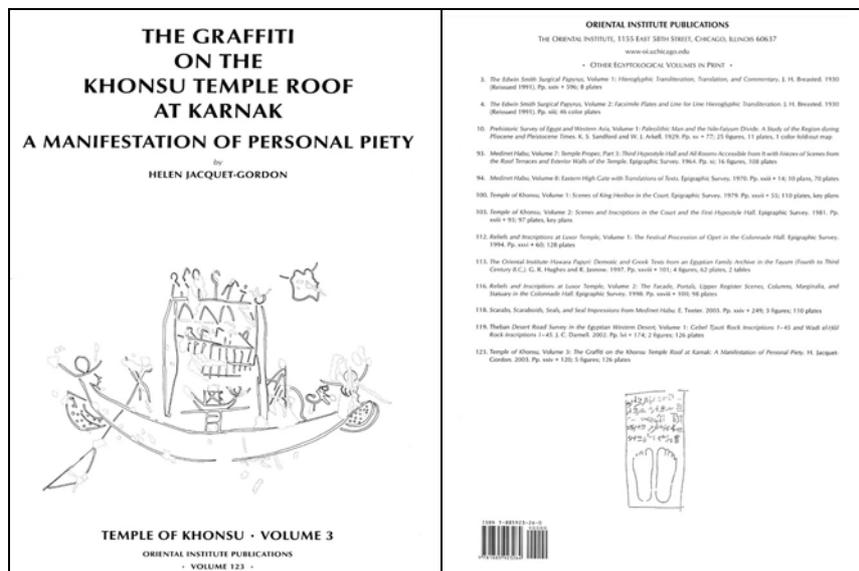


Jacquet-Gordon, H. 2003. The graffiti on the Khonsu Temple roof at Karnak. A manifestation of personal piety. – Chicago, The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

Book review by F. Hagen



This book has been a long time coming. The basic research that underlies the publication was done as early 1955-1956, and it is regrettable that it has taken so long for the results to finally see the light of day, for it offers a considerable amount of data that is relevant to the study of a variety of sub-fields of Egyptology.

Ancient Egyptian graffiti has long been neglected by Egyptologists (a notable exception is Peden, 2001) in favour of the more visually impressive and aesthetically pleasing official inscriptions found on temples, tombs and stelae. Graffiti however, can often yield information that is at least as valuable and interesting, because through them one can glimpse aspects of every-day life among classes of people that are rarely mentioned or even acknowledged in the official rhetoric of kings and governments. Graffiti are as texts less dominated by rigid decorum both of form and content and they are often revealing in ways that formalised discourse is not. The existence of the graffiti presented in this book has long been known, and some have occasionally been published elsewhere. Examples were included in the ‘Description de l’Égypte’ (vol. III pl. 57; cf. Neret, 1997), the great report published by Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt in 1798, and Jacquet-Gordon herself has published examples elsewhere (1979) but the majority is published here for the first time. As the author points out (p. 3), similar graffiti are found on other Egyptian monuments like Medinet Habu, Edfu and Philae, so the graffiti from Karnak must be analysed as part of a wider Egyptian practice. The number and state of preservation notwithstanding, the Karnak inscriptions are not unique and must be seen in their wider context.

The introductory pages (pp. 1-8) contain a brief discussion of the local context of the graffiti: the find spots, the contents, the authors, the purpose of the graffiti, etc. As the title of the book suggests, the graffiti are found on the roof-blocks of the Khonsu temple at Karnak, but also on the staircases leading up to the roof. In form they are largely homogenous, mostly consisting of a pair of footprints engraved into the stone, often accompanied by the titles and name of the owner. Occasionally more elaborate versions include a threat-formula warning any would-be defacers of the consequences of their actions. A well-preserved example is graffiti no. 145 (p. 55, pl. 55), which reads: “Year four, second month of Shomu, day 26 of Pharaoh Shoshenq Beloved-of-Amun. Made by the god’s father of Khonsu Djed-iah son of Khonsu-em-heb son of Pen-ta-opet. Khonsu in Thebes Nefer-hotep, the very great god (*ntr ʿ3 wr*), the first to come into existence, says: ‘(As for) him who erases the footprints of Djed-iah, my servant, I will erase his name from the Benben, the great and splendid temple (*p3 pr ʿ3 šps*), and I will not permit his son to be installed in the place of his father.’” This particular graffiti is written in hieratic, but there are also examples of hieroglyphic (for example no. 148, 152) and demotic (for example no. 176, 183), and possibly even Carian (no. 184). Not all graffiti are accompanied by texts: footprints sometimes occur on their own (such as no. 51, 296), boats or barks are regularly depicted (especially on staircase M: no. 297, 298, 299, 300, 304, 305A-B, 306, 307, 309, 311), as well as a range of other objects. Even game boards (*senet*, *sigā*, etc.) are found inscribed on the roofblocks (no. 63, 223 and 243), and, as Jacquet-Gordon (p. 6) notes, they are often found “in the shady area at the base of the pylon, where the players were protected from the sun during most of the year”. The gameboards thus reveal an aspect of temple life that is unattested in more official sources.

The authors of the graffiti, where names and titles are preserved, are invariably low-ranking individuals (*wab*-priests and god's fathers), and, significantly, these are in most cases associated with the temple of Khonsu itself. The graffiti are, in other words, the work of the priests of the temple, and not of travellers or visitors to the site. This raises the question of why the graffiti were engraved in the first place. The book's subtitle ('A manifestation of personal piety') encapsulates the basic thrust of the author's argument. The graffiti represent the efforts of lower-ranking individuals who, unlike their superiors, did not have the opportunity to erect a statue or stela inside the temple proper. However, these low-ranking priests had access to the roof due to their involvement in the temple, and they exploited this in order to preserve for eternity "their names and their physical presence in the consciousness of the god who had been in life their patron and protector" (p. 8).

As mentioned, the title of the book includes the phrase 'personal piety', an expression that to Egyptologists carry a range of quite specific connotations. It alludes to the increase in the range of expressions of personal religiosity that occur in art, architecture, archaeology and texts in the Ramesside period, and although a well-known phenomenon, the interpretation of this historical development remains controversial. The traditional interpretation, advocated today perhaps primarily by Assmann (1996, 1997), sees the development as representing a change in underlying beliefs. On the other hand, scholars like Baines (1987, 1991, 2001) and, implicitly, Kemp (1995) have recently questioned this, preferring to attribute the development to a change in the decorum that governs the expressions of religiosity, rather than to a change in the extent and form of personal religious belief. The use in the title of this book of the phrase 'personal piety' with all its connotations is, I think, unfortunate, because it associates the graffiti with this ongoing debate but without engaging with it.

Although the purpose of the graffiti was, at least in part, to retain a link between the person inscribing it and the temple, the practice reflects a more complex situation. The graffiti in general can, as Jacquet-Gordon herself notes (p. 5), be profitably compared to the practice among high-ranking priests of depositing statues dedicated to gods in parts of the temple. This raises questions relating to hierarchy and professional identity, and the threat-formulae included in many of the graffiti hint at possible tensions within the priesthood itself (*cf.* graffiti no. 273 which has been deliberately scratched out). To label them simply as a 'manifestation of personal piety' appears to me somewhat reductive, especially as some of the graffiti make it clear that the priests considered their service in the temple as part of a pattern of reciprocity, similar to that which characterises the earlier Letters to the Dead: "Oh Lord of Truth, I am your servant. Cause [my] annals to endure in your temple every day (*imi mn gnwty [=i] m pr=k r^c nb*), (for) I have provided for your beloved place (during) every feast..." (no.152, sim. nos. 167 and 275).

The catalogue itself (pp. 12-111) is user friendly and well-presented. Each entry is accompanied by a small line drawing of the graffiti, and this serves as an illustration for both the description and the discussion of the graffiti. These small-scale drawings greatly facilitate the navigation of the catalogue, and are complemented by the corresponding facsimile drawings and photographs in the plates section (pls. 1-126).

In terms of sophistication the texts vary enormously. Perhaps the most interesting in that respect is graffiti 292 (p. 101, pl. 113), dated by the author to the 30th dynasty or later. This is an imperfectly preserved hieroglyphic inscription, but its modest appearance and formulaic contents do not reflect its intricate composition. The following diagram illustrates the complexity of its arrangement:

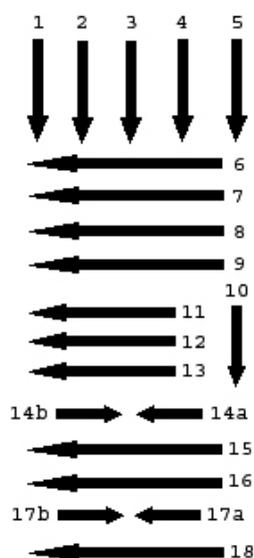


Figure 1. Schematic representation of graffiti no. 292. Arrows indicate reading direction, numbers indicate sequence.

Here line 10 (*s3 mi nn* “Son of the like-entitled man”) is to be repeated before each of the names in lines 11, 12 and 13.

Lines 14 (a and b) and 17 (a and b) are also rather ingeniously composed:



(14a) *mrr hns w pw* (14b) *mrr nsw pw*

“What Khonsu loves and what the king loves [is that every libation priest and *wab*-priest who enters the temple should praise my *ka* before Khonsu]”



(17a) *msdd hns w pw* (17b) *msdd nsw pw*

“What Khonsu detests and what the king detests [is that this [...] should cease to exist in the Benenet of Thebes]”

In both cases *-pw*, although written only once and with the two signs facing opposite directions, forms the latter part of both sections (a) and (b): a condensed writing that exploits the versatility of the hieroglyphic script. It may be significant that the author of this particular inscription carries the title “lector-priest” (*hry-hb*) in addition to the common titles “*wab*-priest” and “god’s father”; certainly graffiti 292 supersedes many of the others in its display of skill, both in execution and design.

H. Jacquet-Gordon’s book will no doubt be of use for scholars researching a wide range of subjects within Egyptology. Those interested in the organisation of, and life in, Egyptian temples will find it rewarding, both in terms of non-professional activities not attested elsewhere (playing games) and social structures (families of priests, low-ranking members of the priesthoods, etc.). The inscriptions also offer an opportunity to study degrees of literacy among low-ranking officials; the graffiti range from well-executed to poorly written, and there are even examples of what appears to be illiterates emulating hieratic (nos. 206, 227). The potential for research regarding the chronology of the 22nd and 23rd dynasties has already been demonstrated by Jacquet-Gordon herself, and included the identification of a previously unknown king (king Iny; Jacquet-Gordon, 1979: 174-183). The graffiti also illuminate the link between the use of theophorous names in families and their priestly duties in the temple of the corresponding god; a reminder perhaps, that such names may not be devoid of meaning for the individual concerned.

Jacquet-Gordon, H. 2003. The graffiti on the Khonsu Temple roof at Karnak. A manifestation of personal piety (Temple of Khonsu vol. 3). – Chicago, The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago Publications. 112 pp. ISBN 1885923260. Price £70.00 (hardback). Distributed by Oxbow Books www.oxbowbooks.com.

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