

FIGURAL GRAFFITI FROM THE BASILICA OF ST. PHILOXENOS AT OXYRHYNCHUS (EL-BAHNASA, EGYPT)

GRAFFITI FIGURATIVOS DE LA BASÍLICA DE SAN FILÓXENO EN OXIRRINCO (EL-BAHNASA, EGIPTO)

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ABSTRACT

Oxyrhynchus represents a key settlement for understanding the phenomena of continuity and transformation in the long transition to Christianity. The importance of this city and its religious panorama even after the Islamic conquest is testified by the wealth of textual and archaeological evidence unearthed over more than one century of archaeological investigations. New essential testimonies are offered by the excavations carried out since 2013 by the Mission of the University of Barcelona within the area of a Christian religious complex (Sector 24), which has led to the discovery of a rich *corpus* of figural and textual graffiti. Some of this evidence was found painted or scratched on stone slabs, which were probably used in antiquity to seal the underground galleries of this religious building. After a brief introduction to the history of the site and the aforementioned Christian complex, the present contribution will offer an overview of a group of figural graffiti discovered in this area. Their examination in light of the textual and archaeological sources offered by this settlement and considering the parallels provided by other contemporary cultic spaces will offer some glimpses into the social and cultic background of the devotees visiting the holy site and leaving a trace of their passage on the walls of this sanctuary.

Keywords: Oxyrhynchus, Christianity, Basilica of St. Philoxenos, non-textual graffiti, drawings.

RESUMEN

Oxirrinco representa un asentamiento clave para la comprensión de los fenómenos de continuidad y transformación en la larga transición al cristianismo. La importancia de esta ciudad y de su panorama religioso incluso después de la conquista islámica queda atestiguada por la riqueza de los testimonios textuales y arqueológicos desenterrados a lo largo de más de un siglo de investigaciones arqueológicas. Nuevos testimonios esenciales son ofrecidos por las investigaciones llevadas a cabo desde 2013 por la Misión de la Universidad de Barcelona en el área de un complejo cristiano (Sector 24), ha permitido descubrir un rico corpus de graffiti figurados y textuales. Algunas de estas evidencias se encontraron pintadas o dibujadas sobre los bloques de piedra, que se encontraban entre los materiales arquitectónicos que formaban el estrato de relleno del expolio de la cripta de este edificio religioso. Tras una breve introducción a la historia del yacimiento y del mencionado complejo cristiano, la presente contribución ofrecerá una visión general de un grupo de grafitos figurados aquí descubiertos. Su examen a la luz de las fuentes textuales y arqueológicas que ofrece este asentamiento y considerando los paralelismos que ofrecen otros espacios culturales contemporáneos permitirá vislumbrar el trasfondo social y cultural de los devotos que visitaban el lugar sagrado y dejaban la huella de su paso en los muros de este santuario.

Palabras clave: Oxirrinco, Cristianismo, Basílica de San Filóxeno, graffiti no textuales, dibujos.

1. INTRODUCTION

The ruins of the ancient city of Oxyrhynchus lay near the modern village of el-Bahnasa (province of Minya), around 190 km from the city of Cairo. Its location is certainly not fortuitous since the settlement was a crossroads for the caravan routes that led to the oases of the western desert and today's Libya. The presence of an important harbour on the Bahr Yussef River turned the city already in the Dynastic period into a vital distribution centre of goods which connected the Mediterranean to the south of Egypt (Figure 1).

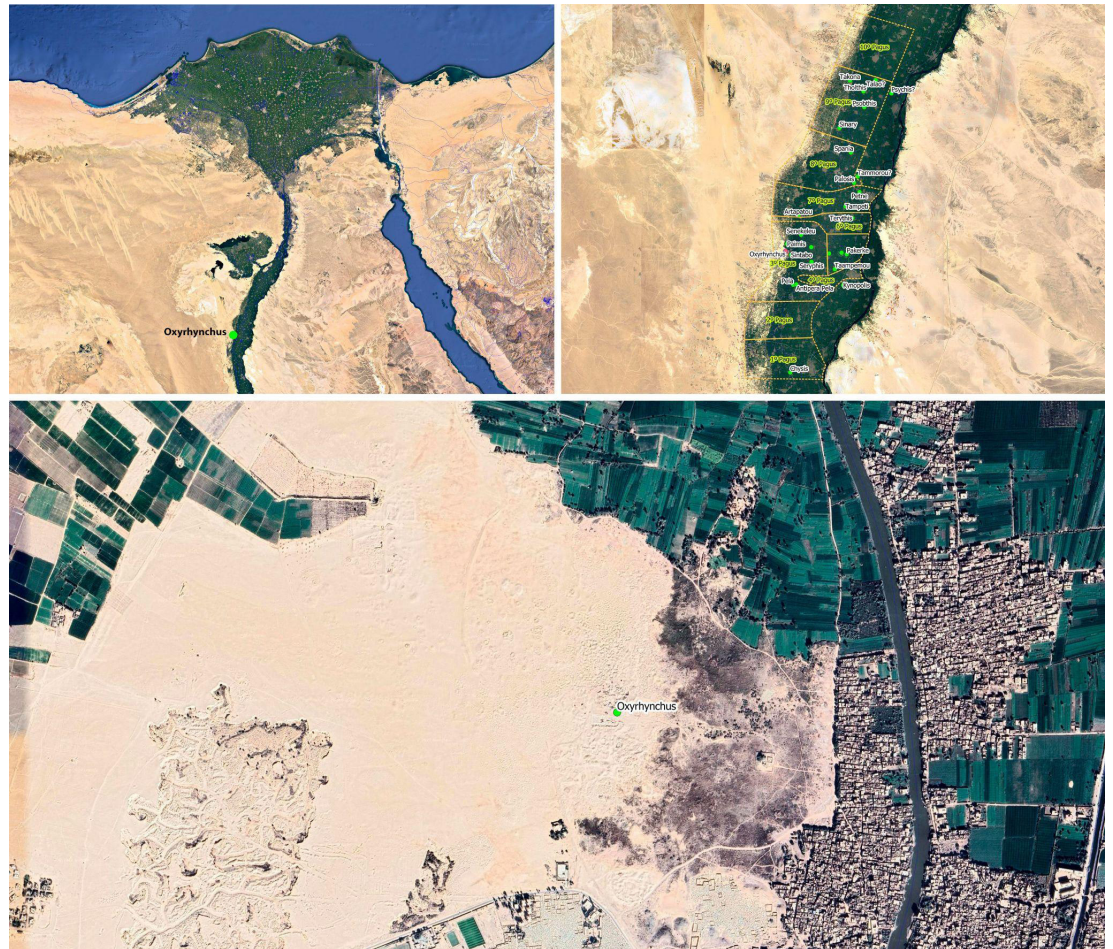


Figure 1. Location map of the city of Oxyrhynchus with the *pagos* (top right) and aerial view of the city showing the ancient urban areas, necropolis, and city's walls.

From the Saite period, the city known as *Pr-Mdd* became the capital of the nineteenth *nomos* of Upper Egypt. After the conquest of Alexander the Great (332 BCE), the newcomers named the old *Pr-Mdd*, Oxyrhynchus “The City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish”, and the town experienced a new phase of prosperity which endured throughout the Ptolemaic and Roman phases. In the Late Antique period, the city became known as *Pemdje*, ceasing to be the capital of the nineteenth *nomos* of Upper Egypt and becoming the administrative centre of the vast province of Arcadia, formed between 386 and 400 CE (Keenan, 1977).

The first modern report on the archaeological remains of this ancient site goes back to the beginning of the nineteenth century when Vivant Denon, following the Napoleonic expedition, visited el-Bahnasa, providing the first brief description of the archaeological landscape of this settlement (Denon, 1802). Almost one hundred years later, in 1886 the settlement began to be extensively investigated by Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt (Grenfell, 1897), who concentrated their efforts on excavating several rubbish dumps surrounding the modern village. In the course of various archaeological campaigns that ended in 1907 (Grenfell and Hunt, 1907) they unearthed over half a million papyrus texts, which still represent today a discovery that has no parallels.

The site was then subject to several surveys begun with Ermenegildo Pistelli and Giulio

Farina between 1910 and 1914 (Turner, 1952: 80; Bastianini and Casanova, 2009: 46), followed by Flinders Petrie in 1922 (Petrie, 1925: 12-18), and Evaristo Breccia who investigated the site between 1927 and 1934 (Breccia 1933; Breccia, 1934-1937; Pintaudi, 2007: 104-108). The long abandonment of the settlement led to numerous clandestine excavations, which finally promoted a new season of archaeological interventions by Ali El-Khouli in 1982 (Leclant, 1984: 370; Leclant and Clerc, 1985: 363) and Mahmoud Hamza in 1984 (Leclant and Clerc, 1986: 265). Almost a decade later, in 1992 the investigations of the University of Barcelona directed by Josép Padró until 2019 started. The excavations are currently supervised by Maite Mascort Roca and Esther Pons Mellado¹.

Over the last thirty years of archaeological investigations carried out at this site, several archaeological remains were unearthed and investigated, thus offering essential insights into the ancient Oxyrhynchite urban landscape. The data acquired so far, help us in tracing the transformations of the settlement over the centuries, from the Late Pharaonic period until the phase following the Muslim conquest, highlighting its complex multicultural panorama.

Several areas of the site have already been subject to extensive archaeological investigations; among which are, the so-called High Necropolis, the Osireion, the Basilica of St. Philoxenos and the monumental gate of the city (Erroux-Morfin and Padró, 2008; Mascort, 2016; Padró, 2007; Padró et al., 2014; Pons Mellado, 2021; Subías, 2003; Subías, 2008). On the other hand, papyri allow us to widen our knowledge of the urban panorama of this ancient site. They indeed provide information on a considerable number of civil, religious, and administrative buildings yet to be discovered and excavated. Considering these sources, the integration between archaeological and textual evidence remains essential for reconstructing the main features of this Egyptian settlement between the Greco-Roman and the Late Antique phase.

2. THE BASILICA OF ST. PHILOXENOS

This religious complex, the life span of which might be confined between the fifth and the late eighth or early ninth century CE,² is located in the so-called Sector 24 of the High Necropolis, where excavations have been carried out since 2009 (Padró et al., 2018, 2020).

The building (90 x 30 m) has an east orientation and comprises five aisles, a central crypt and the basilica apse to the east (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Aerial photo of the Basilica of St. Philoxenos in 2016 with the location in green where the blocks were found.

- 1 The archaeological intervention in this sector has been possible thanks to the aid of the Ministry of Culture and Sports of Spain, University of Barcelona-IPOA, Palarq Foundation and Catalan Society of Egyptology. The research for this contribution was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany's Excellence Strategy – EXC 2176 'Understanding Written Artefacts: Material, Interaction and Transmission in Manuscript Cultures', project no. 390893796. The research was conducted within the scope of the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC) at Universität Hamburg.
- 2 This chronology is suggested by textual and archaeological evidence, among which the discovery of a graffito preserving the Coptic transliteration of an Arabic name written on the stone slab *Inv. no.* 470. This evidence, soon to be published by the writers, was found inside the basilica in a context sealed before its destruction.

The different architectural elements found in the sector; bases, columns, capitals, plinths and lintels remark the magnitude of the space consecrated to a saint whose identity was unknown before the beginning of the investigations within the crypt and the study of the graffiti here discovered. The comparative examination of graffiti and papyrological evidence has allowed us to reconstruct its peculiar function in the religious panorama of Late Antique Oxyrhynchus.

The studies currently undertaken on the archaeological, papyrological, and epigraphic documentation found over the last years of archaeological investigations (Mascia and Martínez, 2021; Padró et al., 2018) seem to support the identification of this religious institution with the basilica of St. Philoxenos, which served as an important religious institution probably from the fifth century onwards.

Indeed, the Oxyrhynchite papyri provide numerous references to a religious institution consecrated to St. Philoxenos.³ Even though, only a few of them, such as *P.Oxy. XVI 1950* (24 January 487 CE), offer a possible date for the use of the area as a religious space already in the late fifth century CE. Further evidence is provided by *P.Oxy. XVI 2041* (sixth-seventh CE), a document recording the transportation of building materials from a nearby settlement. These activities may have been associated with building renovations which presumably interested the religious complex in the sixth century CE (Papaconstantinou, 2005). Other documents, like *P.Oxy. XI 1357* records a festival devoted to St. Philoxenos on the 22nd day of the month of Khoiak and another on the 12th day of the month of Phamenoth, thus offering more tangible information regarding the religious celebrations associated with this local saint (Papaconstantinou, 1996: 150). Beyond doubt, textual and archaeological evidence underlines the importance of this martyr, St. Philoxenos, in the religious panorama of Oxyrhynchus.

Thanks to the investigations undertaken in the course of several campaigns and the comparative study of textual and archaeological sources, we can also begin to reconstruct the structural characteristics of this religious complex. The basilica has a floor plan resembling that of the church of Antinoupolis (Grossmann, 2002: 55); however, the Oxyrhynchite religious complex took advantage of structures belonging to a more ancient edifice. These spaces were transformed into the crypt of the Christian building, which is accessed through a 12 metres long ramp that starts at the foot of the basilica's altar.

The crypt has a quadrangular main chamber measuring eight metres on each side, which provides access to another central space that served as a corridor leading to two vaulted chambers, located to the north and the south. This crypt has an east-west orientation but with a deviation in its inclination of 10° with respect to the axis of the basilica. This fact seems to demonstrate that at the time of the basilica reconstruction, the project of the original crypt was significantly changed and the south chamber was amortised, considering that the foundations of the columns are located in this chamber.

It is interesting to notice how the Basilica of St. Philoxenos, as suggested by several oracle tickets⁴ and now confirmed by various graffiti discovered in the building⁵, inherited in the early Byzantine phase⁶ the role previously held by the Sarapeion, becoming the main oracle centre of the city⁷. While we still lack precise evidence on the nature of the pre-existing building on which ruins the Christian sanctuary was built, the continuity of the ancient oracular practice in this basilica might lead us to consider the possible identification of this complex with the Greco-Roman temple of Serapis.

3 *P.Oxy. LXVII 4617* (400-499 CE); *P.Oxy. LXVII 4620* (475-550 CE); *P.Oxy. XVI 1950* (487 CE); *PSI VII 791* (500-599 CE); *P.Oxy. XI 1357* (535-536 CE); *P.Oxy. XVI 2041=P.Cairo 10122* (500-699 CE); *P.Lond. V 1762* (500-699 CE).

4 *P.Oxy. VIII 1150* (sixth CE); *P.Oxy. XVI 1926* (sixth CE); *P.Rendel Harris 54* (sixth CE).

5 A corpus of over 150 figural and textual graffiti have been documented in the crypt and annexed underground chambers, some of which seem to testify to the performance of divination practices inside the building. These testimonies are currently under study by the writers.

6 The association between St. Philoxenos and the divinatory practices attested by the Oxyrhynchite oracle tickets has been the object of several studies already in the past (Papaconstantinou, 2001, 336-337).

7 Numerous are the oracle tickets addressed to Serapis or possibly associated with his cult published thus far: *P.Oxy. VIII 1148* (first CE); *P.Oxy. LXXIV 5017* (first-second CE); *P.Oxy. VIII 1149* (second CE); *P.Oxy. IX 1213* (second CE); *P.Oxy. XXXI 2613* (second CE); *P.Oxy. XLII 3078* (second CE); *P.Oxy. VI 923* (175-225 CE). Several studies have been devoted to the production of oracle tickets in Roman and Late Antique Egypt (Papini, 1990; and Papini, 1992).

3. THE FIGURAL GRAFFITI OF THE BASILICA OF ST. PHILOXENOS

This *corpus* of evidence came to light in the course of the investigations of the religious complex in 2013⁸, part of a considerable number of architectural fragments preserving predominantly textual graffiti. These materials were probably used in antiquity to seal the underground galleries after the extensive plundering of this religious complex (Padró et al., 2013: 10-12). The study of these sources in association with the ongoing publication of the rich textual *repertoire* here discovered has an essential value in reaching a deeper understanding of the social setting surrounding the Basilica of St. Philoxenos in Late Antique Oxyrhynchus.

The present article is on the line with numerous contributions recently devoted to the study of non-textual graffiti (i.e. drawings/images), sources which have remained too often at the margins of scholarly interests.

At first glance, it might appear that in Christian Egypt the number of figural graffiti significantly decreased, especially if compared with their Pharaonic and Greco-Roman ancestors. However, this phenomenon rather than reflecting a broader diffusion of literacy in Late Antiquity, a subject which remains under debate (Wipszycka, 1984; Bagnall, 1993: 255-260), might have been directly associated with the abandonment of traditional writing systems⁹.

The evidence recorded in many Egyptian settlements, among which Oxyrhynchus, proves indeed the important role played still by figural graffiti and the continuity of their amuletic value in Christian religious contexts.

Various Christian non-textual graffiti have been recorded, for instance, at the site of Antinoupolis (Pintaudi, 2017: 471-487 and Delattre, 2017: 496-497, 503-508). Several Christian figural graffiti have also been identified in the Temple of Isis at Aswan (Dijkstra, 2012), which was later transformed into a Christian religious complex (Dijkstra, 2009: 85-90, 93; Dijkstra, 2010: 36-37; Dijkstra, 2013: 61, 67-68). Christian figural graffiti are also well-attested in the Temple of Seti I at Abydos and the associated Osierion, although only a few have been published so far (Piankoff, 1958-1960; Westerfeld, 2017: 199, 203-204).

The Oxyrhynchite graffiti help us in re-thinking and visually understanding how this religious complex was experienced as a social space since various pieces of evidence seem to demonstrate that many of these graffiti were made when the stone blocks originally pertaining to the walls of the building were still *in situ*¹⁰. This element appears to reinforce the hypothesis that graffiti practices were diffused in a phase in which the basilica was still an active religious centre. Furthermore, it offers a different idea of the physical appearance of this religious complex, the walls of which most likely should be imagined as originally framed by a variety of graffiti left by devotees visiting this holy site.

An in-depth examination of the available evidence discloses important information regarding the agency behind these graffiti practices. The specific choice of the tools adopted in the production of these figural motifs might help us to link these sources to specific groups of visitors. Like in most ancient settlements where graffiti have been recorded across the Mediterranean, charcoal and/or graphite¹¹ were, in the Basilica of St. Philoxenos, clearly the principal raw materials selected in the production of graffiti, mainly because easily accessible to everyone in both domestic and public spaces. For instance, remains of burned wood in fire spots could be found crossing the city and even in the area of this religious complex.

On the other hand, it is interesting to notice the recurrent use of red pigment and brushes for the production not only of some of these figural graffiti but also a variety of

8 For digital image processing we have used an image enhancement technique based on decorrelation stretching. For their classification we have adopted and followed the same inventory number provided by the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities for the registration of antiquities kept in the warehouse of el-Bahnasa.

9 (Cruz-Urbe, 2008: 4)

10 For instance, the stone slab *Inv. no.* 464 was clearly originally in connection with another specimen; for further insights see the dedicated section 3.3. 'The black devil'. Other evidence is offered by various inscribed materials currently under study by the writers.

11 On the production of ancient graffiti using these specific materials, see DiBiasie-Sammons, 2022.

inscriptions recorded in the same area.¹² We can imagine that pilgrims unlikely visited this religious site equipped with such tools; in this sense, perhaps this material choice reflects a practice performed within the membership of the local religious institutions, which easily had access to media generally among the equipment of professional scribes and artisans¹³.

In several cases, the depicted subjects can be clearly associated with a religious context, representing indeed themes recurrent in the Christian tradition (*Inv. no. 469*). In other instances, the graffitist seems to have taken inspiration from the natural world (*Inv. no. 464*) and the surrounding landscape (*Inv. no. 572*); although it cannot be excluded a possible association to Christian subjects, as suggested by textual references (*Inv. no. 572*) and archaeological parallels (*Inv. no. 464*).

The importance of this *corpus* of figural graffiti in association with the ongoing study devoted to the entire *repertoire* discovered in this area remains essential in understanding the role that the Basilica of St. Philoxenos may have played in the lives and religious observances of local monastic communities and lay people.

3.1. THE MONK

This limestone block (*Inv. no. 469*), measuring 46,4 x 19,8 cm, preserves pictorial graffiti likely made by more than one individual at different moments. This is indeed suggested, among others, by the tools used to draw specific parts of the graffiti. A first hand seems to have been responsible for the drawing of a boat, an iconographic motif widely attested in the basilica's crypt,¹⁴ which was probably carved with a piece of charcoal. This subject is attested at Oxyrhynchus already in the Greco-Roman period and recorded among the graffiti discovered in the area of the High Necropolis in Tomb 21 (Padró et al., 2009: 6). This motif is well-known among the figural graffiti recorded throughout the Egyptian and Nubian lands¹⁵ up to the Byzantine phase. The so-called "boat graffiti" are indeed recurrent in the Christian tradition and often found in association with Christian religious markers. The graffiti might have also taken inspiration from the surrounding landscape, being Oxyrhynchus a harbour city having central importance in the commercial exchanges between the south and the Delta region¹⁶. However, the choice for selecting this precise motif could have a precise ritual function, namely recording the pilgrims' visit to this holy site¹⁷.

To a second hand, must be attributed the representation of what seems a caricatural representation of the sun, visible on the left side of the slab, accompanied on the right by the depiction of a human figure surrounded by a sort of cloud. The use of red pigment, probably applied with a brush, seems to imply that the graffitist was to some extent prepared for his/her task; in this sense, the graffiti is likely not the result of a casual action. The most intriguing element of this cluster is the figural representation visible on the right side of the stone slab. A human figure is depicted wearing a long tunic, the head covered by a hood, and the eyes marked by thick lines. This typology of clothing¹⁸ as well as the hands' position that sees the character in a typical attitude of prayer suggests the representation of a monk or another

12 These testimonies are also customarily classified as ink graffiti or *dipinti*. A distinction based on the production of this form of writing (scratched or inked) was originally adopted in Classical archaeology. Graffiti being the term adopted for identifying scratched or carved texts, and on the other hand, *dipinti* for painted or ink evidence. Nonetheless, it has become diffused in more recent studies, the use of the generic term graffiti for both typologies of evidence.

13 Similar considerations have been drawn for numerous red-painted textual graffiti originally covering the walls of the superstructure of the basilica, soon to be published by the authors.

14 Numerous representations of ships traced with charcoal, but also painted in red or carved have been recorded on the walls of the underground chambers of this religious building and are currently under study by the writers.

15 On boat graffiti from the Egyptian lands see Pope, 2019: 74, 76–77, 79, 81; on the evidence offered by the Nubian lands see Williams, 2019.

16 Various references to ships and ships-owners often associated with local Christian devotees (*P.Oxy. XLVIII 3406*) and authorities are recorded by the papyrological documentation from the fourth century onwards. For instance, *P.Harr. 1 94* (325–375 CE) is a register of freights listing ships, ships-owners, and skippers that mentions a certain Apollonius, son of the bishop Dionysius (Gonis, 2003).

17 A similar interpretation has been offered by Jitse Dijkstra for several graffiti discovered at the site of Syene (Dijkstra, 2012: 73–74).

18 For an introduction to monastic vestments in Egypt, Nubia, and beyond see Innemée, 1992. On the same subject see Mossakowska-Gaubert, 2023.

member of a Christian institution¹⁹. Various evidence favours the identification of the figure as a sacred character, namely the detail of a hand emerging, on the left side, from the cloud. The bodiless hand is represented in the act of catching the figure, or most likely an object resembling a garland (Figure 3). The hand is presumably an allusion to the *Dextera Domini* (i.e. “the right hand of God”), an Old Testament motif broadly diffused in the Jewish²⁰ and Christian²¹ tradition, of which it is possible to find parallels in figural representations attested across the Mediterranean world.

It is especially in the Christian narrative that the hand most often emerges from a small cloud, like in the episode of the Ascension of Christ (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9-11), while in iconic representations is frequently associated with a victor’s wreath. A cloud is mentioned as the source of the voice of God in the gospel accounts of the Transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36; see Schiller, 1971: 145-152).

Similar representations can be found in numerous Christian religious institutions across Egypt. For instance, in the church of the Red Monastery in Sohag, the motif is found in association with sixth-century paintings enclosed in niches representing Athanasius I, patriarch of Alexandria, as well as Pshoi and Besa, the main religious characters associated with the history of this monastery. The same theme can be found in relation to the representation of Basilius, bishop of Caesarea, Stephanus, the first martyr, and Tetonas, archbishop of Alexandria (Bolman, 2016: 2, 10, 14, 34, 104, 164). This subject can also be found in the necropolis of el-Bagawat in the northern chamber of the mausoleum no. 25 (Cipriano, 2008: 184) and no. 80 (Cipriano, 2008: 204).

Further parallels are offered by an illuminated Sahidic manuscript (MS M.613, The Morgan Library & Museum) preserving the *Passio Theodori Anatolii* dating from the ninth century CE²². The codex was discovered among the ruins of the Monastery of St. Michael at Phantouou, near the village of present-day Hamuli in the Fayyum region (Depuydt, 1993: I, no. 144, II, pls.: 19, 397).

The hand enables to represent God without showing his figure in accordance with the Old Testament rules, therefore it symbolised divine intervention. The use of the *Dextera Domini* (Murray and Murray, 1996: 136), in the Christian period was associated with the concept of divine protection and legitimation of power. When the *Dextera Domini* is associated with representations of saints, it symbolises the coronation of the character and/or his benediction.

However, it remains unclear if the character represented in this graffito is a saint or a monk; the crown might refer to one of the five crowns that devotees might receive on the day of the Last Judgement: the incorruptible, the justification, the life, the glory and the joy crowns.

While any believer could receive the five crowns, the “crown of glory” is generally directly linked to Christian clergy (1 Peter 5:4).

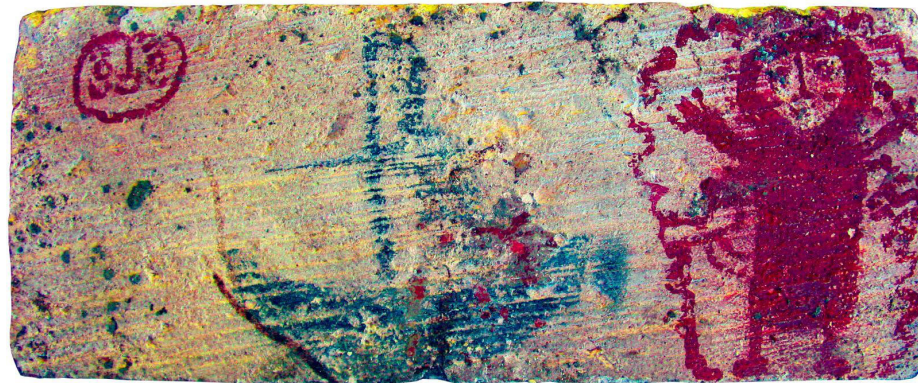
Following a more symbolic interpretation, we might identify the figure as a monk, perhaps deceased, which might justify his representation at the centre of a cloud. In this sense, the monk could be seen in the act of receiving from God the crown of justification, promised to those who love and await the second advent of Christ.

19 A strict parallel to our graffito both in the gesture and the rendering of the figure, although representing a woman, is offered by the representation of a female monk, perhaps the Metredora the Little mentioned in the nearby graffito *I.Abydos Copt.* 63, discovered in the Temple of Seti I at Abydos (Westerfeld, 2017: 203-204; Murray, Milne, Crum, 1904: pl. XXIX).

20 See, in particular, the iconographic representations in the wall paintings discovered in the synagogue of Dura-Europos dating to the third-century CE (Gutmann, 1988: 25-27). A later representation of a bodiless hand, interpreted as the angel of God is attested in the mosaic pavement of the Beth Alpha synagogue (Beit She’an, Israel) dating from the sixth century CE (Sukenic, 1932: 40-41). A crystal bowl dating from the fifth-century CE discovered at Boulogne-sur-Mer depicting the Sacrifice of Isaac preserves the same motif (Sukenic, 1932: 41).

21 This theme is already attested in the early Christian period up to Mediaeval times. Among the earliest testimonies of its diffusion in the Christian tradition are the paintings of the catacombs of Rome (Paulsen, 1990; Griffin and Paulsen, 2002).

22 <https://www.themorgan.org/manuscript/214172>, [last access 23/03/2023].



0

50 cm

Figure 3. *Inv. no. 469*. Top: original, Bottom: decorrelation stretch in colorspace LDS.

3.2. THE LION

This stone block (*Inv. no. 572*), measuring (35,7 x 20,6 cm), features the representation of a lion drawn with charcoal; a line painted in red overlaps the original iconographic motif (Figure 4). The choice of the subject clearly raises questions on the source of inspiration of our graffitist. In the Byzantine period, Oxyrhynchus offered various occasions for having a glimpse of a lion's semblance. For instance, considering the *venationes* recorded in the Oxyrhynchite papyrological documentation. During these events, the inhabitants might have had the occasion to see lions fighting in the local circus arena²³. However, a source of inspiration might have been also the surrounding urban space, where the lions flanking the ancient *dromoi* leading to the main sanctuaries of Oxyrhynchus probably still constituted a dominant landscape feature up to the Byzantine phase²⁴. Statues of recumbent lions guarding the tombs of the local inhabitants in the High Necropolis represented also a peculiar element in the local funerary spaces²⁵.

On the other hand, it cannot be excluded that the stone slab preserved only a section of a much more complex figural representation; perhaps we can recognise an allusion, for instance, to a biblical episode, like Daniel in the Den of Lions (Daniel 6).

²³ For an insight into the events hosted in Oxyrhynchus during the Byzantine phase, see, for instance, *P.Oxy. XXXIV 2707* (sixth century CE?) preserving a circus programme.

²⁴ Statues flanking the processional ways are occasionally mentioned in the papyrological documentation in earliest times. For instance, *P.Rendel Harris II 204* (third CE), a sworn declaration made by two guardians, stating that they were employed “[...] to watch and mount guard by day and night in the same city (i.e. Oxyrhynchus) over the temenoi and statues and public (places?) [...]” (Whitehorne, 1995: 3053).

²⁵ Indeed, numerous statues have been discovered, *in situ* or as discarded material, by the Mission of the University of Barcelona over the last decades of archaeological investigations, most of which, however, date to the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. See, for instance, the lion discovered in Tomb 29 (Padró et al, 2010: 7). The finding of the head belonging to a statue of the same typology was also recorded by F. Petrie in its report regarding the excavation campaign conducted at Oxyrhynchus in 1922 (Petrie, 1925: 16). Among the latest specimens of this typology of statuary might be cited an exemplar currently preserved at the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam (*Inv. no. 9353*).

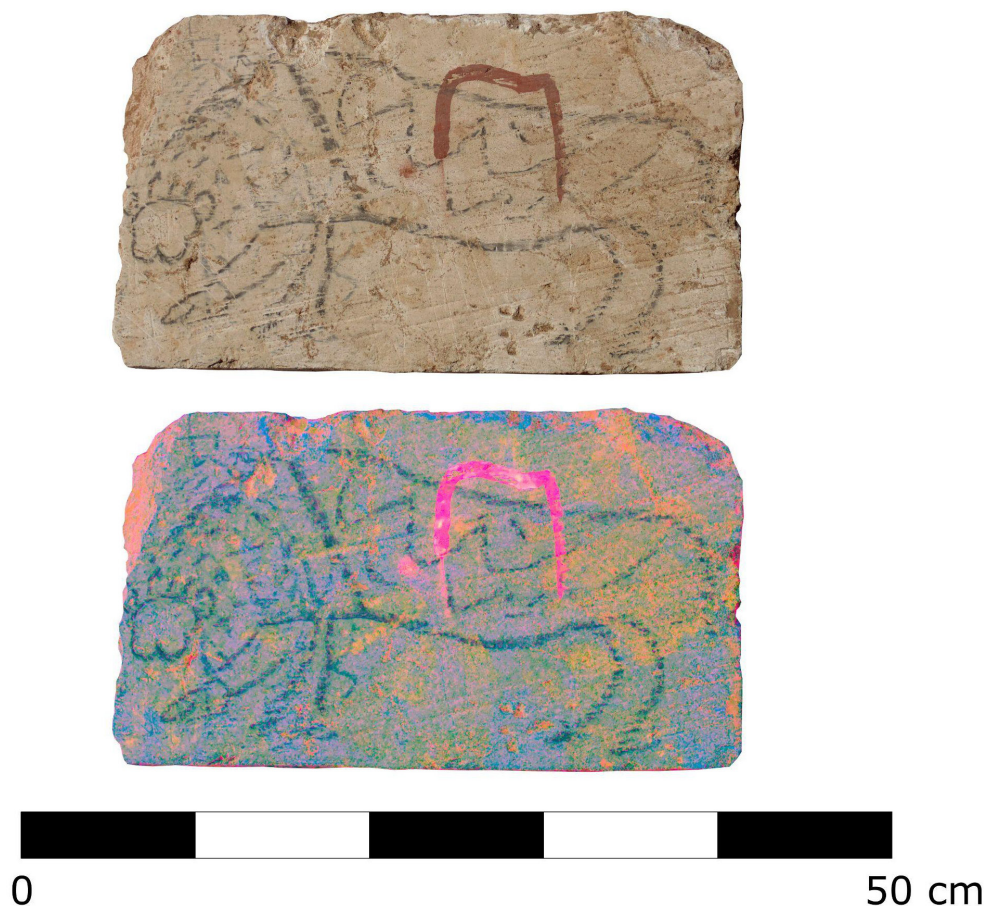


Figure 4. *Inv. no. 572*. Top: original, Bottom: decorrelation stretch in colorspace LKB.

Other representations of lions in the artistic *repertoire* of Byzantine Egypt can be found on ceramic objects with similar scenes, like *Inv. no. 2688*, now kept in the Cairo Museum, where a lion appears on a two-handled water jug dating from the sixth century CE (Gabra, 1993: 104 and Wallis, 1898: pl. XXX, fig. 163 and 166).

The image of the lion frequently had in antiquity a protective function; for instance, symbolising in Late Antiquity, Christian virtues and resurrection. It was also often considered a symbol of vital force necessary to raise moral perfection and union with God (Osharina, 2013: 100).

3.3. THE BLACK DEVIL

This specimen (*Inv. no. 464*) was originally found in connection with another stone slab (*Inv. no. 468*)²⁶, thus suggesting that these graffiti were made when the stone blocks were still placed in their original position (Figure 5). The limestone block, measuring 49,5 x 21,5 cm, features at the centre the representation of a fish, which recalls a *melanocetus johnsonii* also known as “black devil” (Pietsch, 2009). However, since the black devil is an abyssal fish, which certainly did not belong to the habitat of the Nile valley, probably the author of this figural representation might have taken inspiration from other indigenous species. For instance, the *lophius piscatorius* (Muus and Dahlström, 1978), also known as the angler or “monkfish,” or the *lophius budegassa* (Caruso, 1986), the “black-bellied angler”. These two species inhabit between 100 and 1000 metres depth near the Nile delta area, in Mediterranean Sea waters and are therefore saltwater fish. They might likely have reached Oxyrhynchus through the Mediterranean fish trade and were depicted by this anonymous graffitist as exotic animals. While figural graffiti representing fish are attested across the Egyptian lands, precise parallels to our knowledge remain unknown. At Oxyrhynchus representations of fish are recorded among the graffiti discovered in the Greco-Roman tombs of the High Necropolis, like Tomb 21 (Padró et al., 2009: 5-6).

²⁶ This slab, currently under study by the writers, preserves a figural representation framed by several Coptic words.



Figure 5. *Inv. no. 464*. Top: original, Bottom: decorrelation stretch in colorspace LDS.

Still, comparisons to our figural representation are offered by the Late Antique ceramic repertoire and we find this species of *lophius* on various ceramic forms, like several dishes found at Kellia (like *Inv. no. 12540*, sixth-seventh century CE), produced in the Egyptian Delta region and inspired by a similar species of fish (Gabra, 2007: 60). (Figure 6)



Figure 6. Drawing of *lophius* fish. Photo: (Gabra, 2007: 60).

Similar images of fish on ceramic containers can be also found in the Brooklyn Museum (*Inv. no.* 42408)²⁷, in the Gustav-Lübcke-Museum (von Falck, 1996: 170) and the Coptic Museum in Cairo (*Inv. no.* 9065), the latter discovered among the ruins of the Monastery of St. Jeremiah in Saqqara (Gabra, 1993: 109).

While the choice of the subject seems here dictated by curiosity for the surrounding natural world, rather than having a clear cultic significance, as it is well known, the fish had a specific symbolic meaning in the Christian world. *Ichthus* or *ichthys* is the acronym for Christ Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ υἱὸς Σωτήρ (Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour) (Masri, 1982; Rasimus, 2012), linked with Christ and the miracle of the loaves and fish.

4. CONCLUSION

This article aimed to underline the importance of the basilica of St. Philoxenos in reconstructing the religious panorama of Late Antique Oxyrhynchus. Indeed, the figural graffiti discovered in the area of this religious complex remark its key role as social space.

Graffitiing practices answered the different needs of the devotees visiting the site, from simply underlining their willingness to mark their presence in the area, to living a clear sign of their religious devotion. The use of different techniques, the choice of the represented motifs, being simply dictated by the observation of the surrounding urban and natural environment or inspired by a shared and common *repertoire* of religious motifs help us to have a glimpse of how this cultic site was experienced by contemporary society.

Indeed, whatever the motivations behind these graffitiing practices were, they acquire a particular significance in light of the place selected for their production.

On the other hand, the examination of these testimonies opens a series of research questions which hopefully will be answered thanks to an in-depth study of the entire Oxyrhynchite *corpus* of figural and textual evidence. It remains difficult, for instance, to ascertain if the graffiti were made by pilgrims predominantly when visiting the interior spaces of the religious complex, as recorded in the Temple of Seti I at Abydos and the nearby Osireion (Piankoff, 1958-1960; Westerfeld, 2017), or rather extensively framed also the exterior walls of the basilica, like in the Temple of Isis in Aswan after its transformation in a Christian religious complex (Dijkstra, 2010: 36). In fact, each solution finds many parallels throughout the Egyptian lands.

Despite the interpretative uncertainties, the importance of this evidence remains essential, and we can consider them as a starting point for understanding the role(s) that the Basilica of St. Philoxenos played in the religious observances of contemporary society.

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²⁷ <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/54401>, [last access 28/12/2022].

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