

Graffiti

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INTRODUCTION

The urge to write on the wall has preserved some strikingly vivid and spontaneous illustrations of the interests and preoccupations of the ancient world.¹ Many examples must have escaped the notice of early excavators, and even with the scrupulous methods and technological aids available today it remains very difficult to distinguish a deliberate incision from a random scratch. But in Antiquity, far more than in the western world of today, both public and domestic space was liable to become etched with words and drawings, the latter reminiscent of modern cartoons.² The Packard Humanities Institute (PHI) excavations at Zeugma in 2000 revealed several instances of graffiti, the most exten-



Figure 1. Trench 2: House of the Bull, courtyard: wall decoration.

sive of which, covering an entire wall of Room 9G in Trench 9, was briefly described and illustrated in the 2003 Interim Report.³ Analysis of the repertoire of graffiti on this wall will comprise most of what follows, but first we will record traces of graffiti found elsewhere in the PHI excavations.

Trench 2, House of the Bull, courtyard

This room is a courtyard whose walls reveal two separate layers of painted plaster.⁴ The second, later layer has a plain decoration of rectangular panels defined by parallel red lines against a white background, with a central roundel, also defined by parallel red lines. In the center of the roundel is a circle painted to imitate red porphyry (fig. 1). Traces of at least three letters are incised at the bottom of the roundel between the parallel lines that define it. We have been able to identify an isolated *pi*, and an *eta* and an *upsilon* in a nexus.

Trench 2, House of the Bull, Room 2L

This room is vaulted, with a mosaic floor comprising a geometric design. Like the courtyard, it was plastered twice. Fragments of fallen plaster showed graffiti in Greek, but the lettering was not recorded by the excavators.⁵

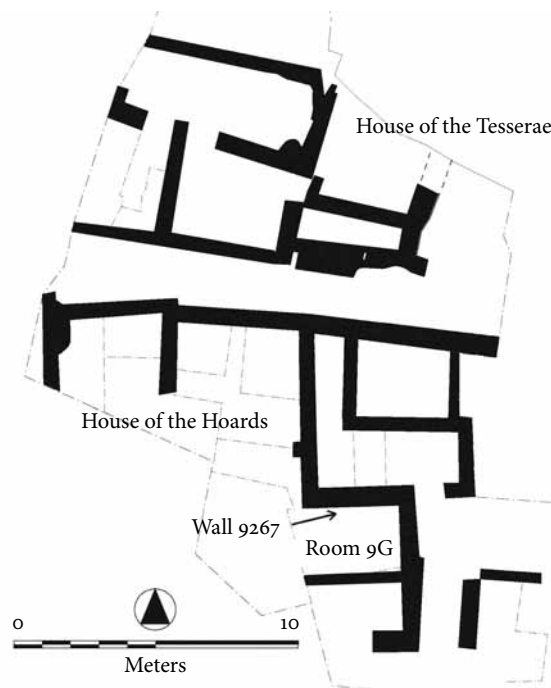


Figure 2. Trench 9: orientation plan.

Trench 9, House of the Tesserae, Room 9A

The excavators noted traces of graffiti on the plaster of the southern wall, but details were not recorded.⁶

Trench 9, House of the Hoards, Room 9G

Excavation of the House of the Hoards in Trench 9 revealed the western range of the upper terrace, comprising three rooms: 9G, 9I, and 9J (fig. 2).⁷ The excavators did not expose the western wall of Room 9G, but the excavated portion measures 4.5 m N-S x 4 m E-W, and the room was therefore probably square. The wall plaster is painted white and divided into panels by a solid red border. Traces of painted decoration survive within the border, including an inner border of solid green, narrow parallel lines of black and red, and vegetal motifs in green inside the white panels.

Slightly more than half the width (2.1 m) of the excavated portion (3.97 m) of the north wall (wall 9267) was covered with graffiti. It is not possible to tell how much further the graffiti extended, since the right-hand portion of the wall suffered extensive fire damage and almost all the plaster is lost; but on the single painted panel that is preserved in the right-hand corner no graffiti are visible. The surviving graffiti, almost exclusively figural, are scattered indiscriminately across the plastered surface; the graffiti artist(s) had no inhibitions about straying from the

white background onto the painted border or across one of the vegetal motifs. For example, the first two letters of the single complete word (ZHTHMATA) are superimposed on parallel red lines, the next two letters are on the white ground, the *mu* straddles the white background and the solid red border, and the rest of the letters are etched onto the red band. Similarly, two of the boats (cat. 4 and 5) straddle what remains of one of the vegetal motifs (see reconstruction drawings: figs. 3 and 4).

The room has been excavated down to the floor, which consists of flattened bedrock. The graffiti begin at a height of 0.52 m above the floor, which suggests that the person executing the lowest sketches would have been sitting or lying down; a gladiatorial graffito in the central peristyle of the Villa San Marco at Stabiae is likewise executed surprisingly low down (67.5 cm above the floor).⁸ The graffiti on our wall extend to the top of the surviving plaster, a distance of 1.29 m above the floor, a comfortable level at which to draw standing up; the wall itself survives to a height of 1.85 m, and it is not possible to guess how far up the graffiti extended (see photograph and computerized elevation: figs. 5 and 6).

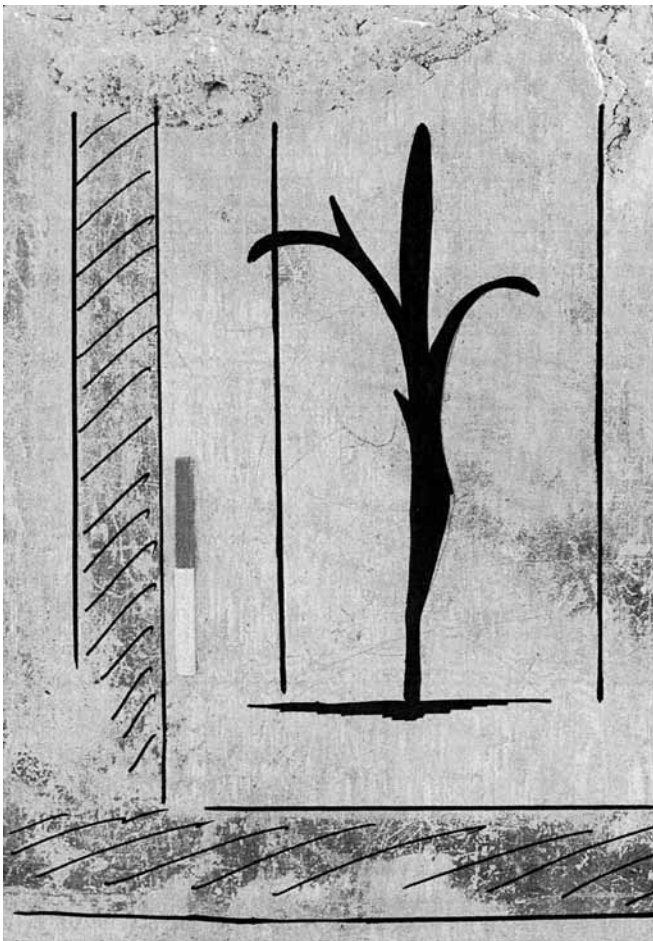


Figure 3. Wall 9267: fresco: vegetal motif, reconstructed.

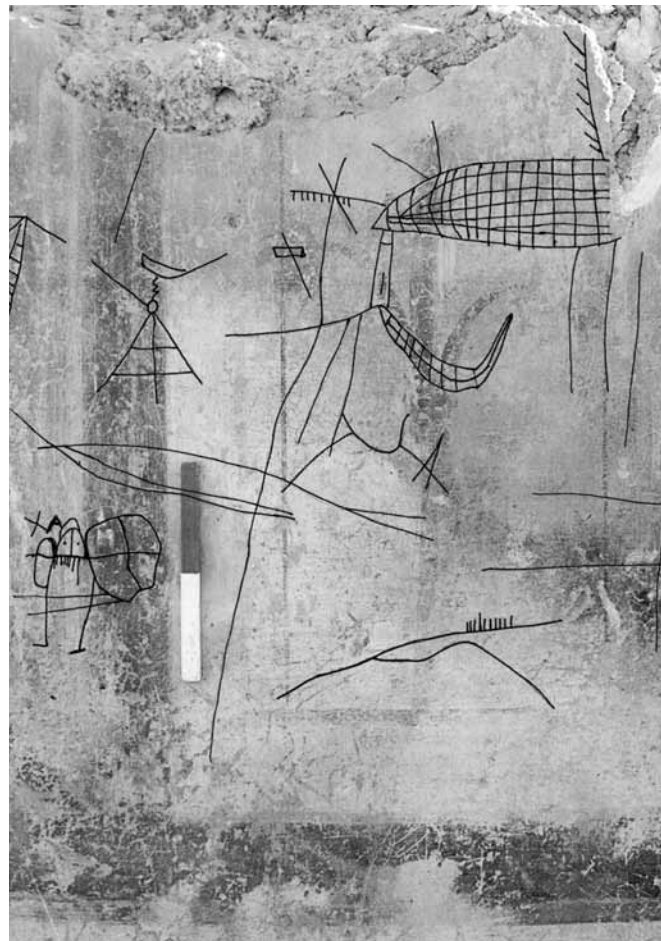


Figure 4. Wall 9267: fresco: vegetal motif, as excavated (overlay of graffiti enhanced).



Figure 5. Wall 9267.

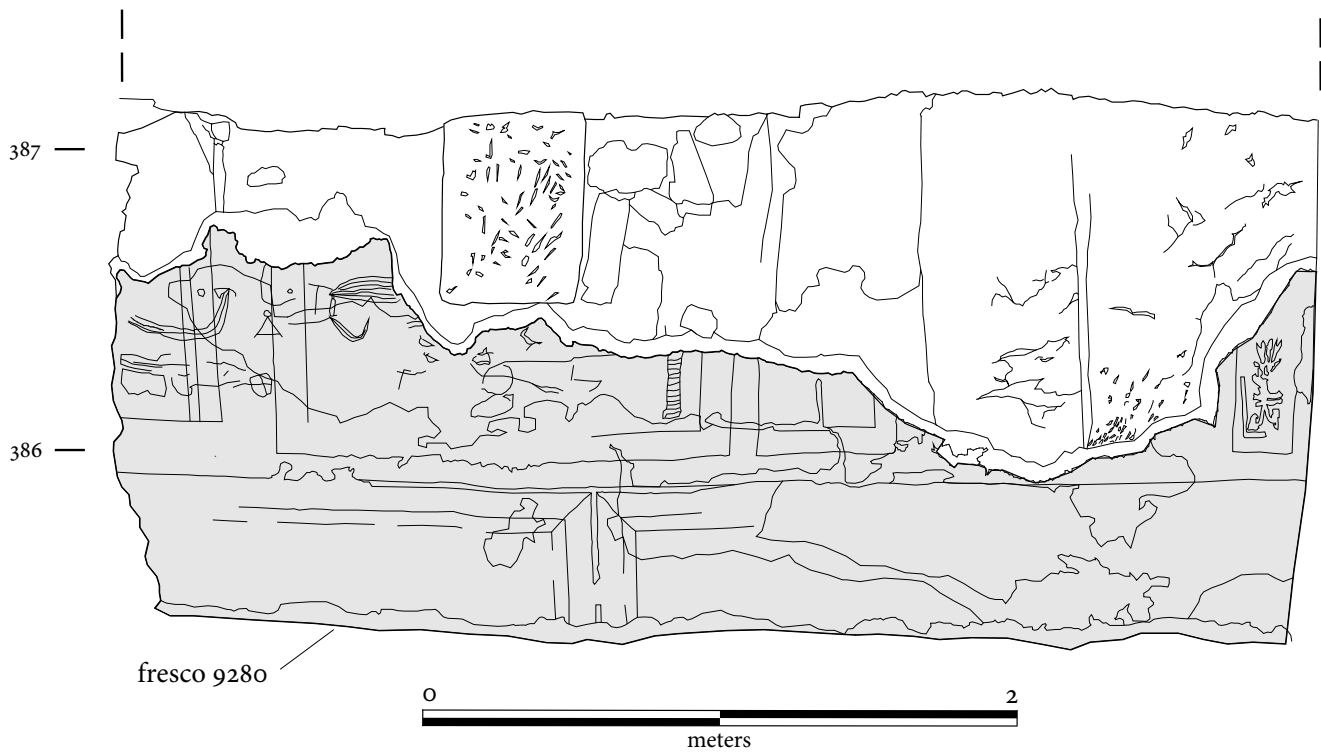


Figure 6. Wall 9267: elevation.

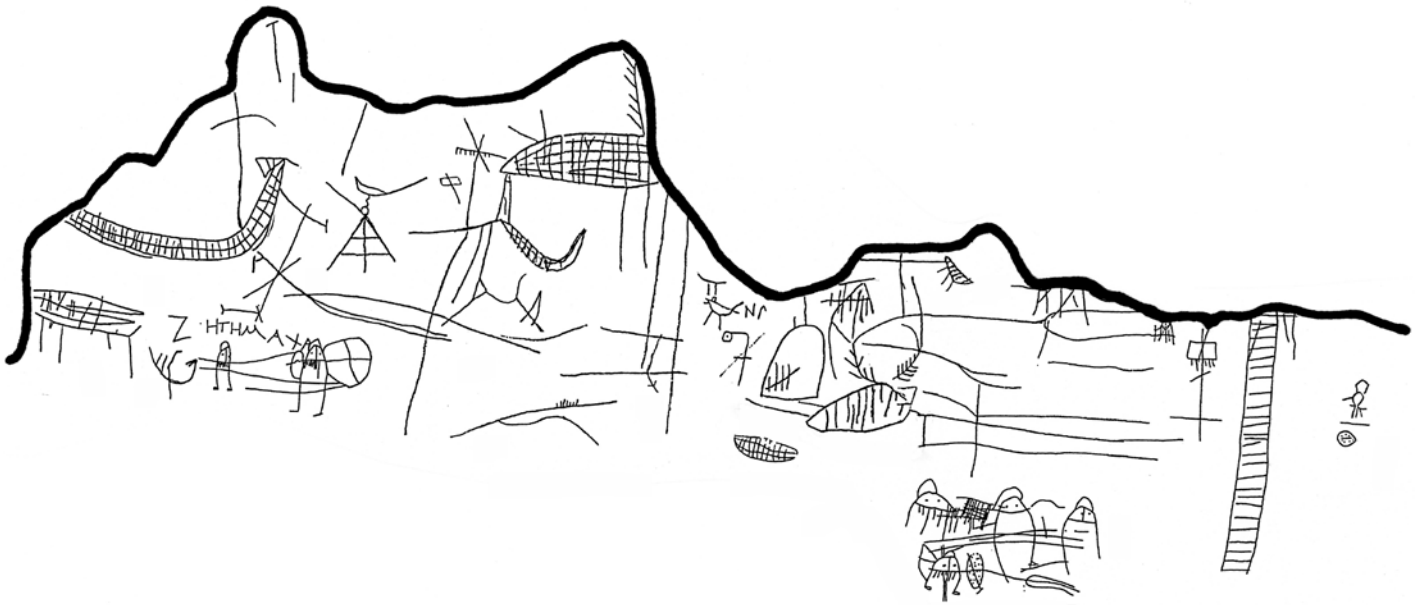


Figure 7. Wall 9267: complete line-drawing of graffiti.

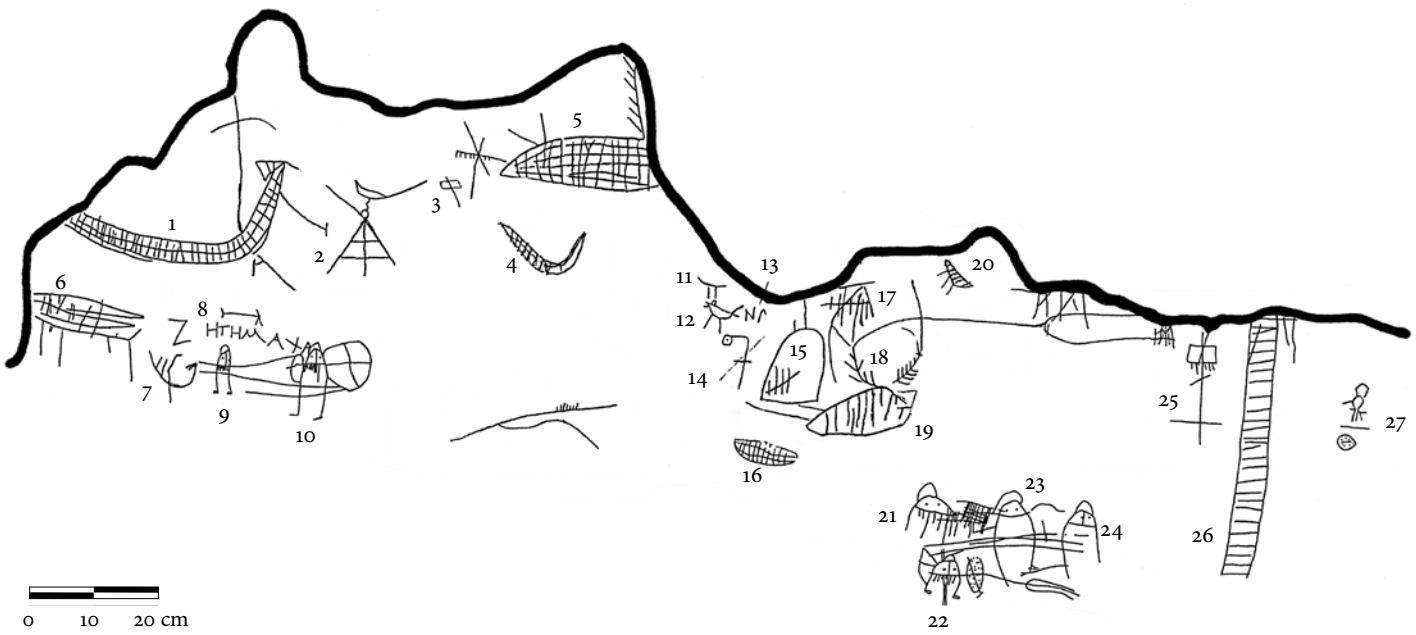


Figure 8. Wall 9267: figural graffiti, numbered.

In addition to the depredations of the graffiti artist(s), the plaster on the north wall has suffered natural wear and tear, resulting in a plethora of chips and scratches. From the photographs available to us, we have detected 27 discrete motifs that we are confident are intentional sketches, some more lightly incised than others and therefore harder to see. Although we have adopted a skeptical attitude towards the rest of the marks, those that are most deeply incised (mostly strong vertical or horizontal lines) we have included on the accompanying drawing (fig. 7); the rest we have not replicated, otherwise our rendering would have been unintelligible. In order to foreground the figural graffiti, we include a drawing without the nonrepresentational motifs (fig. 8).

The range of motifs includes perennial favorites of

the graffiti artists of the Roman world (ships, birds, and gladiators), as well as some less frequently attested motifs (a *vexillum*), and unique representations for which we offer tentative identifications or (in severely problematic cases) simple descriptions of what we can see.

We have not been able to establish separate “hands,” and so it does not seem possible to tell whether more than one graffiti artist was at work. Five discernible groups of images occupy the space, but we are reluctant to deduce from this observation any conclusions about authorship. The right-hand group of gladiators have broader helmets than the left-hand group, and feet that are “hollow” instead of solid, but the distinctions are not sufficiently striking to support the attribution of “hands.”



Figure 9. Wall 9267: left-hand section of area containing graffiti.

CATALOGUE

The catalogue numbers below correspond to the numbering on our drawing (fig. 8). For a color photograph showing the graffiti on the left-hand section of the wall (= cat. 1–14 below) see figure 9, and for the right-hand section (= cat. 15–27 below) see figure 19.

1. Boat

ca. 40.5 × 15 cm

This boat has a high prow with a triangular object attached to it. The stern is not visible, because this is where excavation stopped and the plaster in this area has been damaged. The outline of the hull is filled in with a series of parallel vertical lines bisected by a line that follows the contour of the hull so as to create a pattern of hatching. Such patterning is common in graffiti of boats, and may be an attempt to render the texture that would be represented by color and shading on a painting or a mosaic. The triangular object attached to the prow of the boat is patterned with two lines running parallel to the base of the triangle. We have not found a comparandum for this triangular object. Underneath the prow protrudes a line that may be meant to represent a rudder. Together with attempts to render texture, the rudder is a common feature in graffiti depicting boats (fig. 10).

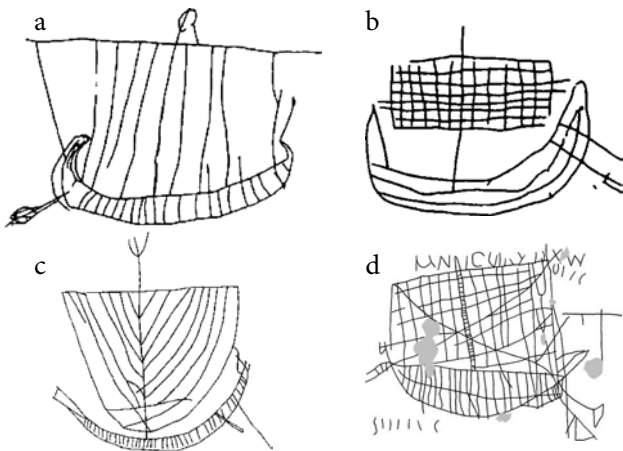


Figure 10. Comparanda for boat with textured surface and rudder (cat. 1):

a–b) Langner 2001, nos. 1915 and 2011 (Delos); c) Langner 2001, no. 1938 (Pompeii); d) Langner 2001, no. 2001 (Puteoli).

2. Geometric design

ca. 9 × 11.5 cm (height of triangle = 7.5 cm)

This item looks like a letter A with a vertical stroke down the middle and a second horizontal bar. At the apex is a small circle with a zigzag line on top of it. It is not clear

whether a line extending to the left from the apex at an angle of 45 degrees is meant to be associated with this image. Conceivably this item is meant to represent an instrument of some sort. The “wigwam” shape may suggest a type of plant-trellis; or, if the circle and zigzag at the top represent a cord and ring, this item is possibly meant to be suspended, like a scale, although the presence of a second cross-piece and the absence of a pan render this identification unlikely.⁹ We have not found a precise comparandum for this item, although it is reminiscent of graffiti representing the rigging for a ship’s sail from San Salvatore di Cabras, Sardinia (Langner 2001, no. 2070) and Dura-Europos (Langner 2001, no. 2246); the latter includes a circular object at the top of the mast.

3. Titulus?

ca. 3 × 4 cm

This item is very faintly incised.¹⁰ The part that we can see seems to comprise a rectangle bisected by a diagonal that protrudes further below the rectangle than above it. Except for the angle of the diagonal, the image is reminiscent of a placard (*titulus*) such as that carried by a prisoner in a parade, as in a relief from Miletus representing a warder and three prisoners, the first of whom is brandishing a placard that presumably identified the miscreants and their crime (fig. 11).



Figure 11. Relief from Miletus, second/third century A.D., showing shackled prisoners, warder, and *titulus*. Photograph by kind permission of Prof. Dr. Volkmar von Graeve.

4. Boat?

ca. 12.5 × 6 cm

This boat is similar to cat. 1, except that the hull has a pronounced curve, like a boomerang.

5. Boat?

ca. 22.5 × 7 cm

Despite the fact that its upper edge bulges outwards, we have identified this vigorously hatched oval object as a hull, because its convex shape is similar to images where traces of other features clinch the identification as a boat (fig. 12).¹¹

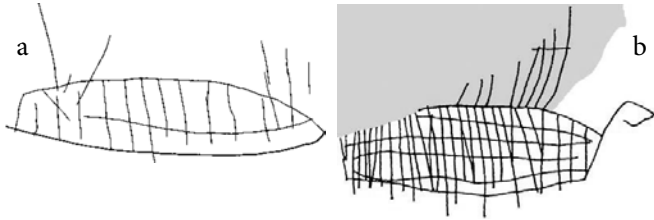


Figure 12. Comparanda for hull with convex shape (cat. 5): a–b) Langner 2001, nos. 1994 and 1997 (Pompeii).

6. Boat?

ca. 17 × 11 cm

This image, although sketchier than cat. 5, is sufficiently similar for tentative identification as another hull.

7. Boat?

ca. 6 × 6.5 cm

Identification of this image as a boat is particularly insecure: instead of a hull represented by an enclosed outline, this sketch comprises a single line with a pronounced curve. This is reminiscent of outlines of boats found occasionally elsewhere, although usually in conjunction with another identifiable feature such as a sail, a mast, or a bank of oars (fig. 13). To compound the uncertainty, our image includes five more or less vertical lines incised within the curved outline that do not seem to represent a sail (a feature otherwise unattested on the boats on our wall) and cannot be accounted for with any degree of confidence.

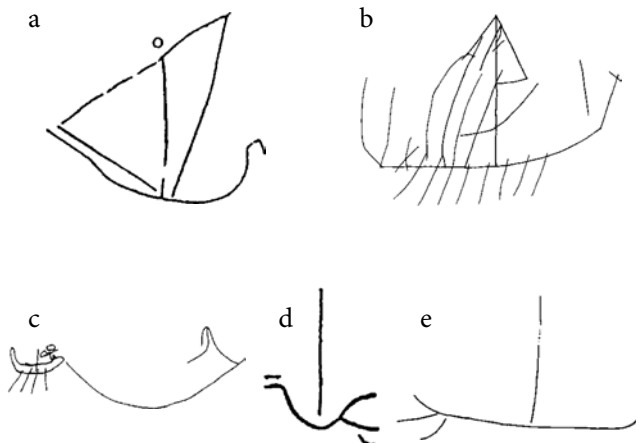


Figure 13. Comparanda for boat in outline (cat. 7): a) Langner 2001, no. 1929 (Alexandria); b–c) Langner 2001, nos. 1947 and 1952 (Stabiae); d) Langner 2001, no. 1977 (Athens); e) Langner 2001, no. 1978 (Delos).

8. Inscription: ZHTHMATA (ζητήματα)

ca. 21.5 × 2 cm (height of zeta = 3.75 cm)

This is the only complete word on the wall. It is deeply incised. The first letter (*zeta*) is much larger than the rest, and is set apart from the others. The script, being incised, is angular, rather than displaying the loops facilitated by the passage of a stylus over papyrus; only the median loop of the *mu* is curved. The first *eta* is larger than the second. Both *alphas* have a serif at the apex. The vertical stroke of the first *tau* extends above the horizontal bar. The second *tau* is strongly cruciform and is tilted so far to the right that it looks like a *chi*. The outlines of the crest and helmet of gladiator cat. 10 overlap with the right diagonal of the second *alpha*. The gladiatorial image is more heavily incised than the *alpha*, and seems to be superimposed upon it (fig. 14). Hence the word seems to have been there first and may not refer to the gladiators below.



Figure 14. Gladiators cat. 9–10 overlapping with ZHTHMATA (line-drawing at fig. 15 below).

The palaeography cannot be very precisely determined, since we are not dealing with the handwriting of a professional scribe employing stylus and ink on a papyrus laid horizontal, but the incisions of someone, possibly semi-literate, who was scratching on a vertical surface. The most distinctive letters are: *alpha*, which is formed by three straight lines rather than a diagonal and a loop, and is characterized by the serif at the apex and a precisely horizontal median bar; and *mu*, which has splayed verticals and a shallow median loop. This combination bears some similarity to the handwriting of a very fine papyrus fragment of the second book of the *Iliad* (Bodl. MS. Gr. Class. a. 1(P)), dated to the middle of the second century A.D., except that the letter *mu* on the papyrus is more deeply looped and *alpha* has serifs on the ends of the diagonals as well as at the apex.¹² It seems safe to say that the script of our graffito is not inconsistent with lettering that could be expected in the period immediately preceding the destruction of the House of the Hoards (A.D. 252/253).

ζήτημα, from ζητέω, “to seek,” describes “that which is sought,” hence “inquiry,” “question,” “search.” In a legal context the plural is attested in the sense “claims,” “objects of dispute.” In the context of our puzzling sketches, it is tempting to interpret the word as “puzzles” or “problems.” In a graffito (SEG 8 [1938] no. 622) from a private house at Hermopolis Magna on the Nile, about 80 km upstream from Oxyrhynchus, the label ζήτημα is attached to the image of a naked man, alongside four figures labeled, respectively, Οιδείπους, Σφίγξ, Θήβαι, and Ἄγνουα (= Ἄγνοια); hence ζήτημα here seems to mean “riddle.” On a graffito from the basilica at Pompeii (CIL iv 1877) the transliterated form “ZETEMA” is the heading for an enigmatic claim relating to paternity, and may therefore mean “riddle” there too, as it does in a trick question about the paternity of Priam’s children, likewise with the heading ζήτημα, in a graffito from Cyrene.¹³ A second instance from the basilica at Pompeii (CIL iv 5341) includes the phrase “ZETEMA DISSOLVIT = “(s)he solved the puzzle”?. A graffito from the Odeion at Aphrodisias also seems to employ ζήτημα as a heading and, in the context of the riddling phrases that follow, it seems to mean “riddle” or “trick question.”¹⁴ Our graffito is the only example where the plural of the word appears.

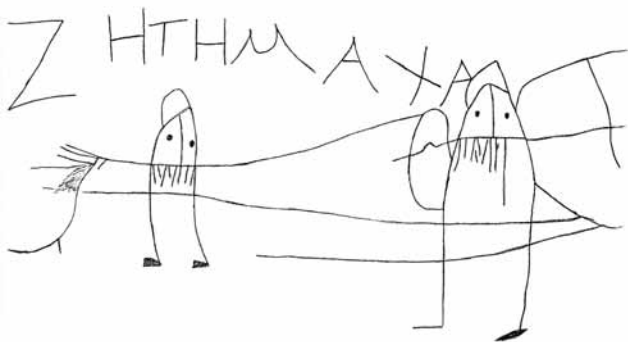


Figure 15. Line-drawing of gladiators cat. 9–10 overlapping with ZHTHMATA (color photograph at fig. 14 above).

9, 10. Two gladiators

9 = ca. 2 × 7 cm

10 = ca. 4.5 × 11 cm (width including “shield” = 11 cm)

These two gladiators are probably conceived as a pair (fig. 15). They are depicted schematically, from the front, wearing a crested helmet with two eyeholes and a division down the middle. This design corresponds to the helmet worn by the type of gladiator known as a *secutor*.¹⁵ The central ridge is probably intended to protect the nose. In our graffito the outline of each helmet is extended downwards on either side to indicate the gladiator’s legs. Beneath the helmet there is a fringe. The horizontal incision indicating the base of the helmet of cat. 9 is extended on either side, possibly to suggest the gladiator’s arms. Below that, a second, more superficial incision beneath the “fringe” extends to left and right, and continues beneath the “fringe” of cat.

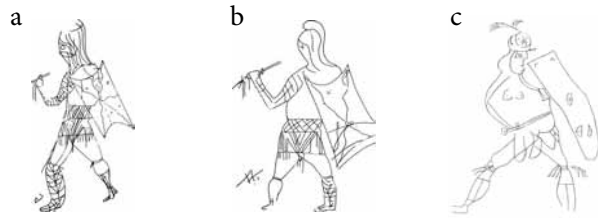


Figure 16. Comparanda for gladiators wearing fringed garments (cat. 9–10): a–b Langner 2001, nos. 795 and 796 (Lyons); c Langner 2001, no. 783 (Pompeii).

10. It is tempting to interpret this incision as an attempt to render the body of both gladiators, but comparison with cat. 21 and 22 suggests that our incision may be coincidental. Hence the “fringe” seems to be the sole indication of the body. It may conceivably be meant to represent the *subligaculum*, the loin-cloth worn by gladiators, although that is usually represented as a triangular fold covering the genitalia; the fringed skirt on a mosaic from the Domus Sollertiana at El Djem in modern Tunisia is the uniform of a prisoner.¹⁶ Two graffiti from Lyons depicting gladiators show both the triangular fold of the *subligaculum* and a fringed garment slung around the gladiators’ hips, and a graffito from Pompeii shows a gladiator wearing a “skirt” that looks as though it is made of strips of material such as leather; our “fringe” may represent the gladiator’s body via an allusion to a generic garment of this type (fig. 16).

Extending to the right of gladiator cat. 10 is a large excrescence, roughly circular, that is divided into four quadrants. This is probably not meant to be a shield; it is proportionately too large, and from the surviving evidence (both representations and actual items of equipment) it appears that round shields were decorated not in quadrants but in concentric circles.¹⁷ A smaller, oval object on the gladiator’s right (i.e., to the viewer’s left) does not correspond to any identifiable element of a gladiator’s armor or equipment. It cannot be meant to represent a *galerus*, the shoulder-guard worn by a *retiarius* (net-fighter). This is because the regular *retiarius* wears no helmet and does not carry a shield; instead, he is meant to wear the *galerus* on his left shoulder to protect his neck from a sword-thrust from his opponent, who would normally be right-handed. Hence, even if our graffito-artist has invented a hybrid gladiator who does not correspond to any attested category, it is unlikely that he

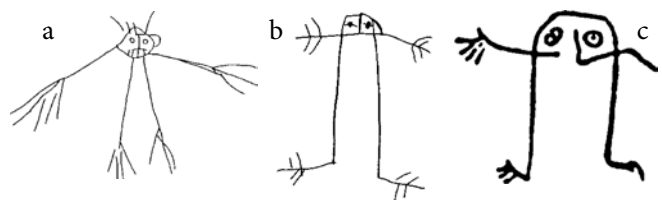


Figure 17. Comparanda for truncated figures, possibly gladiators (cat. 9–10):

a) Langner 2001, no. 633 (Pompeii); b) Langner 2001, no. 635 (Beth She’arim); c) Langner 2001, no. 646 (Baouit).

would combine details so irrationally; the same hybrid occurs at cat. 22 below.

Comparable human figures in which the body is not represented are attested from Pompeii (possibly a gladiator), Beth She'arim (the same rounded head as our gladiatorial helmet, with dots for eyes and a division down the middle), and Baouit in Egypt (fig. 17). In all three instances the representation of the chin extends into arms on either side. It is clear that in the example from Baouit the central division, which does not extend all the way to the top of the head, is meant to represent the nose. The feet of gladiators cat. 9 and 10 are also distinctive, represented as a short horizontal line protruding from the bottom of the leg. In both instances the feet are turned to the left. The feet of cat. 9 are slightly rounded. This simple representation of the foot is often attested (fig. 18).



Figure 18. Comparandum for gladiator with schematic representation of feet (cat. 9–10): Langner 2001, no. 835 (Tell-'Eitun near Hebron).

11, 12, 13. Two birds and a partial inscription

ca. 4.5 × 3 cm, 5.5 × 4 cm, 3 × 1.5 cm

Of the three images comprising this cluster, the lower bird (cat. 12) is the most fully preserved. It is unclear whether the partial image of another bird (cat. 11) and the likewise partially intact inscription (cat. 13) were ever completed, but at present they remain only partially visible. The bird (cat. 12), in a standing position facing left, has long legs and an open beak. The outlines of its upper and lower body cross over to form its tail. It has a crest on top of its head, but there is no attempt to represent wings, nor any decoration on the body. On the basis of its similarity to cat. 12, the image above (cat. 11) may be identified as another bird, only partially designed. It has two vertical strokes representing the legs, and an outline for the lower body.



Figure 19. Wall 9267: right-hand section of area containing graffiti.

To the right of these birds is the beginning of an inscription (cat. 13). Its position close to the lower bird's tail may suggest that it was intended to identify the birds, or else it may be unrelated. The inscription too was only partially designed or remains only partially preserved. The first letter is a *nu*, and there is definitely no letter in front of it; it is followed by a diagonal stroke with a hook at the top that may represent an *alpha*. No other letters are visible. In three other instances birds in graffiti are associated with fragmentary lettering that may have originally been intended as a label (Langner 2001, nos. 1661–2 [Rome]; 1665 [Ephesos]). An example from Ios depicting two birds includes the graffiti artist's signature in large letters, and beneath that a word in smaller letters (κατάπλους, "sailing") that may be intended as a label (Langner 2001, nos. 1671–2). A graffito of a bird from the baths at Chesters on Hadrian's Wall is accompanied by the word NEILO (Langner 2001, no. 1703).¹⁸ In our example, however, even allowing for dialectal variation, there is no species name beginning NA- that would fit;¹⁹ the drawing is obviously not a duck (νήττα). The long legs suggest a wader.

Birds were a popular image in graffiti, frequently occurring on their own, and sometimes in the context of an altar or a sacrifice, or occasionally on top of a standard or a mast.²⁰ Our complete bird (cat. 12) is a relatively simple example, and is rather unusual for the shape of the tail and the open beak. In its simplicity of outline and the absence of any feet, it is reminiscent of a bird sketched in the theater at Aphrodisias (Langner 2001, no. 1737). The outline of the body crossing over to indicate the tail is paralleled in a more sophisticated example from Stabiae, where the design of the tail is much larger in proportion to the body, and is filled in with vertical strokes (Langner 2001, no. 1696). At Dura-Europos a chick being fed a worm by its parent has the same simplicity of design, with the outline of the body cross-over to indicate the tail (Langner 2001, no. 1668). An example from Delos replicates our cross-over tail feathers very closely (Langner 2001, no. 1738). The most unusual feature of our bird is the open beak. Even the chick anticipating its meal at Dura-Europos does not have its beak open. We could not find a comparandum, other than two fish with open mouths (Langner 2001, nos. 1808–9 [Aphrodisias], 1881 [San Salvatore di Cabras]).

14. Geometric design

ca. 5 × 7.5 cm

A vertical line is bisected in the middle by a long diagonal and a short horizontal. At the top, a horizontal bar extends to the left. A rounded object with a flat base and a dot in the middle is attached to the end of this bar in the manner of a modern streetlamp suspended over the road on an extended arm. We have been unable to identify this item with any agricultural tool or surveying implement. Possibly both this item and cat. 2 are abstract designs, rather than representational images.

15. Arched shape

ca. 8.5 × 10.5 cm

A single line, deeply incised in the plaster, outlines an elongated bell shape that is flat at the bottom and curved at the top, and leans slightly to the right. In the lower left corner of the object, four vertical lines are crossed by a diagonal, reminiscent of the modern system for counting in fives (e.g., library users entering a reading room). It is uncertain whether these lines, and also the two vertical lines on the top of the object, are meant to be associated with it. Three surviving graffiti, however, provide parallels for the shape of our image (fig. 20). The bell shape is similar to the outline in a more detailed but as yet unexplained graffito from the entrance to a shop in the Agora of the Italians at Delos (Langner 2001, no. 2502: “fragliches”). There is a similar outline in a graffito from the Temple of Bel at Palmyra (Langner 2001, no. 2518: “fragliches”); the outline is cross-hatched inside, and may conceivably be meant to represent a barred window (although Langner’s “fragliches” is still probably the most judicious verdict). A third graffito, from a *cubiculum* in house I ix 13–14 at Pompeii, shows the same outline, with a vertical line extending from it at the top and a horizontal line to right and left, with a diagonal line inside, and a shape like a letter A underneath (Langner 2001, no. 2519: “fragliches”). The outline of our object is the same shape as the gladiators’ helmets (especially cat. 9 and 10), but it is very much larger and lacks the eyeholes and the central ridge, and therefore should surely not be identified as a helmet.

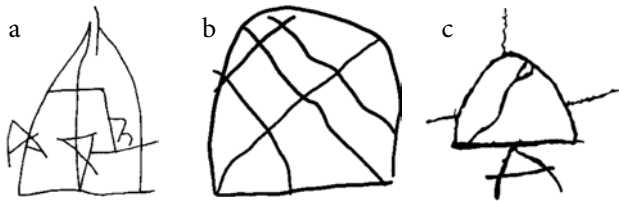


Figure 20. Comparandum for arched shape (cat. 15):

a) Langner 2001, no. 2502 (Delos); b) Langner 2001, no. 2518 (Palmyra); c) Langner 2001, no. 2519 (Pompeii).

16. Boat?

ca. 9.5 × 3.5 cm

An oval shape with a pronounced curve along the lower edge is patterned with hatching. Its similarity to cat. 5 suggests that it is to be identified as another boat. Where the plaster has flaked away in the middle of the upper edge we have indicated the probable contour of the image with a dotted line.

17. Aggregate of vertical lines

ca. 5.5 × 13 cm

It is unclear whether this item should be regarded as an aggregate of vertical lines bifurcating a horizontal, similar to the design inside the “arched opening” (cat. 15), or whether

it is meant to represent a *vexillum*, like the more transparent image to the right (cat. 25). A second horizontal line joining two of the verticals distinguishes this image from the design inside cat. 15, but the central vertical line, which would have to correspond to the pole of the *vexillum*, does not extend above the upper horizontal, as it very obviously does in the representation at cat. 25. It does, however, extend lower than the other verticals, and runs into the stalk of the palm branch below (cat. 18). The curved line on the left may not be associated with this image.

18. Pair of palm fronds

ca. 9.5 cm × 5.5 (= left palm) / 4.5 cm (= right palm)

This image comprises two curved palm fronds. They may be associated with the image below (cat. 19, a ship’s hull?). Palm fronds occasionally appear in graffiti depicting boats. A graffito from Pompeii depicts a boat with a palm frond at the stern and one on top of the mast (Langner 2001, no. 2198). A graffito from Dura-Europos depicts a boat with a palm frond at the prow, another at the stern, and a third suspended over the deck (Langner 2001, no. 2199). More often, however, palm fronds are associated with figures of athletes or gladiators to signify victory (Langner 2001, nos. 780, 919–37). They are also depicted on circus tracks and on altars (Langner 2001, nos. 2327–9; 2336, 2338–9). A predilection on the part of our artist(s) for fringed edgings seems to be attested by the combined representation of palm fronds (cat. 18), the schematic rendering of the gladiators’ bodies (cat. 9, 10, 21–24), and the *vexillum* (cat. 25).²¹

19. Boat?

ca. 14.5 × 7 cm

A roughly oval shape with pointed ends is patterned with parallel vertical lines. A graffito from Pompeii that displays a comparable shape and decoration has been identified as the hull of a boat (fig. 21).



Figure 21. Comparandum for hull (cat. 19): Langner 2001, no. 2232 (Pompeii).

20. Boat?

ca. 4.5 × 3 cm

A curved shape is patterned with parallel horizontal lines. This item is tilted in relation to the other boats depicted on the wall. It has three lines running at right angles to the lower edge of the outline that might be meant to represent a rudder and oars.

21–24. Group of four gladiators

ca. 29 × 16 cm

21 = 7 × 8 cm

22 = 6 × 13 cm

23 = 4.5 × 11.5 cm

24 = 6.5 × 6 cm (width including “shield” = 9.5 cm)

Four figures of gladiators stand in a frontal view (fig. 22), similar to gladiators cat. 9 and 10. Each has a crest on top of his helmet and dots for the eye-holes, and the outline of the helmet extends to indicate the legs, just as with cat. 9 and 10. Two of the figures (cat. 21, 22) are deeply incised, while the others (cat. 23, 24) are drawn more faintly and exhibit less detail.

The two gladiators on the left (cat. 21, 22) are similar to gladiators cat. 9 and 10, although the figures are somewhat more compact and their helmets are less elongated. They both have the fringe of vertical lines below the helmet that seems to signify the body (see cat. 9 and 10 above). The feet of gladiator cat. 22 are “hollow” and face right, while the other gladiator pair (cat. 9, 10) both face left. The mass of vertical and horizontal lines to the right of gladiator cat. 21 may represent a net, although this figure cannot be meant as a regular *retiarius* because he is wearing a helmet.²²

The gladiator below (cat. 22) is accompanied by a poorly defined circular object on the left (probably not a *galerus*: see cat. 10) and a more clearly designated elliptical shape on the right, stippled with holes in the plaster and bisected by a diagonal line running upper left to lower right; this latter object may conceivably represent a shield, although the shape corresponds to no known type. The lower edge of this gladiator’s helmet extends to the right across the “shield” and appears to terminate in three prongs. Hence it may be meant to show the gladiator wielding a trident (albeit disproportionately large, and shaped like a pitchfork rather than the classic angular trident). As with gladiator cat. 21, this image cannot be intended as a faithful representation of a regular *retiarius*, since the gladiator is wearing a helmet (and may just possibly be associated with a shield). We should perhaps allow either that an unorthodox combination of equipment and fighting style was employed in third-century Zeugma or else that the graffiti

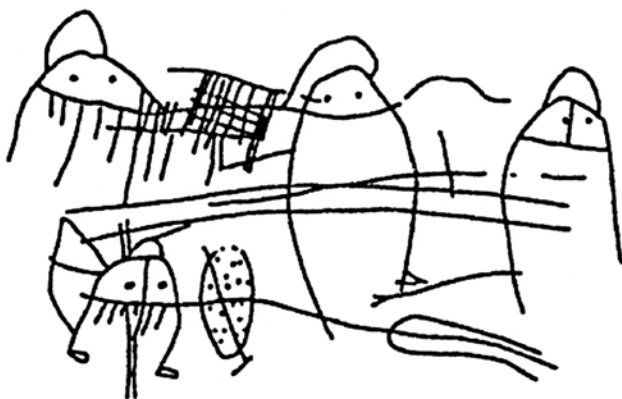


Figure 22. Line-drawing of gladiators cat. 21–24.

artists were using their imagination; the latter explanation is, however, somewhat at variance with the impulse to exactitude of detail in most of the gladiatorial graffiti that have survived.²³ Skepticism perhaps dictates that the attendant motifs be viewed not as representations, but simply as doodling shapes that do not contribute any narrative detail to the gladiatorial images.

Gladiators cat. 23 and 24 are less deeply incised than cat. 21 and 22, and have neither a fringe nor feet.²⁴ All four gladiators have the same body shape, helmet, and crest, except that cat. 21 and 23 lack the division down the middle of the visor. Both the feet of gladiator cat. 24 and the lower part of one leg are not visible.



Figure 23. Vexillum and ladder (detail).

25. Vexillum

ca. 4 × 16 cm

This image is incised much less deeply into the plaster than the other graffiti on the wall (fig. 23). It depicts a rectangular flag, fringed along the lower edge and mounted on a pole. It is not possible to tell whether other symbols and decorations were originally displayed on the pole above the flag, as are attested on the graffiti of a *vexillum* from Dura-Europos (fig. 24 a). This is because the artist seems to have drawn the upper portion of the pole twice, once slanting to the right, and once vertically. Possibly the version slanting right was a mistake, and the vertical line was the correction, as in the double edge to the “ladder” image to the right (cat. 26). In that case, it is possible that the same artist, prone to making the same error, drew both images, and in both instances his hand slipped and he drew the vertical askew. If, however, the slanting line is the true continuation of the pole, then the break in the plaster immediately above prevents us from knowing whether other details were depicted further up. Even so, this need not necessarily have been the case, since a simpler type of *vexillum*, whose pole terminates in a simple crescent above the flag, is attested in two other graffiti from Dura (figs. 24 b–c).

Vexilla are rare among graffiti. A few military standards appear in graffiti from Hatra,²⁵ but Zeugma is now only the second site, after Dura-Europos, to have yielded a secure

example of a *vexillum* on a graffito. At the least, this suggests that the graffito artist was familiar with the army, if not a serving soldier himself. The destruction layer above several houses attests a Roman military presence immediately prior to the Sasanian attack.²⁶ Hence this graffito may have been the work of a soldier who was posted at Zeugma in these circumstances, in which case it should be dated to the mid-third century.

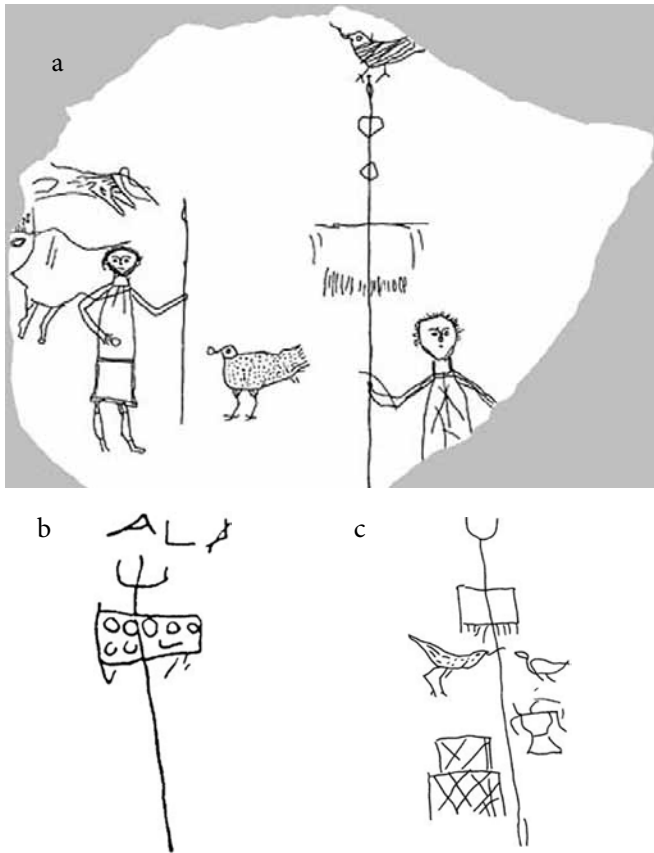


Figure 24. Comparanda for vexillum (cat. 25):
a) Langner 2001, nos. 1305–6 (Dura-Europos);
b-c) Langner 2001, nos. 2466–7 (Dura-Europos).

26. Ladder?

ca. 4 × 39.5 cm

Two parallel lines are joined by 27 horizontals, in a ladder motif. We cannot tell how far this image extended, since the plaster breaks off before the top.

At the top of the surviving portion, the vertical edge on the left is drawn twice, once slantwise and once straight, as though the artist had corrected a mistake. A similar “correction” is visible in the drawing of the *vexillum* (see cat. 25 above). It is not clear from the photograph whether the lower end of our image terminates in the red border running underneath the main painted panel, or whether it extends into the portion of the wall where the decoration is obscured by a burn mark. But because the rest of the “ladder” is deeply incised, and nothing with the same depth of

incision is visible below the point at which we have shown the ladder terminating on the accompanying drawing (fig. 8), we are confident that our “ladder” ends in a rung. While the legs of a modern ladder extend below the lowest rung, ancient graffiti depicting ladders frequently show them terminating in a rung, as in the ladders on the left and in the middle on a graffito from Rome depicting a total of three ladders on a building site (fig. 25 a). Similarly, the ladder resting against the side of a ship (albeit at a very implausible angle) in a graffito from the *Thermae Stabianae* at Pompeii apparently terminates in a rung (fig. 25 b).²⁷ Other ladders, however, are shown ending in legs, like their modern counterparts (fig. 25 c–d).

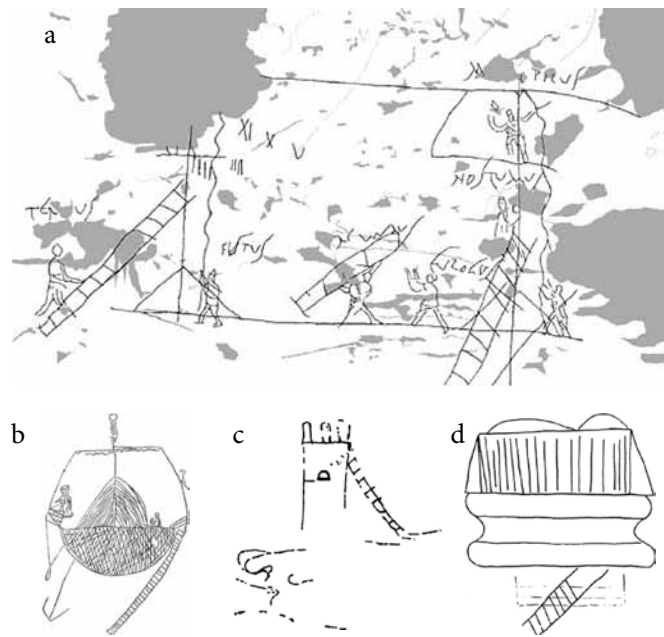


Figure 25. Comparanda for ladder (?) (cat. 26):
a) Langner 2001, no. 1353 (Rome); b) Langner 2001, no. 2086 (Pompeii); c) Langner 2001, no. 2286 (Anfuschi);
d) Langner 2001, no. 2318 (Herculaneum).

The “ladder” motif can be incorporated into architectural representations, as in two graffiti from Dura-Europos depicting buildings whose towers are rendered by a parallel series of horizontal lines representing (presumably) schematic building blocks (Langner 2001, no. 1354 and 2304), or a graffito at Bu Njem in Roman Tripolitania (modern Libya) in which the blocks are more individualized (Langner 2001, no. 2306). It can also be adapted for decorative purposes, as in the edging of the garment worn by Fortuna in a graffito from Aphrodisias (Langner 2001, no. 1211). The same motif is also employed for the mast of a ship on a graffito from Bu Njem (Langner 2001, no. 1991). But our “ladder” is freestanding, and it dwarfs all the representations of ships on the wall, so we are confident that either it is meant to be a representation of an actual ladder, or else (less probably) it is an abstract geometric design (see cat. 2 and 14).

27. Group of geometric motifs arranged vertically

4.5 × 9 cm

A group of geometric motifs, arranged in a vertical sequence, is faintly visible to the right of the "ladder" (cat. 26). From the top down we can see a pentagon, a circle, a horizontal line, and two parallel vertical lines. Each of these motifs adjoins the one below. Underneath this sequence there is another horizontal line and, below that and slightly to the left, a circle stippled with dots; these two motifs are separate from the rest, and from each other.

SYNTHESIS

Boats are ubiquitous in graffiti from around the Roman world, most notably at sites on or near the sea (e.g., Delos and Pompeii), or near a major lake or river (e.g., Alba Fucens, near the Fucine Lake, or Silsile, on the Nile). Of a total of 45 sites where graffiti of boats have been found, only two are distant from a substantial stretch of water: Thamurgadi (modern Timgad, in Algeria) and Bu Njem (in Libya). Although Zeugma is so far inland, the Euphrates saw major water-borne traffic, and boats are therefore a natural subject to spring to the graffiti artist's mind. There are four securely identifiable boats on our wall (cat. 1, 4, 5, 6) and four tentative identifications (cat. 7, 16, 19, 20). None of the representations includes sails or banks of oars; only the hull is represented, and in one instance (cat. 1) a probable rudder. In every case but one, the enclosed outline of the hull is filled in with a series of lines etched in two directions, vertical and horizontal (cat. 1, 4, 5, 6, 16), or else in one direction only (cat. 19, 20). "Hatching" is a common feature in graffiti representing the hull of a boat. Only two of our representations include a strongly curved prow (cat. 1, 4), but the rest can be identified as boats by analogy with the roughly oval shape employed for a hull in comparable renderings elsewhere.

Gladiators are the other principal motif on our wall. They are ubiquitous in graffiti across the Empire. Although no venue for mounting gladiatorial displays has yet been identified at Zeugma, there is no need to assume that the artist had been unable to view gladiatorial combat in his local community. Uncertainty attending the identification of various motifs associated with these gladiators prompts the suspicion that the artist may have rendered them with inauthentic details of equipment and fighting style, or else that unconventional fighting styles were attested at Zeugma in the third century; the possibility remains that these attendant motifs may have nothing to do with the gladiators at all. The provision of gladiatorial spectacles for the entertainment of the troops on the Roman frontier might account for the presence of gladiatorial motifs on this wall. And the *vexillum* visible here, although lacking the symbols that would identify it securely as a military standard, nevertheless suggests that the graffiti artist was probably familiar with the army, possibly a soldier himself.

There are no striking stylistic differences among the motifs that require us to postulate more than one graffiti artist at work. The apparent grouping of the motifs in five discrete clusters may simply result from our inability to see motifs in the intervening spaces that were too faintly incised to remain visible today. The eastern half of the wall, however, does seem to have remained free of graffiti, possibly because furniture or other items were in the way.

Where motifs overlap it is possible to determine which was drawn first, as in the case of the last letter of the word ZHTHMATA, which was incised before the gladiator whose helmet overlaps with it. This does not, however, mean that two different people must have been at work, although that is a possibility. It remains a hypothesis that the artist who sketched the gladiators, and perhaps some or all of the rest of the images too, may have commanded basic literacy such as to enable him to spell the riddling word that precisely captures the tantalizing challenge that these intriguing sketches pose for their modern interpreters.

NOTES

1. We would like to record our sincere thanks to Bettina Bergmann, who has shared her knowledge of the site with us; to Jennifer Tobin, who supplied us with information about the graffito in the courtyard in the House of the Bull; and to William Aylward, who has provided us with patient and expert guidance throughout.
2. Pictorial graffiti have been collected by Langner 2001. It will be evident from what follows that we have been greatly assisted by this collection. All reproductions from Langner 2001 appear with kind permission of the author.
3. Early 2003, 47 and figs. 36–7.
4. Tobin, this volume; Bergmann, this volume.
5. Tobin, this volume, n. 85.
6. Tobin, this volume.
7. Tobin, this volume; Bergmann, this volume.
8. Varone 1999, no. 83.
9. For representations, see Ibel 1906, fig. 15 (a relief showing double scales), figs. 20 and 21 (reconstruction and photograph of a relief depicting a butcher's scale with a counterweight).
10. Our identification is very tentative because under different light we think we may be able to see further incisions parallel to the lower edge of the rectangle, resulting in a composite image that looks like a pair of ladders side by side.
11. The hulls of many boats in graffiti are similarly hatched: cf. Langner 2001, nos. 1969, 1970, 1984, 1989, 1997, 2008, 2032–3, 2060, 2085, 2200, 2204–6, 2210.
12. Turner 1987, 38–9 and pl. 13.
13. Probably a parody of ancient didactic method: see Kaster 1984.
14. Roueché 1993, 42, revising her earlier suggestion of a religious sense or a warning against theft (Roueché 1989, 245); Slater 1993, 183.
15. For a bronze figurine from the Musée de l'Arles Antique that is depicted wearing this type of helmet, with a hinged visor that opens and closes, see Junkelmann 2000a, 40 fig. 22 (visor closed), 62 fig. 62 (visor open).
16. For a representation in full color see Vismara 1990 (cover photograph).
17. See Junkelmann 2000b, 57 fig. 71 (detail of a mosaic from Zliten in Libya showing two *essedarii* in combat), 78 fig. 111 (round shield from Pompeii), 136 fig. 215 (mosaic in two registers from the Via Appia, now in the Museo Arqueologico Nacional in Madrid, depicting the combat between two *equites* and its outcome). A curved rectangular shield lends itself more naturally to decoration in quadrants: see Junkelmann 2000b, 69 fig. 96 (funerary relief of a *secutor* from Tralles), 103 fig. 142 (*secutor* victorious over a *retiarius* on the Zliten mosaic), 106 fig. 147 (rear view of an ivory figurine from Lavoex near Avenches depicting a *secutor* and a *retiarius*).
18. This word might have nothing to do with the bird; for the suggestion that it might even refer to Septimius Nilus, the prefect in charge of the garrison in the third century who is named on an inscription from the site, see Watkin 1885, 143.
19. Thompson 1936.
20. Langner 2001, nos. 1634–747 (= 114 discrete examples).
21. We have not assigned numbers to three instances of “fringing” that are apparently deliberate but do not appear to represent anything definite: a horizontal line to the left of boat cat. 5 with a “fringe” of seven or eight strokes beneath it; a vertical line from the top of boat cat. 5 with a “fringe” of six diagonal strokes to the left, like half a palm frond; and a sloping line, at the same height as gladiators cat. 9 and 10, and in the same vertical field as boat cat. 5, that supports in the middle a “fringe” comprising seven strokes reminiscent of blades of grass on a ground line.
22. For *retiarii* with nets, see Langner 2001, nos. 850–6. The closest

- comparanda are no. 852 (Ruscino, at the foot of the Pyrenees) and nos. 853–4 (Pompeii).
23. See Langner 2001, nos. 769–940 (individual gladiators), 1003–62 (pairs).
24. We are confident that a scratch at the end of the left leg of gladiator cat. 23 (to the viewer's right) is not part of the graffito but a crack in the plaster.
25. See references at Goldman 1999, 76 (= catalogue item G.8).
26. See Tobin, this volume, conclusions for trenches 2, 11, and 18.
27. See also the discussion and reproduction at Maiuri 1958, 26–7 and fig. 7.

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