Interpreting figural graffiti:
case studies from a funerary context

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Introduction

Both written and figural graffiti are a common phenomenon in pharaonic Egypt. In spite of their abundant occurrence, there are at present only a handful of monuments for which a complete inventory of graffiti has been published (*cf.* Fábián 1992; Raven 1999; Jacquet-Gordon 2003; Cruz-Uribe 2008b). The general tendency in Egyptology to "attach a somewhat undue importance to textual inscriptions" and "neglect non-lingual evidence" (Raven 1999, 81) has certainly affected the study of figural graffiti. Studies on textual graffiti are comparatively numerous (recently *e.g.* Peden 2001 and Navrátilová 2007a), whereas those focusing particularly on their figural equivalent are much less common. This makes an all-encompassing study of the subject, particularly with regard to searching for reference material, extremely difficult.

Notwithstanding the subject's marginalisation in the literature, not all types of graffiti are just "momentary ideas or inspirations" (Franke 2001, 38) or unattractive scribbles defacing a monument, as they can represent mementoes of former visitors to the tomb, temple or site under consideration. While a finished tomb or temple represents the motives and intentions of those responsible for its construction, graffiti, *inter alia*, present us an indication to the way people dealt with either existing, functioning or possibly desolate or ruinous structures. Such continued use or re-use forms an integral part of the *use-life* of a monument, either systemic or non-systemic (Van Walsem 2006, 112, after Polz 1987, 122–123). Graffiti, defined as unofficial writings and drawings that are incised, scratched or painted on rocks, walls or artefacts, provide a graphic testimony to attitudes towards earlier monuments (Málek 1992, 67), and could even be considered as one of the key groups of sources for the study of Egyptian uses of the past (Navrátilová 2007b, 1371). The gap between intention and practice might, as Kemp (2006, 209) has appositely demonstrated, be considerable. The merging of graffiti with inscriptions in already existing tombs and funerary installations, *e.g.* interaction of initial and secondarily applied 'decoration', is subject of the present paper.

Scope of (figural) graffiti

Before attempting to interpret the material presented below, it is first necessary to address the rationale for applying graffiti in ancient Egypt. In other words, for what reasons did the Egyptians leave behind testimonies of their presence in for example temples or tombs that were not built for them personally?

Written graffiti are described by Peden (2001, xxi) as a form of communication that is "invariably free of social restraints", the "unostentatious inscriptions" of which present us with an unparalleled accurate reflection of the character of the society that produced them (however, for a critical note, see Darnell 2002, 886). It should however be noted that written visitors' graffiti are not necessarily as individualistic. A number of them follow firmly established formulae (Helck 1952, 40; *e.g.* "Did come the scribe NN in order to see (…)" (*cf.* Hayes 1942, 25, no. 97, pl. XX)), suggesting writing graffiti was a topic taught at school (Fischer-Elfert 2003, 132). Nevertheless, in ancient Egypt, writing was exclusive and limited to a very small section of society. Baines and Eyre (2007, 67–**70) estimated that a maximum of 1% of the Egyptian society** had been literate, even during the New Kingdom. Written graffiti cannot therefore simply be understood as random mementoes left behind by members of any segment of Egyptian society. People evidently had a clear purpose in mind when applying written graffiti, certainly when the inscription is executed in ink, which implies access to writing utensils.

The choice of location for the inscription, *i.e.* within temples or tombs, presents us with an important aspect regarding their initiators. As Fischer-Elfert (2003, 133) remarked, the random appliance of graffiti on such 'extremely sacred' monuments, while still functioning, would not have been permitted and that certain phrases, *e.g.* those assuming a critical tone towards its ruinous condition, would even have violated the rules of decorum. Indeed, one might be tempted to argue that most people were aware of these 'rules'. Nevertheless, graffiti were left practically everywhere. Whether we can deduce from this 'omnipresence' an "unspoken approval" of society, or even formal permission (Peden 2001, 293), is questionable. As Peden (2001, 294) concludes from his research, "expediency and opportunism", rather than "strictly enforced social mores" would have steered human action when leaving mementoes of one's presence. The state of preservation of the monument under consideration, *i.e.* whether ruinous and dilapidated or perhaps still in use, certainly mattered. The condition of the monument at the moment the graffito was applied is however now often hard to assess.

One furthermore needs to be cautious when considering graffiti as acts of vandalism, merely resulting in the defacement of monuments. One graffito in particular, dating to the Saite Period, unequivocally relates on the Egyptians' attitude towards the application of graffiti, when stating that "*Wo immer ihr wollt, da schreibt auf die freigelassenen Stellen, auf dass ein Mann zu seinem Gefährten spreche, indem es auf den freien Stellen eingeschnitten ist; dort soll [es] (dann) gefunden werden, um später als Leitspruch(?) zu dienen*" (Kuhlmann 1973, 207). Whether or not such an invitation prevailed in earlier periods as well is hard to appraise. The case studies presented below, however, do not seem to contradict this Saite statement.

Visitors' graffiti

Graffiti, habitually applied specifically when referring to textual inscriptions in Egyptology (*cf.* Thissen 1976; Franke 2001), could be divided into several categories. Well known in this respect are the so-called *Bauinschriften* (Stadelmann 1975) and *Besucherinschriften* (Helck 1952; Wildung 1975). The term *Besucherinschriften*, or visitors' graffiti, signifies secondarily applied inscriptions that were left behind by passers-by on edifices with the aim to commemorate one's visit to the concerned structure. Whether these visitors could be typically regarded as tourists remains open to question (Wildung 1975, 766; Thissen 1976, 881).

In her study of New Kingdom visitors' graffiti in Abusir and North Saqqara, Navrátilová distinguishes four sets of formulae. These are antiquarian or descriptive, signatures, piety oriented, and those commemorating a stroll or casual visit (Navrátilová 2007a, 132–133). Antiquarian graffiti praise the monument and its owner on the surface of which they have been applied. Such graffiti can present us with an insight into the attitude of the ancient Egyptians towards their history, as it appears in some cases that they knew the name of the owner of a monument and were thus aware of their past.

The piety oriented graffiti commemorate someone's visit to a monument without referring to the building itself. Such a testimony is intended as an invocation to the deities of the site. At Saqqara for example, the gods of Western Memphis are often addressed (Peden 2001, 61).

With graffiti commemorating a stroll or casual visit, the writer unambiguously states that he came to visit the concerned necropolis only to 'amuse' or 'invigorate' himself. A distinct class of visitors' graffiti is presented by those commemorating school excursions (*cf.* Firth and Quibell 1935, 78 [A]; Helck 1969, 120–121 [D], fig. 13, pl. 3 [D]). In respect of the graffito left by the schoolmaster Sethemheb and the apprentice scribe 'Ahmose (Firth and Quibell 1935, 78 [A]), Navrátilová (2007a, 76) tentatively assumes that the visit might have had a connection with their work in the nearby New Kingdom tombs, although this has not been stated explicitly in the inscription.

Curious graffiti relating to school excursions have been identified recently in Asyut (Kahl 2006; Verhoeven 2007) and in Saqqara (Demarée 2009). In both cases, tomb walls were utilised to write down well-known Egyptian didactic texts.

Visiting the necropolis

Now that one is aware of the possible reasons for people to visit the necropolis, one still has to ask why one wished to commemorate this occasion, and who were the intended recipients of these messages. The audience to which visitors' graffiti were aimed at appears to have been bipartite. In the first place there are the other, contemporary or future, visitors to the necropolis. Saqqara is situated within walking distance from the country's long-term capital Memphis and the city would have formed an ideal starting point for undertaking regular strolls or pilgrimages. The so-called pleasure walks to the West of Memphis, such as exemplified by the scribe Hednakhte (Firth and Quibell 1935, 82–83, pl. 83; Navrátilová 2007a, 108–110), are testimonies of such undertakings. In addition, the necropolis itself had always been a construction ground. The cemetery was in a continuous state of development and one can easily imagine the large quantity of overseers, artisans and workmen permanently present at the site. Considerable numbers of visitors continued to be received in the finished tombs in the form of priests responsible for the maintenance of the offering cult and family members gathering at the tomb of their direct or more past ancestors. Whereas the majority of graffiti recorded in the Saqqara necropolis are clustered in and around the Step Pyramid complex of king Djoser (*cf.* Firth and Quibell 1935, 77–85; Navrátilová 2007a, 67–129), renewed interest in the Memphite necropolis occurred during the New Kingdom. In particular the tomb of Haremheb, which in the Ramesside Period became the centre of a cult of the deified king (Martin 1989, 72–73), attracted visitors along with a revived interest for the site's more ancient monuments. Thus, a whole range of people frequented such necropoleis, all of whom were potential candidates to have left behind testimonies of their visits.

Since we are dealing with messages inscribed in tombs or temples, one likewise needs to consider the graffiti in a funerary and religious context and therefore take the 'eternal audience' of the deceased and the gods into consideration. The latter audience for example is well attested on the roof of the temple of Khonsu at Karnak. Many of these graffiti were executed by the lower status clergy of the temple personnel. By inscribing their name, title and footprints on the temple roof, these priests would therefore remain forever in the presence of 'their' god (Jacquet-Gordon 2003, 5). In the case of priests inscribing figures, as opposed to their names, an interpretation of the motive is less straightforward. Usually, we could only guess as to their reasons (Dijkstra 2009, 78).

The focus of research on textual graffiti has led scholars to the conclusion that they were left by the "educated or curious-minded" (Peden 2001, 96) rather than the "general peasant population", who, according to Baines and Eyre (2007, 72, n. 6), were unlikely to have visited elite tombs. Indeed, most authors of the textual graffiti that are recorded at Saqqara and Abusir identify themselves as scribes; the illiterate would obviously have been unable to produce written graffiti themselves. However, the occurrence of figural graffiti does not necessarily fit within this overall impression of an educated section of society frequenting the necropolis, visiting specific tombs and leaving graffiti. Many of the scribbles neither allude to an **artistically sophisticated** segment of society. Therefore, would figural graffiti, which parallel their textual equivalent, be considered as grapholects of the Egyptian communication system (Cruz-Uribe 2008a, 1), one naturally wonders to what degree the producers of figural graffiti were literate as well. After all, the hieroglyphic writing system had an essentially figural character (Cruz-Uribe 2008a, 4).

Interpreting figural graffiti: three case studies

In the discussion above several thoughts on graffiti, *i.e.* scope, sense and interpretation, were passed in review in order to establish a framework for further analysis of the figural graffiti to be discussed below. Most of these statements and research results are founded on the analysis of textual graffiti. Unfortunately, comparable studies on figural graffiti are sparse. Most recently, Dijkstra has addressed the need for structuring graffiti when trying to understand the use and reuse of buildings (Dijkstra 2009, 78). Such an approach also underlies the present study, adopted in 2007 when surveying the graffiti discovered in the New Kingdom tomb of Ptahemwia at Saqqara. In the present paper, some preliminary observations of ongoing research on three case studies will be discussed. Particular emphasis will be laid on the interaction of graffiti with the monument's original decoration.

Stela Louvre C8

Stela **Louvre C8 (Fig. 1; limestone, 190×106×14 cm) is attributed to the reign of the 13th dynasty** king Sobekhotep III Sekhemra Sewadjtawy (*c*. 1725–1722 BC). **While its exact provenance is** unknown, the stela is customarily regarded as originating from Coptos (Helck 1975, 17). Internal evidence, however, rather suggests Abydos as the site where the stela once stood (Leahy 1989, 59, n. 85). Two daughters of Sobekhotep III, the princesses Iuhetibu and Dedetanuket, are shown adoring the ithyphallic deity Min in his manifestation as *Mn ḥr nḫt*; Min-Horus-the-victorious. A cult of this deity is well attested in Abydos (Kemp and Merillees 1980, 236), where, during the Middle Kingdom, he was assimilated into the Horus-myth (Hassan 1928, 149; Romanosky

2001, 414–415). The upper part of the lunette contains the winged sun disk with the caption *Bḥdtj nṯr ꜥꜣ sꜣb šwt nb pt*; 'Horus the Behdetite, Great God, Dappled of Plumage, Lord of Heaven'. This caption is followed by an invocation to Osiris (right) and the royal titulary (left). This upper section is separated from the lower half by a *pt* sign running across the stela's full width. The lower half is dominated by the figures of Min and the two princesses, above whom twelve columns of text are indicated. Three lines of text are associated with the figure of Min-Horus and nine are associated with the princesses (Pierret 1878, 107; Helck 1975, 17, no. 25). The latter text is particularly significant from a genealogical perspective for the brief reign of this king (Macadam 1951, 21–22).

   On closer inspection, the surface of the stela appears to be covered with several jackal figures (Fig. 2). Since only standing jackals are depicted, these are most likely to represent the canine funerary deity Wepwawet. None of the published line drawings of the stela (Prisse d'Avennes 1847, pl. 8; Petrie 1924, fig. 121) indicate any of these figural graffiti, nor are these later additions mentioned in the literature. Two aspects of these jackal figures are particularly noteworthy. Judging from their execution, different techniques were used: both scratched and incised. This observation therefore hypothesises an application by different individuals. When considering the arrangement and orientation of the figures, one notices that all of them are facing right, oriented towards the image of Min-Horus. Furthermore, their close proximity to, and alignment with the three key figures implies their direct association. Therefore those responsible
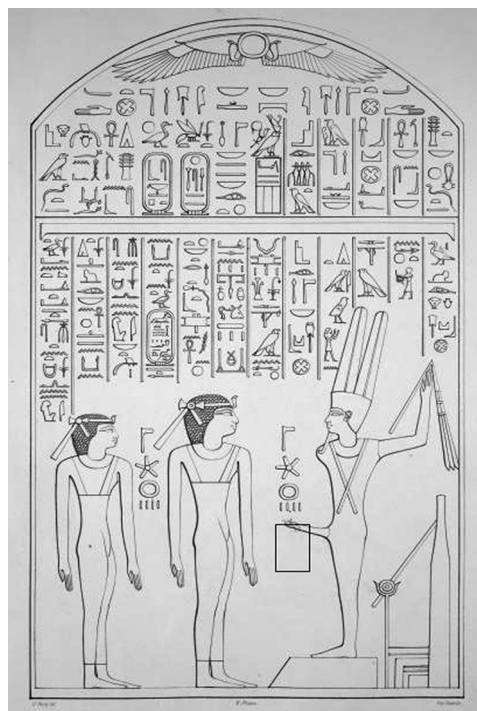

Figure 1. Stela Louvre C8. **The square indicates the position of figure 2** (Adapted from Prisse d'Avennes 1847, pl. VIII).

Figure 2. Detail of stela Louvre C8: jackal head atop an ankh-sign (Photograph: N. Staring, image not to scale).

for the graffiti's execution considered with the original decoration when replenishing it for their own purpose. The resulting alignment of figures is reminiscent of the New Kingdom Salakhana votive stelae from Asyut, dedicated to Wepwawet (Munro 1962; DuQuesne 2007). As opposed to the Salakhana stelae, the jackals on Louvre C8 are not part of the original decoration and are oriented in line with the adoring subjects (*i.e.* the princesses) towards Min.

In the example presented by stela Louvre C8 we are clearly dealing with the continued attention to and (re-)use of an already existing monument. The exact purpose of this re-use remains yet to be determined. The jackal figures, most probably to be associated with Wepwawet, at least suggest a funerary connotation. The fact that people were able to add graffiti to the stela implies that it must have been visible and accessible in its original position.

A parallel for the continued attention to funerary stelae is presented for example by stela Glasgow City Museum and Art Gallery '23–33ad, originally from tomb 328.A.07 in Abydos (Kemp and Merillees 1980, 235–236, fig. 73). The owner of the stela, Sobekhotep, is shown with both hands raised in an adoring gesture towards Min-Horus-the-victorious. The yellow paint that originally covered the image of Min has obviously been worn away by rubbing. The act of rubbing thus suggests a sustained reverence for this funerary monument, as do the graffiti on stela Louvre C8.

Unfortunately, the context and original setting of the Louvre stela remains obscure. This drawback renders a further interpretation of the graffiti extremely difficult.

Tomb of Ptahemwia

In 2007, the Dutch mission working in the New Kingdom necropolis at Saqqara discovered the tomb of a royal butler called Ptahemwia (Raven *et al.* 2007). The tomb is built in mud-brick and a substantial part of its limestone paving, revetment, and architectural elements have
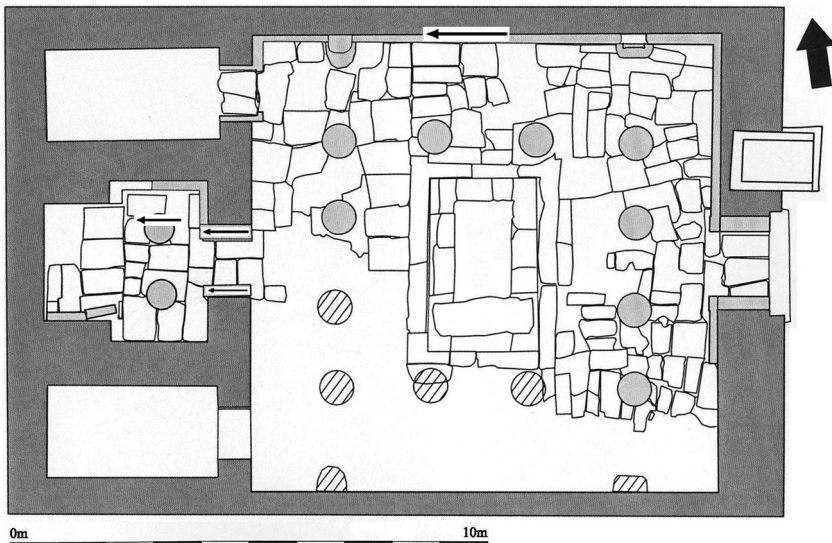

Figure 3. Plan of the tomb of Ptahemwia. The location and orientation of the jackal graffiti is indicated by arrows (Adapted from Raven et al. 2007, fig. 2).

been preserved. Measuring approximately 16×10.5 m, the funerary monument's superstructure consists of an entrance pylon, a peristyle courtyard, and three chapels for the offering cult of the deceased. The northern limestone revetment contains remains of the original decoration in sunk relief, enabling the tomb to be dated to the reign of Akhenaten (1353–1335 BC) (Raven *et al.* 2007, 26).

The tomb additionally proved to contain a strikingly large number (forty-six) of figural and written graffiti. The graffiti had consistently been applied to the undecorated dado (Raven *et al.* 2007, 24) and therefore do not interfere with the original decoration. In some instances the graffiti were undoubtedly inspired by the tomb's initial decoration. Such an example is presented by a nearly identical copy of the tomb owner depicted on the north wall of the courtyard (Raven *et al.* 2007, fig. 8). Others appear to resemble mere 'momentary ideas or inspirations'. One particularly conspicuous ensemble of graffiti consists of nine standing jackal figures depicted atop standards (Fig. 4) and often accompanied by a bulge, identified as a *uraeus* (Graefe 1986, 863). These are distributed over the north wall of the courtyard (two), both faces of the entrance doorway to the central chapel (six), and on the north papyriform column in the central chapel (one) (Fig. 3). All but one specimen were painted in red ochre, which implies that those responsible for

Figure 4. Dipinto of a jackal on a divine stand. Central chapel, north column, north side.

their execution had to bring writing utensils. Their application was therefore probably not decided upon on-the-spot, which is often the case for scratched and incised graffiti. As for the latter, one would only need access to a sharp tool, which would be easily available in the area surrounding the tomb. Painted graffiti, or *dipinti* (Dijkstra 2009, 77), were more likely left behind with a clear purpose in mind.

It is noteworthy that all jackals face uniformly towards the west, *i.e.* the inner sanctum of the central cult chapel. A second 'systemic' pragmatic phase (Van Walsem 2007, 31) in the use-life of the tomb, *i.e.* after the initial burial of the original tomb owner, is testified by the use of the western chapels for mass burial as from the end of the New Kingdom until the Third Intermediate Period. The jackal figures, most probably to be identified as the funerary deity Wepwawet who in his capacity as 'opener of the ways' leads the deceased through the paths of the underworld, could possibly be seen in connection to (the funerary cult of) these later burials, which is also reinforced by the archaeological context. It is salient that these later, 'unofficial' additions seem to be reckoning with the original tomb decoration. Thus we have the paradox of intrusive burials violating another persons' tomb, while at
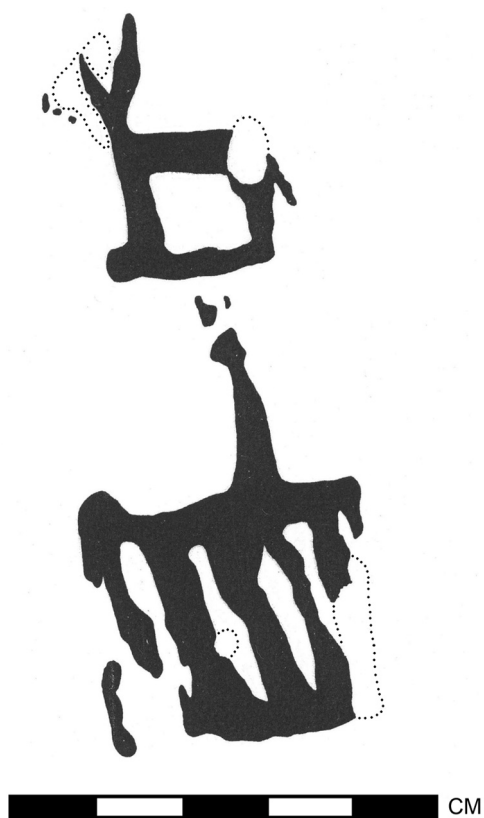
the same time acknowledging its decoration scheme, which as a result remained unaffected. Practical considerations should however be kept in mind. The extent of available flat wall surface, something often contingent for the quantity and size of graffiti (Cruz-Uribe 2008a, 2), offered by the undecorated dado naturally makes it a primary location anyway.
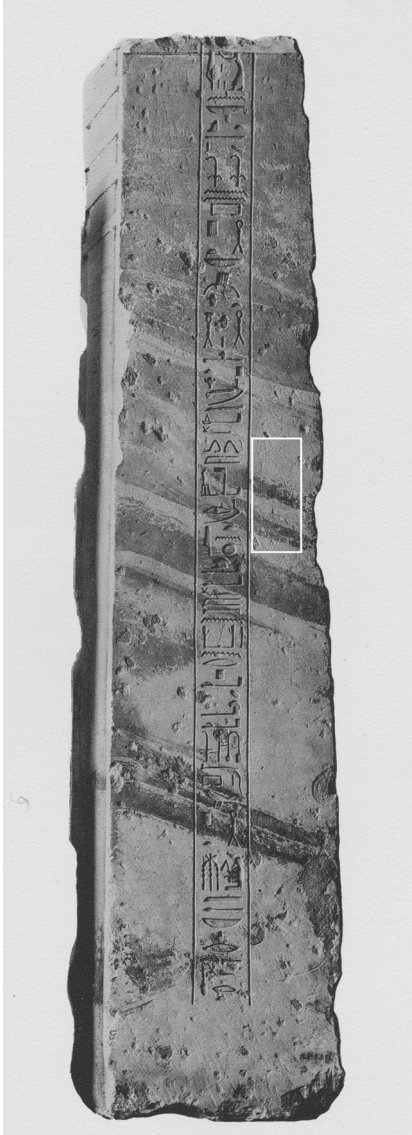

Figure 5. Pillar 4 [d.4] from the tomb of Ptahmose (Adapted from Boeser 1911, pl. XXIX [4 d.4].

Pillars from the tomb of Ptahmose

In search for comparative material in the Memphite necropolis for the graffiti of Ptahemwia, pillars from the tomb of Ptahmose (19th dynasty) provide parallels. Originally from the collection of J. D'Anastasy (Boeser 1911, 8), the National Museum of Antiquities (RMO) in Leiden contains several architectural elements from his tomb that should be sited in the Memphite necropolis of Saqqara, although its exact location is lost. The four pillars (inv. AP.51) would originally have constituted part of the entrance of the tomb (Boeser 1911, pl. XXVI–**XXIX**).

The sides of the pillars all indicate the *Djed*-pillar, the back sides display a single column of text, and the front sides contain an image of the tomb owner represented in an adoring pose. The four columns of text above his figure present hymns to Osiris and Re.

Figure 6. Graffito of a human head adorned with the white crown, on pillar 4 [d.4] (Drawing: N. Staring).

Figure 7. Pillar 4 [d.1] from the tomb of Ptahmose (Adapted from Boeser 1911, pl. XXVI [4 d.1].

Three pillars contain a figure scratched just above Ptahmose's hands that are held up in adoration. In the example reproduced as figure 8, the graffito appears to be resembling a cynocephalus (Boeser 1911, 8), or baboon. The orientation of this figure, as well as that of the two jackal-like figures on the other pillars, is in concordance with the orientation of the figure of Ptahmose. The scratched and incised lines of the graffito do not interfere with the original decoration. On the reverse of the same pillar, halfway and just to the right of the text column, a human head adorned with the white crown could be discerned (Fig. 6). The orientation of this head (facing right) is not in harmony with the orientation of the hieroglyphs (facing left). It is however noteworthy that the shallow incised lines of this graffito appear to be covered by a layer of yellow paint. The identification of this substance as paint (Boeser 1911, 8) is however contentious; encrustation might be another option (Raven, *personal communication*). While its constitution should be verified yet, the identification of the substance as paint would imply that the graffito had been applied before the pillar was finished and eventually was obscured by a final layer of paint. The royal head as a motif for graffiti is certainly not exceptional in the

Figure 8. Graffito of a cynocephalus on pillar 4 [d.1.] (Photograph: N. Staring).

New Kingdom necropolis of Saqqara. In the tomb of Ptahemwia similar heads were found (seven examples), while the nearby tomb of Haremheb contains the complete figure of a standing king (Martin 1989, 159 [Gr. 15], pl. 149.). However, none of these heads is adorned with the white crown, which renders the Ptahmose graffito so far unique in Saqqara.

Concluding remarks

The reluctance to document and the subsequent loss of figural graffiti is aptly illustrated by the demise of graffiti in and around the Step Pyramid complex of king Djoser at Saqqara. As early photographs in the archives of G. B. Gunn illustrate, the walls of such structures as the South Chapel were covered with figural and textual (New Kingdom) graffiti (Navrátilová 2007a, pls. 7, 8, 13, 14). Only the latter appeared in publication (Firth and Quibell 1935, 77–**86, pl.** 83). Consequently, much initially available reference material, containing significant information on the Egyptians' use, reuse and attitude towards contemporary and ancient monuments has vanished undocumented. With the present paper I aim at contributing to the discussion on this highly neglected subject through an analysis of graffiti on three isolated case studies. Utilising new material unearthed in excavation additionally establishes a secure context for the graffiti, and provides valuable information that contributes to its interpretation. Well known museum pieces likewise might yield revealing graffiti that have never received thorough scholarly attention before.

The originally realised appearance of a monument, either a stela or tomb, does not present us with explicit information on its eventual perception by observers both contemporary and future. The use, reuse, and perception of a funerary monument can all be conceivably studied through its subsequently applied (figural) graffiti. Here therefore appears to be a dichotomy between sense and practical use. As opposed to actual vandalism, the applications of graffiti reviewed in the examples above merely add to, and conform with the original decoration of a monument. The original decoration is therefore respected while adding 'marks and scribbles', and effectively replenishes the value of the monument. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the original and extant decoration might not necessarily have been relevant or understood by the people who added the graffiti.

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