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INTRODUCTION

Graffiti, Ancient and Modern

One day in the middle of the third century, a man grasped a nail and scratched his name, “Hiya,” in large Aramaic letters along a doorway inside a synagogue in Roman Syria. Roughly two hundred years later, someone ducked inside a catacomb in Roman Palestine and grabbed a sharpened stick to scrawl the Greek message, “Good luck in your resurrection!” along the smoothed stone surface framing the cave’s entrance. Spectators of entertainments, perhaps a century after that, used a knife to energetically hack the Greek phrase, “The old Jews for the Blues!” into the stone seats of a public building in Byzantine Asia Minor. To modern audiences, these acts of writing might seem to have little in common other than their apparent inappropriateness. Today, after all, most people would classify acts of scratching one’s name onto a synagogue doorway as vandalism, if not sacrilege; writing messages around tombs as outrageous displays of disrespect, if not desecration; and carving enthusiastic messages into the seats of municipal buildings as illegal tampering with public property. But these interpretations of such writings, however intuitive they might seem to contemporary sensibilities, demonstrate how differently the same activities resonated in antiquity. Ancient people viewed applications of messages, such as those above, quite distinctly—as desirable, even normal activities inside of their respective environments. Their writers did not apply their words to deface or to defy, but rather, to exhibit their devotions to deity, their imperatives to comfort or protect dead ancestors, and their factional and civic pride.

Decades of exploration and excavation have exposed graffiti associated with Jews from far corners of the ancient world, from the shores of the

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Black Sea to the eastern and southern portions of the Mediterranean littoral, through the deserts of Egypt and Arabia to the eastern stretches of Mesopotamia, in areas of modern Crimea, Macedonia, Greece, Croatia, Italy, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, south to Malta, Tunisia, Rome, and Sardinia (Map 1a, 1b). These markings encrust surfaces of ancient synagogues, pagan temples, passageways along desert shrines, byways, and cliffs of ancient harbors; doorways and burial beds in underground tombs and cemeteries; theatres, a hippodrome, an imperial palace, private homes, and marketplaces. Their chronologies of deposit also span more than a millennium, with the earliest examples associated with Iron Age Judah (c. sixth century BCE) and the remainder from periods of Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine hegemony through the Arab conquests (the fourth century BCE through the seventh/eighth centuries CE). Locations, contexts, and chronologies of these vernacular writings and drawings might seem impossibly diverse, but many share a surprising number of common features, which implicate broad ranges of human behaviors from domestic practices to public and private worship, commerce, recreation, and commemoration.

But as indicated by the introductory examples above, the task of evaluating ancient graffiti proves to be a challenging one. For a start, consider two conflicting modern judgments about graffiti writing. The recent opening of Galleria Varsi in Rome, a space devoted entirely to international street art, reflects the evolving respect, among cultural elites, for graffiti artists and their works.¹ Glossy coffee table books document the oeuvres of urban artists, whose graffiti emblazon public spaces throughout the United States, Europe, and the Middle East.² The ubiquity of stories about graffiti in the popular press and in film, which eagerly locate and analyze the most recent “hits,” whereabouts, and identity/ies of the elusive British artist Banksy, exemplifies how relevant and increasingly newsworthy are graffiti and their creators.³ Banksy, along with other artists, known by professional aliases such as Broken Fingaz and Lady Aiko, earn renown as visual commentators, whose works boldly confront societal ills and urban realities and advocate social, economic, and political change (figure I.1). The past decades, in short, offer plenty of witnesses to a positive cultural reception of graffiti and street art.⁴

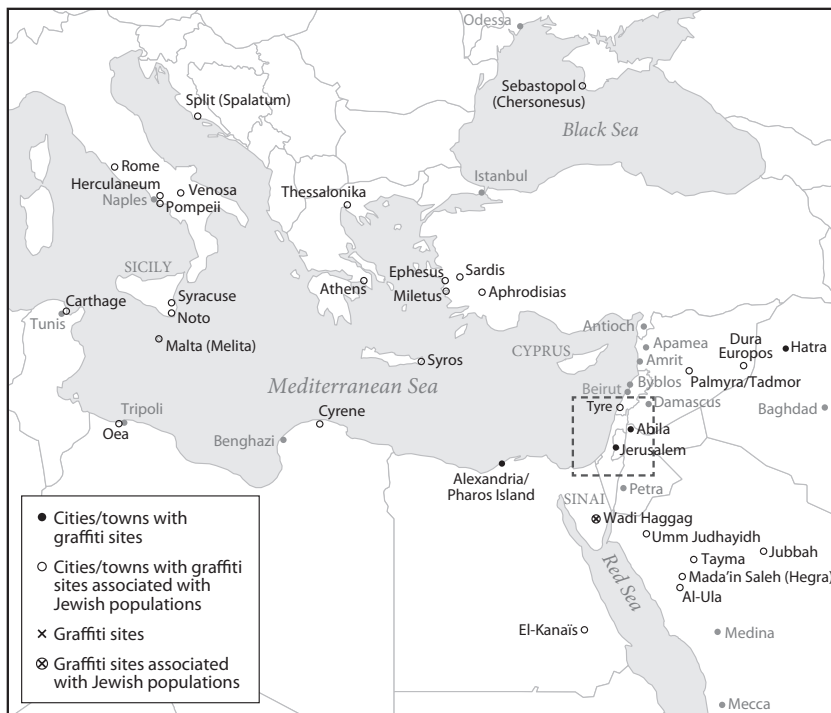
Yet such esteem has not entirely erased older views of graffiti writing. One could equally point out that longstanding prejudices entrench views that graffiti are forms of defacement and constitute only marginal and “low” forms of self-expression. Despite recent revolutions in the reception of street art, for instance, graffiti and comparable media commonly retain pejorative connotations in the United States and parts of Europe. To some observers, the word “graffiti” might evoke esteemed acts of social and political activism, while to many others, it indicates illegal acts of vandalism that

deface the surfaces of public or private buildings. In urban environments in the United States, where strategically placed markings (tags) on houses, stores, or street corners territorialize gang affiliations, graffiti often signify juvenile delinquency or gang membership. In Europe and the Middle East, graffiti more commonly manifest religious, political, and social activism and dissent (figures I.2 and I.3).⁵ Graffiti can serve common functions, globally, as a means to inspire terror: spray paintings of swastikas on public structures, including playgrounds, intimidate and anger viewers by evoking fear and outrage.⁶ These features of graffiti writing are among their most potent and to some, their most pernicious. One might reasonably ask, therefore, whether employing an anachronistic category, such as graffiti, which simultaneously evokes associations ranging from political activism to gang violence or racism, would detract from efforts to examine any ancient texts and images, including those produced by Jews.

The capaciousness of graffiti, as a category, might resound strangely to students of the ancient world for additional reasons. Indeed, if a single word, “graffiti,” conventionally classifies so many different media (including spray-painted, painted, or carved writing) with such discrepant contents, and if examples of graffiti reflect such diverse objectives of their creators (from self-advertisement, to architectural appropriation, to defacement, to terror) and inspire such conflicting emotional responses in their audiences (whether of esteem, appreciation, disgust, or fear), one might reasonably ask whether the category remains too broad to be meaningful in any context. Use of the same term to describe tags outside bodegas in New York City; voodoo symbols drawn by devotees on a New Orleans tomb; and anti-Nazi slogans on public walls in Germany, reinforces this point. Aside from their obvious visual and locational differences, such markings betray vastly distinct media, cultural impulses, and individual intentions and responses. Objections might multiply when using the identical category of graffiti to classify different types of ancient markings. Someone who incised a message of well-wishes to the deceased in a burial cave would likely deny any connection between her act of writing and that undertaken by someone else, who carved letters deeply into the stone backings of civic theatre seats, in order to mark them as reserved seating for “the old Jews.” Using graffiti and cognate terms to describe both types of writing thus might appear to be more distorting than helpful; it would, moreover, artificially unify data and associated actions, which ancient writers and viewers likely regarded as entirely distinct. Such critiques are cogent, partly because the term (graffiti) is not an internal or ancient one.

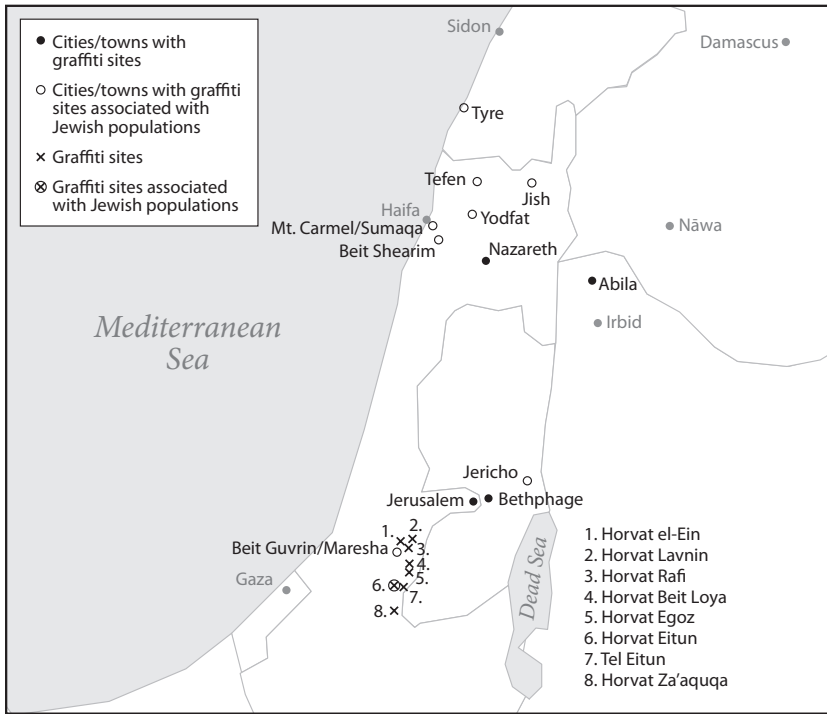
This book confronts such logical challenges by magnifying them. Indeed, the very anachronism and capaciousness of the term “graffiti” should not be explained away, because both features are instrumental for reexaminations of ancient Jewish life. The remainder of this chapter and this book

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Map 1a. Locations of graffiti associated with Jews and neighboring populations throughout the Mediterranean (S. Kelley).

as a whole demonstrates why and how this is so. Well-worn terms, such as “religion” and “race,” among several others, have no precise analogues in antiquity, but scholars commonly deploy them to gain greater insights into the dynamics of the ancient world.⁷ Highlighting the artificiality and the obvious anachronism of the category of “graffiti,” as well as the dissonance and consonance between its modern and ancient applications, ultimately facilitates its productive and responsible use for the discussion of the permeable boundaries between ancient writings and images and their relationships to the daily activities of their creators. Distilled views of graffiti, when informed by methods developed in the fields of anthropology, spatial, landscape, visual, and liturgical studies, demonstrate how graffiti assume roles as creative and powerful agents in antiquity as well as modernity: they can advertise the names and affiliations of their authors, advocate political change or resistance, recast and appropriate the spaces they adorn, and inspire wildly ranging emotions in their audiences. Subsequent chapters are devoted to considering related activities and understandings



Map 1b. Detail of area in dashed box shown in Map 1a (S. Kelley).

to emphasize the inextricability between the activities that dominated the everyday lives of ancient people, and vernacular writing and drawing. Collective evaluation of graffiti thus harnesses their potential to change the face of ancient Jewish historiography.

One could ask how and why graffiti, among all other available ancient media, might serve such potent roles in generating insights into the ancient world. One answer is that graffiti retain information that most other genres of textual or documentary evidence distinctly lack. Even today, studies of ancient Jewish history remain disproportionately reliant on the words of the few (rabbis of the Mishnah, Tosefta, and Talmuds) to consider the lives of the many (“ordinary” Jewish men and women of the time). Scholars conventionally view this type of dependency on literary texts as inevitable, as many continue to use rabbinical writings to frame discussions of daily life and the archaeological and inscriptional evidence produced by Jews who were outside rabbinic circles. Yet this hermeneutic is by no means inevitable, for a simple alternative exists: prioritizing the evidence produced by the “many” over that produced



FIGURE I.1. Banksy mural on West 79th Street and Broadway, New York City, USA. Zabar's Market has installed plexiglass over the mural to protect it from wear and vandalism; March 2017. Photo by the author.



FIGURE 1.2. Political stencil from Jaffa, Israel; August 2017. Photo by the author.



FIGURE 1.3. Anti-Nazi graffiti on wall in downtown Erfurt, Germany; June 2017. Photo by the author.

(nearly exclusively) by the “elite.” By drawing attention to genres of archaeological data more suitable for the discussion of Jewish daily life (including graffiti) and by challenging the hegemony of rabbinical texts for their interpretation, this book demonstrates what is at stake: the possibilities and expanded scope of ancient Jewish historiography when one emphasizes vernacular data and uses local and regional analogues (often produced by non-Jews) to interpret them—outside of literary texts and outside of twenty-first-century expectations. The following chapters, which distinctly consider features of ancient graffiti from diverse locations and contexts, thus open up new ways to interpret Jewish life, as it bridged perceived ethnic and cultural boundaries and theological, practical, chronological, and geographic divides.

PURSUIITS OF THE EVERYDAY

The elite Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus once described historiography as an enterprise that conventionally concerns “the highpoints of affairs,” rather than “the minor details of unimportant circumstances”

(*Roman History* 26.1.1).⁸ Comparable methods of reading formal material, from Herodotus and on, have yielded intellectual, political, and social histories that prioritize exceptional circumstances and people. This has also held true, somewhat inadvertently, in studies of ancient Jews, even if such approaches to the past have begun to shift only in recent years. Beginning in the 1980s, theorists, such as Michel de Certeau, and historians of the *Alltagsgeschichte*, transformed the study of the everyday in present and past time; refinements in these methods have encouraged scholars of early Jewish history, classics, art history and visual studies, archaeology, and anthropology to advance ongoing scrutinies of “unimportant circumstances” and overlooked data to better illuminate the quotidian activities that occupied the majority of people’s lives, also revealing differences in class, status, and gender.⁹ A cursory review of traditional approaches to writing about Jewish “everyday” history reveals how limiting the disproportionate reliance on rabbinic sources and monumental archaeology for these purposes can be, and why careful examinations of graffiti can generate substantially improved insights into the daily lives of Jews in earlier and later antiquity.

When approaching a study of ancient Jewish life, at first glance, rabbinic sources seem like the most natural and productive places to turn. Rabbinic editors from Palestine and Babylonia shaped their expansive collections of the Mishnah, Tosefta, Talmuds and other midrashic works, from the second through the seventh centuries CE. Even if the rabbis do not explicitly describe graffiti writing (with exceptions detailed in Chapter 2), few other aspects of daily life, in fact, seem too mundane or humble for their extensive and detailed deliberations. Meticulous descriptions of agriculture, trade, craftsmanship, architecture, family life, marriage, sexuality, and other features of daily existence in the Mishnah and Talmuds invite the historian to rely on their fastidious accounts to reconstruct the quotidian activities of Jews in antiquity. So, to take but a few examples, rabbinic texts preserve exhaustive debates about appropriate postures for daily prayers; chronicle, in painstaking detail, arguments concerning which pack-camels get priority to pass in narrow lanes; and enthusiastically debate how a polygamist’s estate should be divided appropriately among his multiple widows.¹⁰ The richness and occasional eccentricity of such discussions promise unanticipated insights into the existence and activities of Jews, who inhabited regions stretching from the Mediterranean basin to Arabia and Mesopotamia. But it is through keen awareness of the inward focus of rabbinic literature and of how the editorial agendas of the rabbis shape the selection and description of popular behaviors and sentiments that one can appreciate their limitations as historical resources.

Scrutiny of rabbinic writings, first of all, cannot singlehandedly recreate the worlds of “non-rabbinic,” non-Roman-Palestinian, and non-Babylonian Jews. As many argue today, in fact, the “triumph” of rabbinic Judaism,

which inclines scholars to favor their texts for historiography, was never a foregone conclusion in antiquity.¹¹ Many ancient Jews (at least until the medieval period) lived outside of rabbinic textual cultures, and most diaspora populations never once set foot in Palestine or Babylonia, the places associated with rabbinic learning and textual production.¹² Furthermore, as scholars consistently caution, the rabbis did not redact the Mishnah, Talmuds, and other works for the purposes of internal historiography, nor for twenty-first-century historians, but for myriad other interests, including the preservation of rabbinic methods of argumentation and reasoning, as well as consolidations and transmissions of rabbinical authority.¹³ Particularly in light of the fact that rabbinic editors were elite men of similar circles, as discussed additionally below, historians' pervasive dependence on the Mishnah and Talmuds to generalize about Jewish life throughout antiquity remains fundamentally problematic.¹⁴

But archaeological evidence, which often appears to serve as a vital counterbalance to the elite bias and polemic in many literary sources, bears its own limitations. Architecture, art, and formal inscriptions discovered in synagogues, cemeteries, and tombs, in their highest densities in Roman Palestine and elsewhere along the Mediterranean littoral, initially promise more direct types of information about the everyday lives of Jews, found outside of the rabbinic orbit and sometimes outside of Palestine or Mesopotamia, which are otherwise absent from rabbinic texts. Scholars interrogate the architectural styles and urban locations of ancient synagogues, for instance, to postulate about the social positions of Jews in their surrounding societies. Pictorial arrangements in mosaics and on murals from synagogues, furthermore, offer important clues for how some Jews interpreted their Bible, integrated distinctly pagan and Christian imagery into spaces for worship, engaged in euergetism, and buried their dead.¹⁵ Monumental inscriptions, too, retain critical information, documenting the names some Jews conferred upon their children, the languages they preferred to write in (but not necessarily speak!), institutional hierarchies within synagogues, and the selective involvements of women in them. Some inscribed texts record portions of liturgies or biblical interpretations, and demonstrate various degrees of enmeshment between Jews and their neighbors, among other things.¹⁶

But these complementary sources for historiography are beset by additional limitations. First, they often retain a situational bias: most known objects and structures (with the exception of rare data from domestic contexts in earlier periods) are associated with synagogues or mortuary environments. This fact limits the study of Jewish life in other spatial and practical contexts.¹⁷ Second, archaeological data, such as those described above, largely reflect and reinforce the historical interests and priorities of ancient Jewish elites. Only wealthier Jews could afford to build, decorate, and renovate

synagogues, as donor plaques attest. Only wealthier Jews, likewise, could afford to hire artisans to construct monumental tombs and to inscribe elaborate epitaphs for their deceased.¹⁸ Moreover, while inscriptions exacted on stone and in mosaic, such as donor plaques and epitaphs, retain critical information about patterns in naming and honorific titles and practices, their semantic contents are often formulaic and bereft of more specific details about the lives and experiences of those whom they commemorate.

Finally, considerations of many features of synagogues and burial complexes are limiting for historiographical purposes for another fundamental reason: they only occasionally record substantive information about what people actually *did* inside surrounding spaces.¹⁹ For example, one could parse the iconography of a synagogue mosaic from Roman Palestine to conjecture about the cosmology of its patron(s), but the same data can more rarely assist speculations about the myriad activities once conducted by those who trod on that decorated floor.²⁰ Mortuary architecture, likewise, manifests contemporaneous customs and aesthetics, and documents methods of burial, but cannot reveal information about the activities mourners might have conducted tomb-side. Centuries of looting and partial record keeping in early archaeology compound the problem by depriving the archaeological record of the smallest finds (bits of bone, wood, fragmented plaster), which otherwise might have afforded invaluable clues to reconstruct the activities conducted inside associated structures (including those of commensality, lamp-lighting, anointing, etc.).²¹ With rare exception, most of the evidence for the behaviors Jews conducted during their day-to-day lives—whether in synagogues or cemeteries, at home, or in the marketplace or theatre—has disappeared from the archaeological record.

Equally problematic are the conventional models historians and other scholars use to interpret these data. As Martin Goodman once aptly assessed, the isolation and abstraction of monumental features of the archaeological record inevitably lead to their interpretation through available literary texts, which, as indicated above, have no obvious historical link to the populations who produced the same inscriptions or monuments.²² Equally distancing are the research questions historians commonly apply to ancient texts and objects: efforts to pinpoint the etiologies for the ultimate “triumph” of the rabbis over non-rabbinic Jewish cultures, or to investigate historical antagonisms between early Jewish, Christian, and Muslim populations, often (if necessarily) impose and reify a medieval, if not twentieth- and twenty-first-century cast on the available data for Judaism in antiquity.²³ Daily activities of ancient Jews, let alone the tenors of their relationships with their neighbors, appear to be serially distorted, if not lost, in translation.

Historians thus clearly possess critical information from rabbinic and monumental archaeological sources for the discussion of ancient Jews and

their neighbors. But intrinsic limitations in available data, paired with conventional reliance on entrenched genres of literary evidence for their interpretation, have inadvertently perpetuated historians' disproportionate emphases on specific genres of evidence, produced by exceptional individuals, which they interpret through words of interested authors. Access to broader ranges of Jewish activities, read outside of the gazes of rabbis (let alone of pagan or Christian writers, as discussed in Chapter 3), remains a desideratum.

In antiquity, after all, most Jews did not exclusively devote their waking hours to debating arcane marital laws, considering ways to manage unruly camel traffic, drawing plans for constructing new synagogues and their mosaics, murals, or foundations, designing monumental display tombs, or even contemplating their essential similarities to their distant relatives living across the Mediterranean Sea. Their daily lives were disproportionately consumed with the mundane activities that sustained them, including: buying or selling wares in the market, growing crops, tending animals, preparing food, eating, working, praying, caring for the sick or the dying, chatting with their family members and with their Jewish and non-Jewish neighbors, traveling briefly for business, spending time with loved ones, and dedicating moments to remembering those who had passed away.²⁴ Occasionally, they might have taken time to enjoy the horse races or go to the theatre. Analysis of these everyday activities requires attention to different types of evidence, more obscurely represented in features of the literary and archaeological record.²⁵

This book demonstrates that evidence for these types of activities and for the participation of individuals in them is available and comes in the form of graffiti. This heretofore under-considered body of material ultimately sheds new light on some of the most elusive features of ancient history—the activities that some Jews (including non-elites and non-males) conducted during their day-to-day lives, which required extensive exchanges with other Jews and non-Jews.²⁶ They document social practices of convocation and prayer, travel, work, commerce, recreation, and occasional and periodic commemorations of the dead. Of equal significance is the fact that unlike many other categories of artifacts and inscriptions found in secondary contexts, graffiti are usually discovered *in situ*, which means that they document ancient individuals' uses of spaces and landscapes that surrounded them, inside their original spatial as well as practical contexts. Systematic review of graffiti thus serves as a type of “missing link” in Jewish historiography by constituting evidence for Jews' devotional, commemorative, social, and economic behaviors, fully situated within their broader societies and landscapes. This evidence can even challenge traditional readings of ancient texts on comparable subjects. And it is to the parameters of these graffiti and to methods of their analyses that this chapter now turns.

DEFINING GRAFFITI

The following discussion of graffiti associated with ancient Jews requires a preliminary disaggregation of centuries of accrued presumptions about textual and pictorial production. Common uses of the word “graffiti” in modernity reflect the legacy of eighteenth-century tourists in Pompeii, who applied the Latin-derived Italian term *sgraffiato* (to scratch) to label the ancient drawings and writings found carved into the walls of the famous ancient town.²⁷ In this book, the meanings of “graffiti” (in the plural) and “graffito” (in the singular) specifically draw from the ancient Greek verb “to write” (*grapho*), more than the Italian use, to indicate modes of writing or decoration that are done by hand—whether on walls, in tombs, or on vessels.²⁸ Modern graffiti can be stenciled, written in magic marker, copied, or applied from projections (“projection bombing”), or rendered freehand with spray paint (“throw-ups”). This category, when applied to ancient examples, likewise encompasses multiple media, including markings that are painted (conventionally described as *dipinti*) and/or those which are engraved (*graffiti*). The media chosen for these expressions (painted versus carved) remain significant, because they betray different dialogical registers and modes of use.²⁹ While the practical features of their application are important to consider, modern assumptions about their “illicitness” should be set aside, as they distract from the distinct moralities of graffiti writing in antiquity.³⁰ As is argued throughout the pages to follow, graffiti making was in many cases unexceptional or even expected; its examination underscores the agency of the graffiti makers whose hands scratched or painted their messages (and also the agency of the graffiti itself, which circumscribed the actions of their audiences, directing them toward taking certain seats or saying certain prayers).³¹ Yet additional aspects of these markings qualify them specifically as graffiti, as discussed below.

If it is not an illicit circumstance that defines a marking as a graffito, then neither are its aesthetics, which can be particularly deceiving when classifying ancient inscriptions and images. Many commissioned texts or images, for instance, might appear to be of poorer quality to the modern eye, particularly when produced by non-elites of the Roman provinces.³² The Beit Shearim catacombs of Roman and Byzantine Palestine offer hundreds of examples of this pattern: the rough-hewn paleography of many epitaphs from the site is nearly indistinguishable from markings found nearby, which scholars differently classify as graffiti. Inscriptions from Pompeii, Ostia, and elsewhere in Italy often demonstrate the opposite possibility: they deploy elegant paleography (as well as classically attested poetic and grammatical forms), but scholars still consider them to be graffiti, rather than monumental texts.³³ While markings’ appearances should factor into their interpretation, their apparent elegance (or lack thereof)

cannot singlehandedly classify “hits” of writing as graffiti, as opposed to something else.

Lexical or semantic contents, likewise, cannot independently differentiate graffiti from more monumental texts.³⁴ For example, as discussed in the following chapter, identical phrases of commemoration, such as *dkyr* and *zkyr ltb* (“be remembered for good”) recur frequently in ancient Hebrew and Aramaic inscriptions. Some texts that include this formula, such as those embedded in mosaic pavements from Palestinian synagogues, are accurately described as monumental inscriptions (texts commissioned specifically for prominent display) (figure I.4), while other synagogue inscriptions that include identical sentiments, also found nearby, are appropriately classified as graffiti. Contents alone cannot distinguish between associated types: only enhanced attention to their additional and interrelated features, including those of display, authorship or commission, chronology of deposit, and use, can differentiate the activities that produced them.

Modes of display remain particularly significant, because they commonly link to the agency, status, and preliminary financial transactions of authors or commissioners. For example, conventions of monumental epigraphy (whether in devotional, mortuary, or civic contexts) predict that those who commissioned prominently displayed writing or decoration *purchased* the rights to do so; either people legally *owned* the spaces in which artisans recorded their names, or they donated significant amounts of money to fund features of the surrounding space.³⁵ Prominently positioned texts or images, including dedicatory, foundation, or mortuary inscriptions, might advertise generous acts of men and women, private citizens, freed-people, or civic authorities, who funded the construction, renovation, or decoration of markets, theatres, hippodromes, smaller-scale synagogues, or burial caves around the eastern, western, or southern Mediterranean.³⁶ In mortuary settings, likewise, monumental inscriptions might label an individual’s final resting place inside a tomb and document the preliminary purchase of the plot by the deceased or her family.³⁷ In many such cases, these types of commemorative inscriptions, which identified the dead or expressed legal ownership over surrounding spaces, were carved, tessellated, or painted by paid professionals, scribes, or artisans. The production of these and other monumental texts thus often relies upon two financial transactions: donors both purchased the rights to commission writing or decoration inside a space and paid professionals to exact their work. Display of such modes of writing in prominent locations thereby serves multiple functions in reflecting, advertising, and reinforcing the social, economic, and political means and legal holdings of the individuals they name.

Unlike monumental texts and art, applications of graffiti are not necessarily contingent upon creators’ preliminary acts of financial exchange and



FIGURE I.4. Hebrew dedicatory inscription from floor mosaic of Susiya Synagogue in Susiya, West Bank; January 2011. Photo by Ezra Gabbay.

commission.³⁸ Regardless of whether they are anonymous or boldly advertise the names or identities of inscribers, lexical contents of graffiti reflect distinct purposes and manners of application. All, indeed, result from their creators' *sui generis* and individuated actions of writing, likely performed without preliminary permission or purchase. Angelos Chaniotis articulates this distinction in a complementary way. He declares that graffiti (unlike donor inscriptions) are: "always of unofficial character."³⁹ While ancient examples abound for the pattern, a modern one from the Mahane Yehuda market in Jerusalem clearly demonstrates this point. In 2015, a young local street-artist, Solomon Souza, began to spray-paint portraits of rabbinic sages and Israeli historical figures onto storefront shutters throughout West Jerusalem's *shuk* (old market), which are only viewable at night when the storefronts are shuttered (figure I.5). His images employ techniques and materials (freehand spray-painting) that resemble those conventionally used in graffiti or street art. But since the municipality formally permitted and encouraged Souza to undertake this project, his resulting work is better classified as monumental art than as graffiti—albeit that which follows a street-art aesthetic.⁴⁰ This example manifests what Chaniotis underscores: despite all appearances, "official" versions of commissioned work cannot be graffiti at all.



FIGURE 1.5. Shutter portrait of Rabbi Yosef Ḥayim ben Eliyahu of Baghdad (a.k.a. Ben Ish Ḥai), painted by Solomon Souza in Maḥane Yehudah market, Jerusalem, Israel; June 2015. Photo by Ezra Gabbay.

Functionality also plays a role in determining which examples of writing and decoration are best classified as graffiti. Martin Langner, for instance, emphasizes the friction between the functions of graffiti and the intended uses of the spaces that surround them. To Langner, graffiti are “images engraved on a space that did not primarily serve this function”—that is—the space was not created specifically for the display of graffiti.⁴¹ This perspective is useful, in many ways, because it emphasizes the potential dissonance between certain acts of writing and decoration and those activities conventionally conducted inside a surrounding space. But Langner’s definition, however illustrative, embeds vestigial expectations about graffiti writing as, somehow, subversive to normative uses of surrounding spaces and landscapes. Closer spatial analyses of ancient graffiti reveal, by contrast, that some visitors to buildings or natural landscapes *anticipated* the appearance of graffiti, even if individuals had not specifically and originally designed surrounding spaces for the purposes of their display. A Latin graffito from Ostia, for example, whose writer promises to physically violate (“bugger”) those who write on a surrounding wall, simultaneously reflects the strident objections of the wall’s legal owner and anticipates its subsequent and potentially irreverent use by unauthorized authors and artists.⁴² Considerations of diverse modes of writing and decoration can

thus better illuminate concurrently competitive, dissonant, and complementary uses of writing on identical surfaces and spaces.

Chronology, too, remains a determining factor. Graffiti are iterative and additive; their presence signifies the ongoing use and modification of the built and natural landscapes that surround them. For instance, artisans often cemented monumental texts into the tesserae of floor mosaics (figure I.4) or brushed them into wet plaster before it hardened into fresco. Applications of graffiti, by contrast, frequently postdate the final construction and decoration of surrounding wall and floor surfaces.⁴³ Indeed, their writers often carved them, incrementally and diachronically, to explicitly respond to the monumental decoration and writing permanently displayed nearby.⁴⁴

Graffiti, moreover, are social enterprises. Tendencies of graffiti to “cluster” demonstrate this point. Archaeologists just as rarely discover a single graffiti along the Sinai rock desert, as do pedestrians scrutinizing abandoned storefronts in New York City (figure I.6). This is because one graffiti often serves as an invitation for other passersby to contribute their own work. Whether on decorated walls inside domestic spaces in Pompeii, or in south central Los Angeles, therefore, people often draw graffiti beside other examples to engage in graphic responses to previous writers or artists, in exchanges that could continue over years and decades (in some instances, even centuries!).⁴⁵ In many cases, therefore, graffiti appear to be as intrinsically social, dialogical, and participatory as they are a means of self-expression or communication—and it is partly for this reason that they are so useful for the discussion of social and cultural history.⁴⁶

Graffiti also encompass images as well as texts. Traditional studies of ancient Jews, for multiple reasons, tend to favor textual rather than pictorial evidence.⁴⁷ A more comprehensive study of ancient behaviors, such as graffiti writing, however, substantively heeds Roland Barthes’ frequently cited assertion that images, gestures, and other types of data should merit equal scholarly attention (“I read texts, images, cities, faces, gestures, scenes, etc.”).⁴⁸ After all, images (just like Barthes’ gestures and faces), can often express sentiments and emotions as well as, if not better than, their literary counterparts; not to mention the fact that, as discussed below, ranges of literacy were somewhat more limited in antiquity than today, which would make the number of people who could “read” images far greater than those who could identify or vocalize letters, words, or complex phrases in texts.⁴⁹ Recent scholarship in visual studies advances and transforms this perspective, particularly emphasizing the significance of the visual and its inextricability from other modes of communication, expression, and experience. In his discussion of the juncture between piety and visual experience, for example, David Morgan summarizes how: “language and vision, word and image, text and picture are in fact



FIGURE 1.6. Tags on abandoned storefront in Lower East Side, New York City; November 2010. Photo by the author.

deeply enmeshed and collaborate powerfully in assembling our sense of the real.”⁵⁰ Efforts to assess ancient “senses of the real,” to correspond with Morgan’s interrogation of modern data, require the consideration of all available sources of information, including textual or visual features. The discussion below expands this view.

Words and pictures are sometimes inextricable—whether in graffiti or other media—as many other comparisons reveal. As Juliet Fleming notes in her study of graffiti in England, for example, early modern copyists rendered certain poems in graffiti, including posies (“forms of poetry . . . written on something”), to configure images, including nets or axes.⁵¹ Ancient writers occasionally inscribed texts in similar ways to conform to visual patterns that represented, reinforced, or interpreted their literary content (an example would be a poem about a fish whose words were configured to look like a fish).⁵² Readings of graffiti, which are sensitive to such possibilities, whether manifested in burial caves, synagogues, or theatres, may reveal comparable mergings of the visual, the textual, and the architectural, to permit consideration of their potential interaction. These possibilities demonstrate how the ever-elusive meanings of writings often related directly to their visual display and to their spatial and geometric relationships to other texts and images nearby on neighboring surfaces. Recent studies of Pompeian graffiti demonstrate these points robustly.⁵³ Collapsing categories of “pictures” or “texts” into the broader rubric equates the historical value of pictorial and textual expressions, draws attention to their potential interplay or elision, and considers how inscribers, in diverse ways, used modes of writing and drawing more broadly, to manipulate the totality of the spaces that surrounded them.⁵⁴

Texts and images, nonetheless, are obviously not the same. Acts of writing with letters, words, or pictures reflect a host of diverging contingencies and imperatives, ranging from the literacy skills and personal inclinations of individual writers, to the elusive expectations of what media were considered particularly appropriate, preferable, most effective, or most esteemed, for the precise contexts in which the author wrote.⁵⁵ Inscribers’ decisions about whether or not to make their writings decipherable to an audience merit commensurate attention; at times, some ancient writers intentionally inverted words or rendered letters in obscure ways that appear as “non-sense” to the modern viewer. Presentations of alphabet lists, sometimes in retrograde, demonstrate such patterns—whether around doorways of tombs in Beit Shearim, or in burial caves of the Judean Shefelah.⁵⁶ Associated decisions therefore reflect the strategies of ancient writers as much as their skill sets. Subsuming different types of writing (whether retrograde, legible, or purposely or accidentally illegible) under the rubric of graffiti, therefore, does not erase but rather highlights these constituent differences and

variegations, which collectively point to the power of writing in antiquity, in all of its iterations, for its creators, agents, and audiences.⁵⁷

My working definition of graffiti emerges from this preliminary review of ancient writings and drawings and contemporary theoretical perspectives: graffiti are those markings (whether words, images, or both) applied in an “unofficial” capacity and in social and dialogical ways, regardless of whether their applications were anticipated, lauded, or denigrated by their audiences. Graffiti include a variety of media applied to diverse types of spaces (e.g., devotional, mortuary, recreational, professional, commercial, or civic) and surfaces (e.g., walls, ceilings, or doorways), for what was likely an equally diverse set of reasons, though any statements about reasons must remain speculative. What most distinguish graffiti from other types of writing, therefore, are the precise relationships between their contents, modes of display and presentation, authorship and authorization, spatial, chronological, and social settings, and ostensible functions—not their paleography or perceived aesthetic value. These relationships are dynamic and shift according to the precise contexts (spatial, practical, chronological, and geographic) in which they are found; for this reason I often refer to them as vernacular forms of writing and image making. Thus, while all textual graffiti can be classified as inscriptions, and all pictorial graffiti might be distilled as “images,” or “art” of some kind, not all inscriptions or images are properly classified as graffiti.⁵⁸ This perspective on graffiti necessarily breaks with operative moralities of graffiti writing in modernity, because ancient types of writing constituted neutral or desirable activities, as the chapters below indicate.

Graffiti ultimately remains an anachronistic category. The definition offered here thus does not pretend to be a universal taxon, but a neutral one, which specifically responds to the data and research questions at hand. The following chapters thereby emphasize relationships between graffiti and their diverse modalities and *uses* of surrounding spaces. Such markings have, can, and should continue to be analyzed and defined in distinct ways elsewhere.

READING GRAFFITI IN SOCIETY, SPACE, AND LANDSCAPE

Graffiti associated with Jewish populations might appear to be more challenging to “read” or interpret for historiographical purposes than are many other types of archaeological information, because of their brevity, frequent anonymity, and their lack of clear social contexts (let alone in overlapping cultic, political, or economic ones). Some graffiti are nameless and anonymous, while others consist only of signatures (personal names). Still other types are limited to abstract pictures of freestanding quadrupeds,

obelisks, boats, menorahs, X- and V-shapes and lines, tree branches, and of men brandishing weapons. In light of these obstacles, the gravitational pull of traditional methods of interpretation, so reliant on fuller texts and epigraphic and aesthetic frameworks for the explication of these abstract markings, seems ever more alluring.⁵⁹

But this book argues that it is possible to interpret graffiti, just like other types of data, independently of such well-worn approaches. The following consideration of one genre of modern graffiti, known as tags, demonstrates how particular modes of reading can generate distinct insights about associated cultures and social dynamics, whether in modernity or antiquity. Tags, as they are known, commonly record the personal or street names of artists or collectives (tagging teams or gangs) on walls, trees, apartment buildings, or storefronts in urban and rural spaces. Sometimes they render names in encoded and obscure ways, while at other times they are deliberately legible, for distinct effect. In the United States, tags dominate walls throughout gang-ridden streets of south central Los Angeles as much as the contested upper stories of buildings along the Bronx-Queens Expressway in New York City. Tags, in these cities and others, manifest peculiar inversions of conventional dynamics of economic, political, and social agency. Taggers associated with gangs, including the Crips, Bloods, Sureños, Wah Ching, or Mexican Mafia, have no legal claims to the buildings they hit and may lack the desire or economic resources to purchase apartments or spaces inside of them. When armed with sharpies or cans of spray paint, a steady hand, and years of practice, however, taggers can do something even more powerful than attain home ownership: by writing on walls, they aggressively and strategically territorialize their surfaces to stake claim to contiguous buildings, neighborhoods, and urban landscapes for themselves or for their gang.⁶⁰ Tagging singlehandedly demarcates territory by implicitly threatening consequences when associated markings go unheeded by rival gangs. Indeed, writing a “diss” (a counter-tag) over the previous one, or defying the boundaries imposed by tags, can provoke outbreaks of gang violence.⁶¹

Graffiti marking, read in this way, is an activity—one with creative and real import. Taggers’ activities of applying words and pictures, to modify the approach of Stanley Tambiah, actually change the urban landscapes that encompass them—their buildings, streetscapes, and neighborhoods.⁶² These changes are technically superficial, because tags conform to preexisting contours of walls, buildings, or doorways, and rarely alter them in any structural way. But such markings aggressively modify urban landscapes, to different degrees, by drawing intersecting social, political, and economic boundaries, at least for the purposes of urban gang dynamics. And tags, if unmodified, remain durable—they continue to send their messages as long as they are visible to passersby. Indeed, tags, just like other types

of graffiti, ultimately function as agents on behalf of their artists and associated gangs, by superseding the territorial claims of previous taggers or legal owners of buildings (and threatening subsequent infringements upon them).⁶³

One could study the official governance of cities by looking at the records of elected officials and their platforms, or investigate their seamier undersides by poring through updated crime blotters. Direct consideration of graffiti, however, offers striking insights into the “real” politics that govern life on the streets and features of an informal, but equally real, political, and even religious economy. When regarded with attention to activity, space, gang politics, and landscape, spatial and geographic analyses of tags speak to, as Morgan described it, the “sense of the real” (perhaps, as opposed to the sense of the “official”) in modern cities, in confronting links between texts, pictures, and matrices of economic and cultural life. Associated ways of reading graffiti, which draw upon local comparisons and modern theories of picture and text production, human activity, the social, and the phenomenology of space and landscape, offer useful models for interrogating ancient examples in vastly distinct chronological and practical contexts. Just as modern graffiti constitute snapshots of city dynamics that differ from the pictures derived from crime blotters or urban policy, so too do the ancient graffiti, even indirectly, reveal the quotidian workings of ancient cities (or synagogues or burial complexes) that are rather different than the seemingly official viewpoints, which Josephus, the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmuds, and Christian writers espouse.

Reading Graffiti as Actions or Agents

Conceptual frameworks that support interpretations, such as those above, draw considerably from Alfred Gell’s discussions of art in *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*.⁶⁴ Two decades ago, Gell critiqued anthropologists’ common approaches to art, which evaluated “art-objects” as products of human action (things) and assessed their values according to aesthetic criteria. Art-objects, in Gell’s view, were not “things”—they were active and did something for their artists and creators.⁶⁵ Gell directed attention instead to behaviors of art-production, defined as “system[s] of action,” and declared that art-objects, which those actions produced, ultimately functioned independently (at least on a theoretical level) as “social agents” for their creators. This move is a logical and relevant one, as clusterings of modern and ancient graffiti independently suggest the sociality that their applications entail.

This latter aspect of Gell’s work offers a useful model for framing more productive discussions of graffiti, particularly for the purposes of historiography. Regarding graffiti (in place of art) as a type of *action*

(not solely as a *product* of action), foremost, situates graffiti writing as a behavior, which can be located historically, within broader and identifiable practical, cultural, topological, geographic, and chronological contexts. And graffiti, just like Gell's "art-objects," similarly function as "social agents" (or political or religious ones). Long after their writers have passed on, they remain durable and potent stand-ins for the activities and agencies of their original creators. In antiquity, forms of art and writing were not passive, but often assumed strident and interactive qualities of their own; Gell's approach particularly assists analyses of graffiti in both modern and ancient settings, because it permits attention to such qualities and possibilities.⁶⁶ Examination of multiple types of graffiti (regardless of whether examples are textual or pictorial), from these vantages, moves their study from one of observation or collation toward one of contextualization of human agency and activity—even when related behaviors respond to divine beings or to the deceased.

Social (and Spatial) Dimensions of Graffiti

Graffiti (including tags) index people's preexisting views of the spaces they adorn and simultaneously transform them for their writers and their audiences. Spatial dimensions of graffiti writing, therefore, remain critical for situating the actions of ancient, as well as modern, artists. Placements of ancient graffiti are strategic and deliberate: recurring patterns in their locations demonstrate how purposefully their artists carved, painted, and smudged them in specific if diverse architectural, practical, and spatial settings. Theories of Henri Lefebvre, among others, help to draw attention to these simultaneously social and spatial aspects of graffiti-production for their writers and for their audiences.⁶⁷

To Lefebvre, humans, as social beings, use various strategies to circumscribe the spaces that surround them, whether urban streetscapes or sandstone cliffs. Lefebvre's succinct claim that "(Social) space is a (social) product"⁶⁸ distills a more fundamental argument that "in reality, social space 'incorporates' social actions, the actions of subjects both individual and collective who are born and who die, who suffer and who act."⁶⁹ People write graffiti in different places for variable reasons, but once they do, the idea of neutral or natural space becomes even more impossible as "practical activity writes upon nature, albeit in a scrawling hand, and . . . this writing implies a particular representation of space."⁷⁰ These approaches to spatiality, its dialogical mapping, and its social uses are advantageous for analyzing graffiti.⁷¹

Powerful and implicit social rules, in conjunction, prescribe "appropriateness"—individuals' beliefs about which activities are considered to be desirable or acceptable in particular spaces, places, and times. Modern

taggers, for example, tend to write on designated surfaces of buildings, walls, or even trees, in specific media, because they know that is “what one does” for a chosen effect. Generalized applications of Bourdieusian “habitus” highlight how, through social and cultural inculcation, individuals acquire and reproduce such types of “system[s] of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is [they are] constituted,”⁷² which serve as “both the collection of schemes informing practice and the generative source of new or modified practices.”⁷³ *Habitus* works through its largely subconscious direction of human behavior (“the construction of the world that one takes for granted”), because “it provides the range of conscious and unconscious codes, protocols, principles and presuppositions that are enacted” in human practices.⁷⁴ These conscious and subconscious codes, for instance, could both indirectly inspire a person to write his name on a shrine around a cult statue of Artemis (because that is what one respectfully does when one visits such a place!), or could indirectly deter him from doing the same thing (because what type of person would commit a sacrilege of such a kind, in such a space?!).⁷⁵ Scarce evidence exists to reconstruct the implicit rules that governed the day-to-day behaviors of most ancient people, including Jews and their neighbors. Sufficient evidence, moreover, indicates that free will and independent proclivity played some role in determining individuals’ actions (outside of routines and expectations).⁷⁶ Analyses of repeated patterns in the contents and spatiality of graffiti writing (whether in pagan temples, burial caves, or elsewhere), nonetheless, offer crucial insights into otherwise unknown dispositions, including particularly local and regional ones, such as those that governed common practices of daily life (and graffiti production) in antiquity.⁷⁷

Reading Graffiti in Space and Landscape

Phenomenological approaches of landscape theorists, such as Christopher Tilley, situate these preceding views within a broader environmental and experiential frame.⁷⁸ By describing as inextricable and dialogical the relationships between humans and their sensory and physical worlds, Tilley and others isolate how people’s kinetic activities (including graffiti writing and viewing) simultaneously conform to and modify physical features of their environments (whether built or natural). Enhanced attention to details of landscapes, so frequently overlooked, thus inspire additional insights into the activities of graffiti writers and their effects.⁷⁹ These include the qualities and sources of light and air, temperature, humidity or aridity, as well as the fabrics, textures, cleavages, and angles of surfaces available for human modification (for acts of chiseling, sanding, carving, or painting). Consideration of such elements, whenever associated data

are available, situates the parameters of activities of graffiti writing and graffiti viewing. By serving as “both medium *for* and outcome *of* action,” landscapes can also record evidence (so crucially for these purposes) of “histories of action”—activities undertaken in past time.⁸⁰ Such perspectives ultimately historicize how graffiti manifest relationships forged between writers, their audiences, and the built and natural environments that surrounded them.

Closer examination of evidence for the sensory dimensions of graffiti environments additionally advances phenomenological assessments of graffiti writing (for their writers) and viewing (for their audiences).⁸¹ As diverse approaches from liturgical and visual studies remind us, small kinetic acts, such as writing or drawing (or assuming deliberate bodily postures, lighting lamps, or burning incense, for that matter) can profoundly impact the senses and experiences of those who perform them and the audiences who witness (or touch or smell) their effects. As discussions below indicate, acts of carving graffiti do the same. For instance, in the middle of the third century CE, Durene Christians chiseled messages around the baptistry in the Christian building in Syrian Dura-Europos. In multiple and tangible ways, therefore, these writers physically changed the baptistry (and thereby the building) through their actions.⁸² By cutting into the friable plaster, they performed physical acts that expressed and reinforced their own devotional fervor. But, in doing so, they altered the appearance of the baptistry, specifically the textures of its surfaces, and expanded the functionality of the space to include its serving as a place for writing one’s name as well as for conducting baptisms. This example demonstrates what the following chapters reveal in greater detail—the myriad and distinct ways that graffiti engage and transform the spaces and senses of their agents (writers) and audiences (viewers), to adjust their senses of reality.⁸³

The following chapters draw from and expand these preliminary approaches to agency, spatiality, landscape, and sociality, to inspire insights into the historical activities associated with graffiti writing. This is true, despite the awareness that the “actual” experiences of ancient graffiti writers, let alone of their audiences, necessarily remain elusive.⁸⁴ As Rachel Neis notes in her study of the visual world of the ancient rabbis, for instance, while it remains impossible to reconstruct *what* ancient people, including ancient Jews, once saw (or heard, or felt, or smelled, or tasted, for that matter), it is possible to conjecture about *how* they did so, based on information derived from textual or archaeological records.⁸⁵ Variable approaches summarized here assist comparable efforts to draw evidence from graffiti to speculate about *how* ancient people (whether Jews or their neighbors), as agents, used activities of writing and drawing to engage, change, and experience the spaces, landscapes, individuals, and societies that surrounded them.⁸⁶

CONNECTING GRAFFITI WITH FORGOTTEN JEWS

Significant technical features of data selection and interpretation inform the following case studies, which associate specific archaeological data (graffiti included) with ancient Jews. And graffiti, of course, cannot be “Jewish,” because graffiti are not people.⁸⁷ They are scratches or paintings that people (some perhaps Jewish and others perhaps not) applied to surfaces or objects. Decisions concerning how to identify archaeological materials and associate them with Jewish populations, in turn, inevitably and significantly shape related conclusions about graffiti, Jews, and the activities they undertook in their broader cultural environments.

In the discussion below, graffiti merit association with Jews if they exhibit one or more diagnostic features. Some textual graffiti include personal or second names (*signa*) of biblical, Judean, or Jewish origin or association (Moses, Judah, Judas, Jeremiah, Annanias, etc.).⁸⁸ Others include explicit identifying terms, such as *Ioudaios*, *Hebraios*, *Iudaeus*, or variants of *Yehuda'i*, either in Greek, Latin, Aramaic, or Nabataean, which are commonly translated into English as “Judean,” or “Jew.”⁸⁹ Appearances of Hebrew or Aramaic scripts in graffiti, in many cases, also indicate Jewish language use. Still other graffiti incorporate pictures of the architecture and appurtenances of the Jerusalem Temple, including the menorah (seven-branched candelabrum), ethrog (citron), lulab (palm frond), or shofar (ritual horn).⁹⁰ Associated images were particularly evocative for Jews after the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, even if Christians developed similar ones for their own purposes, in later periods of antiquity.⁹¹ In some cases, however, connections between Jews and graffiti remain more indirect. Some graffiti, for instance, include no diagnostic markers, but were discovered in spatial contexts particularly known to be associated with Jews, such as synagogues or burial complexes where the majority of burials were clearly marked with Jewish names, symbols, or vocabulary.⁹² Such factors cannot prove incontrovertibly that graffiti writers were necessarily Jews. At minimum, however, as discussed additionally below, the lack of erasure of such markings suggests that Jews who used these spaces considered them to be sufficiently acceptable or tolerable to maintain them.

Deployments of identical images or textual patterns, of course, need not predict more substantive similarities in the self-identifications and beliefs of their creators.⁹³ Even if Jewish graffiti inscribers and artists conferred similar names to their children, or drew comparable pictures of menorahs, not all of them retained equivalent cosmologies, practiced similar forms of devotion, or sustained unified theologies.⁹⁴ What the designation of “Jew” or “Jewish” meant, furthermore, necessarily varied among graffiti inscribers, whether they inhabited the same village or disparate towns throughout the Mediterranean.⁹⁵ Graffiti evidence, indeed,

often demonstrates significant practical and cultural diversities among their Jewish creators, and their commensurately varied relationships with their neighbors, which, in turn, fluctuated according to the precise cities, neighborhoods, or even the city streets they once inhabited.⁹⁶ Partly for these reasons adoptions of “fixed criteria” for associating epigraphic and archaeological data with Jews remain highly problematic.⁹⁷ Related occlusions in studies of material remains of Jews, including those presented here, remain unavoidable and sometimes appear to be tautological. Nonetheless, without another route available, one hopes that more sensitive examinations of the archaeological record, as demonstrated below, ultimately offer more locally and spatially nuanced ways to interpret evidence for Jews in regionally variable contexts, outside of preexisting expectations or traditional methods of association.

Methods of determining the antiquity of individual graffiti, in comparable ways, vary according to their precise archaeological contexts and contents. Few examples of graffiti associated with Jews include exact dates or regnal years, which might better assist their accurate dating. In certain cases, however, the stratigraphic record offers important clues for establishing chronologies of graffiti written by or around Jews. Graffiti from the Dura-Europos synagogue, for example, were discovered in a sealed archaeological context that predated the destruction of the building sometime between 255 and 257 CE.⁹⁸ In this case, we have a useful *terminus ante quem* for their ancient application.

Other graffiti deposits pose greater challenges for establishing patterns of relative dating. Graffiti in Beit Shearim, Palmyra, or along cliffs in deserts of Egypt, Sinai, and Arabia are located inside spaces that sustained ongoing reuse; this might prompt questions about their antiquity.⁹⁹ While it remains impossible to establish secure dates for every graffito and dipinto discovered throughout these sites, considerations of regional customs, language, and iconographic typology help to better situate their chronology.¹⁰⁰ Although methods of dating textual graffiti through paleography remain as tenuous as is dating pictorial art through patterns in iconography, deployments of Greek and Latin (and in some cases, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Nabataean) in graffiti may assist their dating to similar periods of Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine hegemony, which predate the early medieval period.¹⁰¹ Tombs throughout Judaea and Palestine, additionally, often contain multiple examples of textual or pictorial graffiti, which replicate those on identical portions of tombs with more secure dating (inside vestibules, around doorways, etc.) located nearby. Similarities in these elements (same types of drawings or sentiments, positioned in the same places, on the same architectural features of tombs) suggest the contemporaneity of their applications. Methods of rigorous typological comparisons, such as these, often serve as the

only means of positing chronologies for three-dimensional artifacts, such as ceramic lamps and vessels, similarly discovered in looted and reused burial caves in Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. Thus, while practices of ascribing dates to graffiti based on analogy are not foolproof, they are, in the end, most comparable to the methods commonly employed elsewhere in archaeological scholarship. What one can say most definitively is that many of the deposits of graffiti discussed below were accrued throughout years, decades, and centuries in periods of antiquity.

One might wish to ascertain additional information about the ancient contexts and the social histories of individual graffiti inscribers. For instance, one might desire to map precisely where graffiti artists fell along spectra of literacy.¹⁰² Abundance of written material throughout Arabian cliffs and Palestinian burial caves, indeed, suggests that many more people of these regions than traditionally assumed were at least capable of copying their names or brief messages into rocks or onto walls, even if they could not do much else. And recurrences of carved invocations to “remember” certain individuals inside buildings and along rocks throughout the Levant and Arabia equally suggest, as discussed in the following chapter, that many writers anticipated that significant numbers of viewers would be able to read their messages—perhaps even out loud. Unfortunately, writers’ expectations (or hopes!) about the reading capabilities of their audiences cannot speak definitively to comprehensive assessments of ranges and modes of literacy (necessarily varying according to time and place) among Jews and their neighbors in antiquity.¹⁰³ Attention to graffiti, nonetheless, can play an important role in initiating and advancing more nuanced discussions of regional patterns of literacy, even if it cannot offer definitive conclusions.

Likewise, one might also wish to determine the classes or statuses of Jews who inscribed graffiti. Graffiti writing, of course, was not just a strategy or an activity of the lower classes, as many might infer from modern stereotypes. Throughout the Hellenistic and Roman world, rather, abundant examples indicate that hegemonic and indigenous elites wrote graffiti, just as non-elites did.¹⁰⁴ While most graffiti exclude elite status markers that individuals enjoyed flaunting, this still does not preclude elite authorship: graffiti sometimes attest to conversational registers and features of daily life, so they might reflect a distinct type of discourse, in which status-flaunting might have taken different forms (such as, occasionally, being able to write at all, or being capable of inscribing a graffito on a particular feature or part of a building). Some Jewish graffiti inscribers, therefore, might have enjoyed higher status within broader imperial frameworks, even if it is hard to imagine that many of them counted among the elites of the Roman Empire—the unusual one percent (or fewer!) of the population, who retained economic capital, freeborn

status, military position, and public offices (*ordines*) that inspired the awe and appreciation of others.¹⁰⁵

Other Jewish graffiti writers were not elites of imperial frameworks, but more certainly enjoyed elevated status in the eyes of their Jewish peers.¹⁰⁶ Hayim Lapin uses postcolonial approaches to draw attention to such possibilities, as he speaks of ancient rabbis, who operated among circles of rabbinic textual production, as “indigenous elites”—those who did not occupy higher status or class within a hegemonic (imperial) framework, but did so among their peers in Palestine and elsewhere. Such a category is eminently useful and equally extends to members of the priestly classes before (and, to varying degrees, after) the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.¹⁰⁷ So circumscribed, evidence does exist to link indigenous elites and graffiti production. For instance, in the 1960s, Nahman Avigad discovered pictures of a menorah and a showbread table scratched into fragments of wall plaster from an elite home in Jerusalem dating to the Herodian period. He argued that its artist might have visited the Temple while it still stood and carved elaborate pictures of its implements (including the menorah and showbread table) into surfaces of his own family’s opulent residence (figure I.7).¹⁰⁸ The corresponding section of plaster, now displayed in the Israel Museum, thus demonstrates one known case from Judaea in which indigenous elites (or at least someone from a high status household, priestly or otherwise) wrote graffiti inside their domestic spaces (albeit for private viewing).

Multiple factors, nonetheless, predict that many, if not most, Jewish graffiti inscribers were among non-elite or ordinary classes, however those are defined. This is likely true, whether examining graffiti produced during periods of Hellenistic, Roman, or Byzantine hegemony. Tax lists indicate that some Jews fell among lower economic classes in Egypt during Hellenistic rule.¹⁰⁹ And, until 212 CE, when Caracalla’s Antonine Constitution extended citizenship throughout the Empire, few Jews would have been Roman citizens at all—let alone qualifying among the most highly regarded of the Empire’s constituents. Whenever information about inscribers’ class or status (let alone gender) can be deduced from the evidence available, I draw attention to it. In the meantime, the possibilities are expansive, partly because designations of class and status are quite difficult to estimate anywhere in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds, let alone throughout the Roman provinces.¹¹⁰ While both imperial and indigenous elites were no doubt responsible for some graffiti, non-elites surely carved most of the others.¹¹¹ Perhaps more important and definitive, however, is the degree to which graffiti attest to a culture of writing that was pervasive and performative, with places for a wide range of people, throughout antiquity.



FIGURE 1.7. Menorah and showbread table depicted in graffiti from an elite home in Roman Jerusalem, displayed in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, Israel; May 2015. Photo by the author. Reproduced with permission of Israel Antiquities Authority.

ORGANIZATION

As the foregoing has shown, graffiti have great potential for opening the lives of ancient Jews to our scrutiny in new ways. But the nature of this evidence also requires us to approach it with meticulous attention to the contents of graffiti and the settings in which they are discovered. Productive evaluations of vernacular texts and images necessarily require a preliminary

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