-2). Furthermore, in many cases ship graffiti are to be found inside chancels, areas restricted to priests, sacristans, and altar servers. Nevertheless, local priests and monks would travel little, being assigned to specific churches and monasteries. Pilgrims, however, did travel much more and particularly by sea and many of them were priests. They would have had access and attended mass in the churches of the harbours where their ships made stops. It would be natural for them to draw the ships on which they travelled on the walls of these churches, praying for the safety of their journey (Demesticha et al. 2017: 374). The connection of church graffiti with priests, monks and pilgrims should not, however, be exclusive. Churches were not always used as sacred spaces and were often transformed into warehouses, dwellings or barracks for the billeting of soldiers or sailors. Others have been adorned with ship graffiti after their abandonment, like the Saint George of the Greeks in Famagusta (Walsh 2008). Thus even graffiti in chancels can be attributed to laymen, provided the religious use of the space was altered, even for short periods of time, as we will see below.

The second group of people that can be directly related with ship graffiti is, of course, mariners and soldiers. The importance of the ship as a means of transportation, dwelling and, at least for commanders, ownership, as well as the need to secure its safety through divine intervention would clearly make ship captains, sailors or

mariners portray it anywhere they could, often with great accuracy (Meinardus 1972: 31). To this we might add the use of ships by soldiers beyond specialized mariners, whose transportation was essentially done with ships and they would too developed a taste for illustrating them wherever they were. The case of Prophet Elias in Salonica is interesting, since the church was apparently abandoned during the last years before the Ottoman conquest and used for the billeting of Venetian soldiers who were also accused of vandalising these spaces (Babuin & Nakas 2011: 15).

It is more difficult to connect inland graffiti with groups of people related with the sea, such as mariners. Ship graffiti appear as far away from the sea as Ochrid or even Azerbaijan (Meinardus 1972: 31). In this case the creators of such graffiti are probably long-distance travellers and merchants or pilgrims. The choice of depicting ships should then be mostly related to the ships on which they travelled before they reached the shore, as well as the ship's symbolism as a reference to travel, sea and its dangers. And it is now by accident that in most inland areas ship graffiti tend to become more simple, abstract and unrealistic, drawn by people with little experience of ships.

It is very difficult to ascertain whether medieval ship graffiti were executed by men women, children or adults. The few contemporary written sources referring to graffiti do not mention anything on ship images (Champion 2017: 8-9). The carving on walls is a technique easily employable by everyone who has any sharp object and no special skill or strength is needed. Nevertheless, although the possibility of graffiti being made by women should not be excluded especially as votives for the safety of their relationships and relatives travelling in the sea, the Middle Ages was a period in which women had a limited role in public life and their mobility, especially via the sea, was generally limited with few exceptions (Craig 2009: 23-29). Thus, it is highly unlikely that they executed many of the ship graffiti. As for children, it is equally unknown if they also did create any graffiti. The only indication for such a thing would be the mere height of the graffiti in areas of the wall that could not be reached by children.

**Vandalism, piety and pastime**

But what was the actual purpose of Medieval ship graffiti in the Mediterranean? Their common occurrence in churches or other religious buildings, and especially at their inside and often in their most sacred areas, points towards a predominantly religious

function, according to which ships are carved or drawn by people related with sea travel and their families as votives to god or patron saints to celebrate or to ensure safe voyages (Meinardus 1972: 31). The common use of graffiti has been characterized by Westerdahl (2013) as 'the poor man's votive ships', since it is the simplest and cheapest way for one to dedicate an image of a ship, replacing the more luxurious and expensive models that still survive in medieval churches of northern and southern Europe (Champion 2015: 345; Westerdahl 2013: 343-4).

Ship graffiti are, however, often crudely executed and randomly juxtaposed to each other, engraved upon frescoes or other types of decoration. This gives the image of vandalism or at least of lack of interest or respect of graffiti creators for the surrounding spaces. But such an approach is heavily affected by the modern concept of monuments and spaces of worship where any interference, especially non-monumental, is considered as something negative, ranging from a counter-normative practice to pure sacrilege and vandalism (Champion 2017: 7-8; Oliver & Neal 2010: 1-3). Despite the respect the people of the medieval world had for religious buildings, their relationship with them was, apparently, much more complicated and reciprocal: graffiti was not seen as vandalism but as a religious practice. Graffiti, although carved on the colourful frescoes depicting sacred persons of Christianity, were not meant to destroy or befoul these images, but to connect ships with them, strengthening the notion of protection and patronage through placing the ship as close as possible to them.

But piety cannot explain a multitude of other ship graffiti that were not created in religious buildings. These can only be explained as pastime activities of people using these spaces, since no religious practice nor custom can be related with their creation. Their occurrence in public spaces and passages that regularly received numbers of people (gates, baths, fountains, staircases) shows they were the products of people who either needed some occupation to fill their time, document their presence there, and appropriate spaces they used, much like many modern graffiti (Oliver & Neal 2010: 1-3). An aspect of such graffiti is that they were most likely created by travellers or soldiers who were passing by or used these spaces for accommodation. In the case of the churches of Cyprus, the presence of ship graffiti has been related with some of the main roads of the island leading towards its centre from the sea, which would have been frequented by pilgrims, merchants or soldiers, who would use landmark

buildings where they made their stops to leave their mark (Demesticha et al. 2017: 374-5). The possibility of ship graffiti in spaces where sailors and soldiers were temporarily accommodated–billeted or even imprisoned– should be added: a possible example comes from the church of Prophet Elias in Salonica, where it is highly likely that a large number of ship graffiti were created by Venetian soldiers billeted in the abandoned church around 1430 (Babuin & Nakas 2011: 15).

## Conclusions

What this overview of Mediterranean medieval ship graffiti shows is that the circumstances under which they would be drawn and the people who created them were complicated and diverse. Ship graffiti were everywhere and formed part of daily life, being one of the routines of contemporary people, from sailors to soldiers and from travellers to monks. The reasons behind their creations varied from religious piety to casual and mundane pastime or an effort of people to document their presence for the future and leave their mark in various spaces. Their function in contemporary society was thus multi-levelled, from votive to plainly decorative. They were part of the strong relationship of people with the sea and the water in general.

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