Review of Dijkstra, J.H.F. (2012) Syene I. The Figural and Textual Graffiti from the Temple of Isis at Aswan

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DIJKSTRA, J.H.F. — Syene I. The Figural and Textual Graffiti from the Temple of Isis at Aswan. (Beiträge zur Ägyptische Bauforschung und Altertumskunde, 18). Verlag Philipp von Zabern, Mainz am Rhein, 2012. (239, 36 s/w Tafeln + CD). ISBN 978-3-8053-4395-4. € 69,90.

The book under review presents the first final publication of the joint Swiss and Egyptian mission working at Aswan since 2000. Interested in the Coptic graffiti on the temple's walls for his PhD research, Dijkstra in 2001 started the Isis Temple Graffiti Project.[1] The small number of comparable studies is striking when considering the overwhelming quantity of data available in Egypt for holistic graffiti research, *i.e.* studying graffiti in their architectural context. The figural graffiti received even less scholarly attention — a shortcoming that furthers the difficulty of their study. Ancient graffiti nevertheless provide a graphic testimony to peoples' attitudes towards earlier monuments[2] and have elsewhere been described as one of the key groups of sources for the study of Egyptian uses of the past.[3] Dijkstra adds that they are 'certainly one of the richest sources of evidence available on the personal experience of religion in Ancient Egypt' (p. 7). The meticulous documentation of all 352 graffiti — regardless their fragmentary preservation or illegibility — from a single architectural unity and their minute analysis corroborates their added value. Indeed, these sources throw light on layers of society otherwise not- or underrepresented, especially with regards to temples (*i.e.* lower ranking clergymen and lay visitors) and facilitate research on the use-lives of buildings and architectural changes therein. In order to emphasize the desirability of scholarly attention to figural graffiti, Dijkstra has purposefully given precedence to this category in both the title of his publication and the order of the catalogue.

The publication in essence comprises a catalogue of graffiti, divided in two parts: I. Figural Graffiti and II. Textual graffiti. The catalogue is preceded by a Preface of the author (pp. 7-9), list of Abbreviations (p. 10) and a General Introduction (pp. 11-29). The latter provides a context for the graffiti project within the Aswan/Syene excavations and introduces the temple of Isis. It also presents a general account on Egyptian temple-graffiti and a summary essay on the Isis-temple graffiti, their placement and their significance. The so-called gouges are included as an excursion. The publication contains two appendices. Appendix I (pp. 167-9) has a brief discussion and catalogue of boat graffiti from a Late Antique quay wall at nearby Elephantine (graffiti Nos. 353-356) and Appendix II (p. 170) presents a concordance with the graffiti published

earlier by Bresciani (note 4, below) and for which here a much desired re-edition is provided. Following the appendices are a Select Bibliography (pp. 171-4) and a series of indices (pp. 177-93): Index of Sources: Figures and Texts (pp. 177-84), Index of Egyptian, Greek and Coptic Names and Words (pp. 185-7) and a General Index (pp. 188-93). Figures 1-20 are found on pp. 197-216 and plates 1-36 (b/w photographs) on pp. 219-39. The publication's back-pocket contains a CD-Rom (588 MB; 424 jpeg files in 106 folders) with photographs of the graffiti.

The hard-covered publication has a high quality binding. The manuscript is well organized and has an orderly two-column layout with figures and texts well balanced. Footnotes are used for references. The book's large-sized pages contribute to a clear presentation of the graffiti. Plates are printed on distinct "glossy" paper.

General Introduction (pp. 11-29)

Two districts of modern Aswan cover ancient Syene and only two ancient monuments remain visible today: the temples of Domitian and Isis. Whilst the first was already noted in the *Description de l'Égypte*, the latter remained to be discovered until 1871 when the temple was accidentally unearthed by engineers working on a railway line. Scholarly attention followed suit, but the temple remained to be partially inaccessible until Edda Bresciani in 1970-1 finally cleared the temple in its entirety. At that time the temple had already been encroached upon by houses of the growing city, impeding archaeological research beyond the temple's outer walls. The Swiss-Egyptian team in 2000 started the excavation of 1st-11th century CE houses surrounding the temple, renewing interest also in the temple itself. Interested mainly in the Ptolemaic decoration, Bresciani noted 'at least' 80 Egyptian texts carved in the walls in Demotic, Greek, Coptic and some dating to modern times. Only 40 eventually made it to the publication.[4]

The well preserved east-west orientated temple of Isis (19x15x7m), dedicated to in particular two aspects of this deity —god's mother (*mw.t-nṯr*) and 'Chief of the army' (*ḥ3t p3 mšˁ*), a rather unusual epithet recurring several times in the Egyptian graffiti— today consists of a two-pillared hall and in the east a sanctuary with two side chapels. Undressed wall blocks and limited decoration betray its unfinished state.

The main building activities and carving of reliefs were carried out in the times of Ptolemy III and IV (246-204 BCE). The three granite altars contain the cartouches of Ptolemy X (107-88 BCE). The building continued to be in use into Late Antiquity and later times, a rather modest church was located in the pillared hall. There is no clear evidence to which saint the church (6th-9th century CE) was dedicated. Five phases of occupation are discerned in the Isis-temple derived from its graffiti. Exterior graffiti are exclusively incised, whilst the interior mainly has textual *dipinti*, indicating different levels of accessibility (pilgrims, outside *vs.* priests, inside).

On pp. 19-22 the nature of graffiti in the context of Egyptian temples is discussed. The author introduces the term graffito — a seemingly straightforward term that is actually rather

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[1] Published as: Dijkstra, J.H.F., (2008) *Philae and the End of Ancient Egyptian Religion. A Regional Study of Religious Transformation (298-642 CE)*. Leuven: Peeters. For preliminary reports, see a.o. Dijkstra, J.H.F., (2006) 'Reuse of the Isis Temple in Late Antiquity and Later Times', in C. Von Pilgrim *et al.*, 'The Town of Syene. Report on the 3rd and 4th Season in Aswan', *MDAIK* 62, 228-38; Dijkstra, J.H.F. (2009) 'Structuring Graffiti: The Case of the Temple of Isis at Aswan', in R. Preys (ed.) *7. Ägyptologische Tempeltagung: Structuring Religion*, 77-93. Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag.

[2] Málek, J., (1992) 'A Meeting of the Old and New: Saqqâra during the New Kingdom', in A.B. Lloyd (ed.) *Studies in Pharaonic Religion and Society in Honour of J. Gwyn Griffiths*, 67. London: EES.

[3] Navrátilová, H., (2007) 'The visitors' graffiti database', in J.-C. Goyon and C. Cardin (eds.) *Proceedings of the ninth international congress of Egyptologists 2004*, 1371. Leuven: Peeters.

[4] Bresciani, E., and Pernigotti, S., (1978) *Assuan, Il tempio tolemaico di Isi/I blocchi decorati e inscritti*. Pisa: Giardini.

difficult to define. This has to do not at the least with the modern-day connotations of the word. Their common denominator, as Dijkstra argues, is that 'they are painted or scratched on a surface that was not originally intended for that purpose'. This principle excludes construction graffiti that are nevertheless included in the study, as Dijkstra signals himself. The study of Egyptian graffiti has generally focused primarily on those that are textual and only selectively include those of "particular interest", *even* when that publication focuses exclusively on the graffiti of a particular monument.[5] Just four temples received full study of their graffiti previously: the Taffeh-temple[6]), the Khonsu-temple in Karnak[7]), the Meroic temple at Qasr Ibrim[8]), and the Hibis-temple in Kharga Oasis[9]). A theoretical framework 'addressing the nature of graffiti on the basis of which systematic questions can be asked about the material' (p. 20) is usually absent.

I. Figural Graffiti (Nos. 1-179) (pp. 33-107)

The catalogue of figural graffiti is subdivided into 7 categories (see *infra*). Some graffiti contain elements assigning them to multiple categories. These are integrally discussed in the corresponding categories, e.g. a boat (PIIW 3 [73]) containing six *orantes* and a dog surrounded by four crosses (PIIW 4-7 [134-7]). Thus, the possible association of graffiti is left open for interpretation by the reader: a factual presentation of data characteristic of this publication. However, because of their clear association, the *orantes* mentioned are not separately discussed in the section on 'gods and men' (I.4; only mentioned on p. 65), nor is the dog separately included in the 'animals' section (I.3).

Each section starts with a general introduction. First, the occurrence of similar graffiti in other temples is discussed and subsequently their placement, date, etc. in the Isis-temple are analysed into detail.

Each catalogue entry systematically includes: a line-drawing with north arrow and scale, dimensions, technique, date, literature (references to external sources), and a description. A small selection of photographs is presented in the plates section, while more photographs are included on the CD-Rom. All graffiti were drawn and photographed (on multiple times of the day, under different lighting conditions: see photo's on CD-Rom, e.g. A48) and the final drawings are digitised and digitally placed in their proper locations on the walls, resulting in the clever wall-plans of figs. 3-19. Every graffito has a unique number: a letter refers to the placement within the temple: followed by a sequence number; the second number is assigned to the graffiti based on their sequential appearance in the catalogue. Thus, graffito A42 [57] (man playing double flute) can be easily found on fig. 4: plan of the front wall (A).

[5]) Jacquet-Gordon's publication (*infra* n. 7) on the Khonsu-temple graffiti leaves out 328 foot graffiti (out of a total of 508), simply because they were not accompanied with texts, while Wilson (*infra* n. 8) describes 'only those of particular interest'.

[6]) Raven, M.J., (1999) 'The Temple of Taffeh, II: the graffiti', *OMRO* 79, 81-102.

[7]) Jacquet-Gordon, H., (2003) *The Temple of Khonsu, Vol. 3: The Graffiti on the Khonsu Temple Roof at Karnak*. Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

[8]) Wilson. P., (2007) 'The Meroitic Temple Graffiti', in P.J. Rose *et al.*, *The Meroitic temple complex at Qasr Ibrim*, 105-63. London: EES.

[9]) Cruz-Uribe, E., (2008) *Hibis Temple Project Vol. 3: The Graffiti From the Temple Precinct*. San Antonio: Tambopata Partners & Van Siclen Books.

1. Construction Graffiti (Nos. 1-15) (pp. 33-42)

Perhaps the most ambiguous type of graffiti is divided into masons' marks and architectural drawings. Pages 33-4 present a concise discussion on terminology. As Dijkstra points out, there is just a fine line between 'quarry marks' and 'masons' marks': the same men were probably responsible for the whole process from cutting the stones to the delivery at the construction site. Unlike all other types of graffiti discussed by Dijkstra, the masons' marks are categorised based not on their shared form (*cf.* boats, animals, feet, etc.) but on their supposed function. To illustrate the problem, the horned altar has been attested elsewhere both as a masons' mark and as a figure. A49 [158] is included therefore in the 'miscellaneous' section. The architectural drawing PIIE [7] enables a reconstruction of the temple's original appearance. It represents the construction drawing of a pronaos: a structure that may have once stood in front of the current temple and of which no traces were recovered.

2. Feet (Nos. 16-20) (pp. 43-7)

The scratched outlines of human feet are well attested in Egyptian temples. They appear already in the Old Kingdom and remain to be seen well into Christian times. These graffiti, according to Dijkstra, 'reflect the Ancient Egyptian custom to mark one's worshipful presence before a deity', rather than that they indicate the journey of the pilgrim towards his destination — a persistent idea among Egyptologists.

3. Animals (nos. 21-53) (pp. 49-61)

The majority (30 out of 33) of animal graffiti date to the Graeco-Roman period, and the façade appeared to be most popular with 23 attestations. Six animals have additional items to emphasize their divine aspect.

4. Gods and men (nos. 54-66) (pp. 63-72)

Thirteen human figures were met in the temple, including gods (4) and a pharaoh (1). Four men could be designated *orantes* —typical for the Christian period. Graffito A53 [61] was identified as a copy of abutting relief decoration: a head of the goddess Isis.

5. Boats (Nos. 67-84) (pp. 73-9)

Another common type of graffiti is presented by boats, either processional barks or boats for transportation. However, as Dijkstra points out in n. 363 (p. 73), they may be overrepresented in the literature simply because scholars have long been interested in exactly these figural representations. Nevertheless, it is clear that boats are a common appearance from prehistoric times (rock inscriptions) onwards. In Late Antiquity, the boat becomes a prominent symbol in Christian iconography. All boat graffiti in the Isis-temple date to the Christian period.

6. Crosses (Nos. 85-152) (pp. 81-98)

The dominant Egyptian symbol in Late Antiquity also presents the largest category in the temple of Isis. Dijkstra demonstrates that the basic form of two crossing lines can take many shapes (*cf.* fig. 20). Crosses could have been incised in order to purify sacred space and ward off evil (apotropaic function) or could have been left by (pious) visitors.

7. Miscellaneous (Nos. 153-179) (pp. 99-107)

This last category contains both unidentifiable forms (17) as well as clear representations too small in number to form a separate category (10).

Part II. Textual Graffiti (Nos. 180-352) (pp. 111-169)

1. Hieroglyphic and Demotic Texts (Nos. 180-296) (pp. 111-52)

– A contribution by Eugene Cruz-Uribe.

The script of graffiti texts found in Graeco-Roman temples can be either Egyptian (mostly Demotic) or Greek. Parallels are widely available. One of the largest corpuses of such texts are found in the temple of Philae (450), the majority of which is left by priests rather than by lay visitors.

The catalogue of 117 texts (110 Demotic) includes the complete re-edition of 45 texts previously published by Bresciani. A selection of statistics: an overwhelming majority of 108 texts were left on the interior, 91,7% of which are *dipinti*. The latter contrasts with the incised technique preferred for the figural graffiti, on the exterior walls. 65,8% of the texts are left on the most convenient place for someone standing on the original floor level. The larger number of texts (80,3%) could be dated — mostly on palaeographical grounds — whereas 15 specimen provide a precise date, ranging from 7 March 189 BCE to 16 July 79 CE. 41% of the texts commemorate acts of religious worship. Twenty payment or account texts recall the importance of temples as economic entities.

2. Greek and Coptic Texts (Nos. 297-314) (pp. 153-60)

This script is rather underrepresented, especially considering the fact that they span the Christian period as well (compare Philae: 361 Greek graffiti). The Greek graffiti consist of names and *proskynema*, the adaptation in Greek of the Egyptian custom to mark one's presence before a deity, modelled on the Demotic *rn.f mn* formula. All Coptic graffiti were found inside the temple where the pillared hall once facilitated a church.

3. Modern Texts (Nos. 315-352) (pp. 161-9)

Modern graffiti also form an integral part of a temple's history and present valuable information on the state of preservation and (in)accessibility of (parts of) the structure in the past.

Minor remarks:

– Not all text entries (part II) are provided with a drawing, mainly "due to illegibility", which the reader is now unable to check. This contrasts with the presentation of data in Part I.
– The Select Bibliography (pp. 171-4) lists not all publications cited. One-off citations are included in footnote references and a select number of other publications are included in the list of Abbreviations (p. 10).
– It is unfortunate that the wall plans of figs. 4-17/19 do not show original temple decoration. The 'interaction' of graffiti and decoration discussed in the main text is not made comprehensible graphically.
– The selection of graffiti photographs (pls. 8-36) is somewhat arbitrary. Plates with photographs and line drawings

printed abreast (*cf.* Jacquet-Gordon, n. 7 *suppra*) is preferred.
– CD-Rom: not all graffiti are included. Some graffiti (e.g. A53) have several near-duplicate photo's: why?

All too often graffiti are considered unattractive scribbles defacing a monument.[10] For that reason they are seldom recorded, except when the texts are judged "interesting". Their underrepresentation in scholarly literature is not only attributable to neglect. Graffiti are often difficult to detect and only repeated visits under various lighting conditions increase their traceability. In other words: one needs to specifically search in order to find. With the present publication one can be confident that all graffiti are detected indeed. Dijkstra chooses not to publish *his* selection of "interesting" graffiti, but makes accessible all material, even if no more than a few scratches can be distinguished and their apparent value can be doubted. The importance of this consideration cannot be overemphasized, since it is especially their lack of parallels, questionable representativeness (published graffiti are with few exceptions selections of an unknown total) and obscure contexts obstruct proper graffiti research. Not retained by these limitations, Dijkstra has been able to provide extensive parallels for the graffiti found in the Isis-temple, evincing that their obscurity cannot be an apology for their deficient treatment in the literature. It should however be added that this approach applies primarily to the anepigraphic graffiti published here. The textual graffiti contributed by Cruz-Uribe are treated summarily, providing few parallels or references to external sources: an otherwise rare contradiction.

The presentation and systematic treatment of the graffiti could serve as a format for future graffiti-publications. The visualisation of the placement of graffiti has previously been appropriated by Jacquet-Gordon (Khonsu-temple), Wilson (Qasr Ibrim) and Raven (Taffeh-temple). Dijkstra developed this method further by adopting the coding-system of graffiti according to placement and projecting the actual graffiti as they appear on the walls, including their corresponding catalogue-numbers.

Where the description of the graffiti is often incomplete or even absent in the discussion of the Hibis-temple graffiti, and the wall plans rendered in a schematic manner, Cruz-Uribe for the first time exhaustively treated the nature and characteristics of graffiti in the Egyptian temple-context. He proposed a definition and a list of 16 features that characterise Egyptian graffiti.[11] Dijkstra follows Cruz-Uribe's approach and comments in n. 107 (p. 22) that 'this is not the place to discuss the trait-list (*i.e.* Cruz-Uribe's 16-feature graffiti list) in detail': a missed opportunity. Navrátilová in a contribution on "graffiti spaces" —focusing on New Kingdom funerary graffiti— already criticised a number of the points listed by Cruz-Uribe.[12] Dijkstra indicates that to his mind Cruz-Uribe's no. 5 (p. 205-6) presents the core feature of graffiti: '[a graffito] is normally not created for the same purpose or

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[10] Sometimes even when graffiti are recorded, prevalence is given to the "original decoration", e.g. Martin, G.T., (2012) *The Tomb of Maya and Meryt I*, 53. London: EES: it is noted by the author that several pharaonic graffiti are not included on the main plates of wall-decoration, since 'they would have obscured the original reliefs'.
[11] Cruz-Uribe, *Hibis*, 187-230.
[12] Navrátilová, H., (2010) 'Graffiti Spaces', in L. Bareš *et al.*, *Egypt in Transition. Social and Religious Development of Egypt in the First Millennium BCE*, 309-12. Prague: Czech Institute of Egyptology.

with the same motivation that created the flat surface on which the graffito is found', which for tomb-contexts can be contested as they appear to be an integral part of the "*Besucherkult*". Cruz-Uribe (nr. 16; p. 224-5) also argues that the nature of the location changes as soon as it receives a graffito, and that this change reflects the closure of the temple or indicates that the relevant area was no longer active. The data studied by Dijkstra prove the opposite.[13]) These remarks particularly relate to the absence of cross-context analysis in Dijkstra's publication. Contextual studies on tomb-graffiti in Egypt have made their appearance in recent years and their results can be similarly of use to the study of temple-graffiti.[14])

To conclude, one may confidently state that this publication sets the standard for much-needed future graffiti research and that it will remain to be used as an essential reference work. The reviewer shares Dijkstra's hope that that his publication will provide an incentive for future graffiti-studies.

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[13]) See also: Frood, E., (2010) 'Horkhebi's decree and the development of priestly inscriptional practices in Karnak', in Bareš *et al.*, *Egypt in Transition*, 103-28.

[14]) Apart from the studies cited, e.g. Navrátilová, H., (2007) *Visitors' Graffiti of Dynasties XVIII and XIX in Abusir and Northern Saqqara*. Prague: Czech Institute of Egyptology; Den Doncker, A., (2012) 'Theban Tomb Graffiti during the New Kingdom. Research on the Reception of Ancient Egyptian Images by Ancient Egyptians', in K.A. Kóthay (ed.) *Art and Society. Ancient and Modern Contexts of Egyptian Art*, 23-34. Budapest: Museum of Fine Arts; Verhoeven, U., *et al.* (forthcoming, working title) *Die Graffiti in Grab N13.1 in Assiut/Mittelägypten. I: Besuchertexte und literarische Graffiti aus dem Neuen Reich; II: Tintenzeichnungen aus dem Neuen Reich* (preliminary, see: Verhoeven, U., (2012) 'The New Kingdom Graffiti in Tomb N13.1: An Overview', in J. Kahl *et al.*, *Seven Seasons at Asyut*, 47-58. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag); Staring, N., and Van Pelt, W.P., (forthcoming, working title) *The Graffiti*, in M.J. Raven *et al.*, *The Tomb of Ptahemwia at Saqqara*. Also forthcoming: the graffiti conference *Scribbling through history: a comparative study of graffiti from Ancient Egypt onwards* (Sept. 2013, University of Oxford).